The Wanted Poster: Hiring for Character After 300% Turnover

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Guest: Dana DeVito, COO and Executive Coach, Elite Performance Associates

[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 Dana DeVito, COO and executive coach from Elite Performance Associates. Dana overcame a 300% turnover rate in his own operations, and the hiring framework he built along the way, the alignment system, is the subject of his book, Now Hiring.

[00:00:47] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Dana, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:51] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah, thanks for having me. I've been so excited for this.

[00:00:53] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Ugh, so am I. And I'd love if maybe you could start sharing with our audience a little bit about you and your background and the space that you're in right now.

[00:01:01] **DANA DEVITO:** Sure. To start with, I'm primarily a business coach and/or executive coach and consultant right now, working with organizations across the country. But I started chopping my teeth on franchising with Jack in the Box about 22 years ago. So bought into two units and then built a third. Then in 2019, invested in the Scooter's franchise, Scooter's Coffee franchise as well. So built a couple units there, and I, well, I've exited Jack in the Box. I am still active within Scooter's itself, along with the consulting side of it.

[00:01:35] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Man, I, so many hats, which is so good because I think our conversation's gonna be really interesting. I don't often get to talk to people who are kind of in these companies with high turnover, and so I think this conversation's really important. So I wanna start there. You once ran operations with 300% turnover. Yeah. That's huge. Right. So what did a normal week look like when you're dealing with that level of turnover?

[00:02:02] **DANA DEVITO:** Painful. I, even... Hearing you say it, there's a part of my stomach that drops. It was... Really difficult, and really a pivotal point in my, both my life and my career. We... This was, we ran with high turnover. I think at the expected rate when I first got into Jack in the Box was 120% annualized turnover, which was above the norm anyways because of the complexity of the brand. And so I was comfortable with a good, solid high turnover rate. But when COVID hit, in 2020, we had record sales and record on or record turnover, so it was just devastating. One Monday morning, in one of my units, we had five operating units at the time, one of the units I needed 22 people to run all of my shifts, 18 hours a day. I had seven.

[00:02:51] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Oh, my goodness.

[00:02:51] **DANA DEVITO:** And the, and I just, I felt so spread so thin. So as an owner/operator, I'm the last line of defense, so for me to have such little staff, I'm running from one store to the next, back and forth, try... I slept maybe two to three hours a night trying to jump from each location. And I was consulting as, along the side too, so trying to maintain relationships with my clients and do good service to them. I was, like I said, my stomach dropped. I was beat up, heartbroken, devastated, and realizing, looking for every solution that I possibly could. Like, what's wrong? Why is this happening? Because it's not just, we say, there was some subsidies coming out, and nobody wanted to work, and yeah, I get that But that's not the whole story. It can't be the whole story because I had employees. I still had people that were working for me, so I just, I had to go back and reflect and was, what was the problem going on? It was a culturally, it was a societally, and really what I landed on, it was me and how I was running my businesses really facilitated the high turnover. And talk about a punch in the stomach when I finally figured out that it was me because I was handling every employee like a transaction. I'd go into the hiring process and say: "What can you do for me? How do you solve my problem? How do you make my life easy?" And that's how I treated them. So I'd bring them in, stick them into their role, and then turn around and try to solve the next problem. And once I reflected, another punch in the stomach, but that really was a pivotal point in

my own career and my own businesses and how I looked at employee, being an employer and how to better care for my staff

[00:04:36] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** As you went through that realization, what was the one thing that you were like, "Okay, this is where I see the biggest opportunity for myself to change how I'm approaching"? Was it hiring? Was it performance management? Was it culture? What was the thing that you're like, "This is the one I'm gonna focus on"?

[00:04:56] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. All of the above. But, you know... It's a really, it's like, it's funny, when you get so buried, everything needs to be fixed. And so it's just a great question because I needed to prioritize somewhere, and I really built it into two facets that I focused on. One is the hiring process, so really reflecting on making it a, the start of a relationship so it's bi-directional. Instead of being you know, one direction and transactional, it was, I started looking at it as who's, who is the person on the other side of the table, and how do I start this professional relationship on a good foot? How do I lead with not just seeing what they can do for me, but what can I do for them? And that transitions, I think, really necessarily to the idea of culture. So that was the other side of the same coin is we needed to establish a really strong culture of support, growth, and development, encouragement, and make it something that people enjoyed coming to work for. And food service is tough, especially fast food. And coffee, again, we had two starting businesses, and so we were getting our feet wet and trying to figure all this out. And so that, those two sides were really, I just, I had to do them both at once. And yeah, so that's how I made my choices.

