

- You're listening to "HR Mixtape," your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel well, like work. Now your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Erich Kurschat. Erich is the owner of Harmony Insights LLC, a company that helps organizations and consultants bring the DISC Personality Assessment to life for their teams and clients. He is also the founder of HR Hot Seat, an inclusive mastermind community of real HR pros, solving real HR problems. Erich draws from a broad range of experience as a corporate HR professional, a public speaker, a career coach, a classical musician, and a proud introvert to inspire others toward meaningful work and productive workplace relationships. Erich, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Of course, I'm excited to be here, Shari, this is gonna be a great conversation.

- I'm so excited to talk about strengths. You know, as I think about my own journey from a baby HR person to where I am now, there's a lot that I had to DISCover on that journey, and you do a lot of work in that space. You're a huge advocate for HR networking, and so I think this is just a really great conversation to have with you in your background.

- Thank you, I'm looking forward to it.

- So let's start with this. As you think about somebody going through this journey, what are some key factors that can help someone identify and leverage their own strengths in a work environment?

- That's a good question. I think for me at least, it had to begin with recognizing that there's a difference between what I was good at and what I was passionate about. I spent so many years doing work that I think I was particularly good at in part, honestly, in part because it aligned with my strengths, you know? But I think any strengths-based conversation for me has to involve a DISCUSSION of what we get excited about and what we find uniquely rewarding and fulfilling, you know? And so for me, I had to step beyond, well, yeah, you know what, there are certain things I was good at that I was being acknowledged for, but I don't know ultimately if it was work that I was necessarily passionate about. So as we're talking about strength then, and helping people identify those, you know, there are any number of things that you can point to with regard to the fulfillment and the reward that comes from the work that you do, you know, where other people are acknowledging your contributions, maybe in ways that are not necessarily obvious to you on the surface. You know, maybe you can get really valuable insights from others. I can't help but want to incorporate it into this conversation is it the case that the things

that you're good at also fulfill you in a really unique and rewarding way.

- I couldn't agree more about finding that sweet spot between your passion and your strengths 'cause that's the times in my life where I know I've shined the most. When you think about that journey of self-assessment, I think you can do the informal, right, like you said, where people are giving you feedback and you're kind of navigating, oh, hey, I've gotten feedback that I'm good at this or this thing. But there's assessments, there's a million assessments out there that you can take for personality and strengths and stuff. So I'm curious, your perspective, the good, the bad, the ugly, the best. What's been your take in doing some of those assessment tests?

- I'll start by saying, I've heard it said that professional development is a team sport, you know, and it's sometimes it's, we feel like it rests on our shoulders and we're tasked with becoming better in some grand way and getting feedback from others certainly is an important piece of the puzzle. But early on, I really took to assessments as you mentioned, and there are some really popular ones out there. You see a lot from Myers-Briggs, StrengthFinder, which has been rebranded as CliftonStrengths. You have Predictive Index and Hogan and Colby and so many out there. I mean, there are more than, I mean, you could even jump if you wanted to on Facebook and figure out what "Friend's" character you are, use that as your assessment. I don't know that I would do that personally, but I honestly think whatever begins a really productive dialogue, a valuable dialogue about how we do our best work and how we connect meaningfully with others can be a beneficial tool. So that being said, I gravitated fairly early on toward DISC and we can certainly get into that. I just sort of as a blanket statement, wanna mention that the companies that I've seen really miss the mark on assessments are those who, number one, feel that they're a one size fits all kind of application. You know, whether it's DISC or anything else, that it's gonna solve all their problems, that's certainly not the case. In terms of pre-employment and selection and recruiting, companies that lead others to believe that they've made a hiring decision based in large parts on the results of any assessment, I think can get 'em in some pretty hot water. In my experience, I think a lot of the resentment that can come from assessments are from companies who use them perhaps to valuable ends, but there isn't much transparency around it. People don't know, you know, they don't see their own results, number one, they don't understand how they're being used within the organization. And so instead of helping tackle things like issues with trust, you know, or conflict or turnover, or some of the things that assessments can do well, they end up breeding resentment and distrust and really becoming counterproductive in ways that certainly aren't gonna be beneficial.

