

- 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 April Callis-Birchmeier, change management keynote speaker, author of "READY, Set, Change!", CCMP guru, and Owner of Springboard Consulting. Recognized as one of the top 30 global gurus in organizational culture in 2021 and 2022, April is an internationally-known organizational change management expert who has implemented change for government, healthcare, higher education, and corporate clients. April, thanks so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Thrilled to be here, love it.

- You have this amazing background in change management and very successful, and I'm curious. As you think about successful change management in organizations, what are some of the things that you see HR professionals do that are primary indicators of its effectiveness?

- Well, I feel that there has been a new expectation now that HR professionals also have change management as one of the pieces of their toolkit, that this is an important area as so many of our organizations are just undergoing this constant change. And so, it's an important piece for change management professionals to be able to really step into the role of knowing how to assess the impact of the change, figuring out a strategy and an approach that we need to take, and then developing plans and executing on those plans to help people move from that current state to the future state so they can adopt the change.

- It sounds so simple, even though it's not. It's very complex. What are some of the most common obstacles that you see organizations facing when they're trying to implement change?

- I feel like many organizations don't understand the importance of bringing the people along with them on the change. I was speaking with a client this morning who was working on some restructuring plans. And as we were talking, I'm thinking: Well, wait a minute. We've got all the pieces, the chess pieces in place. We've kind of figured out the strategy. Where do the people fit in and how are we planning to walk them through this path of moving from that current state to the future state? And that transition from what you're currently doing to what you're going to be doing in the future is really stressful for people, so having a plan and having activities, communication, training, if necessary, support, and preparing for that resistance piece is really essential.

- I'm always amazed at when change is implemented and something that,

like you said, the end user isn't always considered. And I'm using end user on purpose because I think sometimes we fall into that bucket when we think about technology changes in an organization. Whether it's a new HCM or a new tool or going from Teams to Zoom or any of those things that we've experienced in the rapid technology space, even that sometimes gets missed and you don't realize there's a whole maybe group or subgroup that really relies on one piece of tech that you just changed. And so, I really love that perspective of, you gotta have the strategy, you have to know the reason behind it, but what's the story and how do you bring people along? I think that can be really powerful when you think about change.

- I think it's essential. And so many times, we just try to talk about change as though it's some sort of buzzword, or, "An integrated seamless system," and it doesn't make sense to people who actually are more interested in, how is this impacting me? How is this affecting me? And so, I think that when we craft our change definition, our message about change, I think we have to frame it in a way that makes sense to people as people. Not necessarily as technical cogs in a wheel of sorts, but really as in a human way, in a human-centric way, talking about, "It's similar to when you had this happen in your life." And that's what we're talking about in terms of this change. I think that many people are so capable of understanding metaphor and analogy and love story, and we don't take advantage of that as HR professionals, sometimes. We feel like, "Oh, well, this is a technical change, so I have to use technical language." That's not necessarily true. If it's a technical change, that's okay. We may say you're using a different software, but let's talk about that business process that you're used to doing, and do you keep doing it the same way or do you have to do something slightly different? Is it like having a new point on a GPS or is it like having a completely new dimension that you're working in? Those are very different kinds of changes.

- I like that example, a new point on a GPS or a different dimension. What a great visual to think about. Stories, as we all know, always stick with us. So, any time you go to a conference and there's a great story, it doesn't matter the topic. You're gonna remember because you have a great story. What a great tool to use for change management. You've been in the change management stage since the very beginning, right? You're one of the first, let's say, CCMP.

- Yes.

- And I'm curious, with that certification, how have you seen the field of change management itself evolve since you first started?

