Building Trust and Boundaries with Jessica Miller Merrill

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Jessica Miller Merrill, the founder of Workology and CEO of Exceptional HR, a top resource in HR strategy.
Shari Simpson: Recognized by Forbes, she hosts the Workology podcast and recently authored Digitizing Talent, focusing on digital recruiting strategies.
Shari Simpson: Jessica, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today. I'm excited to be here. I love it. I know that you got a chance to meet some of the other people on the Paylocity team and they were already so excited to spend time with you. So I was glad I could convince you to come over to this corner and do the podcast with me.
Jessica Miller—Merrell: It was fun because I've been over, I think I've had three different meetings with the Paylocity team and different components in some form. So it's been nice to get to know everybody a little bit differently. Oh, that's awesome.
Shari Simpson: I'd like to start with maybe just you sharing a little bit about your background, your passion, and about the work you do.
Jessica Miller—Merrell: So my name is Jess Miller Merrill and I'm the founder of Workology. We're a online destination for training resources information to help support human resources, recruiting leaders and managers. Myself, I've been in this gosh, a long time in the HR space. I started a blog in 2005. And so I was a practitioner doing the work and I was trying to find a way to be able to differentiate myself as an HR leader. And I started this blog that ultimately became a business. So it's been really fun to help support HR leaders. We support about a million every month through our blog and our online community. And then we do a lot of online training to support them in different ways throughout their career.
Shari Simpson: I love that. Yeah, I think everybody tried to do that blog thing early on and some people have been successful with it. So kudos to you for that.
Jessica Miller—Merrell: I love blogging. I feel like it's the one thing that I actually own, which is tough in social media land because it's just rent and space. But the place, when you go to Workology, it's mine. It's our community. It's whatever I want to talk about, which is nice because I'm my own boss and we make our own rules. Right. get to react very quickly to content support and information based on what the community needs. And that's the exciting part for me. That's the part that I love. And we can do that, you know, on the blog, through our training, social media, even TikTok. You know, I've been known to do a nerdy dance and various things, but it's all in fun to help support HR leaders in different ways. I love that.
Shari Simpson: So we are talking about psychological safety today. And I thought I'd start with when you think about psychological safety in the workplace, what are some of the ways that you are seeing technology support that concept around psychological safety?
Jessica Miller—Merrell: So psychological safety. really easily is just feeling okay to be yourself at work, right? And that could be just

being your whole self, right? And in your quirks and all your interests, like maybe like Dungeons and Dragons, like come to work and be that person. But it's also a place where you can just feel safe because maybe you don't have a boss that's super great or you're being bullied at home or at work or something happening. So psychological safety is just a place where your brain is like, huh, it's good to be here and I don't experience a lot of stress. Technology, in theory, is supposed to be designed to help reduce stress, like to make us be able to connect together better, right? However, psychological safety and technology don't always work together because constant dinging or pinging of your phone or devices or your boss asking you to be on zoom to monitor that you're working like these are things that don't make people feel safe, right? And depending upon Trauma, like your own unique personal experiences, you and your body react to that very differently. Like maybe you have a panic attack. Maybe you get a lot of lower back pain. Maybe you are just frozen in fear and you are or you're a procrastinator. Like it just comes in different ways. So when used correctly, technology can help give people the space. to be able to be themselves and or communicate with people if they aren't feeling great or how they prefer to be communicated or engaged. But also we can listen and then prepare for providing them support using the tech that in a way that they're like, for example, this is an easy one. So think about Slack. All right. It's so hard. Like my team's global. Most of my team's not in the U.S. So that means often when I'm messaging someone at 10 p.m. I'm talking to somebody in Kenya, it's seven hours ahead. So they're getting ready to start the day. I don't want to set the expectation as a boss that I am expecting them to be working 24-7, because I'm not. It's not like, take your time off, enjoy your life. So we have initiated just some hashtags on our messages to each other to let people know if it is urgent or not urgent. Therefore, they know if I say not urgent, it does not mean stop doing everything right now and do it because I'm the boss, because I'm in a position of power, right? Because I pay the bills. That is what a small example of psychological safety. I'm giving my team the permission and they know if it's important or not important and they can do it whenever they get back online. And I'm cool with that.