- There's nothing like taking a strengths test and hearing, you know, somewhere down the line of, "oh, you didn't get that project or that

assignment or that thing because it wasn't in your, you know, that you didn't have that top five strength" and it's man, that's just, it misses the mark on what any of those assessments are really trying to teach us. There's not, you know, nobody falls completely in the descriptor of any one of those categories perfectly, you know, and it doesn't mean you should exclude yourself from stuff.

- I say regularly we are so much more than the results of any assessment. But when used as a common language to help us have conversation around how we do our best work and connect meaningfully with others, I think assessments can be very beneficial. The moment you feel pigeonholed or you know, painted into a corner or labeled or whatever metaphor you want to use, that's when that skepticism really takes hold. And people show up to my workshops and they say, "I'm not sure about this 'cause I feel like I've worked for a company who has previously misused or even abused assessment results." And I understand that I really wanna leave room for that skepticism and encourage people to remain open to the possibility that assessments can be very valuable in terms of enhancing self-awareness and connecting them more meaningfully and productively with their colleagues and stakeholders.

- You mentioned self-awareness. How do you see that playing or developing as you think about your own strengths? You know, do you have to kinda tackle self-awareness first to be able to go down the strengths role or do they work hand in hand together, do you think?

- I think self-awareness is the first piece of the puzzle. I'm not sure there's much you can do with confidence in life in general without first understanding how you are uniquely wired and what you bring to your work and to your relationships. You know, we can talk in terms of strength, certainly. I also like to talk in term in terms of preferences and tendencies, you know, so in what environments do I do my best work? There may be strengths that are a part of that conversation, but it may be something as simple as, I need to put my head down in a cube for three hours to feel productive. And if you interrupt me during that three hours, I'll be distracted in a way that, you know, isn't gonna be so helpful. Or on the flip side, you know, I'm not gonna bring my best to work unless I'm collaborating and cooperating with others. It's through relationships, you know, you could argue that there are strengths embedded in that conversation, but sometimes it's as simple as, you know, in what environments I prefer to contribute my best and self-awareness. It has to begin there before you can begin to understand others and what they need from you and how to apply the value that you're bringing to your work.

- And I think that that language that you just used is so applicable to not only your preferences, but if you're somebody who's neurodiverse, and we've talked about that before, but like, that's great language to talk about where I'm going to thrive the best,

right. And kind of knowing yourself, I absolutely love that. You know, as you think back on your career, how have you used your strength to overcome, you know, challenges or obstacles, either, you know, personally or professionally?

- That becomes a complicated question because quite often it's our strengths that become that obstacle. And I say that within the context of knowing that any strength of ours can be a potential limitation if we're not careful about it. So I happen to be somebody, for example, who's very analytical and I like to think very deeply about things. I was a psychology major and a philosophy minor, and that has deep thought written all over it. So if you want me to turn in something, to submit something that is well thought out, well researched, you know, it's crossed, is dotted, all of that. As somebody who values accuracy, you're gonna get that from me. It also means, you know, that I can move into a new space and need very desperately furniture for that space and go an embarrassing amount of time with no furniture because I can't bring myself to make a decision about what to get. I'm stuck in the analysis paralysis. And that strength then really has become a limitation. So over time, any experience or any success that I've experienced based on the strengths that I bring, has to be balanced in check with the extent to which those strengths aren't working against me at some point. To give you an example, I suppose, I'm on the introverted side of things, that's kind of part of my spiel and a lot of the speaking that I do. And I very much find it to be a strength to prefer introversion for a number of reasons. I think it allows me to listen well at times, to think deeply about things, et cetera. But it also got in my way in the sense that it kept me from networking early on when I really needed to grow a network. And certainly as I owned my own business, that was something that became really important. Well, you could talk about introversion getting in my way then as it has over time for building that network, but also then sitting down and recognizing, okay, what are the strengths that I bring to networking situation. Some of the things I've already mentioned, you know, being a good listener, being patient, asking, you know, hopefully thoughtful, meaningful questions of somebody else to keep them in the spotlight if that's something that they prefer. And I had to do some digging and kind of shift from wait, I think these strengths are working against me at times to wait a minute, they can be really beneficial. I just have to be intentional about, number one, recognizing what they are and then two, applying them to something that is gonna be very rewarding and beneficial for me over the long run.

