



Name It, Tame It: Trauma-Informed Leadership and Felt Safety at Work

Date: Tuesday, July 28, 2026

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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. Joining me today is Shenandoah Chefalo, founder and lead workforce transformation strategist at Chefalo Consulting. She is an award-winning author, keynote speaker, and the creator of the Healing Centered Leadership Pathway, a framework she has used to train thousands of leaders across more than 30 states on trauma-informed and human-centered leadership.

[00:00:44] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Shenandoah, thank you for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:44] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Thanks so much for having me. Excited to be here.

[00:01:00] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So our listeners may or may not know this, but I started off early in my career in the mental health space as a mental health tech working in a residential facility. And your memoir is titled Garbage Bag Suitcase, and I was sharing this a little bit before we jumped on live, that it so hit me in the feels because I can't tell you how many residents I saw come into that facility, and all they had for their belongings was a garbage bag full of stuff. So I wanna start there. I'd love to hear more about your own story and how you navigated that profound instability, foster care, all of the things, and then to become somebody who graduated from college and created this great story and life that you have now.

[00:01:40] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** I appreciate that question so much. Well, it also tells me that book titles are more important than everyone gives them credit for, and they say, "Don't judge a book by its cover," but that's exactly how everyone judges a book. So I appreciate the comment about Garbage Bag Suitcase because that was hard-fought coming to that title. I must have gone through 30 things before I was like, "No, that's it. That's the one." So yeah, my young life started in San Diego, California, in the '70s. I'm in the Gen X generation. But it was a really unstable upbringing, so I lived with a mom who had mental health issues and substance abuse issues. Didn't really know my biological father. And we moved a lot. 50 times, 35 schools before the age of 13. And then through a long series that we don't have time to get into today, I self-reported myself into the foster care system, which I thought was gonna get me the Annie ending. In my 13-year-old brain, I thought I was gonna have a Daddy Warbucks ending. I really didn't know anything about foster care, but it was that or become unhoused with my grandmother, and she was in a senior living facility. And so there was just all these other pieces involved. And so I went into the system and real quick realized I wasn't gonna have my Annie ending, and then did an additional 17 more moves and another 10 schools in five years. And then I aged out at 18, which was halfway through my senior year of high school. So obviously, lots of moves for me.

[00:03:16] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** As I'm moving my daughter to college and we're using garbage bags, I'm like, "Well, it's different for you. It's not the same thing, so let's just be clear." But I made a commitment to myself that I'd really never talk about my time in care, and I did my best to fake it till you make it. I was tired of the judgments. I was tired of the stereotypes about foster kids, you know, the "what's wrong with you that your parents can't love you" questions, that by the way I still get today. That was a question I was asked maybe two weeks ago.

[00:04:00] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** That's wild.

[00:04:00] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Right? It's a really interesting thing about how people view kids in the system, and still today, even at this age, accolades to my name and all, still get asked that question. People will still ask all the time. So my mission was to hide it. And while I did get into college, it was eight years to get my undergrad degree. I was a train wreck. I mean, just to be very honest about it, I had suicidal ideation, was super depressed, but I was also super alone and isolated with no idea how to tackle



the massive problems in front of me. And I got a job at a law firm as a receptionist and ended up being good at it, worked my way up, eventually started working as a law office administrator. And in the process of doing that, was really having some of my clients push some of my own buttons about there's something more here than just people's cases. There's something more under the surface, and had good timing with things like the adverse childhood experience study and what we were learning about neurobiology. And I just saw a path forward of how we could, as managing attorneys and staff at this point, how we could use that information to change culture. And so spent the last 20-plus years doing trauma-informed, human-centered culture change at the organizational level. So taking what we know about personal trauma, but applying that when we all meet together in this thing we call work or community.

[00:05:45] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Man, I have so many follow-up questions, but we only have a short time together. So I guess we'll start here. You know, you've made that connection that your lived experience can directly impact how you help others understand the impacts of trauma in the workplace, what we bring from personal trauma, and what potential trauma maybe we're creating in the workplace as well, and that the workplace puts on us. How did you make that transition to help? Because I believe in it. I really do believe that lived experience brings so much to the table in the conversation. How did you start to connect those dots?

