

People-First Leadership: Building Trust and Communication with Dr. Shari Simpson and guest Jeremy York, Lead Consultant and President at Invigorate HR

Speaker: Announcer

You're listening to 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.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Joining me today is Jeremy York, lead consultant and president at Invigorate HR. Jeremy helps leaders strengthen communication and trust so teams can perform and work better together. Jeremy, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Speaker: Jeremy York

Yeah, absolutely. Shari, thanks so much for having me. I'm totally excited. I love talking about these kinds of topics. And I'm kind of like what I say is like a little bit of an HR nerd and leadership nerd. I really enjoy trying to help other people understand, you know, how to be better leaders and how to really put people first. So I'm happy to be here today.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Oh, I love that. And you've spent years in HR. You co-authored *Work on Joy*. What convinced you that that people-first leadership approach isn't fluffy, that it's actually business critical?

Speaker: Jeremy York

Yeah, that's what a lot of people think, right? When they think that we're talking about putting people first, what does that really mean? Is that a bunch

of the fluff kinds of things? And I've watched organizations really kind of lose their best talent because of, you know, not really paying attention to the people. A lot of folks think that it's compensation or maybe, you know, that that's the reason why people were leaving, but it was really because managers treated people like task completing machines, right? Like they're not real people. And so, you know, I helped an organization at one point in time kind of take that shift that organizational shift from moving from task focus to more like people focused leadership, and they saw their turnover drop by double digits, and in one year which is astronomical right and really translated to the way that they started seeing their people and what they were doing. And so I think once people understand that the data is clear, that when we take employees and we help them feel value as individual people, right, not just like robots or machines, they understand that people perform better, they stay longer, they're a lot more loyal, and they bring a lot of this discretionary effort that you really can't mandate, right? And I think that's what people always want, that just, you know, that intrinsic motivation. And so people first leadership really isn't about the fluff. It's not about just being nice, but it's really about treating people like human beings and being smart about it and understanding how that translates all together.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I couldn't agree more. And I'm, I'm always amazed that these conversations we get into with leaders around this, because you're absolutely right. The data supports it. It's, you know, the, the business data, right? The business language support that this approach actually has impact to our, our revenue and to attracting customers and new clients. What, what do we have to say to our leadership team to get them over this hump, especially when they're like, well, I'm too busy to focus on dot, dot, dot.

Speaker: Jeremy York

Yeah, so that's a great question, because that's what we hear most of the time, right, Shari? It's like people are saying, oh, well, I've got these other things I have to do, or I don't have time to meet with my people. Well, it's it's a simple kind of shift in the way that you look at it, because your job as a manager or as a leader is the people. the people come first, not necessarily

the tasks. And we're measured so much by the tasks that we get done, but we don't realize or stop to think that we could never get those tasks completed if it wasn't for the people. And so we've got to help people understand that their job really is the people, then the work. So being able to understand what people need, what skills they might need to be developing, how we get them educated on different ways of doing things, how we just check in and ask, how are you doing? What do you need? How can I support you? Just some of those basic innate things that we want as human beings. I think we both could agree, right, that, you know, when we feel like that we're valued or that we are part of something bigger, we're a lot more motivated to go the extra mile to do those things. So It's really just kind of a paradigm shift for some of these leaders to shift from focusing on the work, the actual task, to how we get the task completed and get it done. And that way we can see managers or leaders being able to invest more in their people. And then we begin to see the people do more and get more and be more, which is really what we want overall.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Do you have some tactical advice for those leaders where this type of people-collecting data, is the way I'd like to call it, doesn't come naturally to them? So, you know, I'll give you an example. I have Wu and Relator as my top, you know, CliftonStrengthsFinders. And so Also in that mix is input, and a lot of people would say, well, that's very data-driven. But for me, that input is actually I collect people data. So I'm very cognizant of, you mentioned one time your favorite candy was Axe. That goes in the vault, and the next time I'm at the store, I grab your favorite candy, right? So for me, that's a pretty natural thing to do. That isn't always a natural thing for some leaders to do. And so I have found that giving them some tactical, here's how you begin this process is helpful to get them over that hump. What have you seen work?

