- 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. Joining me today behind the mic is Jeremy York. He is Purple Ink's Vice President of Talent Strategy and Success, and co-author of "The JoyPowered® Organization." So Jeremy, thanks for jumping on with me today.

- Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

- So I hope we could start with you sharing a little bit more about your background and really your passion for being an empathetic leader.

- Absolutely. So I call myself a little bit of like an HR-type leadership nerd at times because I love working with people and I love working with organizations to help influence their cultures, their environments to be more people-centric. So I've been in HR for over 20 years and I have seen, as a consultant, a lot of different types of organizations, their cultures, et cetera, and I've really been inspired, those who really put people first. And so that's kind of really driven me on my career journey and leadership journey of looking at organizations that need to be able to focus more on their people. And what really appeals to me is that we can't get work done, and this seems very simple, right? We can't get work done without our people, but yet we are not focused on our people very often. Right? We're focused on the tasks and the work that they need to get done, but we're not really focusing on them. And I think we're in a point now in the world where there's such a shortage of workers and people are so challenged about being able to find good quality people that people are now understanding how important it is to create environments and cultures that are people-centric, that really focus on what people's needs are, et cetera. And so that has kind of been my whole mantra of moving forward and talking about, "Let's put the people back into the organizations, "let's put the human back into the human resources." Right? So that's kind of led me up to where I'm at today and part of co-authoring "The JoyPowered® Organization" which is completely focused on what it's like to have an organization that is focused on putting people first and understanding the importance behind that.

- It is such an exciting time for HR if you think about what you just said and the work we can do to put the human back in human resources in so many ways. Part of the reason I wanted to talk to you is you had a session that you did at SHRM New Orleans this year called, "Empathy: The New Work Culture Norm." And so I really wanna spend our time talking about empathy, but to just make sure we're on the same page, how would you define empathy? And are there different kinds?

— Well, great question. And I think a lot of people get empathy, the word empathy confused with things like sympathy, and maybe even that a lot of people don't even know what apathy means or anything like that. So I'd like to start out by saying, "Hey, in order to understand empathy "and what empathy really means, "we first have to understand "some of the related words." Right? So apathy, right? And apathy means to have no feeling on a matter whatsoever. I'm completely removed from it. Sympathy is to try to feel together, right? In that moment with the person about something, to have sympathy, and we commonly use that when someone passes away, right? "My deepest sympathies." Or, "I sympathize with you." Because we've all kind of been there, we know what it feels for us, but not necessarily with someone else, what they're feeling exactly. But empathy on the other hand is much deeper because empathy means that we have much more of an emotional investment in that other person's experience, right? And about what they're going through and what they're dealing with, where it's not just paying lip service to that person at that time, but really talking about it from an emotional standpoint and really understanding or attempting to understand where that person's coming from. I always say it's like putting yourself in the other person's shoes, right? Of what they're feeling. That's really what empathy is all about. So I give this example a lot of times, and I think this helps people understand, it's pretty interesting. So, all right. So we see someone who is drowning in a lake, right? The apathetic person says, "Oh my gosh, that person's drowning. "That has nothing to do with me. "I'm gonna go about my business." Okay, that's apathy. A sympathetic person would be like, "Oh my gosh, that person is drowning. "Gosh, she must be so scared. "I really feel for her. "I would be scared if I was drowning." Right? So that's the sympathy kinda component. But empathy is, "Oh my gosh, that person is drowning. "That is terrible. "What can I do to help her?" Right? That is that emotional involvement in that type of situation. And so I think it's important for us to really understand what empathy really is at the root of it all for us to be authentic in being able to empathize, display empathy with others, right? And I think that's the important component of learning about that.

— This might seem like a no brainer question, and I have had many times in my HR career where there has been lack of empathy. So the root of it is why is empathy so important to the success of any business, really? Why do we need to lean into that right now in this way compared to things like, "Let me just look at KPIs." Or, "Let me just look at how many widgets we're creating." Or those types of things? How is empathy gonna help us do better in our businesses?

