

- You are listening to the 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 on the podcast is Jason Risoli. He is an accomplished HR professional with over 20 years of experience in various industries. He has a proven track record of driving business improvements through employee engagement enhancing company called Culture and Strategic Initiatives. Jason's career began with a dual bachelor's degree in human resource management, as well as management and organizational behavior from Ryder University. He went on to complete his master's degree in labor and employment relations from Rutgers University. And since then he has worked with a variety of top organizations including large corporations and small businesses to develop and implement effective HR strategies. Jason, thanks so much for jumping on with me today.

- Great, thank you.

- You have had a pretty long career in the HR space, and you've done a lot of work in the corporate culture building, corporate culture thinking about corporate culture, and so really wanted to talk to you about that today. I thought maybe we could start with you sharing, as you've worked in your different roles what are some of the main ingredients that you think about in crafting a compelling and really sustainable corporate culture?

- Well, I think it all goes back to the mission, vision, and values of an organization. How HR can impact and align those values to the strategy in the prioritization of work. We're in the people business, and I know we hear that a lot, but businesses are run by people, and getting the most out of those people with talent management is probably the most important part of sustaining living culture. And ultimately the employer designation of choice. So I look at it as going back to hierarchy of needs. You wanna have the physiological needs, you wanna have the safety needs, the love and belonging, esteem, and then ultimately the self-actualization and trying to making call that, making sure you have the utmost needs taken care of, and then esteeming or trying to esteem to that self-actualization within an organization, ultimately.

- How have you seen HR work at that level with that mission visioned value level so that, as HR continues to shape and maintain that corporate culture, that they have some input at that level to begin with.

- Making sure we're fostering the connection points. Theologically, we're looking at tying back the comp benefit structure, the work, and then now it's become really prevalent in the workspace, is the work

life balance of associates, whether or not it's their work setting or whatnot to tying that back into, how that fosters the needs, safety needs, making sure safety meetings are done, routine maintenance vehicles or the the tools even that they have in order to be productive. And then being able to, again, both physically and mentally being, setting up ways to proactively take care of that love and belonging. This is kinda like where I believe tenure mentorship and the learning development aspects of an organization come into play. Making sure that we're having, again a space where associates can feel good about feedback channels and where their position is within the organization, how it ties into those values. A lot of surveying esteem that's where the leadership, the communication comes in. The feeling of belonging, where they're gonna be going based on those guiding principles of the organization. And that's where I kinda like, I live in a lot with my role. So, treating people with the golden rule, having a team approach, one team, one shared vision, how that ties into the core corporation. The practicing of like servant leadership, living by what I call the five P's, which is proper preparation prevents poor performance. So, that's the work smart, not hard philosophy, always trying to creatively streamline an org to be efficient, but while at the same time being innovative and fun, and then ultimately making sure everyone is happy and joyful. 'Cause that's what I believe the meaning of life is. And then really striving for those employees to be self-actualists. And that goes back to like an interpersonal of being your best self, trying to improve slightly every day. And for a company that means being the employer of choice within their industry, which is I think every company's achievement of what they wanna be. So again, tying all those things back into those mission, vision, and values of the organization is what's really important from an HR perspective. I know that was long-winded, but I want to get that out there of like how I believe and think of it. So it's really intricate.

- Well, and I think all the different pieces you've described are really how you see an EVP and employee value proposition come to life. And you gave some really good examples of, sometimes it gets hard to define culture, it gets kind of labeled as the way we do things around here. So I really appreciated all those examples because those were examples about how you think and work and approach process that can tie into that mission, vision, values, and really bring your culture to life.

- Exactly, I kind think of it as like, so no one person is an organization, however one person could put in the processes and stepping stones and strategic framework to make an organization successful now. So they can't do it all themselves, but they can be a master planner. And that's how I see HR operating within a corporation at a senior level is they're not actually the doer, but they are part of the master planning of the framework of that organization. And we play a really key role in that.

- In an industry where employees might not be office based or you have industries now where people are still either fully remote or fully in office, right? That's really challenged us to think about how do we make sure that our company culture is communicated and felt across all levels in all locations. What are some unique strategies you're seeing in that space?

