

- You are 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.

- Joining me today is Dr. Fred Rafilson, co-founder and CEO at Clarity Talent Measurement. Dr. Rafilson is a nationally recognized expert in industrial organizational psychology and organizational and individual assessment. He has conducted thousands of assessments for private sector, federal state, and county municipal agencies. He also serves as an expert for the employment litigation cases and works closely with agencies under DOJ consent decrees. Fred, thank you so much for joining me back on the podcast.

- You're welcome, Shari, it's always great to be here.

- So I was thinking about this topic as we went into 2024 with a little bit of PTSD from 2020. We had a controversial presidential election, we had COVID, we had all the great resignation, the recession, all the things that you want to bring in. So as we think about what's coming up this next year, that election's drawing near, we're seeing anxieties and tensions rise in the workplace. What are some of the biggest challenges employers and employees are gonna face, do you think, during this election season?

- Yeah, well, it's a great question and a timely question. I mean, yes, it was a controversial election in 2020. Clearly, we're heading in the big direction now, right? So, I think we see several challenges. One is, of course, huge polarization and political debate. There are really strong opinions from either side that can lead to heated arguments, and that can affect team dynamics and morale. In addition, I think stress and distraction from work, news cycles, social media, and personal anxieties about the election can distract employees and decrease productivity significantly. And of course, there's always discrimination and bias. Unintentional, and in this case, even intentional comments based on political affiliation can really create a hostile work environment and that's something we all want to avoid. And I guess the final challenge would be sort of managing expectations and emotions. Depending on the outcome, employees are gonna possibly experience disappointment, anger, fear, all of these things can impact motivation and performance.

- As employers navigate these challenges, what are some things they can do to continue to maintain that positive workplace?

- Great, I mean, that is the question, right? And it's crucial to be proactive and create a supportive environment. And I think that there are some strategies that employers can follow, and it's gonna be difficult, but I think it's clearly important. One, I think, is to foster an inclusive culture. It really emphasize respect for diverse

viewpoints, encourage respectful communication. And this could involve setting ground rules for discussions and reminding employees about company policies on discrimination and harassment. Another thing is really promote open communication, which may seem contradictory, but it's not and it's important. Leaders should communicate clearly and regularly and acknowledge the current climate, and provide a safe space for employees to voice concerns without judgment. Another thing, sort of like in negotiation or any communication, I think, is try to focus on the common ground. Encourage employees to connect over shared values and goals rather than on their political differences. Team building activities and projects that emphasize collaborations can be really helpful. I think another strategy would be to offer resources and support. Providing access to mental health resources for employees, experiencing stress or anxiety can be really critical. Think about workshops on managing emotional responses and healthy communication during divisive times. And I think finally, respect legal boundaries. Remember, employers can't legally express favoritism towards any candidate or discourage employees from voting. So, focus on encouraging civic engagement in a neutral and nonpartisan way. And I know these are all difficult, and it's a difficult period, but I think these are worthwhile strategies and things that employers should focus on.

- I think the mention around organizations not affiliating themselves with a particular candidate is really interesting, because I think that some companies have created cultures where it's kind of obvious who they're supporting or not supporting. How do you see things like pre-employment assessment playing into these kinds of organizations where they're talking about leaning a certain way, being a culture fit. I'm not saying that's right or wrong. I'm curious your perspective.

- I appreciate that, and it's a great question, and I am a testing and assessment guy, so thank you for the question because while I don't think pre-employment assessments can save the world, I think they can do a lot. So I appreciate the chance to talk about them. And I think planning ahead because we're not going to, all of a sudden, implement pre-employment assessments to deal with a divisive election but we are using them to staff our workforce. So, while they can't predict political viewpoints, they definitely can be used to identify personality traits and values that can contribute to a positive work environment, regardless of personal politics. And here's some examples: Two of the facets of the five-factor personality model or the Big Five are conscientiousness and agreeableness. And employees with those traits tend to be more cooperative, they're more team-oriented, and more respectful of others, which can really help to navigate disagreements constructively. The great thing is in addition to dealing with these kinds of divisive situations, conscientiousness and agreeableness are huge predictors of work success. So, you're doing it for the right reasons to select the best employees who are

