— 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 Sarah Noll Wilson, CEO and Chief Edge Officer at Sarah Noll Wilson Incorporated. Sarah is on a mission to help leaders build and rebuild teams. Her goal is to empower leaders to understand and honor the beautiful complexity of the humans they serve. Through her work as an executive coach, an in-demand keynote speaker, researcher, contributor to Harvard Business Review, and bestselling author of "Don't Feed the Elephants", Sarah helps leaders close the gap between what they intend to do and the actual impact that they have. Sarah, thank you so much for jumping on with me today.

— Thanks for having me again. It's good to be back in conversation with you.

— Yeah, love catching up. And we just did a little bit of that offline and excited to get into our content today, really focusing on developing those leadership skills. So, I wanna start here. You have this vast experience. You've written a book, you do a lot of speaking. What are some common challenges that HR professionals face when it comes to developing those really effective leadership skills and maybe how do you help them overcome those challenges?

— In themselves or the leadership teams that they're supporting? Because I think those are two different avenues we could explore.

— I totally agree. Let's start with HR professionals themselves.

— Yeah. One, I think we still have to just name the burnout and emotional fatigue and trauma that HR professionals are experiencing that we see in a level that's different than other positions and organizations. So I just say that from a standpoint of giving yourself some grace. But I think one of the challenges that I see in HR professionals is that a couple of things. One, sometimes we can hold ourselves to a much higher standard than we need to, and we can be much harder on ourselves. And then the flip side though, is because we are the ones who are typically thinking about leadership development, delivering leadership development, sometimes I think we can confuse knowing something with doing it ourselves. So sometimes I think that's a trap we can fall into of we're the ones who teach crucial conversations and yet we're not having the conversations 'cause we're like, "Yeah, no, I know that." So those are some challenges, both kind of two ends of a spectrum that I definitely see play out from that perspective.

— So much truth in the idea of kind of do what I say, not as I do, or being like, what is that expression? the shoemaker's child, right?

– Yeah, yeah, exactly. Right, yeah, they have no shoes. It's a very real thing. And I think that, again, and just to be clear, that trap of confusing knowing with doing and what we usually say is then doing it when it's hard is true of every leader and organization. And it's very much true. We see in high achieving folks who are used to getting things quickly and fast and realizing that when we're talking about leadership skills, really what we're talking about is human skills, right? People skills, that self-awareness, emotional intelligence, that deep, deep ability to be curious with yourself and other people. That's not easy always. And so I just wanna make sure I'm not calling out my fellow HR friends that we see this as a pattern. I know you read the book, I know. I know you did, but how are we building the skill and how are we doing it when it's hard? But then the flip side is there's so much giving. I think that's one of the traps. And also just I think part of the nature of the business is the people who are drawn to HR are givers and they wanna be constantly giving. And so they forget to take care of themselves as well in the process, which is an act of leadership that I think we forget sometimes.

– I saw this a lot in my earlier career years and I'm glad that it's changing, but there used to be this kind of mentality and teaching around HR is always on, you're always accessible. You have your cell phone with you, your laptop is in your car no matter where you are, weekends, evenings, whatever. That's no longer the case. In a lot of places it still is and HR is trying to help define what that looks like. But I'm hopeful and optimistic about the boundaries that HR is setting to take care of themselves and to model the kind of behaviors we want. And I really appreciate your language around it's human skills. So many times we labeled these as soft skills and I think that's just the wrong language. These are just skills that we need. They are just as hard as other skills. And you mentioned curiosity. I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit around that philosophy of curiosity and how that empowers really professionals to lead better, be more authentic and create positive work cultures.

