HR Mixtape
Transcript

The Disengagement Tax: Turning Employee Listening Into Revenue

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Host: Dr. Shari Simpson, Thought Leader, Paylocity

Guest: Jeannie Kidera, CEO, Kidera Culture Consulting

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

[00:00:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Joining me today is Jeannie Kidera, CEO and founder of Kidera Culture Consulting. Jeannie uses Gallup-backed research methods to help founders and HR teams at mission-driven companies turn employee insights into leadership actions that strengthen culture as they scale. Jeannie, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:41] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** Thanks for having me.

[00:00:42] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So you started in education, which I love. When I was thinking about what I wanted to do with my life, that was what I thought I was going to get my undergrad in. I didn't, but I have a big passion for people who sit in that space. I'm curious. You left because you kept seeing talented people inside these systems who didn't really know their value or recognize it. That's such a human observation. How did that experience lead you to where you are now and the consulting work that you're doing?

[00:01:19] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** Well, I think it's important to know that I was a literature teacher, so I spent a lot of time in the classroom asking questions like, "What is actually being said here? What's the subtext? What's not being said, and what does that tell us?" Come to find out, in my work now, these are all the things we do in employee listening. These are also the skills needed when it comes to interpreting between employees and leaders. But when I was in education, in the last few years, I had become one of those teachers who threw out grades and was doing skills-based rubrics all based on empathy development. And I got to the point where I thought, "The kids are all right. They've got this. It's the adults in leadership who maybe could use a little boost in these soft skills. How can I take the empathy development work I'm doing in the classroom and pivot to making workplaces less toxic?" Because I was seeing a lot of burnout of really brilliant, talented people, and leadership not understanding that these people are your bread and butter. This is where your customer experience lives. I landed at a place called Big Think+, a SaaS company that does professional development, and it was hugely beneficial because every two weeks I was doing deep dives with top thought leaders, designing interview questions, then creating content going across individual contributors, team managers, and senior leaders. I was doing that translation alongside Adam Grant and Amy Edmondson and Tiffany Bova. An incredible education in two years. And what I learned was that being kind and doing people-first culture isn't just good for the employee. It turns out the research shows it's the best business move. I learned the ROI on it and thought, I need to get into companies and do this. The Gallup research, in just the last two years, shows that companies in the top quartile of engagement see 23% higher profitability, 20% higher sales, 17% greater productivity, and 10% higher customer loyalty. What else do business leaders want? And the way to get that is to build up your employee experience. So I started doing that at one company, then launched my consulting work to take it to more.

[00:04:27] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Wow. And with your work, you get to spend time with a lot of mission-driven companies that are in that startup phase, which is such a fascinating place to be because there's so much possibility. That being said, there's also a lot of possibility to make some common culture mistakes early on. What are you seeing out of those founders who are really focused on growth mode that is preventing them from creating genuine, caring environments in their startup?

[00:05:01] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** That's a really good point, and I think one of the biggest mistakes, and it's completely without intention, is thinking that culture will take care of itself once it's originally defined, or that just hiring really great people who believe in your mission is going to be enough to create and maintain that great culture. That's a fantastic start, but culture needs to be built into absolutely every decision the company's making and every process. Neglecting it after just that initial step is a really big mistake. It happens because founders and CEOs experience two things as they enter rapid growth. One, they get distanced from people. When you start your company, it's you, then you and five people, then you and 10. But as it keeps going, you are getting further and further away, whether you realize it or not, from the day-to-day reality of what your people are experiencing. So employee listening needs to be a non-negotiable at that point. The other thing that's happening, and this is also natural, is you are forced to look outward. Your attention is on client acquisition and product development and branding, because those are the urgent, in-the-moment things you need to be doing as you grow, and that makes sense. But that stems from a belief that culture is a soft part of business strategy, and it's actually a major revenue driver. Everyone in HR who's primarily listening to this podcast knows the turnover stat: if you lose one person, it's going to cost you anywhere from half to two times that person's salary to replace them. But the stat I think is more important and not as well known, and this also comes out of Gallup, is that disengaged employee who stays, the one who hasn't left but is still disengaged, is going to cost you upwards of 34% of their annual salary every year. And if you have one, you probably have many. It behooves you to pay attention to it. You're leaving money on the table if you're not. It's a mistake to not consider culture a revenue driver.

