- You're listing to "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 Paul LaLonde, vice president of people and culture at CEDA. Paul is a deliberate HR pro who believes philosophy is a difference-making pursuit in life. Learning, teaching, and being of service to others are his purpose. Paul has won numerous awards, including the HR Today MVP Award for his blog, "HR Philosopher." He's also a best-selling author of the book "People Fusion: Best Practices to Build and Retain A Strong Team." Paul, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

- No, thanks for asking. I'm excited to jump in and talk philosophy and wellness with you.

- I absolutely love that. You know, as we kinda start into our conversation, you know, I'd love to hear how philosophy plays a role in your approach to HR. It's something that I just find really fascinating about you and the work that you're doing and what you're doing onstage.

- Yeah, I usually, when people ask me this, I start with a story that kinda sets the tone. It was probably 15 years ago by now, and wow, when I say that, it's like it keeps getting longer and longer, but anyway. 15 years ago, I was just kind of in this weird rut, and I was walking through Barnes & Noble, which I usually do. So I was walking around and I saw this book outta the corner of my eye called "The Art of Living." And it was like, "Well, okay, that seems like a sign," so I picked it up. And it turned out to be the writings from a Stoic philosopher with a new translation by Shari Lebell, who does a lot of work with that, named Epictetus. And the thing I really liked about him was that his approach to philosophy, even 2,000 years ago, was that it's for everybody. And the more I read and the more I started developing my own ideas, I kinda define philosophy as the art of thinking turned into action to make yourself a better person. And for me, I love that it's for everybody. I don't believe in a personal life or a professional life. I just believe in life. So when I'm trying to make myself a better person personally, I'm automatically making myself a better person professionally. So that's kind of my approach to it and how I weave it into what I do in HR.

- So as a VP of people and culture, I'm curious how you maintain and nurture that company culture with that background, especially right now in these challenging times as we think about, you know, hybrid and remote work and some of the consequences, really, that we're seeing from that environment.

- Yeah, it's, love culture questions because it's a squishy word, and

we get to kinda play around with it a little bit, right? But culture is squishy. So I like to define it as just the things that we do every day. It's that simple, 'cause I think people overthink culture. It's what do we do every day? What do you tolerate? What is it like to go to work? And I really do believe it's a lot more simple than people like to think it out to be. But as far as tying it to philosophy, you know, I like to think of a culture of virtue. And in a lotta philosophy, especially Stoicism and Eastern philosophies like Confucianism, virtue leads to what is a happy life. And by happy, I mean the ancient context, which means flourishing, not pleasure. In the modern context, you know, you think, "Well, I'm happy when I'm getting pleasure and all those things." No, true happiness is having a flourishing life where you're adding meaning, not only to yourself, but the world around you. So acting virtuously is acting philosophically. So in culture, how do we wanna kinda translate those behaviors? It's the four cardinal virtues, which is acting courageously, acting moderately, acting judiciously, you know, doing the right thing, and then acting through wisdom, just taking all the information in the world around you and making the best decisions that you have. So I try and coach my managers, employees, C-level, and anybody that'll try and understand that we should act with grace, seek to understand, and try to build that culture of virtue.

- I'm curious, has anybody said to you as you've been giving them that coaching that maybe it sounds a little too woo-woo or a little too like, I suspect you've gotten that. I'm curious how you've responded to that.

- It's interesting. I haven't because I'm pretty intentional with, I don't go to people and act like, "Well, this is what philosophy says, and I'm a philo-" I don't do that. Again, with philosophy, it's meant to be personal. It's about you. So when I'm working on myself, I would think, "Okay, how can I coach up this person to act more courageous? 'Cause they need to be courageous in this situation." So I get a lot, especially during performance management time, people come to me, "How do I have these conversations?" And I'm like, I don't go, "Well, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius," all that, I don't. So it's, I have courage at the forefront of my mind, so that's how I kinda go, you know, "You're a manager. You have to act courageously in these situations. You're put in these situations because that's what managers have to do. You have a duty to do these things." And that's how I kinda talk with them through it a little bit under the guise of: What is the virtue I'm trying to get them and nudge them towards? And really, you know, temperance and justice and wisdom are all kind of part and parcel of that. So it's asking them, "What's the right thing in this situation? What do you think is the right thing to do?" And hopefully get that out of them. And if they're like, "Well, I have to fire 'em all," it's like, "Okay, let's take a step back. Let's act a little bit more disciplined and have some temperance and moderation with this. You're not gonna fire everybody, 'cause that's not gonna

look good, but." So that's how I kind of weave it into it, to avoid, 'cause you're right, to avoid the quote, unquote woo-woo type of feeling that some people may have.