– Yeah, the curiosity is such a core to our practice and how we show up and the type of competencies we're trying to develop in ourselves and others. And I'll say just where it came from was realizing that there are so many situations, whether that was miscommunications between people, whether that was an inability to have the conversations, whether that was... I don't know. There's a whole host of situations where I realized the crux of this is neither of you are getting curious about the situation. You're not getting curious with yourself in the... You got feedback and you declared the feedback is not accurate, instead of asking yourself how might it be true? And for me, curiosity really comes down to this core belief that there's always things we don't know. There's always things we do not know about a situation. There's always things we do not know about the other person. And honestly, there's always things we don't know about

ourselves. And I think that especially in, again, a profession that is working with humans, we see patterns. We've kind of... We've seen it all. We've done it all. And some of that is true, that there is a familiarity and I think that can get in our way of our impact and effectiveness and being able to consider different perspectives. And so that whole idea of curiosity is just remembering that there's always things you don't know. And sometimes the curiosity needs to be really courageous, to be willing to... Curiosity is easy when it's comfortable. It's much different when you're reflecting on yourself or you're reflecting on your culture to say, well, what have we done to contribute to this? Or what are we not doing that's actually getting in the way? Or what are we doing that's getting in the way? And so what I find is that leaders who have a greater propensity to being more curious, they tend to be more intellectually humble. They tend to have a greater sense of self-awareness 'cause they realize there's always something right to be discovered. The other thing I'll say about curiosity is, and I've shared this on some other interviews, but it's such a... God, such a beautiful story. I'll try to make it brief 'cause I know we don't have much time so let me get through it 'cause it's gonna be worth it. So my sister and her family, they were at the Holocaust Museum on vacation and they were listening to a survivor speak, and she happened to be wearing one of our chronically curious T-shirts. And the individual that they were speaking with, they got a chance to talk to him afterwards. And he pointed at her shirt and he said, "Oh, I like your shirt, curiosity's really important." And she was proud sister, like, "Oh, it's my sister's company," and he said, and it's just so beautiful, he said, "Curiosity is the greatest gift we can give someone because we're telling them they're worthy to be known." And if that isn't really what leadership should be about, then I don't know what is. So that's why I think curiosity is so necessary in being a really powerful people leader.

- I think we could just end the podcast there.

- Isn't that such a beau... I mean, it's so beautiful, and yeah.

- And it wraps in so much that I've shared with other people along in my career when they're frustrated about something that's happening in leadership or frustrated on either the feedback they got from a peer, from a manager, and then you start asking them, well, did you ask this question? Did you put aside your feelings and start to get really curious, like you said, about where was that feedback coming from? What was happening in the moment? Maybe there is truth in the feedback. Maybe there isn't truth in the feedback and there's something going on in that person's life. Maybe there's pressures from senior leadership I don't know about. And so many times we don't ask the questions because we're afraid. We're afraid of looking stupid, we're afraid of being embarrassed.

- Or being wrong.

- There's a whole slew of things that hold us back from asking questions. And so often, the people who we are gonna be asking the questions to want us to do that. They want us to be curious. They want us to be vulnerable because that's how you learn. You don't learn unless you start to ask the questions and start to see people in a different light or unpack things differently.

- Yeah, yeah, and even in that example, I can then get curious about why you had the reaction you did.

- Yeah.

- Right? Even just get curious about that, of like, oh, that's interesting, defensiveness, this is how it feels in my body.

- Right.

- What was it about that, that triggered me so much? I feel that's one of my mantras is, well, that's interesting.

- Right.

- When things are uncomfortable for me, whether it's anxiety, mental health, I've just learned to sit with it and go, huh, that's interesting. I see it. Okay.

- I love that. That's interesting. As you think about the work that you've done, I'm always curious to ask those that are in the leadership development space, how do they think about getting first time managers prepared for their roles? Because there's so much that goes into that. And a lot of times, I'm sure those listening know about the Peter principle where you get promoted beyond what you're capable of or you're ready for, and it's like, yeah, you were really great as an individual contributor in that we dropped you into this manager role without helping you transition. So as you've gone through that work, what are some maybe quick tips or ideas for those HR professionals to think about? How do I start to prepare my individual contributors to move into that management role? So it's less choppy, it's more smooth transition.

