The HR Mixtape: Hosted by Shari Simpson with Guest Dan Berger, Founder and CEO of Assemble Hospitality Group

Announcer: Joining me today is Dan Berger, founder and CEO of Assemble Hospitality Group. Dan is a serial entrepreneur and author focused on building workplace belonging. Thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today. I'm super excited.

Shari: You have a really interesting background and story that links your personal life to your passion around belonging. I wondered if we could start with you being willing to share a little bit about adoption and your journey that you had there.

Dan: Yeah, you know, it's funny, Shari. I've been doing several podcasts over the last couple of months and even though I've done a bunch. This is the first HR one. So I'm going to try to position everything with an HR mindset. That's going to be my take. Let me start by saying this. I had a saying when I ran my company for eight years with 120 employees, don't bring your traumas to work. But the reality is our fabric is in our traumas, especially what's in childhood development. So it's hard to decouple the two. Anyway, the point is that my belonging traumas, as I refer to them, started when I was in the womb. Being adopted, I was told by my bio mom that I don't belong with her. And then when my dad abandoned my mom and I, the nuclear family I had at two years old was gone. And the third kind of a nail in the coffin was when we immigrated to the United States. I was nine years old. We came here from Israel. I didn't speak a word of English and I had to kind of negotiate my identity and my cultures. So those three things are my belonging traumas. And I like to call them belonging traumas because that's what they focus on. Last thing I'll say about the subject is that I'm not trying to one up anybody's traumas. Everybody's traumas are real. Everybody's traumas are valid. Everybody's traumas are at a maximum pain level, no matter what happens,

because otherwise you don't know other pain. We can't gloss over it because it's your personal maximum pain.

Shari: With that unique perspective, how have you wrapped your head around as each individual brings their own kind of traumas and experience to the workplace? Now we want to start creating that culture of belonging at work. How does that come to life when you know that you're adding all those complexities to it?

Dan: Well, um, one of the things I talk about in my book, initially my book was going to be about, um, it was really called, uh, creating belonging. And it was going to be focused on a leader who wants to create a sense of belonging, a culture of belonging in the workplace. And then I had this epiphany and I was like, wait a second, how can you create belonging in the workplace for employees when they may not have belonging in their personal lives? Because oftentimes people use work as to replace what they don't have in their personal lives. And step number one, in my view, for any leader who wants to consider these things, and I say that because the reality is that most, you don't have to lean into a culture of belonging. You might want to be transactional in the workplace. Totally fine. And I think that's actually perhaps welcome in a post COVID world where people do their own thing and then they, Work is just another thing. I'm kind of a fan of returning to transactional work. That being said, if somebody does want to lean into belonging in the workplace, the first thing is just to give space for employees to create belonging outside of work. And I didn't do that as a leader. When I ran 120 employees, I did not consider that whatsoever. Personal belonging is different in that it's a safety net. Interpersonal relationships is the first path to belonging. What I call casual encounters or micro-interactions with people you know, baristas, neighbors, that's a second path. There's four other paths we can double-click if you'd like. And we can have those paths at work, but it's really important to have it at home first.

Shari: Yeah, I'd like to hear more about the rest of those paths and how they help create that whole person.

Dan: If I may just take a step back. The first thing somebody has to understand is their belonging persona, their belonging archetype. And the first step is to map out your attachment style, which I just break down into secure and insecure. And then you've got to figure out your need to belong, either high or low. And there's very simple tests I lay out either on my website, that belongingquest.com slash quiz, it's free, or my book. You figure out your belonging archetype. You're either high need to belong, high secure attachment, then you're an eager belonger. You are, you can be an anxious belonger if you have a insecure attachment and high need to belong. By the way, eager belong is represented as a chimpanzee. Anxious belong is represented as a meerkat. The reluctant belonger, insecure attachment style, a low need to belong is represented by the snow leopard. And low need to belong, secure attachment is represented by the wolf. And that's an independent belonger. And you can just kind of think about what that means based on the animals I chose. Chimps are running around, picking their tribe mates' lice off and playing around and whatever. They have to be social. Anxious belongers are like meerkats. They pop up, look around, and go hang out in tunnels. Reluctant belongers, snow leopards, are alone and try to find a mate and then bounce. And then wolves can kind of do both. They're independent belongers. They can be on their own, lone wolf, or they can be part of the wolf pack. That's step one. Step two is identifying what your belonging fuel tank takes. And unlike any other fuel tank, the belonging fuel tank takes any kind of fuel. So it can be interpersonal relationships, like I mentioned. It can be these micro interactions or casual encounters. It can be group membership, which involves being in a crowd, going to events, kind of that collective effervescence as it's referred to. It can be self-esteem, things that make us feel good, getting awards, being recognized. It can be parasocial bonds, which are one-sided relationships, and they can even be fantasy relationships like in novels or TV shows, where we kind of lean into our favorite character. And finally, it's contemplative practices. You know, whatever it takes you to connect with the universe. It can be a walk in nature, it can be traveling, it can be stargazing, it can be praying. So those are the six paths to belonging. And interestingly, Shari, you can have each of those paths at work too. I'm thinking about the workplace as a platform for relationships,

for romantic partners, for self-esteem, for all these things. So once you give a space for the employee to have it in their personal lives, a leader can think about how to unlock those things in the workplace.