Speaker: Jeremy York

Well, that's interesting because you mentioned your CliftonStrengths and what they are. And for me, like, you know, Achiever is like one of my top five, right? Which means that I feel like I constantly have to be doing something, which means that I'm really focused a lot more on results. And that makes me feel

good. But what doesn't always align with that is the people element of that, right? Because we're a lot of times we're trained to think about, you know, whatever tasks we can get done, we check off the list, that's achievement, that feels good, that we're making progress. And we're kind of trained or that's kind of like beat into our minds. That's what success looks like. Right. And so for a lot of folks, that's where we think that that achievement comes in. Well, really, achievement is more about how we're actually actually getting things done, not always just a checklist. So I say that to come back to your original question about tactical advice, part of it is to have this mind shift of moving past checking the box as achievement to thinking about how do I support and develop my people as achievement? What does that look like? Because if we're skilling up and training up our people and developing them, finding out what they need, not just, you know, always skill wise, but also what do they need from us as a leader and from a manager, right? What do they need from that support? And to be able to provide that to them, what we're doing is, is that we're building up what I call their tool belt, right? We're giving them more tools to be able to do more things in the future. That way we become less of a task manager and more of a people development. So our time is now spent, it's shifted to being more people focused than task focused because the people are taking care of the tasks now. So that's a tactical thing is to let's stop creating the checklist. Even though I love Shari, I love a checklist. I love a good checklist and I get it because I feel so accomplished when I mark things off my list, right? But we have to have that paradigm shift and that that reset of saying, OK, that doesn't necessarily mean success. That just means that we've got something off of our plate to free up more time where we really have to think about measurement is looking at people and spending time with them. So another tactical element of that would be. You know, instead of going to your weekly staff meetings or your huddles or whatever you're doing and asking for an update, well, where are you at on this? Have you got this done? Is this completed yet? Sounds pretty typical, right? Of a manager of a leader checking in. Start by saying things like, what are you struggling with this week? What are what challenges are you facing with this? What you know, where do you need my help? Where can I best support you in getting this done now? We're kind of saying the same things,

but we're doing it in a more people focused and centered way, which then allows people to take more ownership. When I say, what's the status update on this? What's going here? When's that done? I'm owning that versus saying, what challenges are you facing on this? How are you progressing on this? That's allowing the person to own it. So it really is just kind of that mind shift and change or how we look at the work or some of those tactical things.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Well, and I love the example you gave because I think it's a great place to highlight where things like automation and tools can really augment and advance the relationship there. If you can take that tactical check-in stuff, push that into a system or a dashboard, right, where the leader and the employee can use that as the source of truth for some of those things, then those one-on-one conversations become so powerful because then you start to have that relationship conversation rather than the check the box.

Speaker: Jeremy York

Yes, absolutely. And, and what you're talking about there is through like some of those automation kinds of things is, again, is that we've had a tendency to automate the wrong things, right? What we want to do is automate the administrative tasks that don't always require human judgment. Those are the things we should be automating. Things like scheduling, data entry, status tracking, routine communications, those kinds of things. Then we can use that freed up time, as I kind of mentioned before, for the things that only humans can do, right? And that's going to be things like having coaching conversations, creating problem solving, you know, having more innovation conversations, relationship building, even strategic thinking, right? We always feel like we don't have time for those things. And the irony behind a lot of this is Shari is that we like to automate sometimes the human stuff. Why? Because we think that takes more time when the effort is that it actually has more value and yields better results. than sending generic recognition messaging or anything like that, right? So we really have to flip that script on we thinking about how we automate things and looking at that. And, and the biggest part of this is when we think about why this people first leadership approach is so important is because it builds trust and trust is the utter foundation of any

relationship, whether it's personal or whether it's work related. And we really need to focus more on tasks that are trust-building with our people, as we put them first.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I love that. You know, and I think it aligns very well with your approach to a joy-powered workplace. And I want to talk about that a little bit. I'd like to hear more about what that looks like from a behaviors and systems perspective, and maybe not so much like the vibe of joy, but like, what's the strategy in that?