[00:06:30] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Well, it actually started with the memoir, believe it or not. I wrote the memoir with the idea of, like, I'll give you the juicy details and the car accident of my life story, which is what everyone wants to hear, if you'll stick around and talk about how we can change the system. But when I was doing the research on how could we actually change the system, like being unhoused or many other social issues, billions of dollars have been spent on trying to make these systems better and they don't. And what I quickly realized is that especially in human services work, people with stories come to the work. And by the way, if you work at Google, it's the same thing. There's no company that's exempt from this. But the original starting point for me was like, wait, there's damaged families and kids. We have adversity. There's all kinds of things going on, or we wouldn't be here in the first place. But also the people in the system have issues, and it was hard to know. I once had a corrections officer tell me, "It's hard to know who the bars are holding in," that corrections officers and inmates can sometimes mirror each other. And that always stuck with me. At the time when he said it to me, I didn't really know what it meant. But the longer I was in a career, the more I saw this parallel process of us all just mimicking each other, and I realized, oh yeah, this isn't just about another policy. This is about a culture of fake it till you make it, a culture of toxic positivity of just like, we don't talk about feelings here, but every job description says we wanna hire emotionally intelligent people. Just this week, I asked a group of leaders, "How many of you want emotionally intelligent staff?" All raised their hand, and then I said, "Great, who wants to talk about feelings here?" And all but one person put their hand down. It's like there's just this misconnection of what these things meant. And so I realized, the problems that we all have personally just get more complex when we're in groups together, whether that's community, a volunteer group, the PTO, a soccer team, like, insert place. And I realized if we take some of these things we've been talking about for personal healing to change cultures and workplace, we can really make big, deep changes, not just for people at work, but also for the people they serve.

[00:09:08] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** You know, it's interesting, when I started my career in HR, it was often the idea that you leave personal at home. You don't... feelings are not for the office. If you're a female and you're crying in the office, that means you shouldn't get promoted. If you're a male and you lose your temper, you shouldn't get promoted. All of these things. And it's like the message was, "Don't be a human at work. Leave your humanity at the door." I'm thankful that the narrative on that has changed in a lot of ways. I don't think we're there in totality yet, but we are seeing a lot of conversations now around psychological safety. But you have a really good perspective, I think, because even that term psychological safety can be nebulous for some people. You've used the phrase "felt safety" when you talk to leaders, and how they need to create that for their team. So I'd love if you could unpack that a little bit for our listeners and help define what felt safety is and how it impacts performance.

[00:10:20] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Yeah, I mean, I think there's two pieces to what you said. So first is that what often looks like a performance problem is often really a nervous system problem, which happens because of a culture problem. So if all the leaders in an organization are constantly in their fight, flight, freeze, appease mode, thus all the employees react from that, and everything is survival. We forget



the difference between urgent and important. We get stuck in an inability to think clearly. We make extreme decisions. It increases anxiety for everybody, and then there's just a need to constantly take action or be doing something. And you could get stuck in that loop. But the thing about culture is it's daily behavior and not slogans. So this like, "there's no place at work for home..." but I don't mind texting you at 10 o'clock at night while you're at home about work. It's about values that become shared agreements, and then they become ritualized practice habits. And probably the number one thing for every leader listening to this is just learn to do repair work and model that people can have behaviors we don't like, because two things can be true at the same time, and it doesn't mean we have to stop liking them or that we have to kick them out of our organization. We all have moments, days, things where we'd like to take back something we've said or done. And where I find most organizations suffering is they have zero idea of how to repair that. And when you can model repair... I get more comments at the end of a training when I say, "If there's any repair work I need to do one-on-one with people, let me know." People are always like, "What?" Like, it's just this open invite to tell me, maybe I've said something that upset somebody at some point. More people make comments to me about that. It's like, that's what we're asking leaders to do, is just at the beginning of the meeting, "Hey, let me know, and then we'll just repair it right now. It doesn't have to turn into these really gigantic big deals." Here's where it can get complex, because we can confuse safety with uncomfortableness. You know, safety is, if I say this thing, I might get fired. Uncomfortableness is like, I have something hard to say, and I don't feel good about it, but it still has to be said. And we sometimes, when we're uncomfortable, just say, "I don't feel safe." And I think it deserves conversation to talk about what that is. Now, when I come in and lead new teams, or I add someone to my team, I'm always like, "What do you need for safety?" Like, let's talk about, here's what I need. What do you need? Where can we meet in the middle? Because we're not gonna all get what we need all the time.