[00:06:14] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, I have a lot of empathy for those that work in fast food. That's where I started my career at 14, right? Yeah. Had to have that waiver from my parents. And you're absolutely right. The job itself can be terrible some days. You're, you don't have any idea of what kind of rush you're gonna have. You don't know if you're gonna get that sports team that's coming through, and they pull up in a bus, and you're like, "Oh, my gosh, what am I supposed to do? I have no chicken nuggets ready." So the work is hard, so how do you make kind of the environment and the people and the culture the thing that is sticky? I love that you started with hiring, and you have a couple different kind of models I wanna talk through that you've kind of highlighted. So I wanna start first with the alignment system. Walk me through what that is and how did that, solve kind of the standard hiring problems that we have.

[00:07:05] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. Thanks for asking that question. The, so the alignment systems, again, it's really addressing both those, the those sides of the coin. The hiring, which is the first side of it, is what I call the wanted poster, and the idea is Reframing this institution of hiring from who is the best among the group that's in front of me to identifying that I have an idea of whom I want to bring into my organization, and it's beyond the idea of skill. Now every-everybody has a certain skill minimum, but we over-sensationalize that, or we tend to, especially with some of the clients that I work with, is that if you've got experience, if above and beyond what my, I think my minimum is, then suddenly you're walking on water and turning iron into gold. And that's frankly not the case. And so I wanted to restructure it to where skill is now a binary. If they meet the minimum skill, then that brings them into the interview process where we start to evaluate on character. And what I, there, I have three fixed attributes that I hire to and then one variable which is relative to the position being hired for. So I hire for drive, which I term by grit or the willingness to persevere. Mindfulness, which I term the consideration of others and themselves. And then humility, how willing are they to lift their team up and also receive feedback well? And then the fourth one is the variable, which is, for, we'll say barista since I still own coffee shops. I want outgoing. So if they're outgoing, driven, mindful, and humble I could teach you all the rest, right? And so reframing it to where I'm looking at that, and then it's no longer a measure of are they, what's the best of the pool? It's do they meet that standard? It's like, and so that's why I call it my wanted poster. I wanna know with such clarity before you walk through the door of whom I'm hiring, and then as soon as I meet you, I'm like, "Oh, that's you. You're the picture on the hiring or the wanted poster. That's, I've been just been waiting for you to walk through the door. Thanks for coming in." And so when I find that I va-evaluate individuals on their cultural alignment with the standards that I have for my organization, I find that we get through bumpy times so much more elegantly. I find that we can we grow the team collectively because that's the heart of the person that's coming through the door. A-and that gives me so much more certainty of success coming forward, and then it also allows me to know what type of relationship and pouring into of that

person that I need to, that I need to be part of. How, If I know their character, then I can grow them or give them the best opportunity to succeed in my organization because I know whom I'm working with. And to give you context, in my coffee shops, we hire 1% to 2% of our applicants. We're so diligent on our filter because it's important to us. We, we want a sustainable culture that grows without any one person. It shouldn't be dependent upon me, and it shouldn't be dependent upon the manager. It should be self-sustaining because we hire people that build each other up and wanna do the best job that they possibly can. So that's the first side of it. I know I've spoken a lot. Is there any questions that you wanna ask?

[00:10:19] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** No. No, that's good. Okay, don't forget the second side. Yeah, this question comes from, conversations I've had with managers in the past, where they're trying to hire for what you talked about, the wanted poster. But they end up kind of falling into these, I'm gonna call them HR no questions... Sure. Silly... Or kind of no ideas of like, "Well, yeah, I could see going and getting a beer with that person," or, "I could see whatever." I genuinely believe what you described, there's a way to ask the questions that are very specific because what you talked about, while those might seem like fluffy, which I don't think they are, but they might seem that way, you are able to draw a direct line to business outcome with all of those traits when you sat down and really thought about what does my wanted poster look like? So that's a long-winded way to get to my question. What questions are you asking in your interview process that are legal but that help surface the things you're looking for?

