

HR Mixtape | Hosted by Dr. Shari Simpson | Guest: Christy Engler, Owner, New Day HR

Announcer: You're listening to the HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now. Joining me today is Christy Engler, owner of New Day HR. Christy supports small and growing businesses with practical HR solutions that protect people and reduce risk.

Christy Engler: Hi, Shari. Thanks so much for having me.

Shari: So you've spent 20 plus years in small business HR, and just that beginning of that sentence gives me anxiety. So what keeps you passionate about this space?

Christy Engler: You know, small business is so interesting, but it really is fueling our world and our economy. And I don't think people really understand that nearly half of our workforce is employed by small businesses. And it's so cool, like I've been able to walk into different types of organizations and I have no idea what they actually do. And then you actually get to see their operations and I'm like, oh my gosh, I had no idea that's how that became a thing, you know, or whatever. So it's amazing what goes on in those organizations and what a lot of them are able to do with such small populations. But I've also just seen such wonderful care of people, culture. I mean, I've seen some amazing, you know, things happen between employer and employee in those situations. So that's what keeps it going for me is how can I help? How can I help contribute to this? That's really what does it.

Shari: Well, and it's so impactful. You can see it in a much different way than you can see it in a big organization for sure. Absolutely. You also have some very unique things inside small business from a problem perspective, right? Like in a large organization, you can kind of sometimes let problems fester a little bit because you have so many employees. But people problems in a small business creates a lot of chaos. What are the things that you've seen that if HR doesn't handle right away, it's just going to continue to snowball?

Christy Engler: So it's funny. I had an owner that I worked with for many years, and he was a wonderful individual and very typical entrepreneur. And so every time he would go to a conference or read a new book, he would want to flip the company on its head, you know, oh, we should be doing this, we should be doing that. And the problem with a lot of it was he was taking advice from people in organizations significantly larger than his. So doing those types of things is a lot harder in a small business. And quite frankly, things were going really well. He had a great business, he had a great setup. And so every time he would do this, then his leadership team would come to me and they would start complaining. And, you know, oh, he's doing it again. And, you know, we've just got things sorted out. And here he's trying to make the change and, you know, and just all of that kind of stuff. And that is where, honestly, I had to go to him and have a very honest conversation. And honestly, I said, Dave, I need you to stop reading books. And he was like, what are you talking about? You know, because I, but I had to be direct with him. I had to be frank. Hey, you're doing this and here's what's happening. And I don't, you know, you have great intentions, but we don't need to flip this every time you come across a new idea, you know, kind of thing. So it's those types of opportunities, quite frankly, that a truly strong HR partner has to be able to have that conversation with an owner. Because if you don't interrupt in that type of chaos, that can get out of control really quick.

Shari: I like that you really leaned into that ownership because it plays into kind of like the next thing I wanted to ask you about was, what are some of the biggest myths that you've experienced owners or leaders having about HR specifically? I know that I've talked with people in the business space and they might be 30 employees and they're like, yeah, we're too small for HR or we're too small for that function. And it hurts my soul when I hear that. So you've been working in this space for so long. How did those conversations go for you?

Christy Engler: You know, it was interesting because I grew up in HR in the PEO space and then in the ASL, so outsourcing space. So a lot of those clients, they had already recognized that they needed something and had made that move to either join, you know, some type of outsourcing company. So without a

doubt, you still have those conversations all the time. And I tell people, even if you have one employee, you already have liability. I was talking with somebody not too long ago, same conversation. Well, we only have six people. Okay. We have a person in Texas. Okay. Are you aware that if you let this person go that you have to pay them right away? What? There's things. There's laws that apply and sometimes they apply even with one person. You've got to be ready for that. So even if you have a single employee, you need to know some stuff and at least have somebody to call when things happen.

Shari: Well, and that's why it's so great having, you know, all of these amazing consultants that exist out there in the HR space who have cut their teeth in all these different environments. So I love seeing, you know, those who have transitioned into that consulting space. If you were advising somebody from the very beginning, right? You're the first HR person to walk into this organization for that maybe 50 to 200 person company. What are the foundations that you have to get right? And I guess I will caveat this beyond the table stakes, right? Like, we know we have to get payroll right. Like, I'm not talking about that stuff.

Christy Engler: Yeah, that's a great question. That's usually the thing. Right? Unfortunately, a lot of organizations that I end up working with come to me because something went wrong. That's usually, unfortunately, where we're starting from, which is a terrible place to start, but it's not uncommon that something happened, right? Something went wrong. So, outside of the basics, yes, have to get people paid, have to get benefits administered. Those are the two pillars, you know, but I always tell business owners, you've got to have the foundation laid. Everybody usually wants to jump to the fun. They want to talk about, you know, social engagement and parties and recognizing it, people and all, you know, social outreach, all the great stuff that that's awesome. But they don't have a handbook. They don't have job descriptions. Their managers aren't being trained. They don't have their employee files in line. These are the, those are the four things that I consider the HR foundation. And I'm like, okay, great. Let's have fun. Let's do all the, all the stuff, but let's get your foundation so that your house is in order so that if anything comes

up, you're ready. You've got it. You're, you're good to go. We'll be good to go for ever once we have all those things in place. And that's where we can start.

