Plan for Interference: Work Navigation and the Micromanaging Boss

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

[00:00:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Joining me today is Lynnae Brown, consultant and strategist. Lynnae spent more than a decade training and managing people in mental health recovery. Now, she explains work navigation, how to get through the workplace you actually have when leaving isn't an option, and how HR can help employees who are struggling. Lynnae, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:00:45] **LYNNAE BROWN:** Thank you for having me, Dr. Shari. It's a pleasure to be here.

[00:00:45] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So we were just talking before I hit record that it has been a crazy morning already, but I feel like this episode is gonna be the light of the day, so hopefully that is true for those listening who might be tuning in today and having a rough start. Lynnae, you are bringing a ton of energy to this conversation already, so I'm so glad we can, we can have this time together. So I want to dig into a little bit about the work that you do to get started here. So you have this concept called work navigation, and I'd love if you could kinda school us on that and give us the high level what is work navigation and why might someone need it when leaving isn't an option?

[00:01:32] **LYNNAE BROWN:** Thank you. Perfect question to start. So work navigation, I would explain it as being able to kind of see what's happening at work, what's really happening at work, in that situation, then seeing where your leverage is, seeing where you have agency, and then making informed decisions about how to move forward in a way that works better for your life. So I always say when I talk about work navigation, this isn't about, I'm not trying to help you get promoted, I'm trying to help you stay sane. Let's, that's work navigation, right? And so I would equate it to an actual map. So say, for instance If you were looking at a map and you're, you're at point A and you wanna get to point B, and what you do normally is you start looking at the different roads to get you from point A to point B, right? You just look at the map and you go, you're kind of navigating where everything is. You're not saying, "Oh, that's a dumb left, left turn right there. I wouldn't take that left turn," or, "That statue shouldn't be... That's a dumb place to put the statue." Like, you're not judging it. You're just saying, "This is the terrain, and then I wanna go from A to B." And then you decide how do you wanna get there. Do I wanna take the long route, the shortest route? Do I wanna go by the store first and then go over here? Like, you start to figure out how to navigate. You don't negotiate where everything, where everything is. And so I see that just like a, in a work situation, where if you're in a work situation and you're feeling burnt out or if you have a job that is giving you a lot of problems, but you can't leave it and you have to figure out another way to hold your job, it's a great way to sort of, kind of like step back and say, "Okay, instead of me being all in the weeds, let me step back and look at the terrain of what I'm actually working in, looking at each relationship I have, instead of negotiating something, navigation," and seeing everything as in, all in, seeing all irritants as information, right? It's no longer that things are just getting on your nerves. It's just like, okay, this thing is happening. Oh, this happens a lot, so this is actually information for me to keep in mind. And it's kind of like a more neutral way to think of work, to kind of pull you out of the emotional parts of, like, figuring out what to do at work when you're just completely ticked off and aren't over it. That's how I like to think of it.

[00:03:38] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I think we have all been there. You know, one of the things that I... as you were talking, I was thinking about moments I've had in my own career like that, where you started to see patterns and you might've been irritated by it or didn't understand it, and you're so right about taking that moment to just pull back a second and go, "Okay, can I influence this at all? Do I want to influence this? If I don't wanna influence it, I can't influence it, how do I navigate it?" So I love, I love that example. Walk me through how you've seen this look like in practice. So, you know, somebody is in that frustrated

moment. How do they start to diagnose and go down this road of, I guess, looking at all of these inputs more as data points rather than, you know, maybe feels or vibes or whatever? It gets really analytical.