[00:11:22] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. Great question and necessary to talk about because, we wanna make it an inviting and a safe and an absolutely legal environment upon which we're operating. So I'm gonna frame it a little bit more. One, we wanna make this a repeatable process, and so we numerically quantify every one of those characteristics. And this is one of the flipping of the script that we do. And many, I've seen a lot of different measuring tools that we, that are used throughout many systems, and they're great, but they tend to build from the bottom up. And so in this system, this is top-down. So we assign everybody a perfect score in each of those attributes when they walk through the door. So everybody gets a, if we were, you want it for a brief, everybody gets at a 10 out of 10 in outgoing, 10 out of 10 in drive, 10 out of 10 in humility and mindfulness. And so what we're looking for is anything that would be considered a red flag. And through this, we developed a story method interview process of being curious and full of wonder when somebody walks through the door. And so we do very little talking as the interviewer. We should be, 10% of the time talking. And so back to the idea of what types of questions to ask. For me, what I wanna know is, in a professional sense, tell me about yourself. And I, and what we can start to discern is in the way they present, in the way they provide that information, you start to see measures of those qualities. For example, if I just ask you, "Tell me a little bit about your professional career." And if you leverage the word I more often than the, you leverage the word we or us, then we can start to see a focus or prioritization of the individual as opposed to the group. And we're just looking for continuation or commonalities in the messages that we're hearing from you. And if it's significant enough, if you have a difficult time speaking about anybody but yourself, then we're gonna deduct a point in humility. And because I say we, our standards are exceptionally high, we only hire individuals that score a 90% or higher. We only want A students. And that's, that's just the general frame. And so we ask, "Hey, tell me a little bit about your professional career." And then whatever they present, I say, "We need to ask two more questions asking for more clarity or asking for further details upon what they've already presented to us."

[00:13:47] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love that. And, I don't think I've ever met anybody who did it from, 100% backwards. I think I love that. And you mentioned this very small, but I think it's really important because I could see the argument coming that, "Oh, maybe you're bringing bias." You started by saying, though, anybody that meets the minimum skills gets an interview, right? So that's how you are protecting against that, because you've already evaluated for skills. You've already identified this person has the skill set I need. Now I need to understand these traits that I have been able to prove are successful. So I love that approach. How have you seen, going back to that 300 turnover number, what impact did you see once you started to use this methodology and this approach in your turnover numbers or your profitability or those kinds of things?

[00:14:38] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. We, we dropped turnover down to less than 50%, which was... Wow... Extraordinary. It didn't...

[00:14:45] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well under industry average.

[00:14:46] **DANA DEVITO:** Well under, yeah. Yeah... It was not easy, and it wasn't overnight. There's a commitment there. And so it just, and somebody once told me this: Things can be simple, just not easy. And that's the framework, and so that's the cautionary tale is that we have to commit to it because you're, people are, there's a, they're dynamic. There's, there a, there's a lot to each and every one of us. And so some of this, as we're gaining traction again, has to be by find... As with any team, it's not just the person in charge that makes the team successful. It's all the components of the team. And so as you continue to bring people in that are supporting of the culture and the vision for what you're trying to accomplish, that then creates this durability and expansion beyond. So I was even surprised by the success of it, but it doesn't surprise me now in reflection.

[00:15:38] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. As you worked on that kind of second piece that you talked about earlier, the culture piece, I suspect you looked at things like, now that I've got turnover, you know, where I want it, how do I, in tandem, think about retention? So, again, you've solved the hiring problem, now I need to think about the backside of it, especially in that environment, because there's just basic turnover you're gonna get with, people going to college or that kind of stuff in that type of industry. But you also typically are not gonna be, go to pay to solve your retention problem every time, right? Like kind of everybody gets paid similarly in the area, and there's differentiators. So what did you find was your kind of retention differentiator as you worked on your culture?

