

- [Shari] 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. Back on the mic with me today is Sarah Noll Wilson and Dr. Teresa Peterson. Thanks for joining me again on the podcast.

- [Teresa] Such a pleasure.

- [Sarah] Excited to be back.

- [Teresa] Yeah.

- [Shari] So I thought we could start with learning a little bit more about each of your individual backgrounds and your passion for workplace culture. So Teresa, let's start with you.

- [Teresa] Yeah, hi, thanks for having us back. My background is in education, so I've taught everything from fifth grade through college students. So the part that I'm most passionate about is how to create learning cultures, where learning isn't these events planned by committees and teams, but how we embed learning into our everyday at work, which is a huge part of building a great culture, especially as we think about life post-pandemic. That's one of the things people value most about their work environments.

- [Sarah] Yeah, there's so much more to you though. I mean, you really summarized it quite succinctly.

- [Teresa] That was in a nutshell, yeah.

- [Shari] How about you, Sarah?

- [Sarah] Yeah, a little bit about me. I spent... Well, here's the shortest version. I got my undergraduate in theater performance, theater education, and then I spent just under 15 years in insurance. So I mean, you can deduct from that whatever you would like. I got my master's in leadership development, because I was really interested in the dynamic and the impact that the person in the position of power and authority had. And so did that work, led leadership development efforts, and now own this company and fortunate to be in collaboration with Teresa every day and our other colleagues that we get to work with. I'm so passionate about this work for a number of reasons. We spend most of our life at work. It's the thing that shapes us the most. It shapes our energy, it shapes how we feel about ourselves, how we think about ourselves, and the reality is, is work hasn't worked for a lot of people for a very long time. But humans are incredibly expansive, and we're capable and we're... What does it look like to create a more human first culture? Sometimes there's a lot of cost to

driving profit and productivity, and it's usually the cost of the people. So just really passionate about making the workplace work better.

- [Teresa] You know what's coming up for me, Sarah, as I hear you say that, and we've talked every single day for probably four years, and what I hadn't thought about until something in the way you said that was, we hear so much from the employer that they don't want employee emotions from home coming to work, with very minimal consideration for how workplace emotions and the stress of work is showing up for people at home. And something about that just lit me up when I heard you say that.

- [Sarah] Shari, welcome to what our conversations and relationship is like. That's a really... And there are some people in the workplace who might not care about that, but there's a lot that I think would give pause to.

- [Teresa] Yeah, and you know, I think it speaks to how we get so used to the conversation being what it is of about emotions coming into work and disrupting work and that would be a problem or whatever the conversation we get used to. I mean, we talk about this daily, and I've talked with Sarah specifically for years, and only just now have I thought, whoa. That hasn't entered the conversation either as explicitly or nearly enough, or with the weight that it really deserves.

- [Shari] I feel like we just decided we're gonna do a whole nother podcast episode future facing here on this topic. We're spending so much time right now talking about talent. And I think that's important, as we think about the future of HR and the future of workplaces and being more human centric, more employee driven. We've spent a lot of time on the podcast talking about building psychological safety, but the work you do and some of the things that you mentioned lead me to this next question, is we haven't really talked about psychological protection mechanisms, and that's something that you guys talk about. I'd love for you to share a little bit about what exactly are those.

- [Sarah] Yeah, I mean, so... A couple of things. We are fundamentally as humans wired for protection. We're wired to survive. And one of the things we know is that our brain is more likely to prioritize us from pain than it is to push us to pleasure. And so we move into a threat-based response so fast, and that's something that's really important for, again, organizations to understand. When we talk about wanting people to understand the complexity of humans, it's understanding the biology and the psychology of it. And so we naturally come from a place of, at any moment can go into a protection mode, which is why it's so important that we are so more intentional than we tend to be about the impacts that we're making, so that we can make it safe for

people to step out of that, and not just telling them, right? Not just saying, "Yeah, you can trust us," but actually showing them. That's what's coming up for me. What about you Teresa?