— Yeah. And that's not a simple question at all or a silly question at all. It's like anyone who can wake up every day and open their eyes and see the world that we're living in, should be able to answer that question, right? I mean, the world has changed so much. And over the course of the last two to three years, we've experienced more than

we've ever thought we'd experienced in our lives, right? So number one, with just everything that went on with the pandemic, that was a very emotional time for everyone, right? And we lost people that we loved, we were all concerned about our own health, and we were all concerned about people that were around us, et cetera. And being able to empathize with people and what they were feeling, was important during that time. Well, it's still important during this time now because we're still feeling the aftermath of that, right? Because it changed our whole entire world. It changed the way that we work, it changed the way that we interacted with other people, it changed how we value work, right? On what we thought was most important in our lives, a lot of people went through a time period where they reevaluated what was important to them, and some people who work maybe was in their top five, work was no longer in their top five after going through this, right? And they weren't willing to do the same kind of things, or they had a whole epiphany on what they wanted their lives to be about because this was a life-changing event. So when we think about all of those things, and we think about people coming into work, coming into the workplace, and I'm not talking about physically, I'm just talking about working remotely being employed with us, they're bringing everything with them today. Gone are the days, and I remember my parents or my grandparents saying things like, "When you go to work, you go to work. "You leave your personal stuff at the door. "You go to work, you do that, and then you leave." Well, that doesn't apply today because everyone is bringing everything to work. They're bringing their personal problems, they're bringing their issues, they're bringing family problems, all of their baggage, and some people are bringing in steam trunks full of problems, right? And we know that. Well, the thing is that we have to understand that human beings are emotional beings. They have feelings, they have worries, they have cares, they have emotions, and we have to understand that. And part of empathy and really the importance of empathy is being able to relate to folks with this, to have the ability to understand what other people are feeling, and then to be able to interpret that on how we move forward, right? It's really the ability to be able to actively share emotions with other people and understand that it's okay to have those and have those feelings, and it's okay for someone to be sad or someone to have a bad day or someone to be going through something. I don't think it is really realistic in today's world for us to think that people aren't going to bring those things into work, or we're gonna expect that people are not gonna be 100% all the time. We're never 100% all the time, right? And so I think that's why empathy is so important today. And just to kinda further expand on that a little bit, is that empathy has a tremendous impact on how employees feel about their employer, right? Think about yourself and think about when you're around people that really have your own concern in mind or they're looking out for you, et cetera, and illustrating that, you're a lot more connected and a lot more engaged with that person than you are with the person who doesn't illustrate that. And that's the same thing for employees when they're at work.

— The next question, the way I had it written was, how can you practice or strengthen your empathy skills? And I wanna change that a little bit because in my career, I have dealt with managers who, and I've talked about this before in the podcast, who are successful at moving the rock down the road, or meeting their KPIs, but their tactics are terrible. And so I guess my question really is, how can we teach them this skill of empathy if they are maybe an apathetic person, or they don't put a lot of value on that? And I think the world is changing, right? So I think managers like this are becoming less and less, but it is something we run into as HR practitioners, is trying to teach this skill set of empathy. So I'm curious your perspective as you've gone kind of on the speaking circuit and talked about this. Now, how do we teach people to be empathetic?

— Well, and that is one of the things I talk about all the time, and I'm glad you used a key word, you said the skill, right? Being empathetic and showing empathy and having empathy, really is a skill that we have to add to our tool belts. And it's not something that everyone naturally has. Some people have that more than others. Other people don't. I will tell you that from a personal standpoint, I remember one of the first leadership assessments I've ever taken early, when I was in my 20s, it showed that I had very low empathy, right? For others because I was always focused on, "Let's get things done, let's do stuff, let's suck it up, "no matter how bad it is, we just gotta push forward." And I didn't really, at that time, really pay that much attention. And one of my first bosses that I ever had, who was an amazing mentor for me, she told me that I could probably benefit from having a little bit more empathy as well. And she was right. She was right. I own it. I accept it. And so it's something that I've had to work on too. So not only am I going out talking about this, I'm a person who's had to really work on this as well for other people and really try to understand that everyone handles things differently, right? So what really is a key to know about why we should learn empathy and why it's important is that, and there's been some data out there where something like around 90, 92% of employees said, "Hey, I'm way more likely to stay with a company "if they empathize with my needs and what's going on, right? "'cause we're being asked to do more at work, "we've got families we're trying to have, "we're trying to live a good life and personally, "and trying to pay attention to our families. "So we've got a lot going on." So that means that empathy at work is important, right? And that we need to be able to learn that and we can learn it. And so what happens in an organization is first, you talk about the importance of empathy and what that is, and to address any type of roadblocks that might exist in their current culture for all of that, right? And so if there are people that are managers, as you said, they're more task-focused, et cetera, but not really a people-focused, we need to identify that. We need to identify the stranger effect, which means that it's easier for us to empathize with people we already know versus those we don't

