



Back of House: People-First HR in High-Turnover Hospitality

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Guest: Donna Giarratana, Director of Human Resources, Baldi Management Group

[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 Donna Giarratana, owner of Moxie HR. Donna has built and transformed people and culture functions for hospitality names like the three Michelin star Inn at Little Washington and the José Andrés Group, and now helps leaders create people-first cultures that show up in the guest experience.

[00:00:42] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Donna, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me. Thank you for having me. Very excited. So you have spent years building and transforming HR in hospitality. What made you fall in love with that industry and the very unique people challenges that come with that type of work?

[00:01:00] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** I started many, many, many moons ago. I started as a hostess and kind of worked my way through. I call us, like, the island of misfit toys. We were all very special. I'm like Charlie in the Box, but different. And the people that work here, you know, I've been my best self in environments within the hospitality organization. So I fell in love with it because of the people, and I'm still supporting the people. It's exciting.

[00:01:24] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Being in hospitality, the culture itself isn't just internal. Like, in a knowledge worker role, a lot of that is internal. You don't necessarily see it externally unless you're reading, like, a survey or a Glassdoor review. But in hospitality, it's very different. That culture is in front of the guests and the clients, and it really shows up in that experience. Where do you see that connection most based on the work that you've done?

[00:01:53] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** So between the guest and the internal team, I see it being very similar. The guest wants to be acknowledged. They want to have the empathy and the understanding. When they walk in the door, they wanna be taken care of. I believe that the team members do as well. Understanding that they're not just there for a job, but to take the next step to make sure they're taking care of their family, getting their benefits, understanding what the expectations of the position are. For the guests, they wanna come in, they wanna feel a part of something, they wanna be acknowledged, eye contact, all of the things. So I think there's a lot of parallels to that in making sure that not only are we taking care of our people to take care of the guests, but it will relay in that. Glassdoor feedback is very interesting. It either can make or break you. I think Yelp is sort of like that with hospitality as well, and usually people only go to perhaps both of those if there's a challenging experience, but you learn a lot from that. As an HR leader, I will go to Glassdoor and try to understand a little bit more from what those feedbacks are so that I can take care of the team in a better way.

[00:02:58] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I don't think I've shared this on the podcast before, but I cut my teeth as a very, very young 14-year-old in my first job at McDonald's, which I think a lot of people might have a similar kind of origin story. But I was very fortunate that by 17 I was a manager in that role. And one of the things I think about now as an HR practitioner is there's definitely some myths about leading in that environment, in that restaurant hospitality environment, that I think can hurt retention in those groups. So what are some of those myths you've seen that leaders think this particular population or situation has?

[00:03:41] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** In today's world, there are a lot of different generations of people working. Whether it be the incoming group of people or the people that have been there forever, the lifers, the people that this is their world, and I love them. Understanding really when they come in as far as the culture and understanding what they want. I believe that every generation may have something different, and in my experience, once we have surveyed or asked the questions, they may want different benefits. Some of the younger generation may be home with their family and their parents, and they don't need

health insurance, and just really making sure that we have all of the different areas that come along with that. The other part is, and they say it for corporate world too, but the perks, all the perks come along, and we're not talking about benefit perks. We're talking, like, hey, let's bring in pizza or whatever. Sometimes that's great. Obviously our people have to eat as well, but really understanding that that is just an extra. It's not what they would really need or want.

[00:04:43] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** There's also a unique way of managing this group, I think, because your clients can be the nicest people in the world that you experience in your day. They also can be the most frustrating, heartbreaking, challenging thing that you have in your day, and so leading in that environment looks a little different.

[00:05:09] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** Agreed. I think that could parallel, again I use that word parallel, with the employee, because they also have things. They have people on our teams that need a little extra, need to be able to be listened to, so the employee team member is taking care of the guests that may have challenges and all of the different things that come along with that. I really think that's the same as with the employee, with the team member. As a leader, you really do have the opportunity to make somebody's life better, and as an HR leader, I feel like I can pour into that.

[00:05:50] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** For sure. How have you worked with the leadership team to instill some of those people-first ideas and methodology when you're dealing with hourly high-turnover team members?

[00:06:05] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** As a leader, no matter where you are, corporate, hospitality, all the things, I believe, and in my experience, it's pouring into your people. It really is. It's supporting them, understanding them. Obviously you have business needs. You have the business numbers and the sales and the turnover and the tips and all of the numbers, which as an HR leader you have to stand with. But I believe that if you take care of your people, those will all come, 100%. So making sure that they have all of the tools and background and understanding of any kind of training that I can provide them, and also everybody learns different. Whether it be on the phone, maybe video, maybe in person, depending on where they're located, if they need an email with instructions. Just making sure, again, I say for the managers to take care of the employee to take care of the guest, I believe HR leaders really do need to support the managers in the same way, because everybody's different and everybody has different needs. And giving a little bit of empathy for the managers because they're all dealing with that whole team underneath them that they're supporting. If they have a bad day, as HR leaders, we also might have a bad day. I used to walk the llama patch. I used to have a moment where I had to take a moment, but we all impact everybody in one way, and really to give the tools and the understanding that we're there to make the next day better and to have that support and to listen. That's really important.