– I like that you brought up performance reviews and coaching managers. You know, coaching managers is one of my favorite activities in HR. I find a lotta joy out of it in helping, you know, managers kind of reach those aha moments. And one of the big things that managers are responsible for is helping to build their team. You know, and you, as a contributing author to the book "People Fusion," which really emphasizes those best practices for team building, I'm curious what is like maybe one core principle that you advocate to ensure that team cohesion happens while also preventing burnout, which is really what we're gonna spend the rest of our time talking about? 'Cause I think there's a lotta team dynamics here that play into that.

– You know, I take a step back. It's just how my mind works. But you know, burnout's defined by the World Health Organization as an occupational phenomenon. And I think too often, we think of burnout as, well, that's on the employee. We use burnout too liberally, you know. "I'm just burnt out." It's like, according to, you know, WHO, it is due to the occupation. It's a workplace thing. So from the team perspective, you know, I really think back to basics. You know, work on building trust, holding one another accountable, working through those type of situations. And that all kinda goes back to the core principle of respect. I try and say, "Look, you're not going to like every single person that you work with. In some instances, that can actually be a good thing. Sometimes it's not a good thing. But you should always be respecting everybody else and acting through respect," which is, to me, a principle, a virtue that kinda ties back to being courageous, moderate, all those sorta things I talked about before. But I think if it begins and ends with respect, everything else can be sorted out.

– What do you say to those employees who have a hard time respecting their manager? I'm sure you've seen that. I've seen that in my career.

– Yeah, and some managers, admittedly so, probably make it very difficult to do so. Circling back, when I'm thinking of these things or trying to coach up, focus on what you as a human being can control, which is so very little. What you can control is how you behave, how you respond, and how you treat other people. The best way to, again, earn respect or be respectful is to act respectfully. So it's the old saying, you know, do unto others and all that stuff. It's like, it's a courageous act to treat people well when they don't treat you well. And that shows more on you than it does them. So it's always about, when someone is treating you disrespectfully or you just don't have respect for them or whatever it is because of how they behave, that says more about them and what they've been going through in their life that's hidden that we don't even completely understand. So acting

respectfully, even if someone doesn't deserve it or you don't think that they should, still says more about you as a human being and you taking the step up and being the better person at the end of the day. Because that's all you can do and all you can control.

– Well, that's good advice, especially because, you know, what you said really resonated about there's so little that you can control sometimes. You can only control yourself, so how you respond to that is gonna be pivotal in your career. You know, as I think about, you know, larger strategies, you know, taking it back from the individual level and bringing it back up to, you know, the larger HR profession, what are some strategies that we can use proactively as HR professionals to help address burnout or help create a culture where we're putting things in place to prevent getting to the point where employees are saying, "I'm burnt out?"

– Yeah, so we've already established that burnout is a workplace occupational phenomenon, right? So it's really on workplace leaders. And some people might disagree with this, but HR can't own this. Especially the outcome. We can't own the outcome of it, because we can own the communication, we can own the coaching, we can own the direction that we're trying to take the organization and shepherd them in in the education piece. But ultimately, it's on the managers. They're the ones setting the schedule, right? They're the ones that have a relationship with their employees. They're creating the environment. So it's not enough really to offer support to employees and to say, you know, "Here, do this, and then you will avoid burnout." 'Cause they could do all those things but then still come back into a really crappy work environment and nothing has really changed, 'cause you're just working on the symptoms rather than the actual cause of it. So I would just say from the HR perspective, just continue to push and drive and educate and keep it going. 'Cause things don't happen overnight. It's not like all of a sudden, cultures are just gonna shift and wake up and go, "Oh, okay, well, let's not create this burnout phenomenon, this burnout culture anymore." It's gonna take good hard work over many years probably to get to that point. But if you're keeping track of it and you have your metrics and whatever it is, over time, you will see those changes if we keep up on it and continue to push that with management and leadership and the C-team and all of those folks.

– I'm curious with your background on a personal note, how do you manage to keep burnout at bay in your own life? Do you have any habits or routines that, you know, you kinda swear by?