- Well, I think that I have noticed and I've seen a focus on being data-driven. And I love that because I think that we have to really view change management sort of like in the way that we view medicine. It's both an art and a science. There's the scientific side is metrics

and measurements and being able to take a look at where are we at different points in a project, and being able to map that out and determine what our adoption success looks like, what our adoption rates are. There's also, though, this art piece, which is really the human piece. It's the storytelling. It's the understanding of how people's identities and how their personalities are very wrapped up in our job roles and in what we do at work. And so, this recognition that we need to have both this data-driven look at change and really being able to measure things and see where we're headed, and at the same time really respecting the person. And that people are not predictable all the time. People are very unpredictable. People have emotions and people sometimes are even surprised themselves when they find that they're resistant about something that they didn't expect to be resistant about. I see that, Sheri, all the time with leaders. Leaders will get excited about a change. Sometimes they'll get on board with the change. And then, something shifts and they're suddenly not too fond of the change, and that's resistance. That's this sensation of, like, "I'm not 100% on board. What do I do about that? Because I'm expected to lead others into this change as well." And so, really helping people manage those emotional pieces and really understand the neuroscience of the way that we think and the way we adopt new things and the way we create habits.

- And if I could have a second degree in neuroscience, I definitely would, 'cause there's so much value there. You talk about simplifying and accelerating organizational change in "READY, Set, Change!". And I'm curious, can you give us an overview of some of the key strategies that you recommend as you're talking about change?

- Well, I really love having a five-step framework. I feel like that was my purpose in writing the book, and in all of the pieces that have really come from it is this understanding that if we do these five things, and there's a sequence, there's an order that's helpful, but they kind of happen all simultaneously at the same time. So, yes, we need to build this relevant, relatable story that people can understand what the change actually is and what it means for them. And then, engaging those leaders to lead. And if you're an HR professional, many times, you don't always get that opportunity to engage with your leaders. Sometimes, we're pushed back a little bit and I really think it's important to step into that role, to step forward and say, "I know that you are very busy with your leadership role, but I know this change role and I'm going to help you." And then, making sure that we have that advanced communication, that layer that sometimes is missing. I've been on technical changes where sometimes it feels like they just wanna send an email the week before the change, and you're like, "No! Just one email is not gonna help anybody." And then we have develop and support, which is that training and that support through the transition period. And then, really working on the why of the change, which is that resistance, and reiterating, what is the purpose of our change? What is that relevant,

relatable story? I see it as a very iterative cycle, and that's what makes it simple and that's what makes it quick, is because you know you're doing these five pieces over and over to ensure people are adopting that change and to ensure that we're getting our organization where we need to be. And the only way we can get there as an organization is if the individuals in the organization make that decision to adopt that change. So, it's very intertwined, it's sequential, but it's also, as I said, kind of happening simultaneously all at one time.

- As you talk to HR professionals about this model, what are some of the common questions or concerns that they raise to you, and what advice do you give to them?

- Well, I find that HR professionals many times are looking at the change. They know they're expected to have an impact and to be very involved in the change. But I'm not sure they always recognize, here's where you can have impact, here's what you can do as an HR professional to really move this needle. And I find that when I have folks in my training and they understand, like: Oh, I can use this tool to really communicate with that leader, to guide that leader all the way through, and to ensure that leader knows what they're supposed to be doing, and it's making me successful because I'm in HR and I'm helping you with this change, I think that's a critical moment. And I've had a number of instances where folks in my courses have suddenly been like, "Oh, this is something that I can do. I can do this in my organization." And it's really very liberating for them because they feel like they can have impact. They can have a dramatic impact on the adoption of success, of the adoption of the change in their organization. I really love that. I also think it's important for HR professionals to maintain certifications and to pursue additional certifications. And the certified change management professional, the CCMP, is a big one, I think, that makes sense for HR professionals.

- Yeah, and it puts HR professionals in that role of a business partner when you can come to the table and talk the business, talk about the change and how you're going to support that change and the impact it's going to have, the positive impact, that that business leader wants and most likely is why they're implementing the change in the first place. So, yeah, having those skills is great and it's important and it has you show up differently than maybe you've shown up before as an HR person.

- Yes, yes.