[00:04:33] **LYNNAE BROWN:** Right. Okay, I'll give you a typical example, and that's somebody working with a micromanaging boss, right? We, a lot of us have that situation happening. So I would say first we start with, you know, the person will say, "Ugh, my boss is such a pain in the blah, blah, blah. They always have to stick their thumb in my pie. They always have to make everything so, so hard, and they get in my way, and they don't think I can do my job. They're always treating me like I don't know what's happening, and I know my job better than they do." Like, we've all been there, right? Work navigation would then, here's the, here's a kind of mental walkthrough. Okay, so your boss is kind of bumping into you when we're in the middle of tasks, right? I call it putting your thumb, putting their thumb in your pie. You know, they're always gonna put your thumb, their thumb in your pie. And it's very aggravating, and it shouldn't be that way. They should be trusting you with your job. Work navigation says instead of saying, "This shouldn't be happening," work navigation says, "But it is happening." He always sticks his thumb in your pie every single time. So instead of being pissed off every time that happens, you say, "Oh, I know he's gonna stick his thumb in my pie. Like I, I know he is. Like he's done this over and over again." That's information because you've seen the pattern already. Okay. Work navigation then says, "Okay, so it's very irritating this guy sticking his thumb in his pie. Now can I ask, can I ask you something? Is the... Does he just do it to you, or is that how he micromanages? Does he stick his thumb in everyone's pie?" He sticks his thumb in everyone's pie. Oh, okay, so that's how he's showing up. That has nothing to do with you. That's just how he shows up. So there's no indication that he's, he's doing that because you're doing a poor job, you don't know your job, et cetera. It's because that's how he shows up. So now that helps get that off, off of you, so you're no longer saying to yourself, "Oh, he, he treats me this way because he thinks I can't do my job." No, that's him. He sticks his thumb in everyone's pie. So, okay, so you can get that off of you. Then the next thing becomes, okay, well, you see a pattern in how he sticks his thumb in your pie. Like when does he usually do it? When does it usually happen? How does it look? And then you start thinking over time about how, what, what it actually looks like in your actual job, in the actual tasks that you have. And you can almost, more than likely, you're probably under... You probably know before he does when he's gonna stick his thumb in your pie. Like you, you know. Like you know. So then it becomes, okay, so let's say a task is coming up and Bob's gonna stick his thumb in your pie. But you pretty much can figure out when or how he's gonna do it. And then from there, you know, "Hmm, I'm just gonna have to take time to figure out which thumb and which pie." But once I know, then I can kind of figure out my strategy around how do I get around this, right? So now all those irritants have become information to help you navigate something that's just you know that's going to happen. You just know that's going to happen. And again, I would equate this kind of thinking to, like, let's say the map again. If you have an appointment at 10 o'clock, ETA is 30 minutes, you don't leave at 9:30. You leave, like, 9:15, right? You leave, you give yourself some space, some room to get lost, traffic, that sort of thing. And if you get there early, great, you stop and have a cup of coffee, right? Or, or at least, or at least if you do get stuck in traffic, then you know you have 15 minutes built in. That's what the workplace is like. It's like you know Bob's gonna stick his thumb in your pie. You know it's gonna be something like that. You, you add it into your day so it's not an interference, it's actually part of your day. It's part of your task. You know he's gonna do this. And I will have to say this over and over again. It shouldn't be this way. Nobody should be sticking their thumb in anyone's pie. You know, you should be able to bake your own pie and just give your recipe and talk about your technique, right? No one should be sticking their pie to see if your pie is done or it tastes good. Like, I, I totally get that. And if that's what's happening, then for your own sanity, you build it in, this thumb pie, his thumb in his pie, and trying to figure out, like, "Okay, how long is he gonna stick his thumb in my pie? What does it look like?" And you just plan around that. It becomes part of the day. It becomes part of the task. And what that does for you is it's no longer an irritant. It comes across like you've built in time for it because that's what always happens, and now it becomes part of the job. Again, shouldn't be that way, but sometimes it is. And what you find is that you're then able to focus more on strategy, right? You're more, more able to focus on what can you do afterwards to kinda get through his, you know, his interference and what that might look like. And that's where you find your agency, right? That's where you really find your agency when you start thinking strategically as opposed to emotionally and how he shouldn't be treating you this way. So I, I think that's a, that's kind of like a, a walkthrough mentally what navigation might look like.

[00:09:14] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah. Well, as you were talking about that, I was thinking before you said strategy, right? Your description is such a good way of explaining to somebody maybe younger in their career, especially in, you know, knowledge workers in the corporate world, what managing up and potentially what thinking strategically, what are the steps to get there. You know, I, I, I think that is one of the hardest things to describe, and often one of the worst pieces of feedback you can get. "Be more strategic." What, what does that mean?