- So it brought around a lot of technological changes that have been amazing, right? So Sears, when I was there was pretty much on the forefront of that. We, for the most part, a lot of our population, majority of our population was remote already, or hybrid already, which was a competitive advantage. I mean, like, they embraced it. That was a big reason why I stayed with the company, personally. I mean, I'm sharing that because it offered a work life balance that many other companies couldn't provide. And it was important to me at that part of my life. But going back to the technology aspect, I can't imagine having employee meetings, now where it's just a phone call or a conference call without us being able to see each other, feel each other through a virtual setting, but there is a need for things like trust and verify, right? 'Cause you're not there overlooking the work possibly. So whether or not that is through utilization of tools that could track incoming phone calls and call centers and productivity from that perspective, or even if it's just like expectations around responding to emails at the very basics of which when we started our careers, it was always the professional standard to respond to an email within 24 hours. Now sometimes that's challenging with the amount of influx that you might get in a day, but if an associate goes three, four days without responding to an email, yeah, there's probably a problem. So trust by verify approach is important. Trying to utilize as much virtual connection as possible is huge. But it's also allowed larger interactivity. So what I mean by that is, meeting in person was always usually smaller group settings. So now through these larger video conference chats, you're able to break down silos and spread those meetings across the larger employee population. And then lastly, I would just point out that, utilization of icebreakers and team building exercises to make sure that there's a personal connection is extremely important. And I think it's easier for some reason to be able to do that. So in person it takes that icebreaker time for employees to be comfortable with each other, for some reason, I think that through a computer setting, through a virtual setting, it allows that to happen more freewill. So I really enjoy, some of the people on my team I've never met before in 12 years, but I know everything about them, and it's been amazing.

- There is something to be said about the point about having access to more people on video calls. You can see when we went remote, you can see their backgrounds and their living situation. You can ask questions, and for some people, I'm sure that was great. I'm an extreme extrovert, so I loved those piece of details. For some people,

obviously that could be very intimidating, right? If you're used to showing up a certain way. What about those that had not had the opportunity to go fully remote? How are you seeing strategies around that population, especially if they're in an environment where there's people in office and then there are like maybe knowledge workers are remote.

- There expectations of roles, right? So I think people, they understand their role in the organization, what their contributions are, and the reason why they might have to be in person because of the nature of their work. I mean, again, it's not that they're extremely important in what they do, but it's just, again you can't have a factory worker that works remote. We had service technicians at Sears that went to customer's homes, and sales professionals that were at home. Yeah, they're on the road. We have workers that are supported from a technological standpoint are supporting servers in the buildings, in offices that had lunch cafeterias. I mean, so there's an expectation of the jobs, obvious why they're in person. And again, I think it's making sure, and I've done a couple podcasts on this before, it's making sure that the work setting for in person is conducive to a person wanting to be there. So, what you doing to make sure, again, that belonging part of Pavlov's theory is taken care of, where they are drawn to the office space as that space being conducive to, again, helping them with their work life balance somehow in a different aspect. Is there a dry cleaners on site? Oh, and I'm talking about larger corporations. When I worked at Lucent, and this is 20 years ago, and I know I'm dating myself, but we had the dry cleaners on site, we had the softball teams that were work set up in person there, we had a bank on site, we had an ATM machine. So we had the convenience. We even had a barbershop on site, and a medical facility, nurse stations. So, there was things that were huge and very forward looking at that point when I worked there that are probably overlooked and not taken into account with certain companies nowadays. But if you have a corporate headquarters, that's why those corporate headquarters that are successful, where people go into the larger, the Fortune 500s, the Fortune 100 companies, they have those types of settings. They have this type of draw.

- Yeah, for sure. As you've worked in different roles, and in different organizations, and you've thought about developing culture, how have you thought about creating a culture that gives room or allows room for the culture to evolve with time? I think back to the last three years and everything that we've experienced from, COVID and the rise of a more prominent social justice movement, all of that is affecting our cultures. And how do we give space for that?

- Again, I think it's important to know what your SWOT analysis is as a corporation, and what your value proposition is. So, being at Sears, I had some very challenging times. I mean, I was kinda in like warfare, I would say almost for years, taking a company through a

bankruptcy, reemerging from a bankruptcy, relearning, you're a completely different business that used to be one of the largest employers in the world and one of the most popular, historical companies in the world, to being a revolutionized business that's transformed into a very small private equity company. Again, knowing what your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are, knowing what your value proposition is, not just for your product line, but also your employee population and that culture. So, what is the draw to your company? What is the draw to your products? What are we offering as a company? And then not being oblivious or intrinsic in the way you think, meaning don't think that you're invincible to what the outcomes of external society, geopolitical pressures are, and may be out there, or the evolution of society, embrace it, understand, take feedback both internally and externally of your employee population and your customer populations to see what those trends are so that way you can be on the forefront, or else, quite honestly, you will be like Sears retail or Kmart that get overtaken by online retailers like Amazon. And you fall behind in your business to really get inundated in the wrong way.

- As you work on tracking some of those things that you talked about. how do you measure the effectiveness of a company's culture? I mean, obviously there's things like attrition, right? You look at exit surveys, that kind of stuff. But is there other metrics or other signals that you have find particularly valuable in measuring where your culture's at?