Shari: And I think sometimes that conversation around getting those other table legs in place, sometimes they think that means you have to be boring. You have to be the policy police, right? You have to, like, introduce bureaucracy. You don't have to do any of those things. These are, you know, what does the handbook look like for your organization? It can be quirky and fun and all the things, you know, but, like, we got to make sure the I-9s are taken care of. We got to make sure we know who's an employee and who's a 1099, right? All of those different things. How have you had that conversation to help change the narrative about what we can actually bring to the table? Because so many times we get stuck in that policy police bucket.

Christy Engler: So it's interesting, too, because a lot of folks think that, OK, if I start doing these things, it's going to take away from our culture. And so I have to show them how, no, this is actually going to enhance your culture. First of all, where's culture come from? It comes from you. It's not coming from me. Right? And it's not coming from the handbook. That, you know, if that's where you think your culture is coming from, we have a serious problem. We have a bigger conversation we need to have. So let's, you know, let's talk about that and where does this culture actually come from? And then let's talk about that culture and then trickle it down. What can all of those supportive things mean and look like so that it is fun in your organization and it does support what you're trying to get done, but at the same time keeps you legally compliant and keeps you out of hot water. You know, as much as we want to have great trusting relationships and we want everybody to be on the same page and be engaged, you know, the reality is people are people and things are going to happen. Things are going to come up. And as an employer, you just need to be ready for that.

Shari: As you've worked with other HR leaders in this space, what are some of the automations that you're seeing these smaller HR teams and HR departments of one start to implement so that they can have the right systems in place and the right automation so that they can do that strategic

work that we all talk about? And I guess the reason I ask this question is because when you are in that space as an HR department of one, you can't separate your admin life from your strategy life. You have to do all the things all the time. So, you know, what are some of those automations that you've seen that have helped?

Christy Engler: So the biggest thing for me and the thing I will always be a champion for is outsourcing. Smaller organizations especially should be outsourcing their payroll. You've got to have a strong benefits broker partnership. You need a system that you can rely on. It doesn't have to be big and fancy, you know, and I think that's where I've seen some misses in small organizations. They're bringing in massive systems on their own instead of outsourcing, and so now they're doing more maintenance with the system than they are anything else. There are so many awesome, small, local boutique outsourcing partners out there who are, they're on the big systems. They do it for you. You're not paying the big dollar bill, you know, to have those things. You're paying for the service, and a lot of the service is absolutely outstanding. So, that's one way where I see, hey, just offload some of that stuff, find a great trusted partner, and then you're not spending all that time doing those kinds of things. You know, find a broker that's in it to win it for you and actually thinks outside the box and helps you find things that make sense. So it's things like that where, again, where I see the misses is where they're trying to do it themselves with these big systems and a small company that doesn't make any sense.

Shari: I love that you mentioned the broker. When I was doing small business, our broker created our open enrollment guides for us, printed them, gave us PDF version. They led, you know, discovery kind of calls so that people could understand their benefits. And that's the first time I had seen that because I'd always worked in bigger organizations. Your broker can do more than you think. Keep asking for more. I'm telling you, they can do more than you think. They are such a great resource you're already paying for.

Christy Engler: 100%.

Shari: And even though you're smaller, a lot of companies feel like they don't have any power, you know, and they don't have anything that they're bringing to the table. I will tell you from some of my partnerships with some brokers, my being a single referral source for them has generated them quite a lot of business. So, you know, they have a vested interest in being a good partner to me and to my clients because I'm going to tell everybody I know. I'm going to get on national podcasts and tell everybody I know, you know, who they are. And then they love that and they appreciate that because, you know, you and I both know, Shari, from being in the space, I will take a referral any day. You know, if somebody I know and trust tells me, hey, this place is great. These guys are awesome. I'm going, you know, I will at least have a conversation with them and not have to do all that work on my own. So yeah, the broker should definitely be doing a lot more. And unfortunately, I see a lot of them that are not and it's really frustrating.

Shari: Well, and another really great resource is your own HR communities that you can tap into. I think I found that a little bit later in my career. I didn't realize that there are huge, robust Facebook groups for HR people. There are more professional groups, obviously, on LinkedIn for different topics. You know, you can join, you know, newsletters and some of the people that I've even talked to in my world, like your Steve Brown's out there, right? He runs an HR community for free that you can join and you can have these really great conversations with your peers who've maybe solved something you don't even know where to begin.

Christy Engler: Absolutely. I would not be standing where I am today without those communities.

Shari: Yeah, for sure. You know, when I think about some of the biggest problems that you've seen, what are the things that small businesses need to stop doing? Because you see it over and over again, and it creates risk and turnover.