- [Teresa] Yeah, I think everything that you said. It's important that people are monitoring for those, for the conditions of psychological safety for others, and then not taking themselves for granted. I think that's the other thing we see HR professionals doing a lot is they're so busy tending to others, but they're not tending to themselves. So how do they advocate for their own psychological safety and tend to their own wellness in the process?

- [Shari] How have you seen those protection mechanisms get in the way of people hearing feedback?

- [Sarah] I mean, again, physiologically, when our brain goes into a threat-based response... So we talk a lot about the amygdala and just helping people understand that part of our brain, because it can move... .07 seconds, it can move into a threat-based response. Shari, you could send me an email, and if you're my boss, and it says, "Hey, stop by. We need to talk," I am not listening. And because fundamentally we actually, we lose access to things like empathy and listening and logic and reasoning. So it's actually quite difficult. And one of the challenges... It's interesting because coming from, coming from a background in theater, feedback is normalized there. You get notes all the time. We call them notes. It is just part of the creative process. Now, is it always comfortable? No, but is there the same kind of shutting down that you normally see? The other thing is it's so normalized that we get really good at giving it because we have to give it so often. That was a really big transition for me when I moved to the corporate world where it was feedback was such a negative word. And I realized that part of it was because one, we're typically pretty ineffective at how we give it and we're not giving it often enough and we're not giving it from a place of care and growth-minded. It's awkward. We make it a confrontation and then we don't spend time helping people understand how to receive it and to understand that, yeah, you might have a reaction and that's okay. I mean, our brain will focus on that one or two negative comments out of a thousand good ones because it's protecting us. Ooh, hot stove. Don't do that again. And so, yeah. The protection mechanism and feedback, they go hand in hand, which is why, when we're working with people like, well, how do you give feedback so they don't get defensive, well, you might not be able to, but what we can do is educate people and normalize it for you and for them, and how do we move through that reaction.

- [Teresa] Yeah, and I think the part I wanna echo is and giving time. It's very normal to have a reaction initially, but we know chemically, it takes 24 hours for us to metabolize those stress hormones. So I think a trap we can fall into is we give feedback, the other person

maybe is defensive, maybe is caught off guard. We know sometimes people are feeling ashamed of something they've done, that they're uncomfortable about that. And giving space between this initial conversation where you're sharing and then a follow up conversation to make meaning when everyone is back and calmer and in a more objective place...

- [Shari] It's interesting that you brought up the 24 hours thing because my youngest son plays football and every year we have to go to the, the pre-season parent meeting. So I've listened to coach give this speech now three times. I have one more to go through. But in his speech, he says, "Do not talk to me 24 hours until after a game is done. Don't come up to me on the field. Don't come up to me after the game. Don't talk to me about play time for your kid." And initially when he had this first conversation with me as a freshman parent, I was like, "Oh my gosh, this guy's so aggressive. What is his deal?" And now having been in the program a while, and even grown in my own HR career, I'm like, "That is such good advice." You just had this great game or bad game. It doesn't matter the outcome of the game. You had this scenario and you need to process what happened to be able to receive any feedback, pros or cons, for how you're coaching. So I think that's really important as you think about giving feedback to your employees. What are some tactics? If you're listening, you're like, "Yeah, you know what, every time I do get a ping from my boss, I go into flight mode." Is there some tactics that you've helped teach employees on? How do I recognize that stuff in advance and start changing my own internal narrative about things?

