– You're 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 Maria Ross. She is an empathy advocate, speaker, author, and strategist at Red Slice, LLC. Maria understands the power of empathy on a personal level. In 2008, shortly after launching her business, she suffered a heart fatal ruptured brain aneurysm and inspired her memoir, "Rebooting My Brain." Her next book, "The Empathy Dilemma: How Successful Leaders Ballance Performance, People, and Personal Boundaries," arrives in fall of 2024. Maria, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

– I'm so excited we made this happen.

– So am I. It took us a little while to get this scheduled, but I'm glad that you're here, and I'd love if you could start with sharing a little bit about your personal experience and how it shaped your views on empathy in the business world.

– Yeah, absolutely. So I have had a long career in marketing and branding, a brief flirtation with management consulting at the beginning of my career, but I started my own consultancy, Red Slice, back in 2008 to really bring the humanity back to marketing. And I was doing a lotta tech marketing in Silicon Valley and was having good success with that, but I was getting really frustrated in the way that marketers market. And my belief has always been that marketing is about elevating the truth of your story and not lying to people. And with that came a really strong emphasis on empathy as a marketer's superpower, really, enabling you to understand your clients, your customers, and really be in lockstep with them and stay in tune with them. So I had my brand strategy consulting firm going for more than a decade. And then about 2016, I decided my third book was gonna be about empathy and about the power of empathy to achieve radical success. There was a lot going on in our world at the time, and I was really saddened and frustrated by the state of leadership in terms of the models that were out there for my, at the time, my two-and-a-half-year-old son. So I thought, as a business strategist, I was like, there have to be examples of brands and leaders who are leveraging empathy as a strength, not a weakness, and crushing it, right? And so I was delighted to find so much data and research around the fact that empathy is not just good for society. It's good for business. And I looked at empathy from three angles, from the leadership angle, the culture angle, and the brand angle, because for me, brand and culture are two sides of the same coin. So you really have to start your brand from the inside out. That led to my book, "The Empathy Edge: Harnessing the Value of Compassion as an Engine for Success." And it took off, and it also was aided by the pandemic, 'cause all of a sudden, people were interested in empathy at work, right? Prior to

that, they didn't really understand the relationship. So yeah, that book took off, and I've been out speaking and doing leadership trainings for organizations, big and small, doing keynotes. I did a TEDx talk. Really, my message is about helping people understand that cashflow, creativity, and compassion are not mutually exclusive, and that's what I talk about on my podcast. But it's really also about helping HR leaders and culture leaders and DEIB leaders understand that empathy is the fuel that makes all of those initiatives actually work and actually creates. It boosts engagement. It boosts performance. It boosts innovation, like on and on and on. We could talk about all the ways that empathy benefits your organization.

- Well, I definitely will encourage people to pick up the book, but I'd love if you could give us a sneak peek into maybe one of the favorite strategies from the books that leaders can implement.

- Yeah, so as I mentioned, the book is broken up into habits for being a stronger leader and leading with empathy, building your own empathy, strategies for building a culture of empathy and strategies for building a brand of empathy. So what's been most popular is, obviously, you've gotta start at the individual level. So how do you strengthen your empathy, and what does that look like at work? And the first and foremost tip I have for people is that even though empathy is about other people, you have to get your own house in order, in order to be empathetic. So the first tip is to practice presence. And I know that's hard. In our, you know, 24/7 worlds, there's a lotta stress at work. There's a lot on our plates, but if you can't clear your mind from all the junk, you have no space to take on another person's point of view or take it on without fear or defensiveness. So being able to make space, make sure that you can have some buffers between meetings, and you're not running from meeting to meeting. Make sure that you are doing some sort of mindfulness practice, whether it's in the morning to start your day or before a high stakes conversation. And it doesn't have to be yoga. It could be yoga for some people, but it could be running. It could be knitting. It could be prayer. It could be deep-breathing exercises. It could be just sitting with your coffee, not in front of a screen, for 10 minutes. But being able to ground yourself so that you are not, you know, so movable in that you can't take on other points of view or see other experiences, or what a friend of mine likes to call, to be able to decenter yourself from the interaction, because that's what empathy actually requires. And so that's my number 1 tip. The second one is to be curious, because curiosity is the number 1 trait of empathic people. So when you feel the urge to just jump in with why I'm right and you're wrong in a contentious situation, ask questions. Get curious about it. You know, why do you think that way? What does success look like for you? What do you want out of this position or out of this job? Why do you feel that you didn't perform up to the level that we know you can this quarter? Like what's going on for you? Rather than jumping in with what you think is the assumed solution or

prescription. And that does two things. Number 1, it gives you the information you need so you can understand someone's context and then move forward. But it also helps lower the temperature, especially if it's a contentious conversation. Like it might be a difficult performance review, or budget negotiation, or a strategy discussion that everybody has really spicy views about, right? So instead of going in with sort of, this is the position I'm going to defend, going in with an open and curious mind. And it doesn't mean that you're a pushover. I think that's the very important thing. It doesn't mean you necessarily are not going to stand your position or stand your ground, but you might understand when you understand someone's context, a different way to communicate with them, or discover that your goal is actually really a shared goal, and maybe you just have different ways of trying to get there. So I love talking about the fact that empathy is not about being nice. It's not about being a pushover, and it's not even about agreeing with someone. It's just about being a detective and understanding what someone's context and perspective is before you jump in and assume what it is.