know. So if we're a manager managing people and we're not building relationships with those individuals and really trying to build bonds, then that means it's gonna be a lot easier for me not to show empathy, right? And so if I keep that distance, and I think in the past, we've talked about there should always be a distance or always a separation between the manager and employees, don't get too close, et cetera. Well, that doesn't necessarily work too much in this day and age. So when we're talking about learning about empathy, it's one, recognizing the importance of it in the organization, talking about it, socializing it in the organization, teaching people to put theirselves in other folks shoes, right? And about how they would wanna be treated. I was just on a call with a client today and we were talking about dealing with an employee performance issue. And I asked the person, I said, "Well, how would you want to be treated "if you were in this situation, "if the shoe was on the other foot?" And they're like, "Wow, that's a great question. "I never really thought about it that way." And I said, "We should think about "every interaction we have with people "a little bit about how we might wanna be treated "if we were in that situation." And it's not just a tactical kind of interaction, right? It's not like I'm checking boxes. It's a person which I need to be able to illustrate and understand what their feelings and emotions might be. So putting ourselves in other people's shoes, right? It's also about being a good listener and practicing active listening, and being able to help understand the person's perspective, asking questions. And here's a word I'm gonna use that a lot of people do not like, being vulnerable, right? So being vulnerable with that person. For some reason, I feel like as leaders, we sometimes think that vulnerability is a bad thing, it's some kind of weakness, but it's actually a strength that we have if we can be vulnerable, and it actually helps build relationships and build rapport and stability with our people when we're able to be vulnerable with them about what we're good at, what we're not good at, what we are struggling with, et cetera. So trying to establish and build that relationship by listening, being honest, being transparent, and just really helping leaders in your organization understand the connection between trust, between you as the leader and the employee, as well as the relationship and what that means, right? So I think a lot of times we're so focused on the work and getting the work done that we're not focused on building a relationship so that it motivates or inspires the people to get the work done, right?

— The vulnerable piece is so important. And I think about that a lot only because I think sometimes people hear that word and go, "Oh, so I have to spill all my tea "about my life?" No. That's not the kind of vulnerability we're talking about, but yeah, share your journey, share where you've been, know what your strengths are and what you need help with and asking for that help. I see it more as an opportunity to collaborate, an opportunity to open yourself up for some really great coaching maybe, especially if you have a supervisor who has a weakness that you're strong in and vice versa, and you can learn from each

other and you have that safe space to do that. You talked about knowing people and I think that's such an important piece, is that you can't show that true empathy unless you kinda know somebody's story a little bit to the extent that they're willing to share it. So I think that's interesting, and I also wanted to talk about one thing that you mentioned about taking an assessment early on. If you are an assessment person, and I've probably taken every assessment out there that you can think of. I'm sure you have too Jeremy. I feel like that's something a lot of HR practitioners can do. I would say though, remember this is a skill. If you've taken CliftonStrengths and empathy is your number 34, it doesn't mean you can't be empathetic. It probably just means it's not your go-to, is the way you responded, so you have to work at it. So I think that's a really good point is if you think about some of those assessments. But as I think about where we're at right now and what we've been through in the last two years for HR practitioners, man, it's a ton, right? Not just the COVID stuff but--

- Tremendous, tremendous.

- Yeah. I mean, we're dealing with what's happening in the Ukraine, we're dealing with the fallout of Roe v. Wade and what that means long-term for organizations. And I think about everything that we've tried to do as practitioners to be empathetic to all the different scenarios, right? You're managing kids, you're single, you're managing maybe handling adults. Maybe you're just trying to manage your schedule with your spouse or your partner, because now maybe one of you is hybrid or one of you is fully home, all of this has led to this phenomenon for HR practitioners of just straight up empathy fatigue. We just don't have it in us sometimes to flex this skill. How do we come back from that? How do we... Some of us can't just take a break and go to Maui for a month and recoup. So how do we continue to foster that skill and come back from empathy fatigue?