[00:07:28] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** You know, that gap that you mentioned, as leaders advance and really have to focus on important business drivers, I've heard "I don't have time." And we know based on the numbers that you're missing the mark, because you should be making time. But sometimes they don't even know what that means, specifically where they should be spending it. Meaning, I have an engagement survey annually, I do pulse checks, I check in with my managers. As the head of the organization, as that culture advocate, where should they be investing their time?

[00:08:16] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** Responding to the feedback. Because you can do all the surveys in the world, but it's actually not important that you're asking the question, it's important that you're responding to it. Studies show that it's worse to do engagement surveys, to do pulse checks, and then not do anything with the data. That's actually detrimental, as opposed to just not asking, because the message you're sending is that people's voices don't matter. And the minute the people in your organization think that, you've activated disengagement. Now, a lot of what I'm talking about, the organization size I'm describing may not have a people team yet, or they may have just one person. There is a danger to having an HR generalist and then saying, "Hey, I want you to take this on, too," because now you've got that person who's secretly holding everything together, and they're going to get burned out and become the statistic. I think it is smart to bring in someone from the outside to do this work if not doing so creates statistics inside your organization. But what really matters, where should you spend your time, where should you spend your money, is the creation of the action plan in response to the data. Don't just collect data and sit on it. You're harming yourself, your organization, and your people if you do.

[00:09:45] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Nothing is worse than taking that annual engagement survey or giving feedback on what you think the corporate values are, and then seeing them go up on the walls. "Oh yeah, there's total buy-in. They actually listened to me," and then that's where it stops. You've got really cool posters or really good perks, but they don't hit at the heart of engagement or pull on the heartstrings of what people actually want in their jobs. And I think that often leads to a translation problem between leadership and employees, especially when you think about organizations where there might be a big financial gap between those two roles. When you have individual contributors who might be living paycheck to paycheck, and you have CEOs who are playing chess with their stock options, it's completely different worlds. How do we help bridge that communication gap, especially when you might be an HR department of one? This really isn't an HR responsibility in totality. It's a business responsibility. So how do we help that communication between those two groups?

[00:11:15] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** Well, first of all, I love that you're framing it in terms of communication. I literally just dropped a blog post about how internal comms is actually a fundamental part of employee experience. Think about the fact that the way we first experience each other is through communication. Do we like the way someone is talking to us? Think about the difference between a manager who refers to the people on their team as subordinates versus the manager who refers to them as team members. Just that word switch alters morale and alters culture. So the way we communicate up and down the ladder really does matter. Someone who's doing the analysis of those surveys needs to have the ability to translate that argument into a money argument. "Yes, this is the kind thing to do, but here's the ROI if you make this change. Here's why having engaged employees matters." Another Gallup stat: higher engagement firms enjoy 2.5 times higher revenue growth rates. So if I say to someone in leadership, "It'd be nice if we could do something about engagement, people would be happier at work," sure. But if I say, "If we do this, our revenue growth rate is going to increase by 2.5 times," now I'm listening. It goes the other way, too. If I'm a CEO and I have news to deliver that I know isn't going to land well, how do I frame it in a way that an entry-level person or a team manager is going to hear and understand the value of? So it is a communication game. And when you break down communication in an organization, that's where you lose trust, and that is the hardest thing to build back. It's hard enough in interpersonal relationships. It's even harder at an organizational level.

[00:14:12] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah, and that trust between the HR leader and the executive leader, when you're having that conversation about sharing the engagement data, I'm thinking about the CEO who goes, "Yeah, cool story, but what does that mean for me?" I wrote this down because I think this is such a strong takeaway: taking that empathy statement and translating it into a money argument. I can't share that enough with my audience. You are a business leader with HR skills, not an HR leader with business skills. If you can think that way and apply that statistical impact to the bottom line, that's going to be huge. And the other thing that plays into this: the companies that take their values and use them to manage their business versus the companies that manage their business and happen to have values. Those are different things. How do the companies doing the latter move toward making business decisions rooted in their values? What does that look like in practice?