Shari Simpson: What a great example of such a simple solution. Like sometimes we overcomplicate, you know, how do we introduce something like that? Hashtag great.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: My team came up with this. It was, was like, okay, because I, I work weird hours. Like I have a kiddo, sometimes I'm working while I am waiting in the car pickup line from swim, right?

Shari Simpson: Like I have a 15 year old.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: Okay. So sometimes I'm like doing a little check or maybe it's a Saturday night and I got sucked into something else. And so I'm on looking at things and I'm like, Oh, I need to give my team direction for blah, blah, blah for next week. I want them to know that it's okay to ignore that until they get back online. Now,

Slack also has a new feature that you can schedule your DMs, which I found because my team was making fun of me because it was like one o'clock in the morning and I sent some messages, right? And they're like, get some rest. We're worried about you. I was fine, but I was like, aha, now they don't need to know. Yeah, I can send a message at 1 a.m. and they can get it at 9 a.m. the next day or whatever.

Shari Simpson: Are you seeing any technology that's helping predict or help surface that psychological safety isn't happening in the workplace?

Jessica Miller-Merrell: I definitely think that if you're using different tools that are maybe evaluating the context of content that is being shared in your communities or your internet portals, those sort of things. You can learn and understand about maybe how people are reacting through their own conversations, right? And then you can make a choice to hopefully have a conversation if they can feel safe one-on-one. It might be a survey because that is anonymous, hopefully. and they feel safe enough to answer the survey truthfully, but then you can be able to move forward. But you don't have to have a bunch of fancy tech. You just have to listen, give them space, and then create a community of trust, like between all the parties, right? I want my people, if they don't like something that I'm doing as a boss, as a leader, to feel comfortable to say, this is not good for me. That is what creating a psychologically safe environment is, where even when you're not in a position of power, you feel comfortable to stand up and say, hey, this is not good. But just know that we are bringing more and more and more our personal stuff into work, which is what we've been telling people. Bring your whole self to work. I am in support of that. However, that means they bring their whole self to work. Yeah. And some of it is not great, right? some people, like there is a recently on TikTok, I think a GoFundMe went viral because a teacher was living in their car. This is in Texas at the beginning of the school year, right? Like that person, they're probably an amazing teacher, but their basic needs in some form are not being taken care of, right? So how can we expect our people to do the best work, support the organization, drive revenue, do all these things when they don't have a safe space to be able to go to sleep at night and or be able to pay their bills. Like that's the reality for a lot of us, not all of us, myself included. I do not have a private jet. I don't live in Palo Alto. And I'm not able to just drive or fly to the office whenever I want in Seattle. Right? Like, there's a huge disconnect between CEO and executive leadership and the average life of your employee workforce. And this is where the open conversation and communication can help create that because what is psychologically safe for the CEO of Starbucks, completely different than the barista that's working 10 hours a week, you know, in Austin, Texas, right?

Shari Simpson: I love the approach that you're taking with your employees. And I'm curious, how do you onboard a new employee into that environment? Because I, I can imagine starting a new job, you're trying to get the lay out of the land. Your boss is telling you like, Hey, we've got this hashtag system. I'm kind of crazy that I work all

these hours, but don't just ignore it. Like that could be a lot of pressure coming in the door just trying to navigate that. So how do you have those first conversations with that employee to help them really understand what the culture is in your organization and the expectation around psychological safety?

Jessica Miller—Merrell: First of all, I have a very small team, so I'm not a big organization. So I can get to know people one—on—one, which I think is really great. And I am the one onboarding them at the moment, right? And so we spend a lot of time getting to know each other. I do, I really am focused on like project management, a lot of SOPs to kind of help them understand. And we do a lot of check—ins. So I normally meet with, in some form, we have a team meeting at least once a week, and then I meet with individuals for different projects. Because basically I'm just the project manager of all the things, right? To check in on them and see if they have questions and how can I support them. And sometimes it's not great. always, right? Conflicts happen between other people and then people react in maybe a way that I didn't expect. We just have to be patient and kind of lead with empathy. And I think that's the hardest part for managers and leaders is we're just trying to run the business, right? And then the people sometimes get in the way, but that is what makes our business unique. So, and I think a lot of managers, leaders who are maybe listening to this pondering like, man, these people, like they're what's like, they're what's junking things up, but that's life, right? So if I'm talking to a new person, I just, I want to be really clear and clear and detailed and then follow up with them. And those relationships take time to build that trust. I always say that like trust is the most powerful currency that you as an individual can have. It is more powerful than money, right? Because that's how you build relationships. That's how business gets done. That's why people buy from you or choose to work at a certain environment because there's that trust. And when you lose it, it's really hard to get it back. Really hard.