- Yeah, yeah. To be honest, I've never seen a company do it well. I feel like we fail people and we fail the people we promote and we fail the people that are supporting them. And I think we need to raise the stakes to realize that's what's happening, is when we look at harm, a lot of harm that happens in the workplace happens at the hands of really well intended people. And these are people who are maybe unprepared, who don't have the skills, right? And one of the traps that organizations... I mean, something we see often is that the only people who are getting any kind of formal development, whether it's

internal or bringing in an external company like ourselves, is only given to existing managers. And now, I would argue that... I would argue that a lot of the skills that we are wanting our managers to develop, we should have all of our team members wanting to develop, right? When we think about building a culture of psychological safety and inclusion and belonging, when we think about even coaching, this is something I'm a big proponent of, is if you wanna create a coaching culture, it cannot just be top down. You need to develop everyone in it so everyone is practicing it. And so I think that... So my simple answer is when... When possible, include and invite as many people in those opportunities as possible, even the people who you might think are, I don't know, less than or below or they don't need it. Because if we can have people building the skills of having constructive conversations, being able to give and receive feedback effectively, being able to be vulnerable, right? Being able to be emotionally present and not emotionally dismissive. I'm thinking of all the things that we know creates harm in the workplace. If we can help people develop the skills of truly being self-aware and being able to emotionally regulate themselves, they're only... If we can get them on the learning curve faster, it's gonna make it an easier transition. It might still might not be an easy transition, right? Simply because some of that, I think there are components to, specifically if we're talking about leadership in a formal sense of leading a team, some of it you just can't know until you get into it. And you can have all the ideas of what kind of leader you're gonna be. And you can have all the ideas of, I'm gonna come in and I'm gonna do this and I'm gonna have one-on-ones and I'm gonna be a better manager than my manager was. And then you get somebody who you disagree with and you're like, what do I do? Pardon my language, but what do I do now? Or you have somebody who's struggling with something. You're like, I've never had to deal with this. Or it's the first time you have to fire somebody and you're like, how do I do this? But I think looking at those really... Those core competencies, right? For us, we look at it through the lens of how do we help people be better at honoring human complexity? How do we help people just better understand people? How do we help them embrace experimentation? How do we help them to listen more effectively? How do we increase their self-awareness? And how do we help them speak and stand with courage? Those are sort of our five cornerstones. So part of it is just stop being a gatekeeper for really important skills that will just benefit the whole organization if we can get more people doing it. But we do, we absolutely fail first-time leaders and we put them in and we say good luck. Let us know if you have any questions. And they're like, I'm gonna do a good job and I'm gonna do everything I can, and then they don't understand why they're struggling. The other thing that I think is worthy to say is, boy, we got to stop promoting the really technically brilliant folks into managing people who have not... If they have not exhibited those skills, if they have not... That is another part of the challenge, is we're promoting people into leadership skills that just... There is an author once, and his name escapes me right now. He's been around a

while. He is in his 80s and he's a professor and he writes on leadership. But one of his books, he was talking about how we're asking too much of leaders. We're asking them to be technically minded. we're asking them to be very human minded. We're asking them to be strategic. And maybe part of the failure of management is we're just asking people to be too much, and I think that's an interesting question to reflect on.

— Every time I think about leadership development and the way you were talking about it, and it always amazes me as we think about developing children, right? We don't usually talk about it with that language, but our intent is to prepare them to be successful adults. And so we give them these little bits of things, we teach them about conflict resolution and how to pick up the phone and order a pizza when they're 10, you know? And all these little things we give them, you get a bank account and you help them manage money but there are so many things that you just don't know how to do it until you get there. I had a really funny exchange with my middle kid. This was about a year and a half ago now. He's in South Carolina and he had bought an airplane ticket for his girlfriend to come visit. And he called me, it was a couple days before the flight, and he goes, "Mom, so when do they send me the paper?" And I was like, the paper? What are you talking about? He's like, "The paper ticket to get on the plane." And I was like, there is no paper. You bought the plane ticket, right? Now I'm freaking out Thinking I was supposed to buy the plane ticket. He's like, "Yeah, no, I bought the plane ticket." He's like, "I just don't have the paper." And I was like, oh, I get what's happening. I've printed your boarding pass in advance on the printer and just given it to you so you had it, but you just need the little code on your phone. He is like, "That's it? They don't mail?" I was like, no, there's no paper. And it was like one of those things where it's I wouldn't have thought to "teach him," quote-unquote, that, and you just have to experience. But so many times there isn't a person for a leader to go back and ask that question, what about the paper? And that goes back to your curiosity. It's like, if they're not ready, who do they go and ask about the paper where they're not gonna get judged or laughed at or whatever. I didn't laugh at him. I just was like... I got curious. What are you talking about? What do you mean the paper? Where did you order this ticket? All those kinds of things. But we can use that same analogy when we think about developing leaders.