— I love the comment about curiosity because I think that asking that question of, tell me more about that. Tell me more about why you think that.

— The magic words. The magic words.

— Oh my gosh, you can learn so much

— Yeah.

— as a leader just asking that. And you might be surprised by the answer. You might get information you didn't even know you needed out of your employee, and you're like, "Oh, that's a different perspective. I hadn't thought about it that way."

— Totally, and I think that's the thing, is that we can keep digging. We can ask, tell me more about that, and then they'll answer. And then you might wanna ask again and get them talking. And I like to tell, when I'm talking to senior executives or C-suite, I try to get them comfortable with the idea of empathy at work by saying that it's not crying on the floor with your employees. That's not what we're talking about, right? It's also not, like I said, caving in or submission, but it's a method of information gathering. It's a method of just like taking a beat and trying to understand why somebody sees a situation or their performance, or the responsibilities of the job, or whatever it, is in a certain way. Because then when you have that information, you're talking with full knowledge of what's going on, and you're also having the same conversation. So even if that other person isn't, you know, this is the other common thing I get, even if they're not necessarily practicing empathy with you, you are setting the tone. You are being the model of, this is how this conversation is going to go.

We're going to listen to each other, and I am going to listen to you, and you are going to listen to me, and we're going to have a collaborative dialogue. And so I think that importance is so key in why the research shows that when you have an empathetic leader and you have an empathetic culture, engagement goes up, performance goes up, loyalty goes up, job satisfaction goes up. All of these things go up because people feel seen, heard and valued. And when they do that, they can relax, they can feel psychologically safe, they can feel like they can offer like a nutty idea, and it might be the most creative thing that you have all heard, right? You know, so you have that room to innovate and make mistakes and learn, and you start to create a learning mindset by establishing that, like our team operates with empathy and not making that an empty word. Like just, hey, one of our values is to be empathetic. What does that actually mean? So that would kinda be another piece of advice, is if that's something your team or your organization is really striving to embrace, give people examples of what it looks like in action for your organization 'cause it could be very different culture by culture. But don't assume that everyone understands what we mean when we're talking about empathy. So it's great to be able to give examples. I've worked with clients before that and where I've done talks where they're like, "Yeah, we actually broke down these values into what are the actions and the behaviors that we wanna see so that we can evaluate people and reward them, and celebrate them against that criteria." Otherwise, it's just empty.

– So let's talk ROI.

– Yeah.

– What have you discovered the research shows about impact to ROI? I'm gonna assume it's positive, but I'd love if you have some data around that.

– Yeah, I do. I mean, that's what I mean. There's tons of data, and there's a lot of research I cited in my book and a lot of studies I cited in my book. But there's one study in particular, and I don't have the numbers right in front of me, but there's a study by, I believe it was Catalyst, that they did a comparison. They did thousands of people, thousands of employees, and they broke them up into two groups. One group that said, "My leader is empathetic," and another group that said, "My leader is not very empathetic." And then they did differentials around innovation, around engagement, around inclusion and belonging. And the differences were so stark in the groups that said their leader was empathetic versus the groups that said their leader wasn't empathetic. And so it was just this, you know, I think at one point, one of the ones I believe, I'm gonna misquote it, but it was around, I can be innovative at work. It was like well over 60% of the people that had an empathetic boss said, "I can be innovative at work." I think the number was closer to like 20%