Shari Simpson: It sure is. I can't tell you how many managers I've coached over the years in my career about situations and how they handled it. And like, yeah, you made, you made a mistake, right? Here's your opportunity to get some coaching, but it's going to take a while to get back to where you want to be. So that's so true. You know, you started sharing a little bit about how much your organization is focusing on helping HR professionals, right? How do you see the learning landscape when it comes to teaching psychological safety to managers, especially that middle manager level that's kind of in the middle of expecting to meet all the KPIs and also create a great employee experience while you're at it, please?

Jessica Miller—Merrell: I really want managers to think about their own mental health and wellness first, right? Because when you are good, you set the precedent and you set the expectation and you give permission like invisibly or like not officially with words that it is okay to be yourself or to do this. One of the reasons I went through yoga teacher training is because I found as I was burnt out and

overwhelmed and I was expecting people to work crazy hours and it wasn't fun and it wasn't fun for me, it wasn't fun for them, and it wasn't fun for my family, right? So I, this was during the pandemic, I went back to my yoga and I started like meditation and all these things. And that's when the light bulb hit. And like, that's what I feel like every manager they need is some tool or resource. It doesn't have to be yoga. It doesn't have to be meditation. It could be therapy, whatever, golf. Find your thing. That is how you can bring yourself to like a state of just good for you, like in a happy place, like an equilibrium. so that you can have that emotional intelligence, be able to make good decisions, and not infect other people with your stress and drama, right? Because as the manager leader, you set the tone. So you need to have your stuff together. And that starts with de-stressing yourself, setting the expectation, and then letting others choose how they want to do it. So I teach yoga, I teach meditation, and I think all of us need these kind of things, something. So find your thing. If you are experiencing stress yourself, which is part of life, just know that your employees are picking up on that, just like your family picks up on it. And they're reacting to those feelings and emotions, even if you're not sharing them, because we are emotional beings. We can feel those things, even through a Slack message or a Zoom call screen.

Shari Simpson: That's so true. And if you want to layer in how different generations perceive text messages, whether you have a period at the end of the sentence or not, that's also a factor. I've had some pretty funny conversations with my husband because he's a very formal texter. And I was like, you got to knock it off with the periods. I was like, it's coming across bad.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: I had this whole conversation with somebody on social media because somebody mentioned to me, so I have ADHD, right? Not shocking, based on my schedule and all the things, right? But I think and talk and text the same way. So I have a thought, I hit send. I have another thought, I hit send again. And only later did I realize, because someone on my team brought it up, up and said, hey, you know, you might want to think about writing in longer texts because the messages, the constant messages are driving me crazy. And I was like, oh, that's interesting because my experience is not like that at all. But then again, my phone is constantly on do not disturb, on silent. I don't get any of those. If you're not in my phone contacts, it doesn't go to my phone. I do not, I no longer wear an Apple watch because I don't want those distractions. Because as someone with ADHD, I'm like, shiny object. Yeah. Next one. Ooh. And then I go down a spiral of, you know, because you sent me an update over text. So I don't think that way anymore. Yeah. And the consensus on social media was, yeah, that's disrespectful. And I'm like, ah, Okay, so as a manager leader, like we need to take that information into consideration because that helps people not be stressed out or overwhelmed. And it is a lot of like small things like that. Now, you might think that a psychological safe workplace isn't pronouns, but that's what it is. It's a lot of little things. It doesn't have to be

a big thing, but it's asking people, what do you want? And having them be comfortable to say, hey, your constant text messages are super, are not great for me. They trigger this. And, uh, you know, now I just know I'm going to make longer text messages. And, and that's okay.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. How do you see technology evolving to help us in this space? And I, I think I, I think of things like, okay, to one extreme, we're definitely going to see some more like biometric tracking. I know that's coming eventually. So that gives me the X personally. But then we see all these amazing collaboration tools coming too and easier ways to stay connected and do work together and create more cohesion. What do you think about the tech landscape right now and how it's going to impact things like psychological safety and collaboration?

