

- Hey, and welcome to PCTY Talks. I'm your host, Shari Simpson. During our time together, we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro. And together, we'll explore topics around HR thought leadership, compliance, and real life HR situations we face every day. On today's podcast, I have with me, Erin Lebacqz. She is an international educator, teacher, author, and speaker with "High-Value Writing". So Erin, thanks for jumping on with me.

- Yeah, Shari, thanks so much for having me. I'm happy to be here today.

- So I'm always fascinated when I talk to authors and how they started their career, and like what got you into talking about, you know, "High-Value Writing"?

- Yeah, well you know, I really was motivated to write that book because of my students. I've been teaching writing since the late 90s, always to, I did a little bit of high school, but after that it was mainly university before I switched to teaching adults in businesses. And along that route, I would start to observe, "Oh, okay, the people who are confident about their writing have a lot more opportunity in life." They can say yes to being on a committee. They can apply for an internship. They can help people who, help their direct reports grow, because they have all these opportunities that we find through when we're able to write purposefully. And so "High-Value Writing" is the intention behind that is to help people recognize that we can write with intention and purpose and meet our goals. Writing doesn't have to feel like it controls us. We can take charge. And, you know, over the years, one of the biggest issues my students and participants have had is confidence in writing. And so a lot of it is just around, well how can we be independent and in charge, and we learn to know the right writing decisions to make in any scenario. And so that's what "High-Value Writing" is about, is logically analyzing the situation that we're in, and making purposeful writing choices to achieve our goals.

- I think that leads right into my next question. You talk about writing EQ. Explain that a little bit to me as we dive into this topic today. How do we think about writing EQ and is it a muscle we can learn?

- You know, I think it is, Shari. I think that's a good way to put it. Kind of like how we can learn emotional intelligence in other areas of our life. Any of us who are parents have worked on emotional intelligence about how we react to our kids. Any of us who are or have been supervisors have learned those muscles with our direct reports. And of course, we've all also learned to adapt the way we behave when we're around supervisors or areas, where we're trying to meet some kind of a goal. And so we can learn those same types of skills in our writing. And I think we just have to kind of remember, oh yeah, there's a human who's gonna open this up and read it. And when we're

talking face to face, it's really easy to remember that that human's there, because they're right in front of us and we see their face, but when we write, it's still that same human opening it up. And so that's why I've encouraged people to realize, and honestly, I didn't put this together until about 15 years into my career teaching writing. But unless we are journaling or taking notes, we are pretty much never writing for ourselves. We're almost always writing for others. We are writing to inform them, to help them, to guide them, to persuade them, to critique them, whatever it might be. Our writing is almost never used by our own selves, which means we better bring some emotional intelligence into how we do our writing, because we are using it for others and to build relationships and trust with others. And so, I encourage people to kind of develop an utter focus in writing, and look a little bit at whether we need to self-manage as we write, you know, kind of control our own instincts of maybe, for example, how much detail we wanna give in an email, let's say, and think, "Well, but my reader – how much detail do they want?" I need to start there. And so it is a little bit of flipping the mindset that it's not for me – it's for someone else. So let me try my best to get into their shoes and perceive this message from their angle.

– When it comes to building trust in writing, that's something that I've definitely grown in my own career as an HR professional. I'm sure that those are listening are thinking through the same things. You know, when I started my career off, I had this mindset of I have to be very direct, I have to get to the point, I have to ask what I want, I don't put a lot of fluff into my communication. And I got some great coaching from a supervisor along the way and the feedback was like, "Hey, your communication is great. It's detailed, but it's very dry and I don't feel like, I'm not hearing you as a person come out in your writing, and I know you don't talk like that." So why doesn't that show up in my writing? How do we mold those? How do we get to the point where our personality and the way that we speak shows up in our writing that can be direct but is compassionate, and like you said has this human approach to it?

– Yeah, I think we can work to be concise and nice, you know, we can, writing is always a balancing act and that's one of the ways, where we need to be direct and clear, but also human and supportive. And I really appreciate your story about how you started out, because that's, I think what happens with most of us. I think we have an idea in our minds that there's one way to sound professional – whatever professional means, and it's been modeled to us. We've read bureaucratic papers, we've read textbooks, we've been coached in school to write in a dry, passive manner often. And then we see it sometimes when we get into the workforce too, this idea where people feel that in order to feel sophisticated or worthy of respect, we have to use this bureaucratic dry writing with a bunch of big vocab words. But that is not utter focus, right? That's not oriented to the reader – it's just what all of us being earnest, right? When we start out.