- I appreciate you sharing about being an introvert. I am a textbook definition of an extrovert, and I always encourage my introverts on my team or make an effort rather, to ask them questions when we're in those team meetings because they always have the most valuable insight. I feel like they hear all the things in between the things being said and can really give a really unique perspective on things.

So I appreciate that. It's definitely a strength. If you're an introvert, you should think of it as a strength. I absolutely believe that. You know, as you were talking, I was thinking about the places that we put ourselves in that are challenging or that are scary or that are risky to develop new skills. How have you encouraged people to do that? Or how do you see that as an added value when you're kind of going down this road of figuring out your skills and growing them?

- Well, I mean, everybody talks about where growth happens and it's outside of your comfort zone. And we all have a different size comfort zone. And for some of us it's very narrow, and some of us it's less so, but the moment you step beyond the edge of it, you know it, and you're either excited and motivated to be in that space, or you can become fearful, you know, it might be something uncomfortable and so you long to kind of revert back to that comfort zone. But I think being intentional about that, and actually this goes back to an earlier point that you made about being careful in being labeled or the potential that you're labeled that you only do work or you're only assigned work that is going to appeal to you and your strengths. I think sometimes that's where we shine and that's where we experience the flow as people talk about. But at the same time, if you're only doing things that you're good at, when are you ever really pushing yourself to develop in ways that you might not expect? And so I think, you know, my primary advice for people is to apply a certain intentionality to the work that you do and how you communicate with others. And so, you know, a sort of a simple analogy or example might be if you always take the same drive home from work, deciding to spend an extra minute or two taking a way that you hadn't considered. And yes, it may slow you down and you may get lost along the way, but you never know what you're gonna have the opportunity to learn about yourself in the process. And you maybe you say, well, it's just a drive home, I don't know how much I'm gonna learn, but what if the effort and that intentionality instead was applied to how you approach a project. You typically do things on your own. Maybe I'm calling Shari on the phone. I say, Shari, you know, if I'm not careful, I'm gonna do this all on my own and I'm not gonna benefit from the cognitive diversity of others. Well, how would you approach this challenge that I'm working on? And suddenly I get your input and you blow the doors wide open for a solution that I had never considered. You know, so it's understanding and recognizing your natural tendencies, preferences, strengths, et cetera. And then being intentional about how you are applying those in the work that you do. And when possible, stepping outside of your comfort zone so you consider a different perspective.

- And what great advice for managers listening who are managing teams and who I've identified some of the strengths that their employees have as a reminder that they still wanna be challenged, they still wanna take on different kinds of projects. And how do you encourage that DIScovery and collaboration in a new way? I love the idea of

taking a new way home from work. I was recently on a marketing call with somebody internally here, and she was looking at a pop can, as we were talking about themes for an upcoming event. And I paused and I asked her, I was like, are you looking at that pop can for advice on, you know, our marketing tactic? And she's like, I actually am. She's like, I spend a lot of time looking at my environment for inspiration. And it was just such an aha moment of like, well, I never would've thought to pick up a pop can or, you know, a piece of paper or something sitting next to me and start to read it to spark creativity and innovation. So it's such a great example of just, you know, how you can, you really encourage people to be outside their comfort zone, but in a way that's still safe for them, potentially.

