

- You're 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 is Dr. Mira Brancu. Dr. Brancu helps executives and their teams lead well today and better navigate tomorrow. Her organization, Development Consulting firm, Tower Scope, focuses on helping create a healthy and inclusive workplace culture through a data driven approach using change management, organizational development, and behavioral science principles. Dr. Brancu brings two decades of experience in health care and academia, including an award winning leadership career at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and a faculty appointment at Duke University. Dr. Brancu is also a contributor to the Psychology Today and Thrive Global, and the author of "Millennials Guide to Workplace Politics." Mira, thank you so much for jumping on with me today.

- Sure, happy to do it. I'm really excited to reconnect with you.

- So we have had several conversations about women in leadership, you know, over our relationship time. And I thought I'd bring that to our audience because you have such an amazing perspective, such a really cool background, and you're talking about this. You're talking about women in leadership. And so, I wanna start with kind of a tough question, but as I have been thinking about my own journey as a female in the business space, I can't tell you how many times I was told things like, "You need to be more assertive. "You need to change the words you use, your language. "You have to lean in when you were having a conversation "instead of being guarded. "Maybe you should learn how to golf "because I think that'll give you "the relationship building you need." And all of it comes from, I think you, as a female, should mask as a male for traits to be successful. Are we just, is that what we've done with our women? Have we just asked them all to mask to be successful?

- This is a really good question, Shari, and I think it is complicated because we have these lifetime of messages, gendered messages, that tell us to hold back earlier in our careers, to be quiet, to not make waves, to fit in, to, you know, all of the sort of gender stereotypes of supporting and serving other people. And then we get to this place in our career where all of those messages that we've been told about what's right are now wrong. Now we're supposed to lean in, now we're supposed to speak up, now we're supposed to be heard. And why aren't our voices and why aren't you more confident? You know, you're like, "What the hell? "I can't win here! "Is it one way or another?" And so, is it true that some of the feedback is actually good, accurate, helpful feedback to step up and to own your voice and to demonstrate your competency? Yes, that is great feedback. And it's coming within this sort of like onion layer of messaging behind it about how we're

supposed to be and what's right and what's wrong about who we are and how we show up. And it gets more complicated than that, you know? So we're two white women having this conversation. and I think about underrepresented minorities, specifically black women who've been told, "Don't be loud, be quiet because you're going to come across "as an angry black woman." And that just, man, that hits me so hard. We're all trying to navigate how to advance our careers, and now you have to add this another layer on of, "Hey, be assertive, lean in, "but maybe don't do it that way." And it's like, all these definitions. I'm reading this book right now, and I can't share the title because it's kind of graphic, but the subtitle is "The Feminist Guide "to Taking Back the English Language." And it's fascinating the history of words and how they've evolved over the years and how that's influenced how women speak and how we think about advancement. And so I think about how we speak to each other, and really we need allies. We need allies from men. We need allies for women. How have you coached other people to show up differently for women as they advance their careers?

- Yeah, absolutely. Boy, you said a lot there that like, my mind is spinning already.

- Start with that and we'll circle back.

- Yeah. So. I think that earlier in our careers, we're so focused on just trying to make it. Just trying to be visible and noticed for our work and recognized for our work and appreciated, and we're trying to get promoted. And in some fields, like in male dominated fields, we also feel a little bit more alone. We have fewer allies, fewer people who represent us, fewer people who are helping us navigate these complex systems. And I've talked with a lot of women who have been in those situations where they're like, I don't know if I speak up here, if I will be considered for that promotion or considered for that amazing job or even that assignment that I really want. And they don't have allies or sponsors or mentors that could help them, but they also sometimes feel like, like I've had some women share with me feeling like they didn't even have other women that could support them because there is this scarcity mindset about like, well, look, there's very few women who ever make it to the top or even any leadership role, and you know, what does that mean for me? And it makes you feel like you don't really have peers and supports systems, and that is damaging to your support system that normally you would lean on, like other women who are going through the same thing, who could say, "Yes, I get you. "Yes, I know what you're talking about." So I think there's a lot that is missing from what could be done in organizations in those settings and in every setting. And one of those is just teaching team leaders how to be allies, mentors, sponsors, coaches, supervisors. These are different roles. And there's very few supervisors that know how to be the other things that I just mentioned. And many who maybe have no interest whatsoever. And what happens is that they might think that they're really doing a great job because the team is high performing

and they're producing. But what they're not realizing is that they might be creating a burnout culture for women or a culture of ins and outs. Who's in who's out right now, you know? Or just a toxic culture because you don't have the skill set to know how to navigate between those roles and really serve as an ally, serve as a sponsor, serve as a coach to lift everyone up and be an inclusive, high performing team. That takes a lot of skill. And there's very little training out there available to team leaders to learn how to do that. And once you get sort of stuck in your patterns, then if you get promoted in other roles, you're sort of perpetuating these bad habits that you haven't really undone without that kind of knowledge or training. So from a large, like big picture organizational perspective, I think there's a lot that can be done at that level.