Jessica Miller-Merrell: I think collaboration is good, absolutely. It helps us be able to work more efficiently and we can be more creative in what we do. The more different kinds of people, different ideas, it is fantastic. It also creates a lot of challenges because people have different perspectives and they have expectations and all those things. I think the most important piece for any manager leader is boundaries and encouraging other people to have boundaries on their team. Like I said, I don't answer phone calls from unknown numbers. It actually just goes directly to voicemail and it says, I don't know you. You're not on my phone. Please send me a text or an email. And that is a little weird, but it works for me. Yeah. So I think the boundary piece is like respecting each other's boundaries. So that means managers, I'm really sorry, no messages on vacation. OK. No checking in, expecting that people are going to do these things. We need time to decompress and de-stress because we have to take a breath so that we can come back to work and be able to do all the things. But when we're constantly being barraged with messages and updates and all the tech and, hey, why didn't you respond to these 27 emails? I know you're on vacation, blah, blah, blah. It creates more stress. And cortisol levels are higher, like you get sick, like there's so many different things. So really, everything can change in just four minutes. Like that's what it takes like for your breath for you to be able to calm down and get to a state where you feel safe. When we don't feel safe, we're in that constant fight or flight mode. And I see this a lot in my yoga class. It's so interesting. So the yoga style that I teach is called Kundalini. And I play a gong, I do a sound bowl, like we have a whole thing. I can tell who is having, like who is in that fight or flight mode. At the end of class, I do like a 15 minute sound bowl gong thing. The people who wiggle and move around during that, they are not in a state of distress. They are in a state of heightened awareness because they don't feel safe or they're overwhelmed. We have to give our people at least four minutes and permission. And I often tell in yoga class, like I walk them through a guided meditation so they don't have to worry about how they should feel. I tell them, notice your braille, all the things. Yeah. And I am helping them get to that place a lot quicker so that they can go in and rest and maybe get a good night's sleep.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. So here's my advice to all my HR professionals out there. If you didn't quite catch it, I want to repeat it. While you were talking to managers specifically, I want to talk to those HR professionals because I know, I know that you have a passion for your organization and you want to be there when you're on vacation because you don't want anything to go wrong. But give yourself time to unplug from the business because you yourselves cannot show up as your best selves if you don't give yourself time.

Jessica Miller–Merrell: Absolutely. And this starts for the HR folks. Please don't process payroll on your vacation.

Shari Simpson: Oh, yeah.

Jessica Miller–Merrell: One of my friends got married and then she went back and processed payroll that next day. No. OK? Like, yes. Don't do that. Train someone else. Like, let me call your CEO and tell them that this needs to happen. Like, I will be that person for you. Like, bro. Or, bro. Whatever. Get someone trained. You cannot expect someone to do those kinds of things. Yeah. And you know, you laugh, but I have been there and you wonder why burnout right now is at an all time high. I've seen numbers between like 70 and like 90% of HR people are burnt out. Okay. We've got to cross train our people. We need to have some hard conversations with our leadership and say like, Hey, I am close to the edge here. How can you help me? And if they aren't going to help you, like, let's find a new opportunity for you. Like, I don't want you to get sick. I don't want you to get your family to suffer. Like, I don't want any of those things. But we have to start respecting ourselves and creating those boundaries so that we can show other people that it can be done.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, absolutely. So as we end our conversation, if somebody's listening and they want to get connected with the community that you have, how do they do that?

Jessica Miller–Merrell: They just head over to workology.com and one of the things that is very important for me is inclusive and accessible learning. So all our content and our training that's available, we do HR certification prep, I do some mini credentials and different things like recertification, it's all available on demand. And it's affordable options that you can do. So if the best time for you to learn is 2 a.m. from 2 to 4, more power to you, hop on over there, do your learning your way. and in a manner that works for you on your schedule. And I think that we're all unique and different and we all need to respect that in each other and support ourselves first so that we can support our organization.

Shari Simpson: I love that. Well, thank you for jumping on the podcast with me. Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Jessica Miller–Merrell: I hope you enjoyed today's episode.

Shari Simpson: You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.