- Well, I'll tell you, I'm sorry to interrupt if you wanted to move ahead, but I have a thought related to that in that I have, my wife and I have a one-year-old at home now and talk about perspective, you know, just watching how our daughter tackles life, you know, and gets across a room and manipulate some object, you know, some toy that she's been given. I mean, really, it gives you that perspective and it reminds you that there is such value in perspective. And, you know, we may get to the HR community that I run, but whether it's the HR community or the work that I do with DISC, really recognizing the value of bringing different perspectives and backgrounds and experiences and lived experiences, strengths, et cetera. The list goes on together so that, you know, as an individual, but certainly as a team or an organization, we're so much stronger because of that diversity. You know, we don't wanna just put on a website that we value diversity and then, you know, encourage people to do what is always easiest for them, you know, I would love to commit to this idea of diversity and inclusion by bringing together disparate viewpoints and people who wouldn't normally work together to see how we can tackle challenges in more effective, efficient ways.

- So I couldn't have t'd up my next question any better than you already have for me. Cause I did wanna switch gears and talk about professional networking, you know, so as I think about, you know, HR and a lot of us in the HR space have done the HR department of one thing that still exists in a lot of spaces. And so leaning into a professional network is so important for us. You know, how have you found some effective ways to do that as an HR professional and, you know, share a little bit maybe about your story about being an introvert and starting to think about building that professional network.

- Well, I'll tell you, Shari, early on, especially when I, well, we'll put it this way. When I was happily employed in corporate human resources, I saw no need for a network, you know, especially as an introvert, why would you, why would I spend any amount of time in any room with a whole bunch of people I didn't know? And you as an extrovert, you may say, are you kidding? That's where life happens.

That's fun,

- sounds like,

- Paradise.

- But for me it was a little intimidating, you know, we'll put it that way. And so I didn't have a LinkedIn presence and I certainly didn't nurture a network. And then suddenly I found myself in a position of self-employment where that network was really, really important. Not to say it wasn't previously, it could have been valuable to me had I recognized that and I needed to do something about that. And so I went out and started looking around at what was available, and a lot of it felt transactional and superficial to me. There's a lot of changing of, exchanging of business cards. And in one event, we literally lined up shoulder to shoulder and spent 30 seconds and shifted, and I just like, oh, I just sort of made my skin crawl. And I thought, you know what? I wanna create the community that I would wanna be a part of. And I, initially here in Chicago called it the Chicago HR Mastermind, and it was just, my goal was 10 to 12 HR professionals in a traditional mastermind style conversation where they're seeing each other regularly and building trust and accountability. Long story short, now over six years later, we have thousands of members in 14 different licensed chapters around the country. And everything we do is entirely free, but it's based in this idea that we really are stronger because of that cognitive diversity that as a department of one, if I don't have an internal sounding board, I can show up to an HR hot seat event entirely for free and ask advice of my peers and get a breakout group of my own to tackle the challenge that I'm facing in my worker job search. And a lot of people out there, even if they're in full-blown HR departments, don't necessarily have the relationships with their colleagues where they can get that actionable feedback in an environment of trust and accountability and some of the things that we practice.

- Sometimes there's a lot of politics potentially involved too, internally, if you need to talk through something, right? It's nice to be able to not have to navigate that.

- There are politics and there's also vulnerability, which I would argue is one of the greatest obstacles. It's, wait a minute, I've been hired into this job. I'm being paid fairly well to do it. Why would I want to admit to anyone I work with or for that I don't have the answer? You know, and rather than sowing seeds of doubt. Now, of course that says a lot about the organization and the culture in that organization, but if you have a community of folks, and I read just this morning a just a fantastic article by a guy named Paul Sippl, S-I-P-P-I-L, I believe is his last name, that talks about the differences or the difference between communities and networks and you know, how networks can feel transactional at times and they don't

necessarily acknowledge you as a person, as an entire person, all of your nuances and idiosyncrasies. And so that's why it's been important to me from the beginning to refer to HR Hot Seat as an inclusive mastermind community because our folks are showing up, yes, to tackle common challenges, but to build trust and accountability and support one another in really meaningful ways. Meaningful connection is an important thing to me.

- Do you have any success stories that have come out of that group or for you personally, where you can attribute this professional network you've created that's led to some help or some success in your career?

