

HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson and Alex Seiler, Founder and Chief People Officer of Alex Seiler LLC

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 Alex Seiler, founder and chief people officer of Alex Seiler LLC. With nearly 20 years of global experience building people strategies, Alex is known for shaping workplaces where culture and performance thrive side by side. Alex, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

Thanks for having me, Shari. I really appreciate it.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

So you have described yourself as a cultural jigsaw puzzle. Tell me a little bit about that and how that shaped your leadership philosophy.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

I think it's actually a term I've started using more recently because I think it was reflective of who I am really. I'm half British, I'm half Swiss. I was born and raised in Hong Kong and I've been in the US for 21 years. So I'm a little bit of a hodgepodge of everything. So I think as far as culture goes, I think living between these different cultures, I call myself a third culture kid. It teaches you that there's no single right way to see the world. So I think fundamentally, it shaped my leadership by replacing certainty with curiosity. So I look at everything through a curious lens. And then instead of thinking everything comes from a playbook, I always ask the question, what am I not seeing? Whose perspective am I missing, right? And I think that's where the puzzle

comes into play because it's kind of like, you know, I'm constantly adding new pieces to it and trying to figure out how those pieces come together. And so I think it has made me very comfortable with ambiguity and also skilled at translating between different worldviews, which I think, you know, is key when you're building an inclusive organization.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

What a unique background to have and talk about, you know, bringing your different lenses to the table. As you've gone through those different experiences, worked across different industries, what are maybe some of the truths that you have found about people and culture that are universal?

Speaker: Alex Seiler

Yeah, I think, you know, and I think it's, I'm sure, as you know, like, the further you go along in your career, your thinking also changes and evolves, right? And I think one of the things that, like, I have really come to realize is that people don't resist change, they resist loss. is one thing I've really learned. And so I think if regardless of sort of industry, geography, demographic, I think this all holds true. So I think when transformation fails, it usually is because leaders focused on the destination, like, you know, where you're headed, without honoring what people are actually leaving behind. So, you know, whether it's a startup, whether it's a longstanding sort of manufacturer, culture, I think, requires those mourning. I know it sounds strange to say these two things get mourning rituals, not just vision statements. Like what are we losing as well as what are we now moving towards? So I think it gives psychological safety, it's not just built through policies, but also through patterns. So I think that employees kind of learn when they're truly safe, not from what you say in all hands meetings, but when you actually make mistakes or challenge an idea as well.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I couldn't agree more. I just got back from speaking at the Wisconsin State SHRM Conference and I talked about, well, basically like emotional intelligence and why we need to talk about emotions at work and how that affects leadership. And I centered it around the movie Inside Out. If you've ever seen

that movie, it's a kid's movie. It's a cartoon. Yeah, and I talked about each one of those emotions actually has a place in the workplace. And I kind of honed in on that sadness one for a little bit, because I talked about my own experience having been in a company a long time, I've been where I'm at almost nine years, and I've had several leadership changes, both my own supervisor, but also leadership of the org that I sat in. And some of those changes I really felt like I was grieving for what we had compared to what was going to be. And it's not that the what was going to be the new thing was bad. Right. I think that's kind of like a false statement that having a new leader is you're going to have a bad leader, a bad experience. It's just different. You're right. And so. How do you work with leadership to understand creating that new sense of belonging in that group as you're experiencing change to really hone in on that particular emotion and give space for the sadness and the grief and potentially anger? And now those other things.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

I think and it's such a good point. Like I think I've learned over time, like grief and loss can happen in so many different avenues. Right. And to your point, both personally and professionally. And I think part of it is just acknowledging and being able to talk about it, not pretending it didn't happen. And I think that I think sometimes people feel like they need to have an answer to things like that. But sometimes people just want to be heard. Right. And I think that fits into belonging in a big way as well. I think. I also think that in some cultures, I think belonging means harmony and like fitting in seamlessly. But also in others, it means being valued precisely for what makes you different. Right. So I think a lot of, you know, I think HR leaders can fail when they export one definition everywhere because it doesn't work everywhere. Right. Every culture at every company is different. It's nuanced. And you need to fully understand the people in the business to really figure out what belonging looks like there. I think for me it's always been about creating the conditions where different belonging styles can come together and contribute. And that doesn't mean whether you're an extrovert or somebody that is a quiet contributor. So I think it really becomes real when people don't have to choose between authenticity and professional success. And I think that's become very evident to me as I've got older. I want to be able to speak my mind, but also