- You've worked with a lot of organizations, a lot of projects. I'm curious on your most challenging change management project and what you learned from it that maybe we could take away as nuggets for ourself.

- Well, that's a great question, because when I think about the most challenging, the places that I feel that I have been challenged are the places that I think a lot of HR professionals start to feel challenged. It's that area where you have some influence, but you don't have any authority. And so, you are a little bit out of this circle of, you're in the circle of concern, but maybe you don't have this authority that you feel like would help the change to be successful. I was involved with a really large statewide financial change, and the thing that, for me, was the most challenging about this change was the fact that I was down a layer. I was in the agency level and the change was coming from a statewide team. So, we had a team that really didn't have change management over top of all of the agencies in the state. And I could see that they didn't really understand that we had, in the agency I worked with, we had three times as many employees as any other agency and we absolutely had to have change management. But they didn't really have it as a function in the statewide project. Fortunately for me, I had a terrific team in that agency that recognized the value of change management. And so, I was given the opportunity to create the change management strategy, to really hone in on that relevant, relatable story, and then to work with the leaders to help them lead this initiative. And we were very successful. And I have to say that had it not been for that vision that our team had, that the leadership team had that this was a change management effort, I think we would've fallen into the place that many agencies did, which was not being truly prepared that our people wouldn't have been able to adopt the change. That was a really challenging change for me because I didn't have the authority, I didn't really have any formal authority because I was not even an employee. And so, I was on the sidelines a little bit and was able to impact that change really by working with the leadership.

- What a great story and what a great example of leveraging those relationships, like you said, and being able to show up in that way. This next question's funny, but I'd like to leave us with it. As you think about change management, what do you see changing in the future in this space as we go through the next iteration of what work looks like now?

- One of the areas, I love that question, Shari, because I think that there's so much changing in change management, it's almost hard to keep up, as with everything. But I see one of the areas, of course, is with artificial intelligence, is really understanding, how is that going to impact people? How can we leverage it for change to be able to maybe help us with development of our stories? Maybe to give us some brainstorming, like a brainstorming partner, almost. I don't know if you use ChatGPT frequently, or Perplexity, or any of those tools frequently, but I've discovered that when you put a prompt in that says, "Describe something as though you're speaking to a fourth-grade reading level and you are describing a change in a metaphor," or, "Using an analogy, or, "What story might this be like?" It's a great

partner, in a way, to throw around some ideas and think, "Is this something that would make sense?" And many times, we are looking at relatively simple ideas. Like, we're thinking about making three or four companies into one, so we're looking into a global unit becoming one whole group. But there's a lot of different stories that could come into that. And I think, many times, we don't take advantage of AI to help us develop these ideas and push them forward. I think we have to be really cautious, also, because I think that, like anything, garbage in, garbage out. So, you have to really vet what you have back and think, "Is this something that actually is helpful, or does it just look good? Because ChatGPT generated it in about 1 1/2 seconds. And so, is this something that can really help me?" I think these tools, though, are fantastic because they can take a lot of the legwork out of planning things like communication plans. You can generate instantly a great schedule for a communication plan if you're thinking just email, and then you can start to add in all of the other vehicles, all of the other tools, the different channels that you wanna use. I think it's going to continue to evolve. I think it's a very exciting time for all of us and I see there being a lot of focus on preparing people to adopt AI as part of their roles and part of their organizations.

- I love those examples. I am a huge ChatGPT user, and you're absolutely right. I tell people to think about it as an intern, like, what's your first draft? Have it create your first draft and then react to it. Yes, don't copy and paste it. I say that all the time, don't copy and paste it. Use it as a resource just like anything else, like you would use a Google search, so I love those examples. April, this was such a great conversation, and so relevant for today's HR professional to think about how we approach change and how we leverage it and how we work with our businesses and our leaders to influence without authority to help them reach their goals. Thanks for the conversation today.

- You're welcome. I love talking with you, Shari, and I look forward to our next conversation. Thank you.

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