— And I think I love that story and I love that metaphor of who do you ask about the paper? I had to laugh a little bit because we joke in my family of life lessons. We take our nibblings on a trip when they're 16 and my one nephew is like, "Life lesson number 87, buddy." You've just learned it and there are moments of, oh, right, we had to learn this at some point. But what I love about what you're... The connection you're making and what you're proposing is who is that person? But not only who is that person, how do we normalize? How do we, if I'm a mentor leader, say, what are all the questions you're

afraid to ask? What are the questions you think you're gonna look dumb and you're not and I'm gonna answer them for you? Because there are just moments where I see that in when we're working with clients, whether it's coaching or workshops, and they're like, you can do that? I was like, yeah, actually that's what we want you to do. That's okay for me to say this that way? Yeah. And it's not a judgment. We all had to learn it. We've all had to have difficult situations and figure it out. And I'll say this, another thing that I'll say related to leadership development that is something we can explore from a building all levels is very few companies have structures or mechanisms to get their managers together to talk about management challenges. So then what ends up happening is you have all of these people who are probably struggling with similar things, not talking to each other because they think, oh, everyone else has it figured out and I'm the only one who hasn't. Or they're just working in their silos or they're so focused on the task and the objective that they aren't having the conversations. And I cannot tell you how often when we are able to bring these leadership circles together to say what are the challenges you're facing? And how much of a relief it is for some people to go, oh, I'm not the only one who's struggling with this. Or someone else like, "Oh yeah, I went through that. Here's what worked for me. You might wanna try it." So I think something that companies can do as well to not only set up the first level leaders or first-time leaders, but existing leaders, how do we have space where we talk about leadership topics, not just the projects, not just the objectives, but how the hell are we doing and how are we feeling and where are we struggling? And all of where do we ask, hey...

– Where's the paper?

– Where's the paper, you know?

– Yes, feel free to beg, borrow and steal that, anybody who's listening. I think it's–

– So brilliant.

– It's such a great analogy to just that curiosity and being prepared for the future. I think about HR professionals and the duality of them having to develop their own leadership skills. And in a lot of ways, there's stuff that we're trying to teach leaders how to do. We're building the plane as we're flying it, right? In so many ways. I'm curious, how have you helped HR professionals but also leaders hone in on making decisions? And I think that's such an important part of leadership is that you can be really... You can get really good at analytics, you can get really good at data, you can get really good at knowing people and being emotionally resilient. But at the end of the day, in a lot of ways you have to be the decision maker. And sometimes we get stuck in this analysis paralysis 'cause we're balancing competing demands of things like employee experience and the strategy

that our leaders want and our business execution. Do you have any
advice there on how do you get closer and faster and more confident in
making your decisions as a leader?

– That's a really great question. And it's interesting because what
I'm reflecting on is we don't explicitly say, hey, what we're teaching
you is decision-making skills. And yet that's a lot of what we're
doing. So there's two tools I would share. The first is a visual that
I'll use with clients is helping them reflect on what does this moment
need? What kind of leader does this moment need? Does this need you to
lead out from the front, to be really decisive, to be the one to make
the call? Is this a moment where you need to lead from the side and
collaborate with people and hate together? Or is this something where
it needs you to lead from behind and develop the other person to make
that decision? 'Cause sometimes, more often than not, I will say that
I feel like what we see is too many people are leading out front and
they're not finding the moments to lead from the side or behind. But
it does happen. And I'm guilty of this, I'm super guilty of this. I
love leading from the side and behind. I love talking about ideas and
sometimes the team's like, "Sarah, just tell us what you wanna do."

– Just make a decision.