[00:09:48] **LYNNAE BROWN:** What does that mean?

[00:09:49] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Like, how do I do that? So I, I, I really appreciate you walking through kind of that mental exercise that you would go through if you're dealing with a micromanager because it really highlighted two things. One, we agree that shouldn't be happening. And this is the lived reality, and sometimes we don't have the ability to change our lived reality. You know, maybe it's a financial reason. We can't take the risk. Maybe there's some internal politics where, hey, for whatever reason, this person is seen as the golden child at the next level up, so it doesn't matter what I say or how I show up, nothing's gonna change for that person. There's a whole bunch of reasons why that might be the case. So I'm actually glad we're not talking about that, but we've named that reality because a lot of people lived in that reality, and we try to give them all these tools to get out of their lived reality. Sometimes you just can't do that. You just can't get out of your lived reality. So, you know, how do you see this as a little bit different than maybe thinking about my own personal professional development or, you know, my own career advancement? 'Cause those are different, and they can happen in tandem, I suspect.

[00:11:04] **LYNNAE BROWN:** Yes. They can. I mean, work navigation can, can actually be used as part of your professional development if you really want to think about it. I will say, however, my expertise and my knowledge comes from my own lived experience of burnout 'cause I, I was going through this myself. In 2018, I was a director of a mental health, an employment training program for people in mental health recovery, and I was burned out in 2018, like that sort of, I can't go another day. I am drinking every night. Like that sort of like... But I couldn't leave because I was two and a half years away from having my student loan discharged, 'cause I was in the public student loan forgiveness program, 149K.

[00:11:41] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** You can't leave.

[00:11:42] **LYNNAE BROWN:** I was two and a half years away, and I was like, "I can't leave this on the table. I've gotta figure this out." But, so then that's when I started really developing my, my concepts about work navigation, what it actually looks like in practice. So for one thing, I started thinking about, like... The first thing I remember thinking was, "Well, let me look around here. Like, do I want a promotion?" And I looked around the actual agency, I thought to myself: "I'm not trying to get a promotion. There's there's nothing else I wanna do here. There's no one else I wanna be. There's nowhere else I wanna go. So basically, what I wanna do is just keep my job." And so what I was able to do from there is think, "Well, I don't have to do so much glad-handing anymore. Like, I don't have to go out for drinks after work." Because that's the stuff you do to sort of like be in people's good favor, you know, to be in the crowd, and be in the know, and to like be seen. But if I don't want a promotion, I just wanna keep my job, I realized it didn't matter if I went to the gala or not. And, and I wouldn't say anything. I wouldn't be like, "I'm not going to the gala. I don't want a promotion." I'd just keep it shh, real tight. Just didn't go. "Where were you? We, we didn't see you there." "Oh, I, yeah, I couldn't go. I'm so sorry. I, you know, I couldn't make it. My, my dog's sick," you know, whatever. You know? And I just started backing out, doing these small things to back out of the emotional labor of things that I didn't need to do because they weren't giving me what I wanted anyway, right? That's what started for me, that work navigation, like looking at like, "Oh yeah, I don't have to do that anymore 'cause I don't want that," you know? I'm not thinking about those things. And so that's what I really started thinking about, really helping myself during burnout, but I had to stay put, right? I, and I think right now it's really helpful because, you know, we've been hearing it especially since COVID. You know, people have been working through burnout, working very, you know, at various jobs in various fields. And now, with the economy the way it is, you can't just quit and get a new job. And then the other part I think is really important as well, what I love about work navigation is as I've been developing the concepts and understanding work navigation even more, the beauty of it is if you can understand your relationship to work in general, what it means to you, and what you think work is for, if you get some clarity around that, it helps you be able to pick your next job better. Because if you're not really clear about what work means to you, if you're not clear what your job can actually give you and

what it can't, if you haven't asked all those questions, you'll just go job to job to job and be mad at the end of every job. You'll just bring that with you. But work navigation really helps you to like stay put for whatever reason you have to, and then really think about what kind of relationship do I wanna have with work in the first place? Do I want a promotion? Do I want more money? What am I really looking for? So you get more clear on what you're actually, what you actually want, and then you have a better idea of how you wanna negotiate your relationships with the people that you're working with too. There's just a, there's just a lot there. There's a lot there when it comes to work navigations, you know, for me.

