

- 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 Lynn Fairweather, president of Presage Consulting and Training, LLC. Lynn is an abuse survivor who has worked in the domestic violence response and prevention field for over 30 years. She's an experienced and engaging public speaker with a focus on practical real-life skills for evaluating and managing domestic violence threats. Lynn, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

- Thank you for having me. I'm honored to be here.

- So Lynn, you have over 30 years in the domestic violence response and prevention field. You know, you must have seen it all. I'm curious if you could share a pivotal moment that really kinda solidified your dedication to this work, whether personally or professionally.

- Yeah, absolutely. I am also a survivor of domestic violence in addition to being a 30-year professional. So to me, this work has a lot of meaning, both personally and career related. I would say that the pivotal moment that really set me off on the course that I'm currently on is when I was experiencing domestic violence myself. I was employed, ironically enough at a domestic violence shelter, which is not as unusual as it sounds. There's actually a lot of people working in the DV movement that have experienced it themselves. And when I was doing that work, part of the job that we had was to take police reports from the local police department that had to do with domestic violence and contact the victims to see if we could help them. And one day my boss came up to me and she had a piece of paper in her hand. She held it up and she said, what is this? It was a police report with my name on it as the victim and my live-in partner at the time as the abuser. And I did what a lot of employees do when they are confronted with that in the workplace. I absolutely froze and started backpedaling immediately. I was terrified that if I told them what was happening, they would think that I was a hypocrite because there I was trying to tell people that they could get out of those situations and being in one. I felt that like a lot of employees do that they would think I was incompetent, that I wasn't a person who made good decisions or that I wasn't someone who was capable of doing my work. So I made excuses and I said it only happened once, which wasn't true. I said it only happened because he was intoxicated, which wasn't true. And I kind of left it at that. And the employer, even being a domestic violence organization just left it at that. And I went on to continue my work in domestic violence, but eventually refined what I'm doing to encompass my current work. So for the past 15 years, I've owned Presage Consulting and Training which is a firm that specializes solely in domestic violence in the workplace. So

helping employees and helping professionals to work with those employees and assist them. So yeah, I would say that was a pretty pivotal moment for me, realizing that employees have a lot of issues with domestic violence and a lot of employers don't know how to handle it.

- Well, and what a powerful story to be working in that space and having experienced what you experienced and having some of the same reactions that am assure you had seen from other people that you had talked to. And even being in an organization that you would think had been equipped to handle it. That employer-employee relationship is very interesting and very complicated sometimes, which kinda leads into my next question around HR, we try to treat everyone equitably, yet when I think it comes to domestic violence, there seems to be this one size fits all approach and that doesn't really work, it doesn't work across cultures, it doesn't work across people. So what is the biggest misconception that HR professionals often have when they're addressing these issues?

- Yeah, I think that there's a couple things. The first one would be that many of us, whether we're in HR or any other role, when we hear about domestic violence from somebody that is an employee or from somebody in our own lives, we have this kind of knee-jerk reaction to tell them, you have to get out, you have to leave right now. And we think to ourselves, if that was me, that's what I would do. And unless you've ever been in that situation and walked in those shoes, you don't really know what you would do. And you don't really know what's best for that person. So when we're working, particularly with victims from diverse groups, we often have this perception that they're gonna handle DV the same way that people in western society might handle it. So they're gonna get a divorce, they're gonna call the police, they're gonna get a restraining order. And those are the recommendations that people in HR will sometimes make to victims of domestic violence. But it is a misconception because due to all the differences in culture and the differences in people's lives and their specific situations, there is, as you said, no one size fits all. And if we just immediately apply these remedies that we believe are going to be successful, we could end up doing more harm than good. We could end up alienating that person, putting them at risk and making it so that they feel like we do not understand their needs and issues and they will not come back to tell us what's happening. So yeah, I would think that is a pretty big misconception. And it also has to do with stereotypes and generalizations that we make. We believe because of media, society, that people from certain groups are this type of person, they're gonna respond in this type of way. And that's really leaving out a lot of the truth and a lot of the variety, even subgroups within groups, for example, if you talk about working with victims in Asian culture, Asia encompasses a lot of different countries and each one of those countries has its own specific culture and aspects that will affect domestic violence. So we wanna make sure

we're not throwing the same blanket over everybody and just making assumptions about what they need.

- You know, with all of those cultural differences and just everybody's individual life differences, life experiences, something that you've talked about is a victim-centered strategy. Could you elaborate a little bit more on that and what that looks like and how HR and employers can approach that mindset of a victim-centered strategy?