likely to be driven and engaged, but you're also gonna get these fantastic benefits for these difficult types of situation. Another construct that I think pre-employment assessments could help with is emotional intelligence. Individuals with strong emotional intelligence can better manage their own emotions, they can empathize with others, they can navigate conflict more effectively, especially during stressful times. And again, in terms of working with teams, working with customers and clients and prospects, emotional intelligence is a great trait to screen for in your candidates. And finally, another one of the Big Five factors is openness to experience. And what we know is that employees who are open to new ideas and perspectives are more likely to engage in respectful dialogue and bridge differences. And while that's a great trait to screen for for many positions, it's not for all. Openness to experience isn't necessarily what you're gonna use to screen for accounts, but great for marketing people and salespeople. So, that's one that I would want to talk to you or an agency specifically about the role to make sure it makes sense. But certainly for the helping to identify traits, that can contribute to a positive work environment that's good. So I would say consciousness and agreeableness, emotional intelligence, and openness to experience would be three traits that I would consider in pre-employment exams for this situation.

- You talked about openness to experiences, as well as open communication as a tactic that we can kind of look at or deploy during these times. What about our employees who might be feeling pressure to discuss their political opinion or are overwhelmed by the amount of political chatter? How do employers set boundaries around those discussions while still allowing for them to happen in a constructive, positive way?

- I mean that's really a great question and it's so realistic, right? This is clearly happening, if not everywhere, in a lot of places. And employers absolutely have the right to establish reasonable guidelines for workplace communication to maintain a respectful and professional environment. So this could include a few things. One is clearly prohibiting discriminatory or harassing language based on political affiliation. I mean, that's our job, and we need to make that clear. But on the other side, create designated spaces for political discussions like online forums, break rooms, and I think it's important to do that. You can't just pretend this isn't here and say I don't want you to have discussions. Discouraging political debates or arguments that disrupt work. So it's one thing to create those spaces, have discussions, allow for forums, but debates or arguments that are disrupting work, that needs to be discouraged. And I think really encouraging respectful disagreement and focusing on common ground. I mean, remember, employees still have the right to free speech outside of work and employers can't discriminate based on political personal or personal political beliefs. But the key is to balance this right with maintaining a productive and inclusive work environment. And I

wish this was easy, but your listeners are pros, and this is a challenge that we all need to rise to, and this is gonna be one of the biggest challenges of our careers. So, I know I'm sort of waving a little a magic wand, but I think if you can have these thoughts in the back of your mind and work on them, it can go a long way.

- I'm curious if you have any tactical examples or wording that you would use to create those guidelines. And I'm thinking about all the work that we've done around diversity, equity, and inclusion over the last couple years and creating those spaces where we can have hard conversations. I see this as this is a diversity of thought thing. And so I'm curious if you have anything specific that you can share with the audience that like, "Hey, these are two or three lines that I'd say put into your practice to guide those conversations."

- I would go about it a little bit differently. I would give you some examples of the organizations that have navigated these types of things, and suggest that your listeners delve into those examples and take a look and see what these companies have done. So maybe I can give you a few examples and also some resources, some articles, and websites, and some training programs. And I think that will be more effective than me just trying to come up with a few things. One is during the 2020 election, which you mentioned, Google created internal resources like a virtual election day guide with voter information and mental health resources, and they also encourage managers to lead open discussions and check in with employees individually. So, I think that's a great example. You can find information about that on the web, could be really, really helpful. Another great company that we're all familiar with along a different line, a clothing company, Patagonia. They publicly encourage civic engagement and provide employees with paid time off to vote. They also prioritize open communication and respect for diverse viewpoints in the workplace. Take a look at Patagonia and see what they do. I think you'll be able to really pick up some good pointers from a great organization. And a third one that comes to mind is an online retailer that might work for some of your listeners, and that's Zappos, and we've all... Well, I've bought things from Zappos for sure. And they emphasize their core value of "Embrace and celebrate your weirdness and deliver wow through service." And they encourage employees to be themselves and to respect others differences, including political opinions. So I think that's three sort of broad range of three organizations that's worth looking into to get some ideas of what they've actually done. There's additional resources that I think you could look at. Websites, I would go to SHRM, Society for HR Management. I think all of your listeners are members of SHRM, or if they're not, they should be. So, SHRM is definitely on top of this, and go to SHRM.org and see what you can find. A website that's important to me is the APA, the American Psychological Association, APA.org. They definitely have resources that you could look into for this. A really cool one that I was looking at a little while ago is the National Institute of Mental