- [Sarah] Noticing it and naming it. It seems simplistic, but it's actually quite powerful. So for example, because we use the phrase... We talk about the amygdala. I'll tell myself, oh, my amygdala is triggering right now. Okay, and then taking a really couple of deep breaths. And the reason that's so important is again, from a biological perspective, it starts to calm down that reaction. It's massaging a bunch of nerves, and there's a lot of things physiologically that happen when we take deep breaths. That's why it's such a good tool for us. And the other thing is just staying curious and making sure that you ask questions, clarify, understand it. But the thing with self-awareness is that part of what makes it so difficult for all of us is because it means that we have to be willing to consider that we might not always show up at our best and we have... If we're going to make the impact we want to, we have to be able to close the gap between what we intend to do and the actual impact we make, which means that it might be uncomfortable. One of the ways that we always phrase it is, instead of thinking, oh, there's no way this is true, is to consider, but how might it be? Just to try it on like a pair of pants. How might this be true? So breathing, noticing, and just even naming, I'm having a stress reaction right now, that's normal, it's okay, and then trying to do what you can to be curious in the moment. What would you add Teresa?

- [Teresa] I think something that's worked for me and I think that's worked for other people we've worked with is beyond what you're saying there, trying to get yourself back in a realm of possibility. What might be possible? What else might the boss want to talk about, for example? Because it's very easy to think, oh, that was terrible, and I'm probably fired, et cetera, et cetera. Our brain is great with these terrible scenarios. And the other thing that has worked beyond thinking, well, what else might be on the radar that we could think about, even just imagining that there is another possibility can calm our brain down. But for some folks who get a little bit stuck in the doomsday, this isn't gonna go very well, give yourself permission to just go down that path with your thinking. Okay, if I go in and this does happen, how do I wanna show up, so that you're reclaiming a sense of power and control over your own behavior because I think that's where we see a lot of people get caught up, is they feel like they're just gonna be along for the ride, like a cat toy on the end of a string, instead of centering yourself back in. What's in my realm of control? How I show up, even if this is terrible news, how am I gonna show up?

- [Shari] You talked earlier, Sarah, about your experience in theater and that feedback process. And I've had a couple authors on who have that improv background. And I'm always impressed with their yes, and ability when it comes to different types of things. How do we get better about asking for feedback and being really genuine about it and not, not just the check the box, yeah, I asked for feedback, but really that curiosity that you mentioned?

- [Sarah] We probably need to be asking for feedback way more frequently than we are, even if it's in little ways. I think one of the, one of the simplest practices we can do is when you are asking, be really explicit about what you're asking people to give you feedback on. I think that a lot of times, when we're... In the land of research, we call it garbage in, garbage out. If we're asking a generic garbage question, we're gonna get generic garbage answers. And even as managers, right? What's the most common, what's the most common question asked at the end of a one-on-one? What can I do for you? And it's very broad and it's very... Not that it's a bad question, but if I were to say, "Hey, Shari, what do you think is going well, and what do you think could be doing different," you might give me something to work with. But if I know that I'm struggling with X or I'm trying to get better at Y, if I say, "Hey, Shari, one of the things I'm working on is not interrupting people. Can you let me know when you see me do a good job of that? And I might not always catch it when I am, so would you give me a loving push or a nudge?" So to be really explicit in your ask. And the other thing is... And I wanna take a moment 'cause the focus of our session is really on understanding that as an organization, when we're asking for feedback, and a manager when we're asking for feedback, it isn't enough for you

to ask. People ask for it all the time. And the two most common phrases that are associated with the word feedback is retaliation and inaction. Nobody... We've done number of sessions recently, and the number one thing we're hearing from people after they've had a chance to share is, I am gonna be honest, I'm just cautious or I'm really skeptical that they're gonna do anything with this, or on the far extreme, that people are fearful for sharing 'cause they have had retaliation. So it's not just the asking of it. We have to be, I use the word impeccable, but we have to be incredibly intentional at how we receive it, how we acknowledge and appreciate it, how we tell people what we've heard and what we're doing with it. Because it isn't just the act of you giving me feedback. So when we think about asking for it more, we also have to be better at how we receive it, and then what we do with it as well. Those pieces are equally, if not more important, I think. 'Cause anyone can ask and then be like, "I'm gonna discredit, dismiss, minimize, justify, feel self righteous."

- [Teresa] Tell everyone else that you gave me this feedback.

