

The HR Mixtape: A Conversation with Shari Simpson and Celeste Warren, Vice President of the Global Diversity and Inclusion Center of Excellence at Merck

Announcer:

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.

Shari Simpson:

Joining me today is Celeste Warren, Vice President of the Global Diversity and Inclusion Center of Excellence at Merck. With a background in both operations and HR, Celeste brings a pragmatic and deeply human approach to building equitable workplaces.

Shari Simpson:

So Celeste, thank you for sitting down and having a chat with me today.

Celeste Warren:

Well, thank you for the invitation, Shari. I'm looking forward to it.

Shari Simpson:

So we are talking about DEI, inclusion, whatever the term is that you are deciding to use today in society. And I think that one of the things I love about your perspective is you talk about inclusion from this perspective that it's everybody's responsibility. So what does that mean from that shared accountability in action? What does that look like in action for our organizations?

Celeste Warren:

Yeah. So the reason why I say it's everyone's responsibility in most organizations, in all organizations, you know, you think about the pyramid structure that exists. About between 20 to 30, maybe 35% of the employee population are leaders, people managers, et cetera. Their job is to manage and lead people. The other 70%, they're individual contributors. So they aren't people managers. And if an organization is going to move forward with any type of change, with any type of purpose, you can't leave it to those 30% of the people to do that. You have to make sure that everybody is involved and everyone is doing the role that they need to do. So some things that they can do is and people say, well, Celeste, you know, you're trying to boil the ocean. No, I'm not trying to boil the ocean. I'd like for each person to just try to boil two or three people around them. And how you can do that is simple things like if you are in a meeting and if you're the manager of a team, one of the things you can do when you're in a meeting is basically start the meeting out and say, you know, this is sort of the agenda. Is everyone okay with the agenda? Start the meeting out with expecting people expecting for you to ask for their opinions and ask for their input. If someone's quiet during the meeting in the first, you know, whatever, 15, 20, 30 minutes, reach out to them and say, oh, you know, Shari, we haven't heard from you. Any, you have any ideas on this particular situation or anything that you want to share, just in case, you know, they didn't have a chance to sort of formulate their thoughts yet, or, or they didn't have a chance to get their thoughts in. So that's one way to do it. Another thing, if you're, if you're not a people manager, Everyone has a span of influence. You have people around you that respect you, that look up to you, that listen to what you have to say, and you can use that span of influence that you have to What I like to say is, you know, send an article out around diversity, equity and inclusion to your sphere of influence and say, hey, you know what? On such and such day, we're going to meet in this conference room, bring your lunch, and we're going to talk about this article and, you know, just have a conversation. no obligation or anything, but it gives you an opportunity to not just educate people, but then get their viewpoints and have a dialogue around different perspectives. And so those are just a couple of things that you can do.

Shari Simpson:

I really love your example of bringing that down to that individual contributor level and having those moments where you can advocate and educate. You know, one of the things that I've done through my own kind of DEI journey is I've, as I have learned the background of phrases, right? Like there are so many terms of phrase, so many words that we use that actually have really bad or derogatory history. And so, you know, as I learned them, I've shared them with my peers and been like, hey, you know what? I learned that this background on this, this phrase that I've heard us say, here's the background on it. Wanted to let you know so that you could be educated as well. I've never had anybody respond badly to that. Obviously how you approach it is one thing. You don't want to. You don't want to shame somebody, right? Because you're learning like you're learning. But I love that idea of bringing it down and kind of talking about it from the perspective of how everybody can be involved in what it means to be an inclusive organization. You know, I'm curious in the work that you've done, how have you worked with executives to help them understand that this concept around DEI, it's not a moral imperative. It really is a business one. And we have to wrap our minds around it from that perspective.

Celeste Warren:

Yeah, absolutely. And the way that I approach it is you know, we have to make sure that our leaders understand if they don't get it from the heart, you got to appeal to the head. And everyone, if they're a leader and they want to be a good leader, they want to make sure that their business is growing. Otherwise, they may not have a job for very long. And so I use it from the standpoint of we have to understand our customer base and we have to understand what is getting in the way of those customers across a variety of different identities, different perspectives, different identities, different experiences and life experiences. We have to understand what's getting in the way from our product or our service that we provide of them being able to receive it and get those outcomes that we want them to have. And so you have to study each of those customer groups. And one of the things that I like to say is, instead of us interpreting what we think those customer groups might want or need, it's good to have someone on the team who is a