[00:07:49] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** And specifically, I'm thinking about things like attendance. In the restaurant industry, you gotta be there, you gotta show up, and those last-minute call-outs have a huge impact on the rest of the team. So how do you create policies that are people-first, take into account people's situations, but also at the end of the day, you gotta run the business?

[00:08:10] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** Making sure you ask the questions. For instance, for attendance, we wanna make sure that it is fair and equitable and documentable, because in HR you gotta document everything. But also understanding that if there is a first infraction or somebody's late three times in a row, understanding they're people, but falling within a certain line. So making sure that you have the progressive discipline or whatever comes, the policies available, but when it comes to attendance, making sure that you are flexible based on circumstances and your restaurant type or wherever you're coming from in hospitality. Making the structure, making the policy based on that, not just because we always say that. Two call-outs in one restaurant versus two call-outs in another. You wanna make sure that you have it fair and equitable based on your circumstances. And then from there, having conversations with those employees. Why are they calling out? Why are they being late? If they are always having a flat tire on the way to work six times in a month, you know there's a problem. Making sure that you are understanding a little bit more and having a little bit of empathy in that, but falling within the parameters of whatever that policy is. When it comes to company setup and company culture, what does that look like and how can we really support the employee, but make it that they understand it, they know it? You hand them a handbook and they're not gonna read 70 pages, right? How do you support

that and help the manager to enforce it? I've had a circumstance where the employee needed to work at nighttime instead of the daytime because of childcare, and it's like, okay, have a simple conversation. What does that look like? And then you can adjust.

[00:10:37] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** That honest conversation with that employee in that example you just gave, it could go a couple ways. You might have a slot in the evening and say, yeah, easy, simple transition. I kind of wish you would've told me this earlier. We could've made the adjustment. The conversation could also go, hey, we're actually fully staffed at night, and that's not an opportunity for us right now. Not that I'm letting you go, but here's the expectation, and if you can't meet the expectation, it might be time to move on. Or it might be, hey, this person actually just has a hard time finding childcare, and you have an EAP service that has that built in. Did you know that? Here's the number to EAP. They can actually help you find reliable childcare. I completely agree with the mentality around, in every scenario, have a human conversation and don't just go by what the policy says, because that's not how life works.

[00:11:33] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** Yep. And what you don't know, you don't know. Treat them the way you would wanna be treated. As an HR leader or a manager, you're like, oh, that was just common sense. Why wouldn't you just tell me? But they may have so many things going on that they're gonna try to make it happen, and the spiral they go down until. So just having that open conversation and making sure that they feel heard and seen, but also they know what the rules are. If you do have to have that final conversation to say, I'm sorry, this isn't going to work. There's a why, and you have documentation as to why.

[00:12:17] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** For sure. As you've worked with managers in this space, how have you built out programs that really help them transition from the schedule makers or the metrics watchers to real people leaders in environments where there isn't a lot of time for them to sit behind the desk and go through corporate training on your LMS maybe. How do you think about that differently?

[00:12:41] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** It is on the spot, hands-on conversations. Also understanding how they learn, how they work, what environment they are in. The bottom line is that they wanna become leaders. They're going to move into positions, or they need the tools and understanding of not only the expectation, but just being empathetic and really realizing what it means to be a manager in a restaurant, and all of the moving pieces. Sometimes you have managers that have been managers forever. They have really been in it to win it. And it doesn't have to be my way or the highway. I'm very flexible. I love that. I love being able to partner with them and really show them how to mold, and even if they pick up one or two or three things that give them capabilities to be able to support their employees in a better way or in a different way. The younger ones, the green managers that have come up, or those individuals that have been moved into a leadership position that haven't necessarily ever been a manager, those are fun. It's like, let's do it. What do you really need? What does that look like? And understanding as an HR leader that if there are mistakes made, people don't generally make mistakes on purpose. So giving them the tools and the task and saying, I'm open. Call, text me, email me, tell me what you might need, and I can give you the tools. And if I don't know, I don't know. So it's fun. That's my favorite part, giving people other tools and tasks and all the things.

[00:14:43] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, speaking of tools, LMSs are obviously very important, and I mentioned that from the perspective of sometimes you don't have the chance to sit behind a desk and do that, but that leads to having the right tools. Meaning if you have that functionality that you can pull it up on your cellphone and you can watch it in between downtimes, you're using the technology differently and in a better way. And I think about the advancement of AI and all the things that we're gonna see, and I'm sure we're gonna see chatbots that leaders like this can have quick conversations with to give them some pointers. So that idea of talking through the scenarios is so good. I learned so much that way when I was in those types of roles at McDonald's. You just have to, because that's the moment. You can't wait till after shift where it's eight hours and you're exhausted, and you smell like onions, and you just wanna leave. You don't wanna have a conversation about performance. In the hospitality industry, there are specific metrics we need to watch to make sure that our teams aren't getting burnt out. What are some of the things that you watch in those environments?