- [Shari] Like oh my God, can you believe what Shari said? Or I know that was Sherry who wrote that comment on the thing. And what we're doing in that moment is sending a message that people can't share honestly with this, that we're sending a message when we're showing up in those ways, that we don't take it seriously, that we don't value them, that we don't respect them. And when people feel disrespected, that is one of the quickest way to cut a relationship. It happens almost instantaneously, and it's real hard to come back from that.

- [Teresa] Yeah, we like to remind people, and this applies 100% to receiving feedback, trust is impossible to build in the moment you need it. So if you don't have a full bank going into a conversation like that, you can at best sustain some trust in those moments. You might, with very intentional action, be able to build. But we've seen in these conversations we've had with some other leaders and managers and employees lately are very fresh in our mind, that more often than not, people don't receive the feedback well, particularly the person in power, and that when they don't receive it well, the trust tips, just boop, starts to slide. And there can be immediate schisms of the trust. It was destroyed. I'm using the word destroyed, but it was so deeply diminished instantaneously or through an action. It just keeps, it just keeps diminishing.

- [Sarah] Yeah, and we all think we're great at... Everyone thinks they're better at receiving feedback than they really are. Like, no, I like feedback when it's given from Teresa about something I agree with and delivered in a way I like, because I respect her, I value her opinion, right? But if it's from somebody who I don't have a relationship with, if it's not delivered well, if it's not something I agree with, if I'm hangry in that moment, and it's like, I just want to have lunch right now or whatever it is, and again, honoring that,

that reaction is normal, but we can continue to work to catch that reaction so we can show up more powerfully.

- [Shari] Teresa, I love what you said. I wrote it down. Trust is impossible to build in the moment. Man, that is so true. In thinking through what you were talking about, Sarah, when it came to managers receiving feedback, as employees, we're taught to be asking for feedback, looking for feedback, whatever. But there is a balance there, right? Managers need feedback as well.

- [Sarah] More, they need more. And here's why, because we know that self awareness decreases, the more power and authority you have, and it's not because you're arrogant. Now, it could be for some. It is because fundamentally, because of the power dynamics, you will have fewer people being honest with you, period. The CEO of a company who's... Maybe they have a trusted colleague who's a part of the executive staff. Maybe they're working with a coach. Maybe they are working with some board members, but it's a really small group. And so yes, they... Yes, everyone needs it. Yes, managers really need it or people who are... I'm very intentional because we really believe leadership is an act and not a role or a title. This is why I'm saying position of power and authority. It's what you do with that power and authority that makes you a leader. But you, when you have power, you can not only make or break an organization, but you can make or break a person. And so you have to be... So one time, and I thought this was really interesting, during a session somebody asked, "I understand why self awareness is important for me as a person, my personal growth, but I'm not connecting it to why it benefits me as a manager." And it gave me pause for a second. And part of this actually came from another conversation we had had with this really wonderful author, Minda Harts. And what I said was, I said, "Because when you're not self-aware, you're likely creating harm and you don't even know it. And are you okay with that?" And so it's even more important for managers to ask more frequently to overcome the fact that there's a power dynamic. I mean, there's a power dynamic between Teresa. I look at Teresa as a peer and I'm also aware that I decide her salary. I can control her opportunities. I have influence over things that are important to her stability and ability to be her best self. And that is always at play, which is why managers should be asking way more frequently and receiving it far better than they probably are. What would you add, Teresa?

- [Teresa] No, I-

- [Sarah] Or what comes up for you?

- [Teresa] Yeah, no, I think, I think your point about asking and getting better at receiving is essential. And I think celebrating when you've received it and put it to work is incredibly important for your culture. If you want the folks who are new hires, who are maybe new to

your profession, new to your organization, to be able to receive feedback, that comes, the modeling of that comes from the top. We can't expect anyone at that base level, and I'm saying that with respect, but the essential worker of your organization, to be able to receive feedback and make it actionable for them, if the people sitting in the other seats can't.