- Yeah, so I mean, we do, again, from an HR perspective, there's lots of business things that you could do, obviously, you have financial metrics, marketing metrics that you look at. But from an HR perspective, we do a lot of employee surveys, right? So there's different touch points within the employee population that are very important. When, I mean touch points, I mean time, what incoming employees, how is your onboarding, especially those new hires, what's the feeling? What drew you to the company? Your incumbent, your mid tenured associates, I would say, how's been the learning development, the training, the onboarding after the first six months? What do you see as the career pathing ? Then you get into, again, round tables and town halls of sort, and then engagement surveys. So at Sears, again, we did daily pulse checks, like you're thinking like, wow, daily. But yeah, I mean we had a daily pulse check that we would do to employees, and it's obviously optional, right? It wasn't forced, but it was a way for them to just give a thumbs up or thumbs down that day and actually give feedback in text form. Additionally, if they wanted to, and we had a 90% participation rate typically, which was amazing. And we could identify employee trends at an individual level over time or a group level, the group team level. Over time, it was invaluable that information that we got to be able to understand what was going well, what wasn't going well. And we were only able to do that based on trust, making sure that the information gathered, the feedback

gathered, we were able to make actions, and sometimes direct interaction with the associate in an environment that was based on trust and never once, amazingly very proud of, never once did we that trust ever come into question with an associate even when it was they were complaining about the manager. So again, feedback is huge. And then at the end point, unfortunately, every employer, every company has churn, right? Every company has turnover. So making sure that you're capturing your exit interview data of where those misses were, so that way you can understand what was causing your churn and possibly even be proactive and predictive in your turnover analysis, which is something that we were really striving to achieve while at my last role at Sears is trying to have predictive analysis for churn so we can understand not just what was causing it, but at what point that employee decided to look elsewhere. 'Cause that was the point where it was too late, not the day they left, the day they decided to leave, before they actually resigned. That was the predictive point that we were trying to get to.

- Which is really good if you're doing state interviews in your organization, that's a really good piece of data to gather that information from, that 90% survey rate, that is phenomenal. How, how do you think or what tactics do you think contributed to getting that type of engagement from your employees?

- Yeah, no problem. I mean, again, it was an environment based on trust, but so we're all about convenience in life. It wasn't inconvenient for the associate to simply put a thumbs up or thumbs down. And if they, and again, the open text, if they felt like contributing more, they could do so, so it literally took them five seconds to 30 seconds a day to just sign off an up or a down, and what was contributing to that if they wanted to. And I think they understood the importance of the data, so that's the other aspect is employees feeling that their contributions for feedback are actually listened to and actioned upon. So that was important as well. But, they trusted that what they said was being listened to by leadership, and leadership was taking that into account with how they wanted to shape the business. And that goes back to some of the, again, about feeling of belonging and contribution, to the company and their mission of values is the transparency of an organization knowing that it wasn't just an authoritarian organization that it was an organization based on servant leadership, that practice servant leadership, and also was transparent in how their communication, in how they lived and breathed and operated.

- Yeah, that communication piece is so important. 'Cause a lot of people I think try to do surveys, and then they don't communicate what's happening with the surveys or where the data went or how they use it. Every organization I think resists or faces resistance or pushback when you're implementing cultural changes. You have new leaders come on board, maybe you get acquired by another organization.

There's all these scenarios that we find ourselves in in HR where typically we can feel the culture shift before it's on paper. How have you handled those scenarios? I'm curious if there's any lessons you've learned from past experiences when you do find your culture shifting.

- Yeah, so again, lemme take you through Sears. So 2018, we went through a bankruptcy. Mid 2019, we reemerged a different company. We went through five CEOs in five years. I mean, we were PE backed through ESL investments. And again, so talk about leadership churn or top of the spectrum leadership churn, and how that affects a culture, an ever revolving culture of change. So managing that, it was really a test to the existing leadership team that remained with the company over that period of time. And the HR team, our ability to be able to keep our employee population focused on what those, again, those objectives were, the mission of the company was. And that was to be the best home service provider in the space that we operated. And then keeping tied to our values. Again, just because there's a leadership change at the top doesn't mean that the mission values and vision of the company are ever changing. So we use OKRs. So objectives, key results in order to tie back individually and associate's contributions to the company goal, their goals and objectives, all the way to the top. And we used an internal system tool that allowed it to be transparent. So I could see every single associates objectives, key results, OKRs within the company, and their ratings in back for years. So the transparency was awesome from that perspective. Now, there was obviously a way to make certain things confidential if there was, but that was rarely used. Certain leaders would have to use that. But that was rarely used. So again, having a culture of transparency, focused on what the mission was. One team, one goal, one focus was what really drives the employees. And then having strong leaders, mid-level leaders especially, that would help make sure that the employees were wanting to be there, wanted to work for it. Love your people, as I say, right? And they'll love you back.

- I love that. Love your people, and they will love you back. Well, Jason, this has been such a great conversation. I think we're all kind of in this mindset now, as we think about culture and the future of work and how we continue to support our organizations and move that needle forward with some things. So thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

- I really appreciate it, and love to come back anytime you want me.

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