
Saddle Your Own Horse: Leading With Conviction Instead of Fear

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[00:00:00] **ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who wanna understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Joining me today is Zach Arend, a two-time saddle bronc riding champion who went from the rodeo arena to VP of a \$300 million company, and now coaches leaders through his firm Create Purpose. He teaches executives to saddle their own horse, and today he explains why so many leaders run on fear instead of conviction, and what it takes to break that pattern.

[00:00:51] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Zach, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:54] **ZACH AREND:** Thanks for having me, Shari.

[00:00:56] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So before we get into leadership, I really want our listeners to meet you. So take us from the saddle bronc arena to a vice president title at a logistics company. What did that path look like?

[00:01:11] **ZACH AREND:** Yeah. Well, gosh, I was eight years old when I went to my first rodeo, and I saw this little girl in her pigtails. It was a Little Britches rodeo, so it was a youth rodeo, so these were kids my age. And I'm in the grandstands, and I just remember seeing this little girl in her pigtails down there in that arena, and I look over at my mom and my dad. I'm like, "I wanna do that." And they weren't surprised, 'cause from five years old, I wanted to be a cowboy. Mom bought me my first horse when I was five. It was a Shetland pony named Princess, and I rode that horse all over town, even though we grew up in the grocery business. Mom and Dad had a small-town grocery store. So I wasn't wearing chaps, I was wearing an adult-sized blue apron. It hung down to my ankles 'cause I was five. But it started at that Little Britches rodeo, and I started competing in the rodeo. And one day, I was at a rodeo, and I got introduced to a man by the name of Bruce Sturdy. He became my rodeo coach. And Mom sent me up to his ranch for a weekend, and the first thing he asked me to do was to saddle my own horse.

[00:02:18] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** That's not an easy feat for somebody who's not saddled a horse before, just for our listeners.

[00:02:23] **ZACH AREND:** Well, no. So I'm 11, and he says, "Well, boy, go saddle your horse, meet me in the arena," and then he walked away. And I'm just standing there like, "Well, what am I gonna do?" There's something I haven't said out loud to anybody, and Bruce Sturdy doesn't know my dirty little secret, which is I've never saddled a horse before. And what kind of cowboy lets his mom saddle his horse? So no better time to start than now. And so I go, and I get my horse, Joe, and long story short, I saddled my horse. It wasn't pretty, but I figured it out. And when I rode into the arena, Bruce Sturdy's waiting for me, but something's different. I'm different. I'm riding tall in the saddle, and for the first time, I felt like I belonged in that arena, all because Bruce Sturdy walked away. And that's really where the story of my rodeo career, that feeling turned into a fact. I ended up riding broncs, was a two-time state champion saddle bronc rider in the rodeo. So all because of the way Bruce Sturdy showed up for me. And I think it's informed a lot of my leadership philosophy and how I work with leaders, this saddle your own horse philosophy, where maybe our job is to be more like Bruce Sturdy and not like the little kid wrestling a saddle. It's more about how we're showing up to bring out the best in people, just like Bruce Sturdy did for me.

[00:03:43] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** If we just ended the podcast here, I think people would walk away with good feels. But we have so much more to dive into. I love that story because I think it really plays into your mentality around leadership, that they don't need more how-to information. And granted, that's needed. I'm not saying that we don't need to have manager development, obviously. But they need that courage to act on what they already know. They need to show up in a different way. How did you make

that transition from that example you gave in the rodeo into how you're now coaching leaders to take that step?