- Yeah, a victim-centered strategy is really about listening. It's about, again, making sure that we are not determining what we believe should happen for that person, or only giving them the kind of assistance we think they would want or need. So it really is about listening to what they are telling you and allowing them to maintain self-determination, allowing them to guide their own process, because victims are the expert on their own individual case, and they deserve credit for the strengths that they have displayed so far. They've managed to keep themselves alive, they've managed to keep their children safe, they've managed to stay in their home. And so we wanna look at those strengths and see how we can employ those in helping them to seek safety or find a better situation. We also might make assumptions, again, about what they need based on our beliefs about their culture, but we wanna make sure that we are asking about their barriers, their challenges. I'm thinking about a situation recently in which a employee who was Latina went forward to HR, disclosed what was happening, and they had her come in for an interview to ask some questions and they had an interpreter there, a Spanish-speaking interpreter, and they said, we thought you'd feel more comfortable. And she said, I don't speak Spanish. So it's like we assume that just because somebody identifies with a certain cultural group that they're gonna have this particular need that we're gonna take care of for them. But if we're not asking them about what they need, then we're just making assumptions. It's always better to ask and to admit that you don't know something than it is to assume and be wrong about it. So helping victims is about listening to them, putting their needs first and not putting the company's needs first, or not putting our individual needs as a helper. I wanna feel effective, I wanna feel like I'm helping this person, I wanna feel like I'm saving somebody. But that's not realistic. And it's more important to listen to what they are telling you as opposed to what you want to tell them.

- As you've worked on training programs to deliver to organizations, how have you really trained them up on making sure that they're culturally sensitive and that they're inclusive as they approach these situations?

- So I work with a lot of multinational corporations, which means that they are not only operating in a lot of different places, but they also have a lot of employees. So we wanna make sure that the messages

and the initiatives from the top are trickling down. We have that top down support and we're making sure that it's going down to every region and every person in there. Every company's unique. They have their own cultural aspect to their organization, they have their own rules and ways of doing things. And sometimes if you go in and you try to tell them, "Hey, here's what you should probably be doing," there's pushback on that. It may not be what they believe they should be doing or what's worked for them in the past, but I think finding out what works for your particular organization is about asking questions. So tell me about the population of your employees. Tell me what the demographics are. Tell me what locations you work in and what are the particular laws or resources or barriers in that location that are going to cause problems. What kind of language needs does your employee pool have? Do you have a large population of your employee pool that speaks another language? If so, you're gonna wanna tailor your communications and your awareness campaigns to that group. And also understanding a little bit about the political climate of particular areas, the history of a particular area or of a particular people, and understanding what kind of strengths they bring to the table, and also what kind of challenges are they going to run into when they're working with domestic violence victims. So yeah, it is really about asking questions. It's about drilling down into who that company is and what their mission is and how they wanna relate to their employees.

- You used the word drilling down and I think that leads really great into my next question. 'Cause many cultures have layers upon layers of traditions, norms, and beliefs. How do we begin to peel back some of those layers to understand those varying dynamics and effects of domestic violence in diverse settings?

- One of the things that we try to do when we are doing an awareness campaign that is tailored toward a diverse employee group is we wanna incorporate what's called lived experience. So you want to bring the voices to the table that belong to the people who you're trying to target or help. So one of the ways we can do that is by creating task forces, employee groups. We can also allow people to send us anonymous suggestions and ideas. We can put out anonymous surveys to our employee pool and find out how they feel about issues like workplace discrimination or how they feel about how domestic violence is or should be handled. We can create advisory boards for policies and procedures so we can ask the group that we're trying to help, is this really helping? Are we doing this right? What do you think we should be doing instead? And making that a constantly evolving process. So we don't just do it once and then let it be, we keep revisiting it to make sure that we're changing with the needs of that group if that changes. But we really do need their voices because otherwise we're only going to be, as I said earlier, making assumptions or guesses about what their challenges and needs are. We have to hear it from those people and bring them into the process.

- So with understanding these differences, I wanna ask a little bit of a tactical question because I'm curious as an HR professional, walk me through it. Somebody comes to me as an employee and says, I'm experiencing domestic violence. What's my response to them? Walk me through kind of what the best practice is there.

- So HR professionals are going to probably become aware of domestic violence in two different ways. Either a proactive disclosure or a reactive disclosure. And a reactive disclosure is when somebody is referred to HR because they're having problems at work that are related to domestic violence, it may not be apparent that that is the cause of their work performance issues. So we may have to ask more questions around that. But sometimes someone's abuser will show up at the workplace and security will become aware, or they will receive threatening emails at work through their work website, through their work email. So that is the kind of disclosure where it's delicate because that person hasn't come forward on their own and they don't know what you can offer them to help. They're probably feeling concerned about the status of their job or how people are going to see them. A proactive disclosure is a lot easier. Someone coming up and saying, I'm experiencing domestic violence. But either way our response is gonna follow the same basic guidelines. So the first thing I recommend is that people issue what's called a employee value statement. So when they first sit down, you can say to them, "We really value you as part of our team. We think you do excellent work here and we care about you as a person and care about your wellbeing. Everything you say in here is confidential except for if there's a security issue I may have to talk about a need to know basis, but I want you to know that you're not gonna lose your job just for being honest and talking to me about this situation." So that leaves the groundwork and enables 'em to feel comfortable talking. The next thing you wanna do is state your observations. So we don't come out and ask, "Are you a victim of domestic violence?" A lot of people wouldn't identify with that terminology anyway, but what we do is say, state our observations. "So we've noticed that you've been coming in lately with some bruises on you. Did somebody else do that to you?" Or "We've noticed you've had a lot of unexcused absences lately. Do you feel safe at home? Is everything going okay?" So you're talking more about behaviors than you are an assumption about what's happening. And they will, you know, hopefully have their own way of telling you that something's going on and you wanna listen for certain cues. They may not say "I'm being abused," but they might say, "Yeah, my partner and I fight all the time. My partner has a really bad temper." And that can lead to questions like, do you feel safe around that person? So in some ways we're dancing around the topic a little bit because we're trying to make them feel comfortable and we're trying to leave space for the fact that maybe it's not about domestic violence, maybe there's something else going on. If somebody does disclose that's what's happening, then you want to tell them, you wanna send them a