- I sure hope so after all this time. I sometimes I have to be really, really thoughtful about how it is, how it has taken place, because I've spent so much time just so focused on making sure that it continues to run in a way that's valuable to our members. You know, in part, I started HR Hot Seat because I do facilitate DISC workshops, and I thought, well, if I can bring, you know, a target audience of mine together, which is HR professionals broadly defined, you know, that could be beneficial to me. I think also though it was a bit shortsighted in the beginning, yes, I think that was important to me to bring my audience together. But I think what I didn't anticipate was the fact that the vast majority of our members would engage me for DISC. You know, I argue that the DISC work that I do can be valuable to all companies and all individuals, but I mean, realistically, the minority of people are going to engage me with DISC. The surprise to me was the extent to which that community would serve me in so many other ways, and more importantly, how I could serve it that go well beyond DISC. And so talk about stepping outside of your comfort zone. Suddenly I was having people coming to me for introductions and resources and just my opinion on various things that I had never thought two minutes about. But because I was in this space and bringing people together in this way, I had the opportunity to be helpful. And, you know, suddenly this introvert who years prior really spent no time making connections that would benefit me, let alone other people. Now, one of my favorite things to do is introduce you to somebody else who will be beneficial to you. You know, maybe I can't help you Shari, but I can introduce you to somebody else in my network who shows up with the exact skills and strengths that would be helpful to you, and then step away with no expectation that I'm gonna benefit from that introduction. And that is one of the most rewarding things I'm able to do. Now, I never would've imagined that, you know, and that all comes from, I think, being intentional about how you are showing up in community to be of service to others, not necessarily to get, you know, to have your own needs met. If you help enough other people get their needs met, your needs will be met along the way.

- What great advice, you know, as we wrap up our conversation and I'm thinking about, you know, as a HR person developing your strengths and building community and your network, you know, as you think about that

HR professional who's maybe newer in their career, what advice do you have to them on going into an organization and making a positive impact, kind of based on the things we've talked about? What are the things that, you know, maybe it's two, three, five things. Like, hey, do this earlier in your career and you'll find a lot of success from it.

- I think most people are gonna be quick to say, you know, learn what you can learn, you know, get the certifications. I think that there's value in all of that. I'm very, a big, a very big proponent of education, and so I don't wanna downplay those things. I don't know that necessarily that those have to be the first steps that you take. I would recommend, honestly, anywhere in life, showing up, genuinely curious, right? I think we're so focused on ourselves and then what we're doing and all of that, that we lose sight of the fact that ultimately we are serving other people. We're influencing and persuading in ways that are very genuine, hopefully. And if I show up curious to know what you as an individual need from me, but what you as a company, as an employer needs from me. What are your headaches and challenges? In either case, I think that is very attractive to people. But I don't know that I can even ask those questions until I first show up confident in who I am and confident in my value. So I said a moment ago that we're often focused on ourselves. And when I say that sort of focused on our own needs, I think it's beneficial to be focused on what we have to give. Before I can offer anything to you, I have to show up knowing what are my strengths, what are my preferences and tendencies, and what value do I bring to you in terms of our relationship and to the work that I'm doing, that self-awareness piece that we talked about earlier. So number one, show up self-aware. Two, be genuinely curious. And three, surround yourself by others who want to lift you up. Find a community, create a community, create a mastermind group. Contact me if you want to talk about how to do any of that. But be intentional about surrounding yourself by people who optimally think differently, look differently, speak differently. Bring this cognitive diversity and diversity in other ways to the work that you're looking to do and the career that you're looking to build. And I think that's a really good start.

- Diversity of thought is so important. It has helped me in my career in so many ways. I can be very defensive sometimes when an idea of mine is challenged, but that's knowing myself, right? But, I will stick out the conversation and I have often learned so much about my viewpoint and the way I'm approaching things, by the way somebody else is approaching it or somebody else's viewpoint, things I haven't considered, you know, so such good advice, Erich. Thank you so much for taking the time to spend with me to talk about these amazing things and about the HR hot seat and the work that you're doing with DISC, all really, really exciting. So thanks for your time.

- Absolutely, I've really enjoyed this.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at the [HR mixtape.com](http://HRmixtape.com). Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.