Shari: How do you think as a culture, you know, I've seen so many conversations recently. Let me back up a little. I've seen so many conversations recently around how adults make friends. And, you know, it's a conversation I've had with my husband. Our kids are out of the house now. And so we've had those kind of funny conversations. It's like, How do adults decide to make new friends, to create those groups that you talked about? And some of the ways that existed in the past don't exist anymore. There used to be a lot of clubs and different things that adults could get involved in. It just doesn't seem to be the same sort of environment that we're in anymore. So as you've gone down this road of belonging and started to look at that, some of those things that you mentioned, Where do those types of activities sit? Do we as employers need to create those opportunities for some of that connection? Do we need to help surface things in their community that they can be a part of? It's just fascinating to know how much has changed as a society, but that desire to belong is still there.

Dan: Yeah, a lot is coming up for me. As you mentioned this, obviously very topical, given the loneliness epidemic that's impacting people. That's number one. That's the context. Uh, number two is the, what I, what I've borrowed the term of crossroad moments. And as we get older, we have less crossroad moments. You know, when your kids were going to school, you had an opportunity to connect with the parents. When he started a new job, there was a crossroad moment. So as we get older, we have less crossroad moments. I mean, that's just life. First of all, creating a new crossroad moment can be done. It can be done now that you're an empty nester. You can maybe consider moving. You can maybe consider living somewhere else for a period of time. That's number one. But you do touch on what Robert Putnam has identified for the last century, which is this decrease in social capital in bowling alone. And subsequently, he had a second book that talks about how things are going to get better. I don't necessarily agree. But yes, it started with the television and supervisionization. When we moved out of the

city and we got television, entertainment became a family affair indoors. So now to your question. around what can adults do and what can employers do. Employers can create spaces for employees to feel a sense of belonging with some caveats. The first is remember the archetypes and don't force feed things to those who don't want it. Just because we get all the women or all the black folks in an organization doesn't mean they're going to feel a sense of belonging. So that's number one. And number two, you know, for me, when I ran my company, anybody who didn't drink the Kool-Aid, I automatically dismissed. I said, you're not acting like you belong here, so I'm going to treat you differently. You're not at the happy hour, so I'm not going to respect you. And that was a mistake. That was a mistake.

Shari: I think if you're not familiar with your work, you might think that some of those statements are pretty provocative.

Dan: Yes.

Shari: I think that's fair to call it out. I do agree that approaches to affinity groups have missed the mark when they focus on activities instead of focusing on the true connection that we desire for those groups and the impact we'd like them to have on the business. I mean, that's really where the excitement comes from when you can hear those perspectives and when you're just introducing another, you know, cultural activity group that I agree that misses the mark completely.

Dan: I could just touch on the last thing you said is like, how do adults do it? You know, know thyself as the Stoics taught us is like I said, step number one. Step two is creating these kind of interventions, these kind of discomfort. And I would say step three is developing what I refer to as belonging intelligence, five skills for belonging. And one of them is rejection navigation. You know, being okay with saying, Hey buddy, not for you. Or we say, you know what, this is not for me. So that's one way. Another, another one is what I refer to as social cultivation. It's finding a way to manage your circles in an authentic way. You know, not sending that annual holiday update or whatever, or like not just sending the postcard with just a picture and some print, you know, just

things like that. And, and that's a pretty basic, but again, I think the interventions are very important. I think, and I would say again, for the right archetypes, if you're a chimp, for example, starting groups, you know, when I moved to Boise, Idaho, I didn't know soul. So I started a men's group that ended up being people who are new to Boise, people who are entrepreneurial, and people who are committed, kind of change makers, committed to self-development. The last thing I'll say is to create a culture of belonging no matter where you are. It starts with hospitality. It starts with making people feel warm, feel like they can kick their legs up. Because that unlocks safety. And safety unlocks engagement. and engagement unlocks commitment, and commitment unlocks belonging. That's the five steps to create a sense of belonging in any team, any group.

Shari: Well, and that aligns with so many things that we know from psychology, from our approaches to employee experience, how we're talking about wanting employees to give discretionary effort. All of those things are wrapped up in somebody feeling like they belong in their environment and are getting the resources that they need socially, emotionally, to be able to do that. As you've thought about organizations focusing more on creating a sense of belonging, how should they be measuring their success in this area? I mean, we know that there's surveys out there that ask that question of, do you have a best friend at work? I don't know that that's as a valid statistic or because it depends on how you define best friend.

Dan: That's right.

Shari: So what metrics are our professionals or business leaders looking at?