– Just make a decision. And so that's one visual that people can think
about is, is this a high sense of urgency? Is this something that for
whatever reason, right? I just need to be the one to lead out front on
this and say, this is what we're doing, this is why we're doing it,
but recognize when we need to bounce into different positions. The
other thing is going back to that analysis paralysis 'cause there's
really two patterns that I feel that we see is that either there's the
analysis paralysis or what we actually see more of is jumping to
solutioning before we actually understand what the problem is.

– Ugh. Yes.

– Right? And so one, making sure that we are actually spending more
time than we would normally feel comfortable with. And part of that is
because if you're in a leadership position, let's be very real, you
have been rewarded for your answers. You have been rewarded for being
able to solve problems. Your brain likes it. It gives us dopamine hits
when we're right about something. And so we're so quick to jump into a
solution that I would actually push people a little bit to go, are you
solving the right problem? Whether that's reframing the problem,
asking more questions about it. But one... And if you've done
something and it hasn't resolved the problem, then you're probably not
solving the right problem. Right? That's a really good indication
you're dealing with something more complex. So that was one thing that
was coming up. But the other thing, especially for those individuals
who struggle with the analysis paralysis is depending on the
situation, how do you approach it like an experimentation, right? This

is why one of our core pillars is embracing an experimenter's mindset. Because a lot of times the problems we're facing, the challenges we're navigating, there's not a one-size-fits-all solution, right? Creating culture. There's no one-size-fits-all solution to that. Helping people adopt new technology, there's not a one size solution that fits to that. So how can we get out of this, "It needs to be right the first time and it needs to be perfect," to "let's test something, let's see how it works, let's see what we learn," and really take that experimenter's mindset of we're just gonna try it and we're gonna test it. And then obviously the other component of it too is identifying when is... I was just having a call with my colleague, Amy, said I feel this is an 80% one, and she said, yeah, we just need to get it to 80%. I would only need it to be perfect, just like version one. Let's get version one out. But I think that that willingness to approach things more of as an experiment versus the perfection, it needs to be right, we need to do it. And it's just like, so how might we try this? Okay, we're going to try this. Now, obviously there are situations where I'm not saying, I'm just suggesting we're willy-nilly, just like, well, we're gonna try whatever. It's thoughtful, right? We're using the scientific method, here's what we think is going to happen. But those are some things that can help push people who are in that paralysis, but also can push some people who are like, here's the problem, here's the solution and we're done. It's like, no, we're just gonna try this and we're going to see, because that pattern of solving the wrong problem is really pervasive, really, really pervasive in organizations.

– And I'm encouraged about the curiosity we saw at the very beginning of the pandemic. And I hope we can still embrace that going forward. There was so much creativity that came out of solving really tough business problems with how do we keep our business thriving during this time? Restaurants who didn't have any online order and very quickly figured that out, and it took the curiosity to say for years we've said we can't do this. Now the question is how do we do this otherwise we're going to not thrive. As we wrap up our conversation, and we could talk about a million different things when it comes to leadership, I feel we could have a 12-part series, Sarah, I am curious if you have any tips though, for those leaders who are avoiding conflict. And I genuinely... I'm the kind of person who kind of thrives a little bit on conflict in the most positive way, is that having the different ideas and the diversity and the tough conversations help me grow.

– Yeah.

– That doesn't come naturally to a lot of people and we have to kind of teach that skill. Do you have some tips on how you can grow that muscle really, and be more comfortable going into those conversations?