- It's interesting as I think about the lack of training that you talked about. Yes, yes, there there is all sorts of lack of training. And it's it's simple things, I feel like, that if we could start teaching each other, both male allies and female allies, and how we show up differently. I think about even sitting in a meeting when, and I'm sure those who are listening who identify as female have felt this where you have an idea and you share it, and it kind of gets put to the side, and then a male counterpart says literally the same thing, and all of a sudden it's this brilliant idea. And somebody said along the way once to me, you know, men can be allies by amplifying females' voices. So in that meeting, right, let's say Sally gave the idea and it gets passed over and it's Jim's turn to talk. Jim can say something like, "Sally, you really had a great idea about ABC. "Can you share more with us about what you're thinking?" And it just, it amplifies, it supports, and it helps elevate the women in the room. So I think there's it's also, though, women, not all women, some women don't support other women. What's the psychology behind that? I've always just been very fascinated by, like we kind of all know the score, but we're not willing to help elevate each other.

- Yeah, it is a really sad situation. I mean, I think many of us have been subject to that. I have had several really unfortunate situations where a woman in my life that I thought was a good friend or a colleague undermined me or continuously sabotage or publicly questioned me in ways I felt like I was trying, or she was trying to demonstrate her competence at my expense. And I've got to tell you that those behaviors feel especially hurtful and disappointing. Like a betrayal, you know, after my own effort to support them and avoid competing with them. And even, even, this is this is the most disappointing, some women who identify themselves as staunch feminists and speak the language of feminism, and yet, sometimes they do that as well when there is pressure to succeed or when there is an environment of scarcity. Like in those situations where you have some goals, personal goals, and you have learned some unfortunate bad behaviors, you know, about achieving and cutting people off at the knees or whatever sort of aggressive, sort of individualistic focused goals,

and sort of accepted that as the only way that you can succeed. And what we don't realize is that is internalized sexism, you know? It is accepting these sort of norms of society as like, this is okay to do to other people in order to succeed. Well, that is not okay to do with other people. It is not, you know? We can succeed together, but I don't think a lot of people understand how that can happen because they haven't seen many models where somehow together you've gotten there. What we see often is this model of competition and only one person wins. I mean, look at how many shows we have on TV where there's only one winner, and you you have to beat everybody out, and you know, you sort of, you don't see very many models of supporting each other. Now, I see more and more of those even on TV. Like "Great British Baking Show." I love that show. And then the new one, "Baking It." I think that we are starting to realize that we actually want to see, we crave healthy, positive, supportive environments. And we're looking for that in our organizations now more than ever. And women, especially women of color, marginalized people are really like amplifying that message that we are looking for a positive, healthy work culture where we're not accepting this culture of succeed at all costs. And I think that that's giving me a lot of hope. We still see some of those behaviors, but I agree with you, Some of that is like taking on these sort of gendered messages that those things are okay. There's somebody that I follow, Mark Green, who talks about man box culture and toxic masculinity, and how much it affects everybody, men and women. And it's all about like feeling boxed in by these behaviors and how they sort of infiltrate our society and how we think and how we often suffer under these circumstances that we set up for ourselves to only win in one way and look a certain way and act a certain way, which is usually like a lot of bravado, right?

- I recently had a conversation with Jeff Harry, and his whole focus is on play and positive psychology. But he wrote an article recently about, basically leaders need to demonstrate more feminine traits. And you just talk to it, right? Employees are craving a more feminine trait approach to work, right? Empathy, camaraderie, collaboration. And I like how he puts it because he talks about it in a perspective of traits, right? Like we need to leverage these traits that we typically see genderized that aren't necessarily specific to a gender, it's specific to an approach. And the pandemic and the future of work, the pendulum is switching, right? The approach is these more feminine traits. So as you think about kind of lack of training, historical knowledge, the things that we've experienced, how do we think about supporting women differently now so they can get from that manager rung to the director rung to our CEO rungs so that the majority of our CEOs in the U.S. are no longer named John and our white people. How do we how do we think differently about that?