We're like, well, I've seen what, quote, "professional" is, and I'm gonna do it too. But those are myths often, you know, those are just examples where we've learned, we've tried to do our best in school, we've tried to do our best in our applications and develop that tone. But when we really are writing to people at work, they need to use the information that we send them – not just see it. So we have to really kind of let go of those worries and those habits, and realize it's okay to show me in my writing. And so we can do that. We can still be direct, because you're right, everybody wants concise writing. Readers are not looking for multiple paragraphs in an email if they can avoid it, right? So we do need to be concise, but I think we can stay away a little bit from over formalized language, and we can, I always tell people it's all about the verbs, where you can be concise and also set a tone. For example, I could sound official and say, "We request that you attend the seminar." Or I could sound more human and say, "We hope you'll join us for the seminar." And request and attend were the verbs in the first one and you can hear how formal that sounds. And it makes me kind of not wanna go if someone requested that I attend, am I gonna sit in the back and check off my name, you know? But if someone says, "We hope you join," I'm kind of like, "Oh, they want Erin to come." You know, I might even get to do something. And those, again, are verbs. So as we write our direct, clear, concise messages, we can then go back and say, "Ooh, could I just swap this verb out for something friendlier?" I'd still be super concise, but that one word will set a tone that's maybe more welcoming or more casual depending on our writing goals.

– Do you think that's a good place for someone to start? If they're listening and they're like, "Oh my gosh." And I love that you used the word "professional" in air quotes. I know you guys can't obviously see that listening, but I was laughing because that's exactly how I felt, like professional writing looks a certain way and it has words like request, and it's very directive. Is there, you know, some tips as or is that a good place to get started? Just looking at the verbs when you are tackling, trying to increase your writing EQ?

– I do, I would say if we wanna get to really good sentence level strategies to really good ones are that, to look at your verbs, because those are your opportunity to set tone without messing up your sentence or making it longer, 'cause we're just swapping verbs for a friendlier tone. And the other opportunity is with who you use as the who of your sentence. Who and if listeners like grammar, that's your subject. If you're not a grammar person, it's kind of like who is doing something in your sentence? Who's your doer? And that's another opportunity to put attention where we want it and to put respect where we want it. So for example, if I were back to that idea of requesting that somebody come to something, if I were inviting people, I could say the name of the institution, you know, maybe I'm gonna say like, "Caring County requests your presence at this and that." Now I've made my sentence all about the county – maybe that's what I want. But what

if I wanted my sentence to be about the people coming? I could say, "You are all welcome to come to Caring County's session," and then I put you in the front that time. So that's the other opportunity. The verb is setting the tone and who you make your sentence be the, who's your main character of your sentence shows who matters too. So those are great ways to kind of purposefully think, "Ooh, who am I gonna put in that," really important doer subject role to show that they are being highlighted and I care about them. And even with that example of Caring County wants you there versus you are welcome, we can also see the first one is a little top down and the second one is a little bottom up. So we get to flex again who matters. And that's part of EQ too - is putting people, representing people in a way that's respectful to them, and shows that they're important.

- The examples you gave really highlight I think how a company's culture can come to life in their communications. You know, we spend way more time in email than any of us would like to admit. And email is often everybody else's to-do list for you, but we do need to grab rich information from it often. How have you coached leaders to think about email differently, think about it more as building community with their words and letting that culture come to life rather than just this very dry information?