be successful at the same time. And I think you can do both. And I think sometimes we've been so focused on having this polished view on everything. And sometimes just like life, it's very messy.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I think it comes from that curiosity piece that you mentioned earlier in a really natural way that you can be curious and ask questions and not seem contrarian or rude or whatever. You're really trying to seek to understand. I'm thinking about some of our younger career professionals that are listening to this. They might be hearing, OK, great. Now I have to understand how to investigate belonging inside of my organization. And what if I have, you know, a multicultural, global environment? Where do they begin to dive into that, to really understand it? And it's not an engagement survey. So, right. It's more complex than that.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

I think starting off by just being curious is so important. You can't mandate curiosity there either. That's not something you can say, please ensure you're curious. I mean, I know some people have it in value statements, but I think that HR can nurture curiosity by designing systems that reward questions, not just answers. So I think that's a big starting point. So what do I mean by that? I think you know, celebrating, I know this is going to sound weird, but celebrating productive failure in performance reviews, or creating lateral mobility pathways that allow for, you know, breadth and linear progression versus upward mobility, you know, because everyone, when they hear growth, they think, oh, that must come with a bonus and a promotion, right? And growth that looks different to different people. And protecting time for exploration that has no immediate ROI. I think you and I know everything we look at these days, it's like, what is the ROI? What will I get from that? Sometimes things just take time, right, to see the outputs of them. The other example I use is when people constantly do restructurings. How do you know if the last restructuring actually worked because you've done another one in a matter of months? Right? So it's giving things enough time to see if they actually are working, if the change is actually working. And then I also think modeling curiosity from the leadership level so that that trickles down. So one

of my biggest, you know, one of the things I, the kind of CEOs in particular that I love to work with are the ones that say, I know what I know, and I don't know what I don't know, and let's figure it out together. And to me, that just immediately says that we can be organizationally curious together.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Well, and that, that time and space to be curious and think, it's a concept that we use in our personal lives, you know, in our interpersonal relationships, we're not making these, you know, ROI decisions, you know, we're thinking about the impact, right. And we're, we're trying to understand their relationships and we ask curious questions to our significant others and the people we love around us and we remind ourselves that we tell ourselves stories, right? We make up things in our head that when we don't have all the information, we also do that in the workplace, but we have this different expectation on the execution of that. And so I think it leads to, you know, as HR is sitting in this space now where they're really strategic powerhouses compared to these, you know, tactical admins that they used to be looked at, they balance that structure of business impact ROI, but really bringing the humanity back to the relationships and the work that we do.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

Yeah, it's, it's a hard one, right? I'm not gonna lie. I'm not gonna be like, yes, you'll just figure it out tomorrow. Like it's I think, well, first of all, I think that sometimes what gets lost, to be fair, is that like, HR strategies should recognize that structure is humanity, first of all. Like people appreciate clear processes. They appreciate transparent criteria. They appreciate consistent frameworks. And those aren't the opposite of human-centered work. They're actually what allows somebody to show up fully in the work that they do, right? I think, listen, I, the term ambiguity, I've been so used to, you know, companies throw out like you're going to be living in an ambiguous environment. I can do it. We can all do it. but I think it also favors the privilege that can do that. So structure creates more equity and I think the balance comes in building systems that are flexible enough to accommodate individual circumstances while maintaining that sense of fairness. I always kind of think of it like the example I always use is kind of random, but like jazz, you need