Christy Engler: I mean, unfortunately, it's there's such a division when you have a lot of owners who fall into older generations. And then you have a lot

of the new workforce coming in right in the in these newer, you know, generations, the disconnect. Between. You know, and I've told a lot of owners over the years and continue to do so, it's 2026. It's a new day. It's a new time. These kids grew up differently, right? They grew up with phones. They grew up with the internet. They, you know, they look at things differently. My daughter's a freshman in college this year and talking with her and her friends and just like, what they're looking for, you know, in their future jobs and my students and asking them their perspective. I mean, they all really care about what companies are doing outside of their sole operations. They want to know, how are they giving back to the world? How are they contributing to their communities? What other types of, you know, things are they doing? Do they have recycling bins, you know, in their office? They care about this kind of stuff, right? So, you know, and one of the big misses I see within that is in recruiting. You know, a lot of folks feel like they can still use the post and pray method. I can still throw a job ad out on Indeed or, you know, wherever, and people should just come running. And it just doesn't work like that anymore. You know, the employers have got to do a little bit more work, and they've got to establish an employer brand, and they need to get known in their communities. And so that's a big miss I see in small business.

Shari: Well, and that recruiting aspect, how are small businesses competing for talent? Because a lot of times they can't offer the same level of pay that a bigger organization can.

Christy Engler: See, and that's actually a little bit of a myth, as I have found. It's not that they can't, it's that they don't want to. And also, I mean, to be honest, you know, and also, unfortunately, a lot of small business owners, their way of getting salary data and market data is just to ask people that they know. And then I usually and then I'm sending them reports and they're like, oh, I'm way off, you know, and they don't believe it until they're six months into a search and can't find anybody. And then I'm like, okay, well, why don't we try adjusting the pay and see what happens. So unfortunately, it's it's kind of being out of touch a little bit with some of those things. But small businesses can do great through chambers of commerce, through a lot of their local organizations, their school districts. You know, here where I live,

our chamber is very strong and, you know, there's career fairs and job fairs and all kinds of things that they host so then the companies don't have to do it themselves. And the schools actually bus the kids to the events. So, you know, there's a lot of cool things going on in communities. So those are the types of things that small businesses have to take advantage of.

Shari: Well, and I will add here, if it's not something that you've come across in your career, another opportunity for small businesses is to partner with your local unemployment office. I used to go and host different events there when I was in a role that was more frontline workers. And it was a great source of candidates, just a really untapped pool who are ripe, who are ripe and ready to work. And so that's a really great way to connect with your community and help. You know, as you think about an HR leader coming into an organization, and like you mentioned earlier, it's often you're coming in in a reactive mode, and you've got 30 days, 60 days to like show your impact and move the needle. Where should they focus first?

Christy Engler: Well, I think you have to come into an organization and you have to learn it. And so just bringing a standard plan that you've created for past organizations is probably not the place to start. You really need to get in there and talk to people. You need to get to know everybody at all levels of the organization. One of the first things I always do is make friends with finance because typically they're handling some aspect of payroll and benefits and taxes and whatever else. And we need to be on the same page. We need to work really well together, especially in a smaller organization. But spending that time, just spend the time, get to know everybody, talk to managers. What are their challenges? What are their frustrations? You know, and you can say, hey, I'm new. There's nothing you can say to me that's going to be offensive, you know, or that's going to take me by surprise, just tell me what's going on, you know. So I think doing that first and foremost in kind of a, and then equating that to kind of an HR audit so that you can really help identify risk areas, I think is really key from the get go. And then you can actually put together a plan and say, okay, here's where we really should focus. And again, get that foundation built. If it's not built yet, you know, or if the handbook hasn't been looked at in 25 years, I've had that before as well. You know, that's fine, but let's start there.

Shari: That's a pretty long time. I don't know that I've encountered 25 years, so that's pretty rough.

Christy Engler: I had one that was, yeah, 25 years.

Shari: Wow.

Christy Engler: Yeah. Yeah. Somebody had typed up something, typed on a typewriter when the business first started, and nobody had looked at it since.

Shari: Wow. 25 years. That's crazy. I feel like that's something that should get framed and stuck on the wall somewhere. Like, have them sign it and put it on the wall.

Christy Engler: Yeah, I love that. Yeah. Yeah. Well, Christy, as we wrap up our conversation, what's one piece of encouragement that you have for that HR team of one listening right now?

Christy Engler: You know, my message to my peers is always, you're not alone. You're not alone. And a lot of them feel like they are. And I was actually talking with a friend just a couple hours ago who, she's on an island. She really is. But, and she said, I always know where to go. Because I've got you, I've got, you know, a few other people, you know, in my toolbox. You've got to have your people. You have got to have your 3 a.m. friends that you can call because your spouse is going to get tired of hearing it, right? And there's only so much you can talk to other people about. You need your HR friends who understand, but you're not alone. I promise you you're not alone and you're not the first to go through it. I promise you that too. So, you know, if anybody needs anything, reach out. Let's start a conversation. Chances are I probably know somebody either in your industry, in your geographic region, and we can at least, you know, get you going. But if you don't have a network, that's the place to start.

Shari: Could not agree more. Such great advice. This was such a great conversation. So thanks for sitting and chatting with me for a few minutes today.

Christy Engler: Thank you. Appreciate you.

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