for those that said they didn't have an empathetic boss, their ability to be innovative at work. And likely, if we extrapolate that, it's because they don't feel comfortable. They don't feel like their ideas are gonna be valued. They feel like they might be punished for trying something new and having it fail. And all of that is kind of related to empathy. Empathy is not just about seeing, hearing, and valuing someone else, but it's also about helping them feel safe and helping them feel like they belong. And your teams are much more likely to innovate and take chances and be creative if they know you have their back. So that was one. Another great stat is that I think it was an Ipsos and PepsiCo joint study that showed the impact on an empathetic culture and how that impacts external sales, right? The customer experience. And that was my wheelhouse that I came from where it was like 9 out of 10 customers say that empathy is the most important element of their customer experience. And I believe it's even in the report, it said even if their problem isn't solved, that their loyalty and their view of the brand and of the company still remains positive if they know that they have been heard. And that starts with, you can't have customer service reps being empathetic to your customers if their management internally is not empathetic to them, right? I think it was Herb Kelleher from Southwest Airlines that always said like, "Happy employees equal happy customers," right? So there's a lot of data on the external viewpoints. There's even some data very early on about how empathetic cultures impact stock price and valuation of a company, and that it goes up if your employees are engaged. I think it's 'cause that domino effect. You know what I mean? That empathy leads to engagement, which leads to belonging, which leads to, I'm gonna do better. I'm gonna care more about my job, which means I'm gonna treat customers better, on and on and on. I love it because everyone kind of assumes empathy as a soft skill and that it's weak. And actually, it takes great strength to be empathetic, but it impacts the bottom line. And that's why I wrote the "Empathy Edge," because that was really the business case for skeptics.

– Well, and we all know that when we work with our C-suite leadership, they wanna see the data, right? They wanna see how the things we're introducing are going to impact their business,

– Yeah.

– and the success of their business. So I kinda think as we get to the end of our conversation, you know, what data can we show internally to help us paint a picture? Should we start with a small group and teach them about empathy and then bring it back up? What has been some of the coaching you've given to HR teams as they try to make this shift in their organizations?

– I love that question. So I get that a lot, especially from people that are like mid-level or below. They're like, "This is all great, but I'm in this big, I'm this little cog in this big wheel, and how am

I gonna impact that?" The great thing is that you can start small, and you can decide how you are going to operate professionally. What kind of a colleague are you gonna be? What kind of a contributor are you gonna be? And if you do lead a team, you can create a microculture within that team that says it's great that the company has values, and they have all their whatever on their website. Our team is gonna operate this way. This is what we stand for. This is how work gets done. This is how we're going to treat each other. I have a new book coming called "The Empathy Dilemma: How Successful Leaders Balance Performance, People, and Personal Boundaries." And a big part of that, one of the five pillars is clarity. Can you spell out for people what is expected of them and not just their job description but how we expect to treat each other? You know, when can we go beyond the lines of asking you to do something that's outside of your job description if we're in an emergency, if we're in a crisis, right? Things like that. So I always advise people to start where they are and start with their own sphere of influence, even if it's five people or three people, or you are not a leader of a team, but you work with people, you interact with people. Because what happens is you create a ripple effect. So you start to succeed because you are operating with empathy, and you are having these really productive conversations. You're able to engage people. You're able to understand people. Because of that, you're gonna be able to achieve your goals. And within the organization, other people are gonna look at your team or look at you and go, "How are they doing that? Like what makes Shari so great to work with? Like how is she killing her numbers every quarter? Like I don't get it." If you become that model of how it's possible to work and balance empathy with high performance, people want more of that. Like they go, "Oh, I see that that's possible. I don't have to be a jerk at work or be ultra-competitive, or be super secretive with, you know, knowledge," or whatever it is that you do that's anti-empathetic. And they can go, "And I can still find success here." And eventually, that starts to catch fire, right? That sparks starts to build. And so you don't have to wait for your CEO to make some big proclamation. You can start in those small areas. And one of the best ways is to really educate yourself or do trainings, or invest in professional development so people understand what empathy at work means. How do you build that empathy muscle back up? Because everyone has it. It's just some people have atrophied, and some people haven't, and we might need to get back to the gym. And so it's really about making that. And then how do you, as an HR professional, how can we align processes and policies and rewards and hiring in a way that we're actually walking our talk. We're not just saying empathy is important. We are building it like companies like Airbnb and others that I mentioned in the book. We're building it into our performance evaluations. We are celebrating people publicly about how they are acting with empathy. And the other big thing, which I wanna mention, is that we also are not tolerating when someone is not acting aligned with our values. Because that says more than if you have pretty posters on the wall that say, "We value empathy, and we value

collaboration." If I see that that jerky salesperson gets rewarded every year just because they made their number, then I'm gonna know the company actually really doesn't care about that. If it's acceptable for that person to treat others the way they've been treating them and still be rewarded, that's gonna speak way more volumes than if, you know, you counsel those people out or have a talk with them, or be empathetic with them and find out, hey, why are you treating people so bad? What's going on for you? You know. So it's really a great tool to be able to understand and to build those relationships. And remember that just as important as celebrating and rewarding and modeling empathy is to make sure that when the opposite is being shown, action is being taken as well.

— Maria, this was such a great conversation. Can't wait for your next book to come out. So, so glad you got to spend a few minutes chatting with me today about empathy and its impact on the business.

— Thank you. This was fun.

— 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.