[00:14:29] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Have you found... And I'm, I'm gonna ask this question in all love, 'cause you and I are not in our 20s. So I will throw that out there 'cause I think this next part is important, and I wanted to call that out. I think that, you know, some of the older generations have been taught this concept of high discretionary effort equals promotion, visibility, opportunity, that kind of stuff. What we haven't been taught is the concept you're talking about, is for you to look at your life and define what you want your relationship with work to look like. I have seen this in our younger generations, in our 20-year-olds coming into the workforce. That is the first thing that they are approaching work with that I've seen. It's a definite shift, and it has led to some good and hard conversations, right? As, as the generations figure out how we navigate this together. But I'd love from your perspective... So you got to this point from a, a place of burnout. How do we help our listeners get to this point without hitting burnout first? Start to ask the questions that you talked about. You had to hit burnout before you got mentally there. What is the trick to get us mentally there faster?

[00:15:50] **LYNNAE BROWN:** I think the biggest heads-up when it comes to kinda tapping into work navigation, and this is where I start with when I work with people, is we start with what really irritates you. Use your emotions as information as an entry point. Figure out, like, if something isn't working for you, you'll know what it is. The irritants, where you get upset, where you feel confused, start there because there's something there that you need to get clear about, and there's something there you need to work on your perspective about, and there's information there that you can use to start figuring out what's not working. And I think, I think work navigation basically anyone can do it, and, you know, in my work, what I do is I help people get there quicker. So I, I like over a two-week period, we kind of go through everything that's happening, and I can, like, point out, like, "Do this, do that, turn that around." Like, "Check out that, ask that question," that sort of thing. But yeah, I would, you know, that's where, that's where I would start is kind of like look of where, where you're irritating at, where you're irritated. And then the second thing is my favorite thing is to get people to start experimenting with things, experimenting what's true or what they think is true and what actually is true. So another one of my favorites is I was working with somebody, and they wanted to pull back their hours. They were used to working, like, 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. That was what they did. They worked corporate America. That's what they did. And I said... And they were looking at, like, wanting to pull back their hours and maybe work less. And so we looked at the job, and it was like, well, there's nothing there that inherently says you have to be there 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. It's just a cultural thing, right? You just kind of over time, you start to just stay later and stay later, get in earlier, get in earlier. And so I said, like, "Why don't you try coming in at 8:00 and leaving at 6:00? See what, see what happens." Like just test it. And then over time, they're like, "Yeah, no one said anything." Yeah, because then now you have proof. It doesn't really mean anything. It's like you started doing it out of habit and for some reason, and then put all these excuses about why you're doing it. But if you pull back and do 8:00 to 6:00, see what happens. And then if you, if it doesn't, like, affect your job, as long as you're still doing your work, then there you are. You, you got two hours back of your day. And then just do it like that. Just be stealth. Do some experiments, see what's really true. Be clear about, like, you know, if somebody gets irked, "Oh, I saw you left at 6:00 yesterday instead of 7:00." It's like, is that just being irked or is your job in danger? 'Cause you can take someone being irked. It doesn't mean anything. It really doesn't mean anything. But if it threatens your job, of course you wanna pull back, "Oh yeah, I'll be here at 7:00," you know, that sort of thing. So that's another thing that you can start doing little experiments to see, is this really true? Do I have to stay 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM? Is this really true? Do I have to do this thing that's not on my job? How does, how did this invisible labor fall on me? How did I, how did I end up being the one having to get the Dixie Cups every day? How did that happen? That's not in my job description. What happens if I don't get the Dixie Cups? You know what I mean? Is you stop, stop doing those things to see what actually happens, and then you get some real information about what's true and what's not true.