- Well, I'm really glad you asked that, because I've been thinking a lot about the contribution that communication makes to culture. And in some ways, culture is communication. I mean there aren't, what else is it? Behavior, I guess. But communication is a lot of it. And sometimes, I've seen a team, or a company, or a leadership group spend a lot of money on cultural change, bringing in change management, culture experts doing a whole lot of great things to improve their culture. And yet, if the next week, one of those leaders sends out an email that sounds condescending, it's all over, you know that it wouldn't have worked. And so the communication is where culture manifests or shows up, right? It's where we see and feel what is the culture. And so, I think it's a wonderful opportunity to set culture every day. In a recent leadership development program, some young managers, new managers asked me specifically the same question you did - how can we build community as an example for this great opportunity we have as we write? And we brainstormed a lot of great ways to do that. You know, from kind of referring back to what I had just said about who is the star of your sentence - that's a way too, where if I'm a team lead and I'm writing a weekly update, instead of saying, "Let's discuss X, Y, and Z at our next meeting," I could say, "Let's discuss X and Y, which Shari brought up last week, and then I wanna touch on Raul's concept for C." And I could bring in, "You know, this is not me with a million great ideas - it was Shari and Raul who had these ideas." I can even just stop using words like I and my, and use words like we and our and things like that. And just again, kind of give import and attention to people that we think might be feeling lonely or not included, and try to talk more with that utter focus

about the team, and try to take out that sort of top down I speak a little bit. And so we do have that community to really, I'm sorry, that opportunity to boost our culture and community through careful wording. I also had mentioned as an example if an email is condescending, that's not setting a good culture. Often, we accidentally write something that puts the reader in a position they don't wanna be in, like takes their choice away, or sounds condescending, or sounds like they didn't know something. That's where we wanna be really careful is what position we put people in and making sure we leave them with power and choice, and don't dismiss them through our sentences accidentally.

- Performance reviews are definitely what I'm thinking about as you talk about how we think about language. You know, I'm sure we've all been in that situation, where we've read a performance review, and we're like, "Are we talking about the same person? Is this me? I had no idea." And some of it could be accurate, stuff you haven't heard from your supervisor, but what if it is stuff that you've heard and it was never articulated in the same way that they wrote it down. Is that they didn't tell you correctly and the situation is, you know, more dire than you thought? Or is it poor choice of wording on their end, because they were trying to be direct, quote, "professional". What coaching have you given HR professionals and managers in this space around performance review writing?

- Yeah, that's a huge one. And talk about something that sets a tone, right? Or sets a culture and so therefore, a huge opportunity. When I work with companies who've got their 80 managers practicing writing performance reviews, we talk about, oh wow, we could actually use this in an actionable useful way - to build culture and direct change. But I think what I think that disconnect that you mentioned between maybe what I think my manager feels about me versus what I read when I get my review, usually the difference there is that we have often been too abstract when we give people advice. And so, when we're not very tangible and we say something like, "You know, Erin needs to improve her communication," that, and if maybe someone had said to me, "Hey, you're doing great, but let's work on your communication. You still need to improve your communication a little." I'm left wondering two things, which communication - emails, DMs, you know, whatever it might be, speaking on the phone, I don't know. And I'm also left wondering, in what way? Should I improve? Do I need to be a better listener? Do I need to be more clear? Do my emails not have a main point? Do I not make eye contact when I listen? I have no idea. And so, but it's really easy to say something that's accidentally abstract, because of course, we, as the writer, know what we want them to change about their communication, but we're all pretty accustomed to saying things that are sort of black and white like communicate better. Good or bad, right? But we need to get tangible. And so what we can do with a performance review is really ensure that we choose a verb well, that sets the right tone, and is actionable. Not something like, "Be

better." But clarify your point in your email, Erin. Not be better at communicating, Erin. But be more, you know, we need to say something tangible in what situations, in what way, always answering the question how when we write those. And I think when we receive tangible, actionable feedback, we feel a little bit more optimistic, because we've been given something to work with versus just kind of the idea that we aren't doing well enough, and we're stuck trying to figure out how.

- That is the worst place to be in. When you get that very generic feedback, you know, be X. And you're like, "Okay, I would love to be X, but what exactly is X?" So those were really great examples I think that we can provide to our management team around, you know, how you provide that next level of clarity. Because the reality is our managers know it, right? They just need to get it on paper. Have you found that by coaching managers that in this way of communicating in performance reviews that it's become less of a chore for them, that they see it in a different way?