[00:15:39] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** I'll start with what it doesn't look like. It doesn't look like just having a segment of your all-hands where everyone repeats, "Here are our values, reminder." Or they're just on the website. You'll start seeing the gap in your Glassdoor reviews. I can't tell you how many times in the last year I've seen people turn down interviews or not fill out job applications because the first thing they do is go to Glassdoor and find, "This culture does not align with what it says on the website." The way you actually live your values, first and foremost, is leadership accountability. The leaders have to be modeling that behavior, not just spouting it. Secondly, they need to publicly acknowledge people within the organization who are also modeling those values. And then they need to do checks: are our employees actually experiencing these values? I have a service called a values alignment assessment that gives concrete data on whether your employees are experiencing your values or just hearing them. Then you consciously and intentionally build them into your day-to-day policies. If your stated value is people first, but I find it impossible to go to a doctor's appointment without taking half a day of PTO, I'm not experiencing a people-first environment. My policies need to align with those values.

[00:17:20] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Well, where you put your time is what you value, and where you put your money is what you value. If you're saying people first, then you really do need to have people-first processes, policies, and the ability to flex. I was at a conference just a few days ago, and a woman was sharing a story about her husband's company. He had gotten a cancer diagnosis, and the company said to him, "If you're not feeling it, don't come in. If you come in and you're halfway through the day and you're exhausted, go home. We're not going to track this against PTO or sick time." That really was a people-first view of how you come alongside somebody and care for them because you say you value that. As we get towards the end of our conversation, for those listening, give me the 90-day cultural improvement plan that you can bring to your founder to help them understand this is going to help them scale the business the way they want to.

[00:18:31] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** I love this question because my base package is actually a 90-day plan. I call it the main pain point solution package. And I think this is really good for companies with a small HR department, because what I see a lot is someone will shoot out a survey with 20 or 30 really specific questions. They're collecting all this data, they think it's great, but it's overwhelming, and it's more than they can actually act upon. Rule number one: do not ask for more than you can reasonably act upon. So for a 90-day plan, I use the Gallup 12 because it focuses on just the 12 categories in the employee hierarchy of needs. It will give me categories: where are the gaps, where are we doing really well, where do we need to work? Do a data analysis on that report. Then zero in on just the lowest-scoring one. That's the main pain point. That's what I fix first. It's going to be the most visible thing for everyone in the organization to see change, and it's going to make the most difference. Then I do a pulse survey, and never ask more than four questions in a pulse survey, for a deeper dive on that specific issue. From that data analysis, I build out an action plan. But you cannot leave it at that. You cannot send it to the C-suite meeting and have it put in a drawer. You need to have a meeting with the C-suite that involves ownership and deadlines: who is going to do which part of this, by when, and, back to communication, how are we going to communicate this plan to the rest of the company for accountability, so they see us taking action? My advice: focus on one to two main problems in one to three months, and do not add anything else to that until those are addressed.

[00:20:48] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So good. Such an easy way to think through a very complex problem. If they want to learn more about your work specifically, where do they find you?

[00:20:57] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** My website is www.kideracultureconsulting.com. On there I have a free white paper called "Why Employee Engagement Is Key to Sustainable Growth and Success, and Where to Start." You can download that for free. My blogs are also on there covering employee experience and engagement topics. And you can reach out through a contact form. I offer 30-minute culture clarity calls, which are complimentary, so you can sign up for those on my website or connect with me on LinkedIn.

[00:21:34] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love it. Well, thanks for taking a few minutes to sit and chat with me, and really dive into the connection between emotional intelligence and culture, feedback, and values. I loved it.

[00:21:47] **JEANNIE KIDERA:** Good. I'm glad.

[00:21:55] **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.