[00:18:39] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I, I find that I've seen that experiment happen when, when we've talked to coached women, you know, how you show up differently in the workplace. And, you know, one of the things, and I don't know how prominent this is now, 'cause to be fair, I work typically remote, so I'm not sitting in a boardroom anymore with a lot of people. But in the past, it has been like, "Oh, the female in the room, can you take the notes?" Right? There's like this kind of... And, and I don't think it's, you know, I think maybe there was some nefariousness that was kind of taught to us. I don't think it's that. I think people, you know, either they think that it's easier, the handwriting's better, or whatever the thing is, right? It's not necessarily everything that we kind of make it out to be. And I think that's a great example to like start that experiment and be like, "Yeah, you know what? I actually took the notes last time. Hey, can Jim take them this time?" See what happens. You, you mean, maybe you're not the note taker. Maybe it just has become the pattern, but it has nothing to do with your job, like you said. You know, you've just taken on these things or these personas 'cause you thought you had to. So I love those examples. I love the idea of experimenting quietly, stealthily. That's huge. How do you, how do you see this working in... And, and maybe you haven't, so I'll throw this out there 'cause it, it's just something I thought about as we were talking. But paramilitary or military organizations, I'm thinking police departments, you know, fire departments, even military people who, everything is so regimented and they don't have a lot of options or flexibilities. Have you worked with anybody in that space who's taken this approach to things?

[00:20:20] **LYNNAE BROWN:** I haven't, but let's, let's think about this for a second because... Well, let me ask you this, like what, what are you thinking about when it comes to work navigation in the military?

[00:20:28] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So for our listeners, they know this. I have three military sons. One's a veteran and, and two are still active duty now. So, you know, I, I get to hear their stories of how they are navigating work, and there are some things that are, you know, typically the same. But there's other things that maybe they're held accountable for or they're expected to do unofficially. It's not like you and me where we might get like a stink face or we might get, you know, rubbed the wrong way or whatever. Their world is so documented. I guess that's the word I would use. It's so documented, which is very different than kind of corporate America. And so while we might be able to take an experiment in corporate America and it's just an experiment, they might end up with a document in their file because of this experiment, because they've become the person who does this thing unofficially, but because of the environment, it is now officially part of their job.

[00:21:32] **LYNNAE BROWN:** I still wonder though, I mean, if it's not an official part of the job, I still wonder if there are some ways to still stealthily experiment, even in the military. I think it's interesting because I don't have any experience with the military. I'm thinking that, you know, the culture is very much about following orders no matter what sort of thing, right? And I also have heard about, you know, things not being part of your job, but because your commander or sergeant or whatever tells you to do it, you do it. It's kind of like that's the military. And at, and that actually, you know, that kind of, that kind of behavior is actually part of not just doing a good job, but saving lives. You know, you have to do what your commander says because you know that they see the bigger picture, and so you have to, like, believe, like, whatever they say I gotta do because I'm not seeing what they're seeing sort of thing. So that makes sense to me. It really does. But I still, I'm just wondering, I'm, I'm thinking though there must be some, some kind of something in there depending on the situation where you could still, yeah, you could still try some experiments. Like, again, the experiments are always stealth. I think that's really the key to it. It's not like you don't announce it because... And here's, here's something else I wanted to say earlier too about the navigation part of it. For me, work navigation is about how do you make your work for you better? So this isn't about professional development. This is not about, going into the HR office and negotiating and self-advocacy. This isn't about, like, getting everyone involved. I have to have a meeting with all these people to tell them how, how unhappy I am and what are, what are you gonna help me do about it? Because we know that when you get other people involved, everyone has an opinion. And then everyone gets an opinion, and then, and then people start telling you what you should and what you can't do, and then you're on people's radar, right? 'Cause that's the thing about when you do experiments and change. When you're on people's radar and what you're doing might be upsetting their apple cart, they will interfere. They will make things difficult. They will make it sound like you're being a troublemaker when all you're trying to do is work less hours sort of thing, right? Or whatever you're trying to do. So that's why stealth is really important, to be able to experiment. And then, you know, and if, say,