Speaker: Jeremy York

Yeah. So, you know, this this whole idea of joy powered workplaces or people first workplaces is really what it's about. Right. And we think about workplaces where people feel good about the work they do. Right. You know, everyone's probably had a job where they dreaded to go in every day and know what that does not only to you physically, but what it also does to you emotionally. Right, but a workplace that's people first this joy power element is a workplace that has systems that respect people's humanity. I'm going to pause there and I'm going to say it again, because this is important, that it has systems that respect people's humanity. Yep. And those are things like having, you know, meeting free focus time to be able to do work, having actual lunch breaks, having a psychologically safe work environment and permission to say, I need help. You know, a work environment that allows people to make mistakes, a work environment that allows people to be honest and transparent about what they're feeling and what's going on. And from a manager standpoint, behaviorally, it really looks like the manager celebrating the small wins. Also, the manager. Here's the big one. This is this is one we see a lot. Right. That doesn't happen is managers admitting their own mistakes. And wow, what a way to be able to show employees that you have a safe environment. Right. And so it's also looking at flexibility and treating that as a trust factor, as opposed to something that has to be earned. Because a lot of places, flexibility is something you've got to put your time in or you've got to show me this, your dedication to get flexibility. But what if we looked at flexibility as a trust factor, that I trust you to do your work, I believe in you. I know you take

ownership for what you do. So I want to trust you enough to allow flexibility to be part of that. So those are things we look at. Also, you know, like in performance reviews, that's another part, right, is instead of just focusing on the gaps and what people aren't doing, let's focus in on what they are doing right. Let's focus in on growth opportunities. Let's focus in on ways to get them to the next level. Right. And those are all things we could look at. Heck, we could even do some succession planning. Right. And talk about what that looks like. Ask the person, where do you want to go? What do you want to be? You know, what does that look like? What's your future? So it's really when we think about this, you know, this joy, Howard kind of workplace people first workplace. It's not about, you know, ping pong tables or vending machines or pizza parties. Those, yeah, make people feel good a little bit, but that doesn't create that emotional kind of response that people need to be connected to the organization. Really, what we've got to do is create these conditions where people can do the meaningful work without unnecessary obstacles to really allow us to show how much we really value and appreciate what they bring to the table. I know that was a long answer for all of that, but hopefully I got all of those places out there and you followed me.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

No, I did. I'm curious, though, do you think that the way that shows up changes at all if the leader is working with frontline employees versus desk employees?

Speaker: Jeremy York

Yeah, absolutely. The way it's delivered is different, but the core of it all is really the same. And that is that everyone needs to feel valued. Everyone needs to feel heard. Everyone needs to be developed and focused. So that's the core of it. But what changes is really the delivery method behind it. So let's take frontline teams. They need leadership presence where the work is being done, where it's happening. So they need those quick huddles. And really, they should be doing quick huddles instead of long meetings because people feel like, I'm not doing what I need to do. You're taking up my time. I'm feeling behind. They also need recognition that respects their time. And they also need recognition in real time of what's happening and what's going on. desk-

based employees or teams, right? They might need more intentional connection because they're not shoulder-to-shoulder working together all the time like someone out on a production floor or something like that. But it's, you know, whether or not the person is, you know, in a plant or whether they're behind a computer, the fundamental question really here is the same. Does my leader see me as a person or a productivity unit? This is what it all comes down to. How am I feeling about the way my employer, my manager, my supervisor, whomever, sees me? Am I a person, a human being, or am I just a number? And I know it's kind of cliché to say that, you know, because we've been talking about this for decades, right? About people feeling like people versus a number. But I say, put yourself in those shoes. Think about as a customer, how you feel as being treated as a human being, as a true customer, or as a number. That feeling is the same when we look at it in the workplace.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Well, and it's interesting that concept of employee as customer. I think we lose that sometimes. And it's fascinating because we refer to our employees as talent, right? And that translates into, you know, when you think about baseball players, right? The talent they bring, or actors and actresses, the talent they bring and how they get treated. But we often miss that in our own approach to working with employees and showing up for them. You talked a lot about kind of the positive approach to this, the things that we need to be doing, right, the behaviors that we need to elicit as leadership. What are some common leadership behaviors you think that feels productive, but it's really quietly damaging the culture?