[00:12:36] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** How do we get there? And that's probably a really big question, because I think about plenty of meetings where I've seen leaders behave a certain way or say a certain thing, and obviously the leader is not asking for repair in that moment, so that's table stakes number one. As a leader, you need to open yourself up for that. But as a person who might want to seek repair in a relationship, how do they get through maybe some of the office politics that exist in the environment?

[00:13:19] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Yeah, I mean, every office is different, and what do you already have that's working well and what's not working well? That's a first question. One of the first things I say is, "Do you do repair work around here?" It's usually met with a no, which tells me, okay, well, we might need some more safety. To get more safety, we have to be more transparent. And so I'm always telling leaders, "Here's what we know. Here's what we don't know. Here's what we can decide today, and here's what we gotta revisit later." Like, telling people someone got fired, or we're not sure what the budget is and what the impact is, but know we're working on it. Give people the information you do have. You know, we fired person X. Please know that we can't share all the details about why, but a lot of thought went into it. Share what you can share. And I think we default to share nothing under the guise of it's confidential. But when we share nothing, people's brains will fill in the blank, and they'll probably be wrong, but they're gonna run with that. So to get to the repair is first transparency. Second is maybe de-escalation, depending on how heightened and hypervigilant everyone is. The slowing down, the "let's pause. I can feel some tension. I want everyone to feel heard. Can we slow down and just go one piece at a time?" And then it's, "Hey, I was thinking about something I said earlier, didn't like how it landed. Can we repair that? Can we revisit it?" Like, that's all repair. It doesn't always have to be these overture, grandiose pieces. Most people just need to know, "Hey, that made me feel a way. Do you know it made me feel a way, and will you try to not do it again?" That's what most of us are trying to get, and we hide behind safety sometimes.

[00:15:49] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah, I love that idea around naming the conversation. I do this with my boys. Now they're grown, but when I used to have to have some of those hard conversations or awkward conversations you have as a parent, I would start it off and say, "Hey, you know what? The next five minutes are gonna be really uncomfortable and awkward, but I need to tell you something, and we're gonna get through it. And when it's done, we can either keep talking about it, or we don't have to talk about it ever again. Like, either way is fine with me, but we're gonna have some feels about it." There's no reason you can't take that same mentality into the workplace. There's nothing holding us back from that.



[00:16:22] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Yeah, I mean, I say it all the time, name it, tame it. Like, just by saying, "I have to share hard feedback," all of a sudden, it's less hard. Or even to your boys, like, "Hey, I've got something really uncomfortable," and they might say, "Mom, can we do this after dinner?" Like, let me get myself in the mood for this hard thing you're gonna share with me. Right now is not the time. I'm thinking about some other things. But it just sets that place for us to both be, and it helps us with boundaries because I think we're also at this crux in the work about capacity and priorities. Just do one more thing. And you kind of touched on this, like, if you cry, you won't get promoted. But if you say no, you won't get promoted, right? And so the one thing I try to teach people all the time is like, "Hey, I wanna support you, but I'm at capacity, so what's deprioritizing? Is this more important, or are these other things you had asked me about before more important? How can we both stay on the same page?"

[00:17:43] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** It's such a good talk track for our audience to take away because, often as an HR professional, it's hard to set boundaries because you want to give a white glove approach. You want to show up. A lot of us got into this profession because we want to help people, and then we realize we work with people. It's complicated. I know our time is short, but I do wanna get to this next question. Often our middle managers are in this position where they might feel scared to talk to their employees about things like grief or trauma or mental health at work, because they don't want to make presumptions. They don't wanna come across as therapists, and they don't potentially wanna be disingenuous or, you know, maybe there's some gender dynamics and they're not really sure where to show up. All of those things are a lot for leaders to navigate. So how do they enter those conversations without making employees feel like, "Hey, you can't bring your humanity to work?"