[00:15:57] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** A couple of things. If the team member that is starting that is new doesn't make it past a certain 60, 30-day time period, I ask the questions as to perhaps the onboarding needs to be tweaked. Those newbies coming on fresh-faced, when you're doing recruiting, it's like you're matchmaking. We're gonna be great. You're gonna come on, you're gonna do all the benefits, all the things, and then you have the time period from the time that they start, the honeymoon period that comes up probably about 60 days, and really checking in with them and touching base. If there is a break in the honeymoon during that time, I wanna understand a little bit why the retention rate is not staying. And then the other part is just the call-outs, just the stress of the environment. I have heard most recently about the double shifts, the open closes or the close opens. They call those clopens. And you're like, okay, why are you doing two clopens a week, manager? What does that mean and how do we handle that? Even if they close at 10 o'clock, just listening and being a part of it and understanding, first of all, the verbiage and lingo, but also if there is a pattern that comes about. Turnover rate, obviously you can't get to that until after it's over, and exit interviews are really important. But I always wanna try to be proactive instead of reactive, and listening and seeing the call-outs and understanding the conversations managers are having with their team members. Maybe I can help with that. The biggest thing I would say is be proactive instead of reactive. What does that look like for your environment? Just understanding what that is and how can I help to give the managers the tools, because the managers themselves are clogging too.

[00:18:02] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** Clipping. Yeah. That's a new one. I'm gonna keep that one in my vernacular going forward. And so we don't want cloppers.

[00:18:11] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I think about engagement in this environment probably a little differently than I think about knowledge workers who might be in a role. Back in the day it was five-plus years. Now it's two and a half or three years. But we do talk about engagement differently in these two environments. When you think about the perfectly engaged restaurant hospitality employee, what does that look like for you?

[00:18:38] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** I don't think there is a perfectly engaged in that sense because of the different generations and people and expectations. The younger generation these days, they want drive, they want energy, they wanna be engaged in the fact that they're using their minds and moving up quickly and doing all of the tasks and tools. The lifers, they're good. They really want you to hear them, see them, give them the shifts, making sure that they're making the money, and they know the environment. They know the expectation of whatever that looks like. Sometimes the generations, and there are many in between, but understanding what that looks like, and not just by hearsay. You can ask the manager, hey, why is Cindy Lou doing whatever she's doing? How do we engage her? Really digging deep, whether it be going into the restaurants, having those conversations, maybe an employee engagement survey, maybe really taking it to the next step to understand. Some of the team members don't feel comfortable saying what they really need. Some people feel like they may be reprimanded if they tell somebody that they're getting preferential treatment or whatever that looks like. Just being open to having the conversations. And one of the things is we say it has always been done like that. And it can't always be done like that. Although there are some tried and true things, within HR and within the hospitality industry, you really have to tweak and be flexible in that manner with the boundaries that are already set.

[00:20:30] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I like that you mentioned the complexity of those that are lifers and those that are maybe there for a moment in time, a cup of coffee, if I will steal a baseball reference. I think about that in my time many, many years ago, and we would do fun things to keep us engaged, like, hey, can we upsell fries today? And the lifers wouldn't participate, because they're like, I'm just here doing my job. I don't need the fun 15-year-old upsell the fry. And it wasn't a business requirement, right? It was just something fun to do for the day. There's realism in that. Are they meeting the expectations of the job? The answer is yes. You're gonna give them a meets expectations on their performance review. So thinking about that as you're implementing these kinds of things, keep that in mind. You don't wanna force a lifer out because you're trying to introduce something new that is appealing to a particular group if it's not a job requirement or a business expectation.

[00:21:48] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** Also, understanding that the lifer may not wanna become a manager. May not want all those extra responsibilities. I wanna be and do as I am, and I'm good with that. It's really important.



[00:22:02] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** All right. As we wrap up our conversation, Donna, what's one takeaway that you wish every hospitality leader could tape to their desk today?

[00:22:11] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** I think it was just what I just said about things don't always have to stay the same. There is always movement. It has always been done like that is really important to understand that, yes, there are some fundamentals that will always stay the same, but you have to evolve. And how do you do that and support your people, support yourself too? If you're learning and growing and developing, and there are so many opportunities out there, so many HR tools, but also for managers and leaders, staying out, getting outside of your box within your organization, but also in your life. Because hospitality really has something special, and you have so many different skills and talents and learning and growth opportunities out there. Just make sure you don't stay, right?

[00:22:58] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Such good advice. Such a great conversation, Donna. Thanks for jumping on the podcast with me.

[00:23:02] **DONNA GIARRATANA:** Thank you, Shari. Thank you so much.

[00:23:13] **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.