the musical structure to enable that sort of improvisation, but rigid adherence to the sheet music kills the soul of the performance, right? So it's kind of like, you know, you've got to think about that when we think about structure and humanity in the workplace as well. And I think as far as what you were saying about, you know, culture and ROI, I think we need to stop trying to put a dollar figure on culture and start tracking the cost of its absence. I think that's like, what is getting in the way of doing that, right? And basically, the things that I would mention are track what I call organizational drag, the bureaucracy, the politics, the fear that slow everything down, because that's what makes things so much harder.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I couldn't agree more. And what a great analogy that... You got me all... I couldn't agree more because, you know, there is that organizational drag measuring that. That's such a good way to look at it because it really does refocus on the things that prevent us from being the most successful, living our best lives in our workplaces, you know, being able to give as much as we can give in a way that's safe and healthy and, you know, doesn't lead to burnout. And so much of our time is spent on some of that drag. You know, I think of all the peers I have talked to over the years who talk about this concept around You know, I'm in meetings all day back to back to back to back. When am I actually supposed to get my work done? You know, and we've created that environment, that expectation that that's what good or success looks like. And so I think that's such a good point of that analogy around around jazz and around thinking about, yeah, you need the mechanics, but you can't lose the excitement and the originality that everybody brings to the table to create this beautiful music. So keep using that. That's wonderful. Hopefully our audience is writing that down and putting that on the board. So I love that. You know, I want to talk a little bit about talent development. You know, you did talk about, you know, thinking about talent development from a broader perspective, not just climbing the ladder. We've been talking about this for years now, that there's definitely a shift happening on how we think about talent. How have you helped coach people to approach that different mentality when it comes to talent development, especially when the paths aren't as linear as they used to be and that can get complicated for an HR business leader to help articulate that and design it inside their organizations?

Speaker: Alex Seiler

Yeah, absolutely. It's such a great question as well. I think the way that I look at it and I coach people is that we need to stop developing people for jobs and start developing capabilities, not careers. I mean, AI is a great example of that, right? We're going to constantly come up against new things in the workforce, in the workplace that we have not come across, that our career has not prepared us for. So having that learning agility and that ability to have, pick up new things and have that literacy and capability are going to be so important. So I think it's about building what I call a personal skill portfolio that

employees curate based on what energizes them and what the world needs, not what the old chart prescribes. Right. And I think that's a very different sort of approach. So I, you know, we, The way I look at it is, you know, in the past we've always talked about career ladders. Now I like to think of it as career lattices. So multiple pathways, right? So it could be diagonal moves. It could be temporary assignments. It could be even moving backwards to build new muscles and then try something new. So what I'd like to really see is that the development conversation shift from where do you want to be in five years, which, you know, everyone has asked it in an interview since the dawn of time, to what do you want to be able to do that you can't do now and what problems do you want to be equipped to solve? I think those are the questions that I've started feeding into any interviews that I do as well.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

What great questions. Wow. I want to switch gears just a little bit and talk about you personally. Cause you've had such an amazing experience, worked for different organizations. You know, what made you decide in your career, Hey, you know, it's time for me to do my own thing.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

Yeah. Yeah, I can imagine. I get that question a fair bit these days since I've been doing fractional work and consulting. I'll be honest, it was a couple of things. It was, first of all, it was very opportunistic, right? So when I was, at the end of 2023, I was coming off a sabbatical for personal reasons, and I advise four startups in the HR tech space. And one of them knew I was coming back from a sabbatical and said, Hey, would you be, we're starting to scale and grow the business. Would you be open to helping us do that as a fractional CPO? And I'm like, well, timing is everything. So sure. And then additionally, right, the market wasn't great. So I was like, and I'd always been kind of interested in being my own boss and testing that out and pushing my limits as far as like, what's it like to be a business owner? And so I think all of those things sort of came together at the same time. And so it was a multitude of those different factors that led me to doing it. And I'm so glad I have because I've now seen different sides of what it means to work in HR, whether it's for a company or for various clients. And the other thing I said, it doesn't need to

be forever. I think some people think it has to be one or the other, but I can say, I've definitely said it could be for a reason or a season, depending on how you look at it as well.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I love that. With this, this space that you're in now, if you could give advice to those that are in HR about kind of, you know, redesigning or blowing up or trying something new from a traditional HR process perspective, you know, what's the one thing that you would say, Hey, you know what, stop doing that this way, go forward and really change and do it this way, because this is what I've seen that's been more successful.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