[00:18:39] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Yeah, I mean, there's no one right answer for every situation. And I would say: What are you already ritualizing? So one of the things that I ritualize with a lot of my clients is something called community meeting, which is like anytime for whatever reason two or more of us are gonna meet, we kind of do this three-question thing, which was developed by Dr. Sandra Bloom, and it's, "How are you feeling? What's your goal for our time together? And who could you ask for support?" Now, when we're talking about building safety, we start with this. But what it does is, if in regular meetings that's how we're starting, then when something really pops up and we start there, nobody also feels caught off guard by it. No one's gonna feel singled out because this is the way we start all meetings. And what kind of gets learned, especially with the question "How are you feeling?" is that you don't give a reason for the feeling. It's just naming one or two feeling words, which for your listeners is not good or okay or fine. Those aren't feelings. So this is like we give out feelings wheels. We're really trying to do the work. But you don't tell why you feel that way. So I might say, "I'm annoyed." And that's it. And the other person who's asking you isn't like, "How can I rescue you from feeling annoyed?" They just allow you to feel it. And when people first start this, they're uncomfortable. But even after four or five practices of it, they're like, "Wait, I can see the value of this." It's like, yeah, you just begin ritualizing that when people name it, they can let the feeling go and move on to the next thing, it gets them unstuck. So that when I am in those conversations of, like, maybe an employee's mother has passed away, and you know that they're in grief, and you want to address it, there's not this awkwardness because we already have a history of seeing people with their whole humanity. And when we get to the "who can you ask for support," maybe I'm not your support person, maybe HR isn't your support person, but it allows you to say, "Hey, I can reach out to Joe, I can reach out to Sylvia, I can reach out to whoever." And that also helps HR know, who are my people's people?

[00:21:15] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** And that we're building those networks so it's not just left to HR, it's left to all of us to share the responsibility of where everybody is all the time. I love that. You know, I once had a leader who did something similar to that in our team meetings, and I remember when she introduced it was right when my oldest had gone to boot camp. And for those who are military parents, that can be very overwhelming because you go from having your kid in high school to no contact for weeks on end as they're going through this experience. And I remember in one of those meetings, going around the room and expressing that I was sad and tearing up a little bit. And there was such power in being able to say the emotion and know that I didn't also have to explain it. I wasn't gonna have a breakdown in the meeting, I was just, "This is where my mindset's at. This is where I'm at." And it really... the practice really helped because then as I was communicating with other people, knowing where they're sitting, I might craft my message differently.



[00:22:23] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** That's exactly it. It's really just a temperature check. So you say you're sad, and it's not that I have to fix your sadness, because I can't anyway. There's nothing I'm gonna do to bring your son home from boot camp early. But I hear it so that when I run into you in the hallway, and maybe you're not making eye contact, or you're not saying good morning like you normally would, instead of filling in the blank of like, "What's her problem?" which is where we mostly go to protect ourselves, instead it's like, "Oh yeah, she said not feeling it today." And I can give space, and when I'm sending those emails, I can think, "Hey, thinking about you and your son." And just that whole piece that gets missed sometimes when we don't acknowledge that feelings are in the room with us, and that's why I always get frustrated with the "feelings don't belong at work." I'm like, where do they belong? Because I'm a human and I have them, so how do you get rid of them? And we don't have to fix people's outside feelings, but we do just have to hear it and understand and use it as that temperature check of like, "Okay, let's give some space to this person," or, "Great, you're enthused today, let me take some of that energy for myself as well." And be able to prioritize what really does matter in that moment and for the day or for the week.

[00:23:59] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** This has been such a wonderful conversation. I guess my last question for you before we jump off here is if you had one piece of advice for those listening, especially in the HR space or as a business leader, to help move the needle forward in their organizations with some of these things, where's a good place to start?

[00:24:21] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Here's the thing. I might start somewhere that will surprise everybody. What can you stop doing? I think this is something that needs to be done regularly in HR and other C-suite and other places within organizations, is just look at your calendar. What meetings, subcommittee meetings, sub-subcommittee meetings are really we've already made a decision, but somehow we're still meeting, or we're just never gonna make a decision, so let's stop meeting, or how could we reorganize to find more time? This comes up with regional and district meetings a lot, where six people are going. Could you rotate one person every six times? Like, what could you stop doing, or how could you reorganize to find more time? Because everything else is about slowing down to be present instead of making urgent decisions, and a lot of folks are fighting time and think, "I just don't have time to slow down and do this." But really, you can't change culture without slowing down. Doesn't mean you stop doing work, but learning to let go of some things that are no longer serving organizations. We don't spend any time talking about that. We just always wanna add a new initiative. We never talk about stopping old initiatives that aren't serving us. So my number one advice is what could you stop doing?

[00:25:39] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love it. Such good advice. Such a great conversation. Thanks for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:25:39] **SHENANDOAH CHEFALO:** Thanks so much for having me.

[00:25:57] **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.