few messages such as, "This isn't your fault, you're not the only person this has happened to. We help a lot of employees at this company with this issue. There are things we can do to help you. I can offer you some options and some resources, and then you can tell me how you wanna proceed." That's gonna leave you space to have your internal workplace safety plan so that you can make sure they're safe during the time that they're on your premises. And if they work from home, maybe it's a work from home safety plan, you can give 'em your EAP referrals, your security, HR contacts, et cetera. The other thing that you can do is you can give them the external referrals, community-based referrals. So maybe they're not comfortable talking to EAP, but they'll talk to the domestic violence hotline. Maybe they do wanna get a restraining order, but they don't know how and they don't know if that would impact their work. So you can give referrals. You can say, have you thought about getting a restraining order? You don't want to say you should go do this, you should go do that. So we're giving them the options and then at the end of this conversation, you're making sure that they have a contact for, you know, if they need to come back, if they have further needs or issues. But you're also making sure they understand your door is open regardless of what they decide to do. So even if they say, yeah, I actually reunited with my partner. We're back together and we're in counseling now, that may be frustrating and concerning for the HR employee that's trying to help, but we have to understand that it's not our choice and we have to respect their choices and let them know we're still here to support them. We can say, okay, we understand that's what's happening. How can we make it easier for you to do your job? How can we make you feel safer at work? So we're meeting them wherever they're at, and we're making sure that whatever kind of support they want, that's the level we're gonna meet them at and open the door for further support. Sometimes the first disclosure, they may say, "I don't wanna talk about this." And then you give that open door statement, two weeks later they come back and they say, "Actually, I could use some help."

- Lynn, that was very, very helpful and hopefully our listeners got a lot out of that 'cause I think you gave us a very good tactical blueprint. It's still weird to start when we encounter these situations. You know, as we wrap up our conversation, I'd like to have you touch base a little bit on how do we approach preventative measures in the workplace? You know, how can our organization adopt these preventative ideas, especially considering some of the diverse cultures you talked about earlier?

- Yeah, absolutely. There's a number of things that can be done starting with the backbone of any kind of domestic violence initiative you're doing in the workplace, which is gonna be your policy and procedures. So you wanna make sure that you're following best practices guidelines for domestic violence and incorporating all of those diversity parts to that, like using gender neutral language or using information about if, for example, somebody comes forward and

they are undocumented, that they're not going to be reported, what their rights are as a victim of domestic violence under the state laws that you're in. So once you have that backbone, you can start looking at how to create a program that could start with a domestic violence in the workplace prevention committee. It could start with the advisory board, like we talked about earlier, with people from diverse groups or survivors of domestic violence coming forward and telling you what they're looking for. And one of the things that I often make sure clients are doing is the training piece for their key personnel, their HR, their security, their managers. Because I think most people remember that old film "Field of Dreams" where they said "If you build it, they will come." This is a domestic violence program in the workplace. If you advertise that you're doing this, people will start coming out of the woodwork and telling you stories and disclosures and you wanna make sure that the people that receive that have the training to do what they need to do. And that your policy and procedure backs it up. Once you've got all this, then you can do your employee facing awareness campaign, and this is where you can really start to reach people and make sure that those disclosures come in. So that can be done through a variety of different avenues. It can be posters, brochures, in break rooms. It can be merchandise like pens with the hotline number on it. It could be having a guest speaker come in and talk about domestic violence or doing a webinar that employees can view. And when they start to understand that they're not gonna be fired for talking about domestic violence, you do care about it and there are things you as an employer can do to help them, then you're gonna start getting those disclosures. Without them, you're flying blind, you don't know what's happening in the workforce, and you don't know what kind of potential safety issues could be coming towards you.

- Lynn, thank you so much. This was such a great discussion and I'm very thankful to talk to somebody who's so authentic with their own story and how it's influenced the work you do. So thanks for sitting down with me for a few minutes today.

- Of course. Thank you so much for having me.

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