[00:04:22] **ZACH AREND:** Yeah. Well, I think I had to learn it the hard way, because that story I just shared with everybody, I had lost track of that lesson. By the time I was 34, I'm a vice president of sales for a \$300 million logistics company. I'd been there for nine years. I started there right out of college. And I get invited into a meeting. My CEO asks, "Hey, you got a second?" And I walk in there, and he demotes me. I get demoted, and the next day I meet my new boss, our new vice president of sales, Michael. And this guy, I mean, he's twice my age, twice my experience. He reminded me of Jon Hamm from "Mad Men." This guy was sharp. And I felt the CEO's hand on my shoulder, and he introduced me to Michael. He's like, "Michael, this is Zach. He's a good soldier. He'll get you up to speed." And I'm like, "Is that a compliment?" I don't know how to take that. And I'm sitting down with Michael, and he's asking me about the team, and I'm like, "Oh my God, yeah, I got 20 people reporting to me," and I'm going on and on. I can't even remember all their names. And Michael turns away from me, and he kinda chuckles. He's like, "Zach, it's been four years, man. I don't know how you've been carrying all of this for so long." And he said, "It's true, you've been a good soldier, but that's not leadership." And look, in the moment, I wanted to blame the company, the CEO, Michael. Like, I've read hundreds of leadership books. Have I been doing leadership all wrong? But he was right. He helped me see something in myself that I just couldn't see. And that's what really brought me back to that story of Bruce Sturdy. I'm like, oh, leadership is more like being like Bruce. There's this book out there in the world called "Extreme Ownership." And I was thinking about, what's his name? I was listening to one of the episodes on your podcast. It was a great episode. Marty Dubin. He was talking about when you have a strength, something that serves you, but you overuse it, you put the word "too" in front of it, too much ownership, there's a dark side to that. And what I was doing as a leader was, in many ways, taking the ownership away from my people, where they weren't able to feel the weight of their own responsibility. And that's turned into a philosophy I call empowered leadership, where I believe it's our job to keep people in a position of power and ownership. That's what the best leaders do. It's an art and a science. For sure there's nuances, right? We have to make sure people have the skill sets and all of that. But what I often find is if we would just start with seeing people as powerful, we would be much more effective in our leadership if we treat people as already powerful instead of people who need our help all the time. Because we fall into that trap. For me personally, I found my self-worth in being able to help others, even though maybe they weren't asking for it.

[00:07:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, it comes from a good place, right? But the reality is, when I think about all the work that our talent acquisition partners are doing to hire the great talent that we need in our organization, and then we bring them in, and we don't let them thrive or take ownership of their space, it's like we've defeated the purpose of hiring them for their skill set, because we're not letting them show their skills that way. You mentioned this term good soldier. I'd like for you to talk a little bit more about what that good soldier dilemma is, and how do you identify that maybe you're being one of those good soldiers?

[00:08:00] **ZACH AREND:** Yeah. Well, kind of putting it into the arena and the horse world, 'cause I'm in the process of writing a book, and I really started to think about how there's the horse and then there's different types of riders. The horse is our primal survival instincts. It's been with us since the beginning, and it keeps us safe, it keeps us alive, it keeps us thriving. But the rider makes all the difference. And with this good soldier dilemma, underneath it all, there's really these two types of riders. There's the fearful rider and there is the rogue cowboy. With the fearful rider, the horse gets scared, the fearful rider grips the reins tighter, they freeze up, they get indecisive and they don't act, and they just stay in that status quo even though it's not working for them, and they're able to tolerate so much. And then the rogue cowboy, they're the opposite. They don't listen to the horse. They're gonna be like, "You darn horse," and they'll just jerk the horse around. They will overwhelm themselves with their own discipline and grit and willpower, and then that starts to spread out to the people that they're trying to lead. And what I've found is the best style of leadership is being the true horseman. Learning that you're not the horse, you're the rider of the horse. And so we have to choose how we're showing up and how we show up under fear. It's not a reaction to our circumstances. It's always an act of creation. There's always an intention behind it. My rodeo coach called it eyes on the bronc. What's the outcome I wanna see here? And am I focused on

it, or am I focused on the ground and the problems and the obstacles, and reacting to that, trying to solve all the problems around me and losing sight of what I'm actually here to accomplish, what I actually want for this relationship or this client interaction, or for this meeting to go well? What does success look like? We take our eyes off the bronc. And so the true horseman knows that I am here to guide myself and the team towards better outcomes.