reflective part of that customer group. That's one thing. And then the second thing is not just to have them on the team, but you want to make sure, so for example, on the marketing team, we're talking about a particular marketing strategy. And I'm there because I have strong skills and capabilities from a functional standpoint. But also, I'm bringing my perspective as a black woman into the discussion as well around how do we bridge the gap between our marketing strategy and our customers who are in that same black women. So that's one of the ways that it's a pure business focus that allows you to connect to different markets, allows you to connect with different parts of the customer base that you may not have been able to reach. And you're leaving dollars on the table. And that's opportunity lost.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, and it's such a great example of thinking about the term intersectionality a little bit differently, right? I love that you leaned into that business need and said, hey, listen, you know, when you have somebody like me in the room, now you have direct access to a demographic and information firsthand, right? And so you can kind of test stuff. I love that. You know, often we get stuck in the space in HR of having to justify our DEI efforts from a metrics perspective. What are the metrics that we actually should be tracking that are impactful? And I think metrics have been a little bit under fire recently because I do think there was probably a time where we're tracking the wrong things. And so that's led to some of the discussions around the impactfulness of DEI efforts.

Celeste Warren:

Yeah, so for me, one of the things that you want to do is not just counting people, but making people count. And what I mean by that is you're making sure that their ideas, their perspectives, they feel valued and it's contributing to your organization. So one of the things is looking at Everyone takes part in engagement surveys, culture surveys, et cetera. But looking at the data and cutting the data across different demographics, cutting it across various different identities, so you can find out, is there one group of employees that is experiencing your culture differently than another group of employees? And that's an extremely strong way of understanding and saying, we need to close

the gap here because this group is seeing the culture and has these experiences. This group has these experiences and they're completely different. and we're all in the same organization. So there are certain strategies that we need to put together that are going to help us to close that gap. That helps you from an engagement standpoint. Again, it helps you from the standpoint of people feeling valued as employees and being able to really contribute to the company's mission and vision. So those are very powerful. That's very powerful information that can be used. And then what I like to say is the same metrics that you would use to say how successful is your business are some of the same metrics that you would use to say how well you have really integrated diversity and inclusion into your organization. Because again, using that previous example in the marketing strategy, when you're looking at how successful your product or your service is, cut the data across different markets and different demographics of customers to see where there's opportunity. So I think there's a lot of different ways, instead of us trying to create or think of different ways to make it. Stop looking at diversity, equity and inclusion as something that's on the outside of the business banging to get in and make sure you have an inside out approach. And you're integrating it into the practices, the policies, the procedures and the strategies. So it's already there. And it's already going to, when it comes out to be executed, it's going to be considering a more inclusive audience.

Shari Simpson:

I love all of those ideas and the concept of, instead of outside in, inside out. You know, for those that are listening that have been in this space a while, there can be some fatigue around these types of initiatives. So how can we re-energize some of those efforts internally?

Celeste Warren:

There's going to have to be strong partnerships. Partnerships across our HR colleagues, partnership across our business colleagues as well. Where the fatigue or the feeling tired comes from is when you constantly are feeling like you're fighting everybody within your organization. and you're rolling this ball uphill all by yourself. And what you need to do is make sure that you are getting other people to help you roll the ball uphill. And then also

simultaneously, you know, trying to cut that heel down so you don't have to roll the ball uphill at all. But you have to have strong partnerships with your talent acquisition teams, your talent management teams, your compensation teams, your benefits teams, to make sure that, you know, as far as comp, it's pay equity and equitable pay across different groups. From a benefit standpoint, making sure that you're providing benefits that are inclusive and are really going to have an impact on all employees and not just some. You want to make sure that you're integrating it into your business strategies, as I talked about, your marketing and your sales strategies, your development, your product development strategies. So before you even create the products, are you going and testing it to see how it would be used or not used or utilized in different communities and groups of people? So you have to make sure that it's integrated into the just, you know, I hate this phrase, but the very fabric of the organization. But it's true. You do have to do that.

Shari Simpson:

It's a lot to do. But I think that that phrase right into the fabric of the organization, I think it's an important concept to think about how it that it just becomes second nature. That collaboration, though, you know, in some organizations, they have employee resource groups. And I've seen some work really well. I've seen some not have the impact that they thought they were going to have. For organizations where they're doing ERGs well, how does that influence the efforts around DEI?