[00:16:21] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. The, again, great question. So the other side of the coin is what I call the three P filter. So we most often, and in espe... I deal with a lot of small to mid-sized business owners and executives in those roles, and the... What we find is the switch that needs to be flipped is that it's not do we need to have a relationship with our team members, right? Do we need to have a professional relationship? It's what kind of professional relationship do we need to have? And we didn't... As I would go into organizations and even looking at my own, there wasn't an easy framework for me to say, "Okay, how do I deal with this person?" Because sometimes they have a good week, sometimes they have a bad week, or they're really underperforming at what my expectations and boy, I thought they were gonna be excellent. What is going on? And so back to my earlier point, the problem's not the individual. The problem is, was me. I wasn't understanding my role in what I needed to provide to them relationally to help them grow professionally. So to reflect on that, I just developed a quick and easy framework that I could then teach other people with like managers that worked for me and then clients on it, and so that's where the three P filter came in. The heart of it is people fundamentally, and I will, this is a hill that I will die on, is people fundamentally wanna be seen, heard, and known. And we often marginalize that by worrying about KPIs or me... Business metrics as a defining factor, and those are 100% necessary. We need to survive and have a healthy organization. So I respect that. Trust me, I've... In a low margin business, it's the life and lifeblood of it. But that being said, we're, at the end of the day, I don't care what we do, what service we provide, what widget we make, we are in the people business. And so this framework, call it the three P filter, I qualify everybody into one of these baskets as you have it. The first one, it's gonna be as a partner. The second one's gonna be as a project, or the third one, and this is the tough one to hear, but it's problem, right? Because we wanna be cautious on how we term it. Is it, we don't wanna be discriminatory or something that's dismissive of an individual. And so again, understanding that the basis of this is it's not do you have a professional with relationship with the individual, it's what professional relationship do you have, and then what's your responsibility in this? So with, we'll start on the partner side. The partners are, they're the ones that are your A... They're your rock stars. They show up, they solve problems without directive. They, shoulder burdens that maybe they shouldn't because they feel such a bond to the organization and the individuals that they're working with that they take on a ton. And they're, out of my, the 22 people I needed, they were the seven that stuck around, right? They were the ones that they, I believed in them, they believed in me. We had this professional working relationship that was just well-entrenched and durable. But we find that we do superficial relationships with those individuals. "How are you doing? You're great. Perfect." And then I go work on something else. And so those are the silent quitters, right? They get to a point, they shoulder the burden so much, and then they're like, "I just can't take this anymore. Nothing's changing. My, I don't have a career path in front of me. I don't know what's next steps." I we're not having those dialogues because they're so effective and efficient at their roles. And so this for me is, again, it informs what I need to do. I need to protect them. I need to help them understand in how to establish boundaries. I don't take advantage of them, and then I empower them for their next phases in their career. What can I do to build

you up, provide training, development, and then make sure that you're in a healthy, safe spot to do that? The second category is projects. They have the potential, but they're not performing to the standard yet. I liken them, I have two kids. They're both in college now. But this is the vision that I have is projects take work, and as adults, when we train, we do a nominal bit of training by habit. We show you, we explain it, we let you practice it, and then we're like, "All right, we're good," and then we run off and then wonder why it, the slow roll to competency is tedious. And so I liken it to teaching a child how to tie their shoes. You have to go down, hands and knees, show them, watch them, let them run off and expect them to screw it all up and come back and do it all over again. And so this, it demands a lot on my time as their leader. I have to be able to commit hours per week walking alongside them shoulder to shoulder, not just releasing them in the wild because I told them once, but committing to their development in a really intimate manner. And that's hard because we think we can do 30 projects, and you can have two, right? So, and we can come back to that. But then the third one is problems. Problems, this is where we, oftentimes with leaders, we don't know the difficult conversations to have. We don't know what we should be doing, when we should be doing it, or even why. And I don't mean problems be de-dismissive and, A, you just need to, cut bait and fire them. It's, how do we, what's their display of engagement? Is it consistent, inconsistent? Are there attributes within the organization that are my responsibility to make sure they're trained for, and have I done that or do I have capacity to do that? And if not, how do we graciously and kindly inform them early, not late, not when I'm frustrated, not when I'm mad, but in a developmental phase? And if we are unable to meet the expectations that they're very clear on, then we work together on how do we reintroduce you into a place that will be effective for you?

[00:21:55] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** You hit on two things that I wanna dive into a little bit, and I do wanna be cognizant of time for those listening, so I promise we won't go super long. The first one is when you talked about that partner role, it's just a note I wanna throw out there for introverts. I'm an extrovert, so this space of building relationships comes very easy for me. That being said, for my introvert friends, that doesn't necessarily come easy. And so, there's no shame in building a system for yourself to remind you how to do these relationship things. It's okay if you have a checklist in the morning and it's, "Ask Susie about this. She told me yesterday. Ask..." Like, you don't, this doesn't have to come naturally. You don't have to be this natural extrovert to do this work. So I just wanna note that, 'cause I think sometimes that falls in that category.

[00:22:48] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. What a great point, because I am a deeply shy, introverted person. That is my nature. I would love to crawl into a corner and hang out with a book, maybe. Whatever it is. So it's, it's exactly right, and what a great mechanism to remind yourself on, and that's part of it. Like, the framework is to remind us what relationship I need to nurture with an individual. And so use the reminders in your phone. Use a script that you have. The idea is that we wanna be curious and full of wonder, and the heart is ask questions. Ask questions with your partners beyond, "How are you doing?" Remember, my interview one is ask two to three more questions beyond the first response. Be curious as to why they answer the way that it is. Be curious as to how are they operating and what negative impact might they be shielding you from. And so how do we insert ourselves back into that and, nurture that type of relationship? And that transfers across each one of those categories, is be curious. Be full of wonder. Find out what's going on