in the military, if you did, if you did an experiment and something happened and somebody said, "Oh," you know, yelled at you or something, you just go, "Okay, that didn't work." Like, you know? You know, you don't take it personally. You're just like, "I, I'm gonna step over here. I'm gonna step my toe over here. Oh, okay. That didn't work." But it's funny because when I talk about the stealth part, I almost see it like a game to see, like, what, what can I actually do and get away with? And not in a bad way. I'm not saying not doing your job. You're always doing your job. You're always doing the contribution. But just, like, if you want your work to work better for you, working less hours, doing less invisible labor, it's gonna take some experimentation to figure out what's real and what's not.

[00:24:15] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** How do you take this concept and bring this to the HR professional as another tool in their toolkit? 'Cause, you know, I'm thinking about that, that conversation between an employee, right? An employee comes to HR and is like, "Hey, I'm, I'm, I'm burnt out. I'm..." Whatever the thing is. "I have Bob who keeps sticking his thumb in my pie." Like, whatever, right? And most HR practitioners, they know the score, right? They know Bob is the golden child. So they have to navigate this spicy conversation with this employee without tipping their hat that they know Bob is the golden child and there's nothing they can do about it. Let's be real. We, we often work in these kind of handcuffed situations. And so how does the HR practitioner then help the employee think about work navigation as a tool for themselves without coming across as maybe disingenuous or, "I don't, I'm not gonna support you. I'm only gonna tow the company line." Right? Some of the kind of tropes that HR gets hit with.

[00:25:25] **LYNNAE BROWN:** And I think HR, what HR does really well is empathize. That's where you start, right? You empathize with the experience of the employee and, and, and you listen to them and you say: Yeah, I understand that. That sounds really frustrating. You start there always, right? And then you can start thinking about the concepts of navigation to say: Okay. Can I ask you something? Does Bob always stick his thumb in your pie? Does he always do that? Okay. So that's something, that's a pattern. So that's actually information. So now we can take this irritant and make it information and this, let's figure out how you can actually plan for the thumb in the pie and make it part of your day. Oh, and then if, and then if somebody says something like, "Oh, but that makes my day longer. They always mess things up and make, make things go longer." Okay. So the next issue is then it's messing up with your schedule. So then let's talk about when Bob puts his thumb in your pie and how that adds hours to your schedule. What do you think has to happen because he puts his thumb in your pie? Do you think you have to stay later? Do you think you have to work harder? You know, it makes your, it makes, like, your day longer? Is that what we're talking about? 'Cause maybe there's something there we can negotiate. Maybe it's you can still leave at 5:00 and just have to ask about the priority of the work so that you can rethink your day and your workload so that you're not staying till 7:00 at night because Bob interfered and made things more difficult. I, I look to explore navigating that way. It's like really shifting it back to, like, what's being assumed because of the interference? And then challenge some of those assumptions of what's being, what's been experienced with. That make sense?

[00:26:58] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah, and that skill is, I think aligns very well with what we're taught about kind of coaching, right? We don't provide the answers. We ask a lot of questions. We get curious. So, I think that's definitely a good approach and a good way to, to help our HR practitioners who wanna show up authentically for their employees, come across that way, that they have genuine empathy for the situation, and, and they are going to help them figure out how to navigate that. So, Lynnae, if people wanna learn more about you and the work you're doing, what is the best way to get in touch with you?

[00:27:30] **LYNNAE BROWN:** Two places. I have my website. It's lynnaebrown.com. That's L-Y-N-N-A-E brown.com. And I'm on LinkedIn every single day. I post every day. I put a lot of ideas out there every single day, so come find me there.

[00:27:44] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love that. Well, thank you for taking a few minutes of your day to sit with me, and have this really interesting conversation about work navigation and life and burnout and, you know, how we kinda navigate all the things.

[00:27:58] **LYNNAE BROWN:** Thank you for having me, Dr. Shari. I really appreciate it.

[00:28:14] **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.