So there's a couple of things I would say to that. So I would say, well, first of all, I can tell you one of my biggest pet peeves, and sadly it's still happening, is the term culture fit. It's one of the most damaging concepts in HR from my perspective. So It's like gatekeeping dressed up as discernment, right? I'm like, we're not looking for somebody to conform. That goes against belonging. And we're looking for people to sort of add to a culture. So I really, I want organizations to use the culture ad or culture contribution. People can kind of, who can essentially honor your existing values, but also expand on them, right? So I think HR needs to do a better job of challenging the idea that culture is something to preserve versus it's also something to add and to expand to. So I think, like anything, cultures, healthy cultures evolve through, I think, constructive friction, or as I like to say, healthy tension, not comfortable consensus, right? So I always say, my big question is, you know, instead of saying, do they fit? You know, the question really is, what do they help us become? Right? So, and I think it's kind of shifting that narrative.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Alex, you're giving us some really great bombs here on this episode. You I mean, you're good. I feel like I feel like you're bringing out the best in me today. Sorry. I appreciate it. Hopefully people are taking notes. You know, how do you how do you personally stay so so grounded and creative in in this type of a field? You know, I I've joked about this before is when you You talk to baby

HR people, they're like, oh, I'm getting into it because I want to help people and I love them. And those of us that are veterans in the field, while that is true, we still like to help people. There is a certain nostalgia and a little bit of the curtain that's been wiped away. And we realize the complexity of people and it's really hard. So how do you stay so creative?

Speaker: Alex Seiler

It's a great question. I think, first of all, I still allow myself to be surprised. That's the one thing I would also say, first and foremost. I also think, to your point, I always say people that are starting out in HR do say, I want to be a people person. And I'm like, sometimes people don't really like HR. So how are you going to approach those people? So I don't want to kill that naivete, but yeah, there is something to be said about the growth that comes with doing this for a much longer period of time. But I think for me, what I've also learned is that creative work requires white space, not hustle culture. I'm really tired of hustle culture. I think I was part of hustle culture for so long and enabled it. So for me, staying grounded means protecting time for non-productive activities, right? So reading things outside of your field, conversations with no agenda, right? physical movement. I'm a big like walking in the countryside. Even boredom, right? Like just being really comfortable with quietness and boredom. So I think the best ideas don't come from grinding harder. They actually emerge in the space between thoughts and mindfulness as well. So I think Practically speaking, some of the things I do is strict boundaries on meeting schedules, thinking walks are big things for me to protect the calendar time, and diverse inputs. I like to follow and read and follow different things to open up my perspectives and not make assumptions. One of my longest standing comments has been, don't make assumptions, always ask the question.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

I love that. And it has totally teed me up for my last question for you. And I think I'm asking it this way on purpose because I think we don't ask this question enough. We ask a different one. Here's the question. What do you wish more executives would ask their H.R. leaders?

Speaker: Alex Seiler

That's a great one. I think that. The question that I would say is and it's kind of to your point, yeah, it's nice because it's spinning it on its head a little bit is what are we optimizing for and who does that leave behind? And the reason I say that is I, and I even did a post about this recently, is we've got to be honest with ourselves. HR is about trade-offs. You can't do everything right. And you're not always going to make everybody happy, but you also need to keep in mind if you are doing certain things, what you're not doing and how that impacts other people. And I think sort of really explicitly calling those out and inviting those conversations in. And then I think it really starts transforming HR into more of a strategic partner because you're building truly equitable and innovative workplaces as well.

Speaker: Shari Simpson

Well, Alex, this was such a good conversation. Hopefully our audience got a ton of it. I got a ton out of it. I'm going to go back and re-listen and write some notes of my own. So thank you for sitting down and chatting with me today.

Speaker: Alex Seiler

Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it. I've enjoyed it as well.

Speaker: Announcer

I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at TheHRMixTay.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.