– You know, I wouldn't go as far as to say swear by, but 'cause again, I think it's just so personal, and what works for me may not work for somebody else and all those sorts of things. But that being said, things that I've tried to incorporate with some success, others not so much, but I keep trying, and then some with great success are really

from a health standpoint. Making sure I'm eating right, which I don't always do, but making sure I'm eating right, trying to get at least seven hours of sleep, and exercise. Everything starts with those three. It really does. Those are the three things that you, now I'm sort of backtracking a little bit, those are the three things I would swear by because they are time tested since the beginning of time. And if you eat right, if you exercise, and you get enough sleep, your mind will get healthy because your body is healthy. They are connected. So especially in a lot of workplace, not even workplace culture, but just cultures in general, I mean, you're not getting enough sleep 'cause you're running around with the kids. You gotta get to work. Or even if you don't have a family or whatever it is, you're still doing all these hustles and work and stuff. It's not sustainable and healthy. So I've been trying to work on those three things. Outside of that, things I like to do that really help are working on mindfulness meditation. And I think that gets a bad rap, probably rightfully so in some cases, 'cause people try and monopolize and monetize it, which is fine. And it doesn't work for everybody. But studies after study after study have shown that if you do meditation, what's called mindfulness meditation, the Eastern where you're sitting there and om and all that type of stuff and working on what you're thinking, consistently doing that over time changes the way the brain works in a positive way. But a side note of that is, when you're working on that over time, you become more mindful of the present moment. You really start noticing things you never noticed before. Like, "Oh crap, I'm starting to get angry." Whereas before, it was something happened, response, you're immediately angry. Whereas mindfulness, it opens that gap between response and reaction to where you can respond to it rather than react. So that's been great for me, just trying to read a ton of things. And then even shutting off the mind, which is a great thing. Just like you have to rest the body, I think you should rest the mind. So there is a place for just dumb TV to just veg out on. Like when I watch my wrestling shows or old-school "Simpsons," "Family Feud," just things I don't have to think about. But those are all the things that have helped me over time.

- I love the idea of mindfulness practice. You know, I'm somebody whose mind is always kind of going, and when I first kind of put my toe in the water with meditation, I had a very probably misconception on what that meant. You know, I had to sit and be silent, and my mind would just be quiet, and I was like, "I'm never gonna be able to do this." And then when somebody kind of talked me through, like, "Don't try to go to like 11 right away. Just start by sitting there and kind of, you know, how does my body feel? How does my arms feel? How do my feet feel? How does it feel touching the carpet or whatever I'm, you know, grounded to?" And you're absolutely right. It helps you get to a point where you can, you know, kind of anticipate what's happening with your body in a moment. And it's really great as an HR person to be able to do that. It helps you keep, you know, what I'll call normal face in meetings, when, you know, maybe internally, you're having a

reaction to something and you can feel it and identify it. It's also great if you're team building. You know, one of the things that we've done in our team before is, at the beginning of a meeting, identifying where we are at in that moment as we came into the meeting. So maybe you're anxious, maybe you're sad, maybe you have something going on in your life that's gonna affect what's happening around you in a meeting. And it was just, it was really great, 'cause it kinda set the tone for, "Hey, if I know I have to have a tough conversation, maybe this moment and this time isn't the moment to have it with this person because of where they're at." So I really like that. You know, as we wrap up our conversation, I'd love to hear from you, if somebody wants to kinda start integrating this idea of philosophy into their HR practice, what's a great place to start? I mean, maybe it's with that book that you mentioned. But do you have other advice or other pieces where, hey, you know, look at this or here's a book or here's a blog, besides your own blog, where people can start to learn more about that?

- No, the wonderful thing about philosophy, to me, is that there's so many possibilities. I'm pretty open and unabashed about saying that I follow the Stoic traditions. I like Taoism, which is an Eastern one. There's a lot of Buddhist stuff, not from the religious side, but there's a lot of philosophical stuff within Buddhism that I like to implement and all those things. But that being said, I mean, there are hundreds of different kinds of philosophies that people can look into that can help influence them. Good places to start would be that book that I did talk about, even though, you know, it's Stoic. But it gets you thinking differently and hopefully it can maybe have you explore different things that you didn't think about before. Another one that's really good is "The Tao of Pooh," which is about Winnie-the-Pooh and how he is essentially like this Taoist, completely in balance with the world character. And all the other characters around him sort of embody these other things that pull people off course. That one's really good. Easy to read and most people should be able to identify with Pooh Bear, I would think. And then there are actually some business books that help kinda showcase how philosophy can influence business. Like one I read is "The Tao of Strategy." And it's about how Eastern philosophy has influenced businesses in the East and how a lotta Western businesses try and replicate that in some way. So there's really, those are some interesting places to start I would hope. My blog, like you talked about, and then the book "People Fusion" is another good one.

- I love it. Paul, thank you so much for such a rich conversation and helping us understand a little bit more about philosophy and burnout and its intersection with HR and some of the things that we can bring into our HR practice as we, you know, coach managers and employees to help them, you know, get ahead of burnout so that they don't hit that point. So I really appreciate our conversation.

- I do too, it's my pleasure, Shari, thank you.

- 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.