- I have, yes. And I think even just talking about it at all gives the opportunity to realize how much, how helpful these can be versus a chore. But one of the ways I've tried to help folks see it as less of a chore is also by using a formula to start with. Because exactly like you just said, Shari, the manager knows the information, but getting it on paper in a way that's gonna be super clear, and you know you're dealing with all that stress when you're writing it, right? Like, "This is going down in posterity, oh my god." And so I encourage people to write who plus what plus the word "by", and then how. So who, what, how, and you use the word "by" to connect that how on there. So it could be like, Raul listens effectively by making eye contact and paraphrasing - something like that. So the by is forcing me to say something tangible and observable - that also helps us make sure that they feel fair to somebody that their evidence-based. And then with that verb, it's that one I talked about Raul listens or Raul makes eye contact - verbs that show something visible versus is. Raul is a good listener - that doesn't help anybody. And it also worries me when we use is, because that can sound like someone's opinion. What if it was Raul is not a good listener? Now that sounds like an opinion that we don't like. And so using a verb that's not is or was, will help ensure that your writing is evidence-based and feels fair. And then that who, what, how formula helps kind of ensure, just keep us honest, like are we putting in actionable advice? It has to come after the word "by". And when people have that sort of formula in mind as a basis, it's less stressful, because at least we kind of know how to meet the goal, and then we can always alter the sentences a little bit afterwards.

- I feel like we could spend all day with the tips and tricks you have and all these little different things, ways of thinking about writing differently, and they're not rocket science, and they're not rocket

science, they're very, very practical. And you've got this great YouTube channel out there. There is a ton of amazing videos. I will make sure to put the link in the show notes to your YouTube channel, and your book, and your website. But there's one out there in particular called, "The Top 10 Tips for Business Writers" and I'd love, maybe as we wrap up our conversation, for you to dive into some of those tips and why they're so important.

- Yeah, sure. Yeah, I was kind of excited to sort of bring things together to one spot for people with that video. And I'll tell you, folks, a lot of the tips, and you can check it out on the channel, but a lot of them have to do with adapting to the situation and to your purpose. So I'd like to focus on two sort of metaphors, I guess, that I use to help me remember that. One is the work of making writing intelligible needs to be done by somebody. I could write a sloppy email, and I was in a hurry, and I didn't put it in a handy order for my reader, and I just send it off. Now my reader has to do the work of figuring out what I meant and what the order is. I could have done that work myself. So one tip is do the work, because somebody will. And if we don't do the work and sort it out as writers, we are actually making the reader do the work, which is not really emotionally intelligent or supportive, right? Because we're the one who knows about the topic. It would be a lot easier for us to do the work of presenting things in an order that's relevant for the reader, in a tone that's effective for our goals and the the situation. And towards that end, I use the metaphor of being a host. If we write a document or a multi-paragraph email, we are hosting someone at our document or email. When I host someone at my house, you know when you have a party, you say, "Hey, here's the restroom." "Here's the drinks and snacks." "Let me introduce you to somebody." Well, when someone comes to our document, they also need to know how to get around. They don't need to know where the food and the bathroom are, but they need to know where the examples are, where the data is, where the, how one idea transitions to another. So I try to keep in mind, "Hey, I'm hosting somebody right now," that means I need to set this up in a way that will be easy for them to navigate, and that helps me a lot too. So kind of broadly speaking, those are some of the big tips. And then there are also a few that are sort of sentence level and real actionable and easy to start with. For example, to be concise - it doesn't say, this part on here, I'll add in. Lead your sentence with who's doing something and what they're doing. Do not start your sentence with it is or there are, or other slow starts is on there. When we start a sentence with "It is important to consider", "I am writing to inform you", "There are many reasons", blah, blah, we are only delaying content and delaying information and meaning until maybe eight words into that sentence, which gives the reader the opportunity to get confused, to maybe stop reading, because they're super busy. It's always better to front load. Don't bury the lead, put the main point up top, and even at the sentence level, put the important information towards the beginning, like who's doing something and what

are they doing? Because something like it is or there are is not actually meaningful. Those are just habits we've developed usually from writing for school.

- I also find that women a lot will use some of those filler words. You know, I read something long ago that talked about women using the word "just". I just wanna dot, dot, dot. And I've worked really hard to pull that out of my own writing, because like, just like you said, let's get concise, let's get to the point. But man, what great advice you have for our listeners. I mean, we barely touch the surface of the great content you have on your YouTube channel. So I highly recommend if you're listening to check it out, And Erin's book, "High-Value Writing". So thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

- Thanks so much for having me, Shari. I had a great time talking to you. Thanks, everybody.

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