Health, NIMH. I think NIMH.NIH.GOV. Really good resource for thinking about the mental health of employees who are stressed, who are anxious. I mean, mental health in the workplace is a really important topic, and for me, it really hits home and I think it's something all of your listeners care about. Some really good articles that do have some practical tips that I think your readers might want to look at, a good one came out in the Harvard Business Review recently called "Leading Through a Divisive Election Season." I would check that out for sure, really on topic. Actually, all of these articles are really on topic. One came out in Forbes recently called "Five Ways to Manage Politics in the Workplace During Election Season." A lot of what I talked about today, I think, will be repeated in there, but you'll also get some good tips from that article. And in Psychology Today, "How to cope with political stress at work," I think, could be super helpful for employers in dealing with how do we put programs together to help our employees manage their stress, manage these difficult conversations. And finally, there's some training programs out there. The Center for Public Engagement offers workshops on facilitating difficult conversations and promoting civil discourse, and I would check that out. A great one is the National Conflict Resolution Center. They provide training programs on conflict resolution and training skills. And finally, another one that a lot of your viewers are probably members of is the National Labor Relations Board. They offer guidance on employee free speech and employer limitations during the election season. So I would definitely check that out. I think, given all of those resources, that's enough that somebody could spend a day doing that and not doing everything else that they need to get done, which could be fun, and it's definitely worth looking at. So I would encourage your listeners to research, explore, and adapt these resources to their specific circumstances. And really by being proactive and creating a supportive environment, hopefully they can navigate the upcoming election season with greater ease and maintain a positive and productive workplace for everyone.

- I wanna flip the question when I think about the anxiety that we're gonna experience during this time. Specifically to those listening who are in HR and leadership, how do they manage their own stress during this time?

- So let me start out by saying it's perfectly normal to feel stressed during election season, and I'm guessing most of us are. So, good to focus on that, and here are some personal strategies. One, limit your news consumption, especially from biased sources. And man, that hits home. I just laughed this morning because I woke up and I picked up my iPhone and I started reading the news, and I thought about this upcoming webinar. I thought, "Geez, what a way to start the day," you know? And it's not a great way to start the day. So, it's everywhere, we're bombarded by it, try to limit that consumption, that could go a long way. And so these are really some sort of basic psychological strategies, but focus on what you can control, not what you can't. You

can control your own reactions and your behaviors, but you can't control the environment around you, so focus on what you can control. It'll make a big difference if you realize, "Hey, I'm feeling this way, I'm reacting this way." It can stop, you can feel better. It's amazing what just being able to place your consciousness on something can do as opposed to letting it run in the background. Engaging in stress-reducing activities is always huge. Exercise, meditation, if that works for you. Spending time in nature, spending time with your kids, anything that, well, when you're with your kids may not be stress-reducing, but it depends on the kids, I guess. But anything, any sort of stress-reducing activities you can engage in is huge, especially now. For me, it's exercise and getting outside. Meditation is great for folks that have that mindset. Another thing is connect with people. We're social animals, right? So connect with supportive colleagues and friends that share your values, always important. You can't keep things bottled up. Even if you're like-minded, you still can't keep things bottled up, connect. And this is a big one, really. Seek professional help if you need it. If you're experiencing overwhelming anxiety, you don't need to. Get some help, seek professional help. There's help everywhere, there's telemedicine. You could do it in person, it's not a big deal now. Most organizations have EAPs, these things are available. Use it, there's a reason for it. Mental health does not have the stigma it once had and it shouldn't. It's critical, so get help. Those would be, I guess, the suggestions I have for how to deal with that personal anxiety that we deal with during this kind of situation.

- You've given us a lot of great tools, both personally and at the employer level. Any final advice for our listeners as we head into this election season?

- Sure, and I think it's really about having the right perspective. We have to remember, as difficult as it may be at times, that everyone is entitled to their own political beliefs, and focusing on maintaining a respectful and supportive workplace environment where everyone feels valued and heard. After all, we're all in the same boat, right? We're all on this big, blue planet together and we're all raising our kids and trying to make a living, and hopefully retiring someday. We really all do have a lot of common ground. So try to tap into that. Encourage open communication, prioritize well-being, and remember that we are all working towards common goals regardless of these political differences. And I think that'll go a long way, both in your workplace and personally.

- Dr. Rafilson, as always, this has been a great discussion. I will definitely have you back again, you always bring such valuable insight for our listeners. So, thanks for taking a few minutes to chat with me. Always my pleasure, thanks so much, Shari.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and

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