- Yeah. That is a very good point because a lot of times we're tired ourselves, right? And we want someone to show us empathy because we're showing it to everyone else, and sometimes we're tired ourselves and we're just sick and tired of being sick and tired, right? So it's hard. And one is kind of acknowledging that empathy fatigue is a real thing, right? It's not something that we've made up, that people do get a little jaded or they get a little brandish about having to show and illustrate empathy all the time, with just everything that's going on, and some people are like, "When are people just gonna suck it up "and just go out there and do what they're supposed to do, "instead of just whatever?" But I think number one is that we have to cultivate compassion and we have to do that in our organizations all the way around, and it has to be part of our culture of empathy that we're trying to build, right? Where we have to be able to communicate openly and express ourselves very clearly to other people, and if we're experiencing some of that empathy fatigue, then talk about it. Let

people know what's a real thing, like I said earlier, but we have to talk about it and not just ignore it. We have to really try to provide that support for each other, and that means employees have to show empathy for their managers. I see so many times where employees get frustrated with their manager because they're waiting on something or this isn't happening, or they're not getting back with them, but the employee never once stops to think about what it's like to be in that manager's shoes, right? And just think about, "Okay, that manager is juggling, "not only a staff of 30 now, because we're shorthanded, "when we're working with less, "a staff of 30 and they're also doing "all these other projects, et cetera." So it's a two-way street when it comes to empathy, right? It's, our employees have to show that to our leaders, leaders have to show it to employees from that standpoint. I think we also have to provide a little bit of grace to people and understand when mistakes are gonna be made and that people aren't always gonna be 100%. And I think most of all, more than anything, we really have to be aware of emotions and thoughts of other people and understand how our words can affect them, right? And just know that we all have to practice this with each other, and it's not a one way relationship when it comes to displaying empathy or building it on the organization. And this is where I feel like that a lot of organizations in trying to put empathy at the forefront of their skill training for their leaders is that we need to train on empathy, right? Look for empathy training on how we can show and illustrate empathy, how we can embed it into our work, how we can address empathy fatigue when it happens. Make it part of the organization's core values and demonstrating empathy and making it an expectation, right? I think that is it. And we can't forget about rewarding empathy, right? And that kind of helps it too. If we're doing something all the time and we're not getting a reward or benefiting from it, et cetera, that is tiring in itself and it doesn't keep us wanting to do what we should be doing. So we could acknowledge when people illustrate empathy or doing a good job of asking questions or really seeking to understand. We can recognize people about things, or we can even say, "Hey everyone. We know we've got some folks "who are going through a tough time on the team. "So let's make sure that we're extending "a little bit of grace "and we're extending some empathy to them "and let's be cognizant of how we would wanna be treated "if we were having tough times or et cetera." And that's the beauty of building a relationship, being transparent and showing vulnerability, is that that is okay to talk about.

— Yeah. I like that a lot. I would add to that, I like that you've talked about thinking about how you wanna be treated, and then I would add that layer, is after you've considered that, now think about how that person would wanna be treated, 'cause maybe it's a little different, maybe your circumstances aren't the same.

— Yeah. Yeah. And that's something, when I train a lot of people, I think, it's part of those old... My family, I was raised, we're from

the South, and so we love our little sayings, right? And we always said, treat people the way you wanna be treated. Well, that's a good starting point, but like you said, I always challenge people to say, but I wanna turn that up on its head and treat people the way they wanna be treated because everyone is different and that's the beauty of people, right? And how we work and what we do. So thanks for bringing that up because that is a very important part.

— And it goes back to what you started at the very beginning, is bringing the human back to human resources and every human's unique, right? So you gotta understand where they're coming from.

— Yeah, yeah. Well, I was gonna say, no one wants to be treated just like a number, right? We wanna be treated as individuals, we wanna be seen as individuals, we wanna be seen for the contributions we can make, and for the difference and what we do at work and for who we are. And I think we always have to think about that when we're working with our people, we can't treat them just like some member or some robot or some machine because they're not. We have to think about the importance of that emotional factor that comes with humanity in general and with the people. And then it's really going back to thinking about, without the people, we can't do the work.

— Absolutely. Well, Jeremy, what a great conversation. And thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

— Absolutely. Well, thank you for having me. It's been great.

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