– Well, first, I love the reframe that you offered of just, yeah, this

is uncomfortable, but I'm going to grow because I'm going to learn something different. Even just having a different perspective. The first thing I'll say is that a culture of conflict avoidance is as harmful and I would argue sometimes more harmful than a culture of aggression. So while it may feel comfortable individually, we have to understand that that's actually doing real damage to our relationships. It's doing real damage to the sense of safety. It's doing damage to people being willing and comfortable to speak up. And so a couple of things that I always invite people is, one, if you find yourselves... Now I'm a progress reformed avoider. I'm always pushing against just the very bred into me, white Midwest woman, be nice, don't speak up, be a good girl, right? I have to push against my DNA, but a couple of things that I would invite people, again, one, just get curious about what were the rules that you learned, whether it was growing up, whether it was in organizations, what were the beliefs and rules you've learned about conflict? And for a lot of people, it's not the opposite of... One of the most common things I hear people say is, well, I don't wanna be mean. So they associate conflict, they associate disagreeing, they associate a difficult moment with being mean. And see if you can push against some of those beliefs. Is that true? Is it really true? Do I know that to be true? And the other thing is for people who are so afraid, one, it's like what's the cost if you don't have this conversation? But also, conflict doesn't have to be a confrontation, you know? And I think sometimes we go into these moments thinking it's gonna be a confrontation instead of really anchoring ourselves into the belief and the practice that it's a conversation. And maybe it's telling yourself, you know what? It's okay that Shari and I disagree on this and it's okay that I might even feel a little uncomfortable with this, but this is actually going to make the idea better. And for me, when I'm working with somebody and coaching them to have a conversation that they've been avoiding, we really focus on a couple of key things. One, how do I help them anchor themselves to a bigger purpose that's bigger than this conversation to give them some courage? What's the anchor here? Why does it matter for us to have this conversation? But also then to get really clear about who do you wanna be? What do you wanna do? What's the impact you're trying to make on this moment and in this conversation? But then there is just emotional regulation that you have to learn to be like, it's okay that it's a little uncomfortable. A little bit of heat is actually good. That's not bad. Harmony is not... Harmony in the sense of conflict avoiders is not good. Harmony in the sense of having different voices coming in and creating this beautiful piece is great. So the thing that... The biggest thing I would say is you are actually creating more damage in your organization because of your unwillingness to engage. Now, then I have a big asterisk and then there are times when it's okay not to. Maybe you really are unsafe. Maybe it's not the right place, right? So I always wanna put that asterisk on and there are times where it's okay if we consciously step back, but let's do it consciously and from a place of power from within instead of feeling powerless.

— Yeah. I wanna share one more thing before we wrap up. And it's something that a leader had shared in our org a few years back when they had stepped into the leadership role of HR, and they gave the analogy of a raft, a whitewater raft, right? And that all of the teams are in this raft. All 200 and something of us are in this raft. And when one person on the team starts to poke a hole in the boat, right? We all are going to sink. We're all in the same boat. And that analogy became so helpful in having tough conversations because you could go into it and say, I feel like I'm having a moment where I feel like you're poking a hole in our boat. And it could be the reality. Here's what I'm seeing and I wanna talk through it. And it gave us some language to use to be able to go into that conversation. So I mean, I know that you teach around that and there's a lot of analogies that one could use. But if you're in a leadership position at that level, give your team some language to use to be able to address conflict that isn't aggressive and is very team focused.

— I love that. And I think it's always valuable when the team can come up with it themselves 'cause it's just so much more meaningful. Obviously in our work it's all about the elephant of, I feel we're feeding an elephant right now. I don't know if anyone else notices it, but I'm sensing we're avoiding something. Does anyone else feel that way? And that you're right. What the language does is it disarms, it sends a message to everyone else that, oh, okay, we need to talk about this and we need to address it. And when you can come up with that metaphor yourself... I worked with a team and they actually had come up with this themselves and it was interesting and it worked for them. But when somebody would say something was sharp, they would go, ouch. And that was their cue to be like, hey, that hurt. And I was like, if it works, I mean, whatever works to say ouch. And then the person's like, oh, I didn't... Wait, hold on. How did you take that? But I love that. I feel we're poking the... I feel you're poking the boat is really beautiful language. Having shared language, shared metaphors. The thing with metaphors too, just real quickly, if I can learn nerd out here a second, when we can apply a concept in a metaphor way, it's one of the deepest levels of learning 'cause we're able to think about it through different ways. And so that's what also makes it really powerful instead of just like, well, you need to give feedback. You know? And that's why... Well, you know my colleague, Theresa, she was the one who started the practice of I wanna prevent an elephant.

— I love that.

— And that was always the cue to me to go, this is important and this feels like a risk to her so I need to make sure that I show up appropriately in this moment.

— Yeah. Love that. Well, Sarah, it's always great to have a conversation with you and just excited about the work that you

continue to do in leadership and just helping people grow. So I appreciate the time you had today with me.

— No, thanks for having me on the show.

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