- Yeah, I do think that it really does start with helping team leaders know how to create, like what I mentioned, those inclusive, healthy, psychologically healthy, high performing work cultures. You're not

giving up high performance here, people. Like, you're not giving up outcomes for this. You're actually enhancing them because you are focusing on the people side of change. I mean, think about how much we focus on the results, the bottom line, the profits, and forget about the people who are actually getting you there. There are a lot of women who are very talented, who are seeking opportunities to step up and demonstrate their worth, and instead, they are feeling undervalued, underutilized, and overworked. And what happens is that they will be offered or volunteer for these special assignments or stretch opportunities. The DNI champion role. The ERG leader role. All of these informal roles and not compensated, and yet perform incredibly well. And then run themselves into the ground with these things, hoping, just hoping that all of this will yield some outcome that is related to a title or compensation, a higher level role promotion. And instead, that doesn't always happen. And it doesn't always happen because their team leaders or leaders above them are not recognizing these as valuable. They're seeing these as ancillary, even though, you know, I just mentioned, even though if you support the people who are enhancing all of those bottom line outcomes, of course you're going to see results. All of the data show that organizations that have greater gender diversity and diversity in general and do well with that improve in all of their results, their profits, their outcomes better than those who can't. And yet these things internally aren't always sort of recognized as occurring and valuable enough to provide the compensation or the title or whatever. So I think that's one of the things. The other is, if people really are feeling overworked and underutilized or undervalued, they are gonna leave, you know? And so I think an effort to really focus on what it takes to retain people these days is kind of different than it used to be. It's not just money. People aren't going to stick around for money, and it's isn't always benefits. People aren't always gonna stick around for benefits either. It's more than that. It's feeling valued. It's feeling like you are making a difference and that people are noticing and that you have enough autonomy and flexibility and support so you can do those things without like, you know, killing yourself in the process and burning out in the process. So I think women are recognizing this and they're looking for organizations that know how to do this well. And I think there are some organizations now that are starting to realize that this is where they really need to start focusing more. And I mean, not just women. Everybody benefits when you do this stuff, right? Everyone benefits when you focus on this stuff.

- What's that expression? The whole boat rises, the whole tide rise? I'm getting this idiom totally wrong. I know I am. Something like that.

- I'm no good with those either. I can't help you with that.

- You know, if you're listening, I want to repeat something you said, and I'm gonna paraphrase it because I thought it was a really

interesting point. You have women who are stepping into roles like ERG leaders and being asked or volunteering to influence policy, to create events, to create networking, to provide development opportunities, and you're not compensating them. And compensation doesn't necessarily mean pay, right? That's a really interesting point for those listening to remember is as you think about those programs inside your org, and maybe you've wrapped them in a stretch assignment, maybe you have an individual contributor who can't have direct reports, and so this is your way to do that. I understand those situations, but you bring up a really good point is, this work that's being done that the organization values, but there's a missing piece. It's not connecting the dots. I really appreciate that. I think that's something for us to think about.

- Yeah, and you know, I think what's especially complicated and nuanced is that different people like to be recognized and seen as showing value in different ways. Some people want to go up stage and get the award, and that feels really good. And some people want a quiet note, and some people want the compensation by money, others want the compensation by title, others, you know? So I think it's also getting to know your people well enough to know how do you feel most valued? What are you seeking in this organization that will cause you to stay, that will make you happy here, that will create satisfaction and balance in terms of what you're seeking? And spending a little bit of time gathering some of that data to see what what works for your people in what particular way. Because you can take a guess, but it might not be right.

- Absolutely. So as I think about a take away from our conversation, I feel like there's so many nuggets already, but I guess I would ask you, if you're listening and they're like, "Hey, I know we have a gap here, "I know I need to help promote women in leadership," where do they start? Maybe what is one or two nuggets on where to start first to help women advance?

- I think my focus has always been at the team level. I feel like the team leader has the greatest direct impact on their team members. They can create a buffer for burnout. They have the capacity to buffer bias, they have the capacity to buffer stress, and they also have the capacity to make all those things worse. And so they have an incredible impact. People leave their manager, they don't leave their organization, but they do leave their manager if things aren't going well. So, and teams are really the, they're the unit of action for an organization. Organizations run because of their teams. And so if I were to sort of focus anywhere, it would be on supporting team leaders to be their very best self, to bring their very best to learn it and learn how to support and enhance and amplify the work of their team. Because if their team looks good, they look good. They will be promoted every time they demonstrate an amazing team, you know, outcome and culture. And so, everybody wins when you target supporting

people who have, especially people who have just been promoted or people who have been in a team leadership role, but never really got sufficient training in how to do that. This is like an organic impact on women. It's not like a very direct, but I think it has the greatest impact on all people, including women.

- I love that. Such great advice, and brings it back to us supporting our employees in a different way and giving them the tools and the resources they need to be successful and help others be successful. So, Mira, thank you so much for your time.

- Absolutely. It was great talking with you again.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.