Speaker: Jeremy York

I think one of the biggest things here, and we can blame our current work environments and just the world we work in and having technology for this really, but it's really responding to every work email within minutes or working nights and late nights and weekends and sending emails during those time periods and all of that. A lot of leaders think that they're modeling dedication by doing this, but they're actually putting out there these signals that work-life balance is a myth, that people start to see, oh, is that what I'm supposed to

be doing to be successful? And they put out this unsustainable expectation that people start to see. And a lot of times, just because you're doing that, it doesn't really even relate. to dedication. For example, I worked somewhere one time, Shari, where I remember the CEO coming up talking about someone else on the team. It was like, hey, that person is just so dedicated. You know, they stay here late at night. You know, they're up, you know, here early in the morning sending emails and this, that and the other. And, you know, me being in, you know, the head of HR thinking to myself, well, then why is this person on a performance improvement plan? Because they're not getting their work done. I mean, and not doing it right. It's one of those things where this leader had this idea that they thought this person was so great, but in reality, it wasn't. So a lot of these things that people think they're modeling, they're not, right? It's really not what it is. And the team really starts to see behaviors that you're doing, and they start to say, Oh, is that what I should be doing? Should I be available? Am I supposed to be doing this? Or they start to feel anxiety, they get that email on a Saturday, and they from their manager or on a Sunday, or 10 o'clock at night and thinking they're supposed to have that, or a manager sends an email at 10 o'clock. And then first thing the next morning, they say, Hey, did you see my email? And the person's like, I haven't even gotten to my desk yet. Like, you know what that is. So it's those kinds of behaviors that actually really don't help us be productive and put people first. So we really have to look at, you know, a culture of humanity, setting boundaries, and a lot of times people are uncomfortable with the setting boundaries at work, but we have to make that part of who we are a workplace culture. And also saying like taking time off is okay. I know for me, like I tell my staff, like, Hey, I'm going to be off these days and I'm really looking for R&R, right? A little rest or relaxation. I'm not going to recover or someone else on my team will be going on vacation. I'll say, Hey, I don't want you to work during this time. Like, I want you to take this time off for you. So it's all about really being very intentional about some of those behaviors to create that environment where people really do feel like, Hey, I am being treated like a human being.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I like the example around the email because I think that there is an

opportunity to work the way that is best for you as a human, right? Like you might be in a situation where let's say you have littles at home and you do have a flexible organization. So sometimes you are working maybe 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. before you get them out the door and then you're working a night again. And having those upfront conversations about what is the actual expectation of response in general? What are the tools to help you work the way you want to work, but also not put pressure on other teammates? For example, the send later functionality in email is a great tool, right? Like if you're working at 10 o'clock at night, that's fine. Just Set that to hit at 9 a.m. tomorrow morning or something, right? There's ways to still work the way that you want to work, but it goes to communication. And I love that you mentioned boundaries because one of the things that I've started to do is that as I have new leadership that I report into, one of the first few questions I ask is, how do you like communication? Are you the kind of leader who wants me to Give you a deck in advance of our meeting? Do you want to ideate real time? Is email your preferred method? Is Teams? You know, my current supervisor, email is not it. If you want something done, you don't send an email. You send a Teams, you send a text message. And I had to get used to that, but it was because we had the good conversation about expectations and communication, that kind of stuff. So I love that you gave all those examples because I think it's so, it goes back to the idea of communication and treating people like actual people. So love that. You know, as we wrap our conversation, what's one thing you really hope leaders can walk away with in this conversation to bring into their next their next meeting?

Speaker: Jeremy York

Flip the script. Have a different mindset, right? Start your next meeting by asking your team, how's everyone really doing today? Like, how are you holding up with managing all the work that we have going on, right? And then really pause long enough to allow people to respond and actually You hear the answer, right? Not not this as a check the box icebreaker. I hate those kinds of things, right? But it's the genuine question where you're prepared to respond with empathy and action, right? You know, if we're looking at developing this kind of culture, you know, this culture change starts with small. It's not some big program. It's not something we just like have a big launch and do all of

this. It's it's small acts of genuine care. empathy, concern, right? And what people want from us more than anything is authenticity. and they want an authentic manager, one that's transparent, that will be honest with them, and all of these kinds of things, this can shift the entire tone of how your team experiences leadership, right? And move away from an us versus them to a we, because now you start to show you're human, they're human, we're treating everyone that way, and people really begin to establish that trust and build those bonds. And, you know, one of the things that I recently have a book coming out called People Not Tasks, A Leader's Guide to Building Solid Employees Relationship. There's five pillars on that, and that is trust, transparency, respect, empathy and kindness. And those are all things that we have to embody as leaders to show that human element and to really treat our people and put them first overall.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Well, Jeremy, this was such a great conversation. Thank you so much for sitting down with me for a few minutes.

Speaker: Jeremy York

Absolutely. Well, thank you for having me. Like I said, I love talking about these kinds of things and I love the dialogue.

Speaker: Announcer

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