[00:23:48] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love your phrasing of be full of wonder. That, I'm gonna steal that 'cause like... Yeah... I talk about curiosity all the time. I don't talk about be full of wonder, and it sounds just so much more whimsical and inviting than be curious. So I'm taking that one away. Perfect. Love it. The other thing I wanted to mention or ask about, you, I've coached managers before on this, and I think it's a, it can be a hard concept. But when you get to that termination conversation or you're getting close to that termination conversation, ideally you want your exit process to be as wonderful as your hiring process. And I think that can get lost sometimes because we think about performance issues, and we add to that our own feelings of frustration when we're dealing with the employee. Instead of doing what you described, which is, "Here's your clear expectation. I've invested time into you when you were at that project phase. I made sure that you had, you understood, you had the resources, you had the support to be successful. And for whatever reason, we're here. It's just not the right fit. There could be a, a whole bunch of reasons why that's not the case. So we can have a collaborative conversation about what comes next." That doesn't mean I'm dismissing the egregious terminations that we have to do. Those are

just kind of table stakes. We have to do that. That's not the case. How did you help your managers think differently about this process? Because I have found that in coaching other managers and leaders, this concept can be very hard to understand.

[00:25:24] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. The first... Great question, and it is such a emotionally fraught circumstance that we've gotta be concerned about that, and that's what I start with, is when I counsel my managers or the people that I, the clients that I have, is we have to remember that the person being terminated, this is a traumatic instance in their career and life. It is hard on anybody to be told, "You are not wanted. This is not a place for you." And so out of the gate, we have to be respectful of the emotional bur... Baggage or burden that we're enforcing on somebody. So often, we don't teach this enough, is the idea that the ownership and the responsibility rests solely on the leader's shoulders. And I mean that not because they haven't done a, they're not meeting expectations, that they're not complicit in their exit or need to exit from the ind- from the, business, but we're the authority figure. We're making the decision. It's not a shared environment, right? They, their ability to have say or influence is out, is over So, recognizing that you have that responsibility and ownership rather than trying to make ourselves feel good about it by justifying the reasons. So often I've seen managers use the termination meeting as a way to say, "Well, you did X, Y, and Z, and that's why I'm letting you go. Because you weren't able to... You weren't doing this. This was your problem." And because it gives us some emotional blanketing to protect our own sense of, anxiety and nervousness. And so that's where, no... Nobody being terminated, my theory, nobody being terminated should be surprised by the circumstance. And so as we build to this, that meeting isn't, is, they already know all the details. So we're not, we don't have to convince, and we definitely don't have to train. This is just a dissemination of information. I am here to inform you that this is the parting of our ways as a professional environment, and we're moving on. I'm not going to defend or blame in that framework because I think that is dis... It's, it undermines our integrity. It's dishonest. It's emotionally dishonest because we're trying to share the burden of the responsibility of termination with the person being let go, and that's just... We're not on equal footing. We shouldn't share it equally

[00:27:47] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. And you made a good point because I think somebody listening might be like, "What about documentation?" You're already documenting. You've done all that document. Like, that's done, right? So i... It's not in dismissive of that. You've already kind of checked that box. The end conversation isn't about going through that stuff.

[00:28:04] **DANA DEVITO:** The first time I start documenting, the, hand to heart, first time I start documenting, that's my conversation with the person I'm documenting. I will tell, "My name's Dana. Dana, I'm writing you up because this is the documentation that will be recorded as you're terminated." Right? This is to, this is, with a recognition on both parties that this is where it's leading if this continues. I wanna be open and upfront with this. This isn't, I'm not documenting it because it's the best way for you to remember. You're gonna remember because you're passionate and part of a team and community. So let's talk about it upfront, that this is where this leads if we continue down this path.

[00:28:44] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. I love that. All right. We are getting to our end here. I feel like we could definitely talk a ton more, but I'd love if you could share, if somebody wants to learn about the work you're doing, maybe franchising, your book, how do they learn all the things about Dana?

[00:28:59] **DANA DEVITO:** Yeah. Thanks so much. So I can be reached at my website for my book. It's nowhiringbook.com. I have a bunch of free resources there, so please come by and grab them. They're my Wanted poster, my 3P filter. Great to help out if you have any more, further interest or questions. For my consulting company, it's eliteperformanceassociates.com. And then I can be, I'm often on LinkedIn, so Dana-DeVito on LinkedIn. I'd love to connect. Ask me anything. It'd be fun to talk to anybody.

[00:29:26] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love it. Dana, thank you so much for your time today.

[00:29:29] **DANA DEVITO:** No, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much.

[00:29:44] **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