- [Shari] I really appreciate that. As I think about receiving feedback in my own personal journey, there have been plenty of times where I have reacted badly. And you gave some of those examples before. How can you recover if the way you reacted is public? So there's personal. I reacted badly, I walked away, I cried, I got angry, I whatever. But what if it's public? How do you recover from that?

- [Teresa] This is a good one.

- [Sarah] It is a good one. I'll let you take a stab at it first, if you have something.

- [Teresa] Yeah, one of the tools that's easy to use in the moment that can help perhaps avoid a bad reaction, I'm envisioning a very public yelling or stomping off, something like Lucy from "Charlie Brown," give yourself a pause, have a sentence at the ready that is a sentence that's comfortable for you to say. I'm always aware that I'm a middle-aged Midwestern woman and the statements I might use might not reflect what everyone else would say. But things that I might say are, "This is heavy for me. I need to take a break, or, "I just wanna pause on this. This isn't what I thought I was gonna hear, and I really wanna hear it, so I need a minute." So a statement you can have at the ready to help you pause so that you can privately go have your bad reaction, which I'm totally fine with. Avoid self-harm and that kind of stuff. But you wanna go scream into a pillow somewhere, that's completely acceptable, I think. So that's coming up for me as something we can try to do to interrupt a bad reaction. And then I'm thinking about clients we've had. We encourage folks to ask for do overs or whatever word would resonate with you. Some of our clients who enjoy golf might say, "I wanna take a bogie on that one," or whatever your language is for a do over. And it's really important to remember, the do over is not for you to mount a resistance to what this person had said to you. The do over is for you to have a second chance at receiving. And this always makes me think of a situation with my son. He was telling me something. I could tell it was important to him. I wasn't in the space. Reminds me of the football coach in the scenario you described. I just wasn't there right now, and I wanted a do over. And the next day I went back to him and said, "You were telling me something. It was important to you. I didn't give you what you deserved. You deserved more of my attention. Can we try again?" In moments like that, moments of repair really help relationships move forward. They can get us back to... Because the

person who gave the message probably hasn't felt great for the last day or two. I tried to give you this. You said you wanted it, and now... So we're in the balance. So a statement like, "I didn't show up in a way that was consistent with how I wanna show up for you. I bet it didn't feel great. I really wanna hear you. Let's try this again." And an invitation. And if this isn't a good time for you to have a do over, when can I come back? Because my timing and your timing, because we're two independently living people, might not be aligned all the time. So being okay with that too.

- [Sarah] Yeah, and just, I wanna reiterate that to heal a relationship, one of the first steps is taking ownership for the role that you played, whether that's an apology and naming of it. Now what I will, what I'll add onto that, so I'll yes, and it, is if my reaction is public, then I think the apology needs to be public as well. Because sometimes what will happen is somebody will do something and then they might apologize to the person, but the person wasn't the only person who was impacted. Everyone who observed it did. And so I think that that's, that's really, really important to lean into. Where that moment happened is also where that moment of healing needs to happen. And it send a really strong message. We're humans. There's no good, bad. They're not a good human, bad human. We're humans that do good things sometimes and bad things other times. Sometimes they're conscious, sometimes they're unconscious. Regrettable events are inevitable. But how we show up in those moments, again, to reiterate Teresa's point, can be a really powerful shift and it role models for people. And again, this is where how we receive feedback creates the safety. Because if I give you feedback, and you go, "Wow, that's really tough. I appreciate that you shared that with me. I need to think about it. X, Y, and Z," then that sends me the message that we can have these kind of conversations. And let's say you don't show up like you want to, but then you come back and you go, "Hey, Sarah, I just wanna... I didn't show up at my best. I realize that I snapped at you. I've had some time to think on it, so I wanted to apologize for that. I appreciate it." And again, that can be an even more powerful bonding moment than if that had never happened. That's what we've seen anyway, anecdotally.