[00:10:04] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. I love all of the analogies, and for people who have ridden horses, I think it really resonates. I was thinking back to the first time I ever rode a horse. It was on a Western saddle, and I was rigid and stiff and bouncing instead of moving with the horse as it moved. And you learn those things as you work with your environments, right? You learn how to move your body in movement with the horse, so you're not bouncing up and down in the saddle, so you're not holding onto those reins so tight. But a lot of it is taking that first step to get over the fear, and there's a lot of fear in every role, especially in leadership, though. Especially in middle management. I think about that group in particular, they have to advocate both directions all the time, and sometimes that's really hard, to stand up for your team in the way that you think is best for them. How have the concepts that you've learned helped people take that step to really advocate for what they need for their teams in a way that can show the organization that it's gonna be a benefit, and not just, you know, you're complaining about headcount or some of the tropes that we fall into?

[00:11:17] **ZACH AREND:** Oh, yeah. And it's so understandable that we do, because there's so much outside of our control, and things don't always go the way we know they could go or should go, and it can be frustrating. The first thing is that eyes on the bronc principle, because the number one biggest priority is, what do I want for myself, for my team, for this company, for my leadership and executive team? What do I want for all of us? What would I love to see here? And getting more connected with the outcome you would actually wanna see. So that's eyes on the bronc. But then the second thing, again, I learned this in the rodeo arena. I'm riding saddle broncs, and I just keep hitting the ground. And my coach, Bruce Sturdy, walks over and he's like, "You know why you're hitting the ground?" I'm like, "No. Wish I knew." He's like, "You're pulling on the rein." And that's a 1,200-pound horse. You can't fight that resistance. You gotta learn to go with it. And he said, "You gotta give that horse the rein. You gotta lift on the rein, not pull." And I turned this into a practice I call the LIFT practice, and this is specific for these leaders who find themselves in that crucible of trying to do the right thing while maybe not everybody is bought in or sees it the same way they do. It's a four-part acronym, LIFT: listen, identify, focus, and transform. The first one is listen without the reins. We have to become aware of the stories that we're telling ourselves about the situation, because we are, me included, full of judgments, assumptions, interpretations, stories that really start to color what's happening. If you're wearing red-colored glasses, the world's gonna look red. And so listening without the reins is dropping the story, separating what's happening from the meaning that you're giving it. So what is? What is actually occurring? And then the second step is identify the pain. What's not working for me? What's not working for us? What's not working for maybe my executive team? What's not quite right? Notice these aren't judgmental statements. It's just, what's not what I want? But we don't stay there, because I've found that if we focus on the stuff we don't want or what's not working, we just get more of it. We now have to focus on the possibility. Get back to the bronc. What do I wanna see here? What would be an amazing outcome here for all of us? What would that look like? How would I know that it's occurred? Making it real and tangible. It's not, "I wanna be a better leader." That's not tangible enough. What would you be doing if you were a better leader? What would be different about your one-on-ones, or when you're with your team? What would that look like? How would you know? That's focus on possibility. And then the last step is transform it into action. That fear only gets conquered, if it's really ever conquered, is through action. But you don't have to know how. You don't even have to know what you're doing. You just have to take a next step. And what I've found is that's actually what leadership feels like, like you have no idea what you're doing. I've been in rooms with a billion-dollar company. They're very successful, and the CEO, an expletive came out of his mouth, but he's like, "Everybody thinks we know what we're doing, but we do not know what we're doing." And it was so funny, 'cause I found that is actually all of us. I think deep down we all don't know what we're doing. So that imposter syndrome or whatever, I've thought of that as, yeah, that's just normal. In fact, that's what growth feels like. You're stepping outside of everything that's familiar, learning something new, stepping into something new. Yeah, you're gonna feel all the feels.

[00:14:57] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, you don't think about it, but there's a first time for everything. There's a first time somebody's a CEO. They've never done that job before. You can be as prepared as you want to be a manager, but there's the first time stepping into that role, the first time you have to have a hard conversation. I think about my HR friends who are listening, and it's like, that first time you have to terminate someone, ugh. It doesn't matter if they've created the case for themselves performance-wise that you have to let them go. It is gut-wrenching for an HR person. The first time you have to handle a potential FMLA leave with somebody who's going through something really terrible and hard. Those are really scary moments for us where we have to step up and we have to show up. And that's just in the small, limited space of being in HR. Managers have to do that all day long. If you've gone through this process, this LIFT mentality, and worked through those things, and you still can't accomplish what you need to accomplish or what you want to accomplish, when is it time to say, "I think I need a different horse. I need a different bronc to get on, 'cause this environment isn't working for me in the way that I wanna lead"?