Celeste Warren:

It's extremely, extremely helpful. And from the perspective of it, so it's a couple things. One is you have to make sure that your employee resource groups are focused, are disciplined, have a clear agenda that's aligned to the company mission and vision as well, and contributing to the overall culture of the organization, but also the development of employees and the business as well. So if your employee resource groups are aligned from that perspective, they're contributing to people strategies and culture, they're contributing to the business as well, then it's extremely powerful. You have to also make sure that they have a voice, their leaders have a voice and can elevate their voices to senior leaders of the organization. So there is a clear understanding and

you're treating them like senior leaders because they can help you with organizational change, not just in the diversity, equity and inclusion space, but overall organizational change that your company needs to go through. And so they can help with that. They can get feedback, valuable feedback across a myriad of different populations of employees within your company and provide that feedback back to you. So you can help to implement better practices, better policies and procedures. Also too, you know, you can't look at them as, well, they're doing this outside of their jobs. If there's anything that is so annoying for employee resource group leaders and members who are working diligently on behalf of not just their members within their constituency groups, but they're working on behalf of the betterment of the company. And so their jobs are, as employee resource group leaders, are integrated and just as important as their functional skills and capabilities and roles that they have as well, because they're helping to grow and drive organizational change. And it's so important that they are given that recognition. At the end of the year, when they have performance reviews and they're evaluating their objectives through the year, part of that needs to include what they were able to accomplish as an employee resource group leader. And then secondly, it's not free labor, folks. You need to make sure that you are some way providing them with some type of compensation. Maybe it's not money. Maybe if you have a point system within your organization, whatever it is that you have that you can provide to them, give them something that motivates them and inspires them to want to continue in these leadership roles because they're extremely, extremely crucial to the success of the organization if they're leveraged in the right way.

Shari Simpson:

You had one nugget in there that I really want to highlight for our audience because I have not seen this consistently and what it was is that your ERG leaders should be having audience with your executive team, not an intermediary, not a liaison, not, you know, hey, the, you know, chief diversity officer is giving the only point of contact. I love that. That is such a good practical way to start having the really strategic conversations that need to happen and allowing that ERG leader to show up and represent the group because they are passionate about not only their constituents, but helping the

organization through a change management process. That was such a good nugget, Celeste. I think that I just really wanted to double click into that because I think that's so important for the audience to hear. You know, as I think about all the things we've talked about, there is resistance that can happen both internally and externally. There's criticisms that we hear. You know, we watch this on the news with organizations. How do we start to respond to that from an HR perspective? Because we're always kind of wearing those two hats, right? You have that risk compliance mindset that sometimes we flex too far to, and then we also have that employee empathy mindset, right? And sometimes we flex too far there as well. How do we find that balance when we're dealing with resistance or criticism in this space?

Celeste Warren:

I think the best thing that our human resources colleagues can do is, first of all, you have to have the courage of your conviction. Because when we're talking about this type of organizational change and resistance, in any capacity, whether you're implementing a new performance review process, a new succession planning process, you're going to have resistance. And it's no different from policies and practices and procedures that are trying to be more inclusive of all the employees. Because that's what you're trying to do. You're trying to make sure that the people strategies that you're putting in place are inclusive of all your employees. And so when you are faced with that type of resistance that inevitably HR professionals get all the time, because everyone's always saying, I don't have time for this, I don't have time to do this, or I don't have time to do that. You're using those influencing skills to make sure that you are integrating diversity, equity, and inclusive practices into those people's strategies, into the talent management process, into the performance management process, into the talent acquisition process. You can do that by trying to weed out as much bias as you can in the process. Because as humans, we're all biased. We're people, and we're flawed, and we have biases. But as HR professionals working very diligently to try to take out the bias from our processes and our systems and our structures, so as we're implementing talent acquisition processes and talent management processes, it's already baked in inclusive practices and the inclusive aspects of it. Because when you're rolling out the program or the process or whatever, it's already designed in it, that it's going to be inclusive and benefiting people.

Shari Simpson:

Celeste, this was such a great conversation. So many good nuggets. One last question before we wrap up. As you look ahead, what is, you know, one emerging trend or a challenge potentially that you're seeing in DEI that HR should really try to get ahead of and prepare for now?

Celeste Warren:

I think that especially in those organizations where it's been perceived by the employees, right, wrong, or indifferent, that the company is rolling back their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Because if you lose the credibility of

your employees, it is very, very hard to get that back. And so we know that in times of social activism and a rise in social unrest, inevitably history has told us that the pendulum will swing to a more conservative stance, but then it swings back also. And so, the best thing that HR colleagues can do is make sure that they are steadfast, that they're steady, that they're integrating these inclusive practices in the processes that they're responsible for, and that they're not swaying in the wind. Another thing, too, is one of the things that's going to be extremely critical today, tomorrow, in the future is effective communication and feedback loops with the employees. So you know what they're thinking, what they're feeling, and you can plan accordingly. That's going to be the best tool that you're going to have because you're going to need to take all of that information and then wrap that up to say, OK, as you're coaching and counseling the leaders, What is it that leaders need to do to have a bigger impact on their organization through their people and their business performance? So that's what I would say that our HR colleagues need to really make sure that they're paying attention to.

Shari Simpson:

So wonderful. Such good advice. Thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to sit and chat about this really important topic.

Celeste Warren:

Thank you for having, Shari.

Shari Simpson:

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.