Dan: Sure. So you, you hit the nail on that and I'm about to say something controversial as well. So just a trigger warning to listeners. but I would say the first thing is defining belonging. And to me, well, you know, to me, I, I've taken all the, all the definitions of belonging from the nineties when this term was first introduced, even though it was introduced by Maslow as that middle ring. And, you know, back, back in the day, which by the way, has been, has been reaffirmed as a affiliation in the kind of new Maslow's hierarchy of needs

released by a group out of university Arizona led by a professor Kendrick. So the point I'm making is, defining belonging. And I define that as the feeling of being accepted, valued, and seen in the group or environment that you're in. And that's kind of what, what creates a feeling. It's one of those things that one of the rare feelings we refer to as a sense of belonging, not just a feeling of belonging because we, we, you know, we sense it and it is kind of this fundamental human need. that we, a lot of people actually, again, trigger warning, like a Brene Brown would not necessarily admit that. It is a social thing. It's not, you don't get it by braving the wilderness. You get it by being social. And being social means different things for different people. It can be watching a favorite show. So, defining belonging. And you know, for best friend at work, instead of asking that, say, is there a colleague you can confide in? Which is a different question, because to me, that's what a best friend is. A best friend is a communal relationship, which means it's not quid pro quo. It's not transactional. It's not, you know, you tell me yours and I'll tell you mine. It's about being able to say something without expecting reciprocity. So that, that safety is a key part of it. So instead of asking best friend to work, you can ask that. Now let's go, let's talk about DEI for one second. It is my view that char leaders should focus on DEI while, while team leaders should focus on belonging. And I think when HR programs start to talk about belonging, you lose the authenticity. And DEI should be our metrics that guide our decisions. And to me, that's it. And there's some work on this concept of organizational fairness, which is really what we're after. And to me, it's that sweet spot in a Venn diagram that consists of DEI metrics, a sense of organizational fairness, and meritocracy. And that sweet spot is the culture of belonging.

Shari: If you were going to start your business over again from scratch, how would you, would you set things up? What kind of cultural conversations would you lay out or expectations would you have for your employees if you were going to do it again to make sure that there was a sense of belonging there?

Dan: So I've started a new business. I started at a boutique retreat center chain, and the first one's in Boise, Idaho. It's meant to help teams create a sense of belonging through shared experiences. Again, it depends on where I

am in my life. I'm now a dad. I have a nonprofit. I have like investments that I help. It goes back to like my goal and my goal is not as it wouldn't necessarily be to scale at all costs, even though that's kind of my nature. Um, and when you don't have that goal of scaling at all costs, you don't, you're not a jerk about it as much. Uh, but again, that had a time and place again, 20, like 2011 to 2018 it was before people had the great realization of COVID. So my new company is much, I'm totally fine with remote. I'm totally fine with that. Um, I think, I do think by the way, for leaders listening, while I think the research shows productivity does not change and McKinsey just released a study, productivity doesn't change remote hybrid or in person. I do think RTO return to return to office is very important for cultural belonging because you need that physical space. You need that community of place. Um, so I would, you know, on one hand, Shari, I want to say I wouldn't do anything differently cause like it was rad and like, The problem was I was replacing my void of belonging in my personal life with my work and therefore I had unrealistic expectations for employees. If I was doing it all over again, I would not raise money and therefore have less pressure and therefore really focus on creating the best possible work and not, you know, being a celebrity.

Shari: That's such a practical perspective, I think, that, you know, there's a lot that we can learn from our experiences that if we hadn't gone through them, we definitely wouldn't be where we're at today. So I appreciate the honesty there about, you know, how you would tackle that. As we wrap up our conversation and you think forward, you know, 10 years, and that's forever now, you used to say, hey, what's your five-year plan? It's like, well, what's your three-year plan? And maybe write it in pencil. Especially these days, every news cycle feels like a year. I'm like, whoa.

Dan: Right, right. How do you think we're going to see things like the concept of belonging evolving? And how do we prepare for that evolution, maybe?

Dan: Yeah, I think that it's a pendulum. On one hand is hustle porn. On the other hand is everybody's a creator. And I think it's a function of technological change. Obviously, with A.I., you're going to have less employees that are doing more. So that's number one, I think. I think that we will probably still

struggle with creating a face-to-face experience, and that'll continue to be important. And I encourage leaders to consider reallocating real estate budgets to in-person events, because that's what will bring people together. So all that being said, I think that in 10 years my hope is we'll be somewhere in the middle and my hope is that people find belonging however they want to find belonging. If it's in the workplace, fantastic. If it's in your personal life, even better. But just remember that if it's in the workplace, that is a transactional relationship that will disappear as soon as you're no longer there.

Shari: Such a good point around if you're creating that in the workplace and when you leave. And it doesn't matter your role or what company or whatever you think is going to be the case. So I appreciate those last thoughts. And I would also hope that by in 10 years, we would have burned every single you belong here sign.

Dan: Well, that kind of goes along the same vein as people who still refer to coworkers as family members.

Shari: Oh my goodness. That was one of our first values. We went through three iterations of values and one of them was teams or families. And then I was like, how do I fire my cousin?

Dan: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Shari: Well, this has been a great conversation. Thanks for jumping on with me and sharing a little bit about your story and the work that you do in the space of belonging.

Dan: Thank you so much.

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.