[00:16:16] **ZACH AREND:** Two things are coming to mind when you ask that, 'cause I often hear leaders say, "Well, what if I'm showing up and treating that individual as powerful, but they just don't do it? They don't follow through. They're not performing. What do I do if I'm at the end of my rope?" But what I heard you saying was more a question of, what if I find myself in an organization that's not the right fit? Is that the question you were asking? The latter question?

[00:16:45] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. What if you've gone through this, and you've read all the books, and then you're like, "Hey, you know what? I'm gonna take Zach's approach. I'm gonna use LIFT," and I'm still not making the impact that I want to. Maybe my team below me is doing great, thriving, but we're still not making that impact.

[00:17:03] **ZACH AREND:** Yeah. Well, first thing, I would invite you to go back to eyes on the bronc and LIFT. Keep leaning into that, because I think we all have this negativity bias, and we're always gonna tend to think the grass is greener on the other side. And this is a really real question for me, because I got demoted. I got pushed back into a sales role, and I had an executive coach at the time, and right around the time I received the news, I had a session scheduled on the books. So I show up, and I'm still kind of trembling. I'm like, "I just got demoted. What am I supposed to do? I don't have a team to lead anymore. I gotta go somewhere else." And that's that feeling of, "This isn't what I want. I gotta go somewhere else." And he just looked at me, and he kind of smiled, and he's like, "Where are you running, Zach? Are you running away from something, or are you running towards something?" And that question, immediately, I'm like, "I don't know, Jeff. What? You're the coach. You tell me." And he pulled out his journal, and it had my name on it, and on the very first page, he said, "Do you remember what you told me four years ago when we first started working together?" And I'm, "No." He's like, "You told me that you were afraid of not being good enough. You were afraid of losing your spot at the table. Well, it's been four years, and you just keep trying to prove yourself, wearing your Brooks Brothers suit in your fancy office." He's like, "Zach, who are you without all that stuff? Without the title? Is that really who you are? Who are you, Zach?" And that question just cut me like a knife, and I felt this pressure burst, and I blurted out, "Jeff, I wanna be a leadership coach." But the moment I said that out loud, I was like, "No, that's insane." And he just cut me off. He's like, "Zach, that's not insane. If that's what you wanna do, why aren't you doing it? What's your next step?" And then he told me about this coaching program. He's like, "I think you should do it." And then I had to go through several hoops. I had to go tell my wife, like, "Hey, babe, I know we're trying to buy a house, but there's this leadership program." And she's like, "Go do it. I want you to do it." And I'm like, "Really?" And so I did it. And it didn't get easier. Now I'm waking up early and building this thing on the side, and along the way, I was doing my leadership coaching thing while hitting my quota at the company. And along came a company like, "Hey, we need a leadership coach. We see what you're doing." And next thing I know, I'm co-creating this opportunity. I told him, "I'm not looking for a job. I'm building a coaching business." He's like, "That's cool. You can keep doing that." And I'm like, "Really?" And so when he offered me that type of job, I'm like, let's take that. And so my answer to that question is, are you running away from something or running toward? Because it still comes back to eyes on the bronc. It's so easy to run away from, to blame somebody, get a little upset, and be like, "I'm going somewhere else." But what I've often found is when you start running towards something, you'll often find that that thing is already right there in front of you, but you've been confusing the heck out of people

around you because you're not running toward, you're running away. And you start to show people who you truly are when you show up in the world running towards something, knowing who you are and what you want. And it's not a selfish thing, 'cause usually if we get what we want, a lot of people benefit, because that's just the hearts of who we are. I mean, we care about people, so this isn't a selfish thing. I think our companies need more of us showing up that way, and I don't think that story's about leaving a company. I think it's actually about being authentic, being values-driven, and making a difference.