- [Shari] All of that was really, really good advice. So hopefully if you're listening, you're taking lots of notes. I feel like this should be manager training 101 stuff, if you don't have it in there. So I appreciate that. As we wrap up our conversation, I keep coming back to what about HR. We do a lot of coaching for others and often we're looked at as we should have all the answers, and especially as we went through the pandemic and our leadership was coming to us like, "How do I handle this?" We're like, "I don't know. We haven't ever had to do this before." How can we start to really ask for feedback and keep our credibility? 'Cause I think sometimes we have this balance where we don't think we can ask for feedback because we don't wanna lose our credibility.

- [Sarah] I love the specificity of that question and being thoughtful about the consequence and the context. My pause is it's taking me back to my time before starting my company and just reflecting on, oh, I wonder when I didn't ask 'cause we were supposed to have it figured out.

- [Teresa] Yeah.

- [Sarah] One of the things that I firmly believe that is one of the most important privileges and opportunities as HR professionals we have is to role model what we want the culture to be, because people are looking at us. They are paying attention. And so for me, it would look like being really anchored into my purpose or my impact and coming from that place of asking. So what that has looked like for me personally, back when I was in that space, was one of the things that, as you know, is really important to me is that we create learning environments that aren't only entertaining and inspiring, but that people leave feeling like they were really meaningful and they can take action on that, knowing that that's my intention and the impact that I want. What are things that I do really well that you feel like contribute to that, and what are some things I could consider doing new or differently? We're a big... I mean, a couple of things. Our questions are fateful. So we have to be really thoughtful about the questions we ask. Asking the question new or differently does a couple of things. It puts people into a solution focus, instead of just focused on the problem. It makes it more positive and productive. It helps us both move forward. So asking the question, what could I continue and what could I amplify and what could I do new or differently is how we tend to phrase it. But I think that... The other thing that's coming up for me is sometimes I think that's the pressure we put on ourselves in that role 'cause we feel like we have to be perfect. And the irony is we wouldn't expect that of our team members. And so if we want our team members to have intellectual humility, if we want them to be vulnerable, if we want them to be able to say I was wrong, if we want them to apologize, then we have to be, honestly, I would argue that we have to... I think HR... I think anyone within HR, combined with anyone who's in senior levels of leadership, they need to be leading out front when it comes to our behaviors that we wanna expect and to show up. And the other thing... Sorry, this is just... I have so much love for my fellow HR, 'cause it's hard and this last... And I don't even know what it's been like. I mean, I know what it's been like as a business owner, but we know through the conversations with our clients, I mean, there's been a couple of industries that have been really impacted. Education has been incredibly impacted. Healthcare has been incredibly impacted. But when it comes to positions, HR is probably one of the most impacted across industries. And so I think it's really important that HR people can look for some love too right now because they've been holding a lot of the emotional weight. They've been holding a lot of the uncertainty. They've been

having to manage the complexity. They've been having to make decisions. And even if they're not the ones making the decisions, they're the ones communicating it and then receiving the feedback and the consequence from those. And so I think it's really important to not just be looking for what could you be doing differently, but be reminded of what are the great things you bring to the table because you've had to carry a lot, a lot the last couple years.

- [Teresa] Yeah, something that's coming up for me is I think all of us together continuing to push, push back or push forward, I guess, depending on how we wanna look at it, but so much of those mindsets about the leader having the answer are very heavily tied to the Industrial Revolution where the work was very machine-based. And work with humans is innately complicated where we won't have all the answers. The world is changing at a pace that it has never changed at before on many great levels and many very complicated and confusing levels. And so I think in the front row seat, we have so many companies across so many industries. The best leaders are the ones asking questions, being vulnerable about what they need to get better at, having that awareness of what they want to get better at and being open about it. And those are the places that are retaining their employees at a much higher rate.

- [Shari] Absolutely, I could not agree more, and this was such a great conversation, and so many good tidbits and tweetable quotes. So I will not be able to cover all of them. So Sarah and Teresa, this was great. Thanks so much for jumping on again with me.

- [Teresa] Such a pleasure.

- [Sarah] Yeah, thank you for having us. This was a treat.

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