[00:20:55] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, I appreciate you sharing that, 'cause I think sometimes I've fallen into both sides of this argument. The argument that's like, "Well, why would I take advice from a marriage counselor who's been divorced?" Right? There's that bucket. And then there's the other bucket that's like, "Yeah, but we learn from failure. We learn from not doing the thing to excellence, or not doing the thing the way we want to do it." And we often learn more from those moments. So when you're going into these rooms and you're talking about leadership coaching, and somebody's like, "Yeah. Hey, well, you got demoted," how do you weave that into your story? 'Cause I think that's valuable. I think that sets the stage in a much different way than, "I've climbed the corporate ladder, and I've been successful at every level, and here's the things that I've done."

[00:21:45] **ZACH AREND:** Yeah. Well, it's interesting, because it wasn't pretty. I was a human being getting demoted, and I wanted to blame everybody. And yeah, I forgot about this idea of saddling your own horse, this personal responsibility thing. That's all I'd ever done. I took ownership for all my results, and I was taking the ownership of everybody else too. And when Michael says, "Zach, you've been a good soldier, that's not leadership," it wasn't immediately, "Oh, I know what you mean." It was more years of wrestling with, what is leadership, then? And I actually studied servant leadership. I'm like, wow, do we not have that all wrong? If you really look at the true definition of servant leadership, it's actually about teaching people to saddle their own horse, and it's not about just surface-level taking care of people. Now, that's a part of it. You gotta love your people. You gotta care for them. But I always ask people, "Are you caring deep enough? Are you allowing them to go through their own discomfort, their own struggle, so that they can learn the lessons and truly grow?" 'Cause that's where growth happens, and if we're constantly trying to protect people and keep stress and discomfort away from them, maybe we're hurting them more than helping them. I think so. Not always, but it's worth looking at.

[00:23:04] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. I have said this before on the podcast, not that you should orchestrate this, but everybody should get fired once. You just learn something from that experience, and you go through that entire grieving process, right? The anger and all the things. But there's something you walk away with differently having gone through that experience. I think back to all the mistakes that I've made in my career and the lessons that I've learned. And even now, you continue to grow. I have a super supportive boss, and she'll say to me, "Is that a fight that you want to have? I got your back. I got your back, but really think about it. Is that something you wanna pursue, or tackle, or change?" And it goes back to, what do you value? How do you make the impact you wanna make? Am I looking at it from the right perspective? As we wrap up our conversation, I'd love for you to share with somebody who's listening today, and maybe they're walking away and they're like, "Man, you know what? I am in that good soldier position." What's one thing that you would advise them to do so they can really start to saddle their own horse and make an impact the way they want to?

[00:24:19] **ZACH AREND:** This sounds simple, and it's probably the hardest thing to do, but it's get a journal and find some time just to sit and start answering some of these questions that we raised in the session today. What do you truly want? What's the outcome? What would light you up? How would you love to contribute? And actually get really clear. And I think that takes us slowing down, which is where we're not good. In this world we live in, it's 24/7. That's what I've found most of the leaders I've been working with lately need to do. Take a Friday afternoon and get offsite, go to a coffee shop with nothing but a journal, and just start journaling and reflecting and thinking, writing. I like to write, because if you stay in your head, I don't know about you, but I just start to spiral. But on paper, I can get a little distance from it, and I can think clearer. So that's where I would start, but start really leaning into what you're running toward. Because only you can answer that. That's your responsibility. That's your version of saddling your own horse, starting to choose the stories and the direction that you want to go. And not waiting, not waiting for somebody to tap you on the shoulder, 'cause for so long, I was always waiting for

that opportunity, and I realized, oh, I will have to be the one to create that. And it started with me starting to wrestle with those questions.

[00:25:46] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So good. My husband is a prolific journaler, so there is definitely something to be said about getting that distance from your brain to the paper. You can see things more clearly. And I would say if you're listening and you're like, "Hey, I don't have time to journal," open your phone and look at your screen time. See if you can cut that down by an hour this week and invest that into journaling. I always remind people of that when we say we don't have enough time. It's like, we do, we just need to prioritize it differently. So Zach, this was a great discussion. I love your connection to being in the arena, to bringing that to leadership, and really forcing us to think about how we saddle our own horse. So thank you for your time.

[00:26:25] **ZACH AREND:** Thank you, Shari.

[00:26:35] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.