

- 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 Jamie Taets, the CEO of Keystone International Group, author of two books, host of "Superpower Success" podcast, and a keynote speaker. She's been named one of the 100 Women to KNOW In America and one of the top 200 Female Founders by "Inc. Magazine." ♪ Oh yeah ♪

- Jamie, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Thank you for having me.

- So as a fellow superwoman, somebody who's running Keystone International Group, hosting your own podcast, writing books, supporting a family of four children, how do you even find time for a cup of coffee in the morning?

- Well, here's something even crazier. I don't drink coffee.

- Wow, then so no caffeine at all?

- I've never had a cup of coffee in my life.

- Wow.

- I know. I'm like an alien in this world. I drink tea, though. I've got my tea. I don't do a lot of caffeine and so I have to find other ways to manage my energy. But I will admit I've a really good support structure. Right? My husband's a saint, my team is amazing. So I've got a lot of people around me to help me with everything, and I know how to manage my own energy. So instead of caffeine, I just do a really good job of kind of managing how I feel, my time, and kind of trying to understand when I'm out of balance because that's when things get crazy for everybody else. But as long as I can stay in balance, I'm good.

- I love that. And it's so good about kind of knowing your flow of energy of when you can be, like, creative. Or when you have to be, like, really analytical and kind of work through all of that. So you talk a lot about culture and scaling businesses, and helping organizations do that. And, you know, when I think about companies when they're in that scaling phase and they talk about it, they often talk about finance or product, or marketing. I'm curious, in your experience, where does kind of HR fit in this picture? And I have a feeling it's often probably underrated.

- It's definitely underrated, but the good news is it's becoming

highlier rated, which we love. We talk to executives about the need to balance business needs and human needs, right? So your culture's really at the intersection of those two. So business needs are exactly what you talked about. Our financial performance, products, innovation, right? Making sure we're staying relevant to the customer. All of those things are absolutely needed. But the business or the human needs are things like, I need to feel like I belong here. Like I'm valued and there's, right? I can use my strength every day. And so that's the piece that we have to find balance in. And so now more than ever, companies have to find a way to reconnect their people to the energy of the business, which can be finances and products, and, right, all of those things. But it's really about managing the human energy in the business and making sure that we're looking at that as well. And so I think HR has definitely increased its voice at the table around how we do that and how we manage our greatest asset.

- As you've worked with HR professionals to do this, is there any just like wow stories that you've come across where you could really see the impact that HR played in kind of preserving that culture or elevating that culture as they went through scaling?

- So the one that comes to mind is a mid-size manufacturing company that we were working with prior to COVID. And then they went through COVID, and we had some great culture data 'cause we'd been doing that work with them prior and seeing the progression of how their culture ratings have really shifted. But what happened with that company when they went through COVID, is literally overnight, they went from manufacturing their products to manufacturing face shields. And they became one of the largest face shield manufacturers in the country in, like, four days. And so their business changed, and their growth mindset kind of accelerated. Like, "If we can do this, we can do a lot of things." And what I saw was HR come in at a business strategy level and help them really change the employment agreement is what I call it. Like, here's what we're now gonna expect of you, but here's all of the things we're gonna do better, right, to be able to support you as an employee in a growth mindset to use your strengths to really propel our business forward. And it was just this really interesting synergy to sit back and watch that was strategy-driven, right? And financially driven. But HR was really there to say, "We're gonna change how we interview, how we onboard, how we cross-train, how we do performance evaluations, because we now are a different company." And it happened really rapidly. And, you know, I think there's a lot of companies that don't believe they can shift at that pace. And they did it. And HR was really a leading factor in that.

- I'm so excited about these stories that I hear of organizations that went through COVID and had some really great innovation that they didn't think they could have and COVID was the catalyst. And not that COVID is a good thing, I would never use it that way, but it did open our eyes to some things and the possibilities I don't think we were as

prepped for or as ready to take on. You know, as you think about that role in HR, what are some of the biggest hurdles that they should prepare for as they work in organizations that are scaling?

- Yeah, and so this is our specialty, right? We work with high growth businesses because what we're trying to do is make growth less painful. There's always gonna be pain, right? It's never gonna be smooth, but we can reduce the pain and make it maybe a little bit more fun than it would normally be. And again, HR is at the forefront of this kind of next scaling I really believe for most businesses. And it's because it's focused on communication and really, resiliency and change is, how do we continue to evolve? Because I think we went through COVID, and to your point, the thing that is really exciting but also kind of sad at the same way, depending on the companies, is we saw companies that learned about who they actually were and what they were capable of. And they've continued that trajectory. And then we saw companies who went through and actually learned where their gaps and their cracks in their foundation were. And when things started to turn, they kind of went back to their muscle memory of before, and they didn't take the opportunity to change. And I think that's the saddest piece is you had that opportunity, you now saw what you were capable of, and we went back. But where HR and the strategy around HR and really tying it to how they elevate the business strategy is around that communication and change. We're doing more change and resilience workshops for leaders on how do I drive effective change through the way I communicate, right? Through how I talk to people about this, right? The language even that we're using to help people be more resilient and understand it. And so as the business grows, your strategy and your communication framework have to grow as well. And they have to evolve with the business. And most businesses grow quickly, and those things tend to be lagging. And that's where a lot of the pain comes from. And then the other thing that I think HR has got a huge lead in is leaders also have to be evolving 'cause the global risk they're managing, the employee environment right now, and what they're asking from leaders, we haven't necessarily invested in taking the time to get our leaders ready for that. And I think HR has gotta be at the forefront, saying, "We don't have leaders that are ready for today. We certainly don't have them ready for tomorrow. And it's up to us to invest in them and get them ready for it."

- You talk a lot about real conversations, communication, and how that's gonna help during change. You know, I suspect you've had some real conversations with HR along the way as you've gone through consulting and helping organizations scale. What are some of those conversations that led to, you know, breakthrough moments with HR teams to really understand the impact that they can have?

- Yeah, so just to be clear, one of our core values is raw authenticity. So we're very upfront about what you get when you work

with us. Because I give the analogy, and I think this also pertains to HR in organizations, is the analogy of a personal trainer, right? You don't hire a personal trainer to give you a bowl of ice cream in the remote. And you don't hire a company like ours or, right, you don't ask HR to step in and help you if you're just looking to do the same things you've always done, right? You need that internal partner that is going to challenge your thinking, that has a pulse on what's going on in other companies, right, and in the industry. And so we want companies to look at their business from that outside in perspective to remove their own bias, their own egos and emotions because you're so close to it. And that's why I think it starts at the top. But HR tends to have such a pulse on the organization that if they're given the voice, most of them will say, "Hey, we're not looking at this the right way," right? Or, "You guys don't actually know what's happening on the ground. Like, let me tell you what we're hearing." And so our latest book, "The Culture Climb," we wrote it not for HR people. HR people love it. We wrote it as a gift to HR people to give to an executive to help them understand why they need to care, right, about culture and the things that are, because we need it to be written from a business standpoint for them to actually engage in the conversation.

- It's interesting that you say business standpoint, 'cause when I think about HR, I think for a long time we've had this conversation around let's get a seat at the table, let's get a seat at the table. I think we have a seat at the table now. I think that has changed. I think what's still continuing to change is this idea that HR doesn't have a business mindset. I'm not saying that you say said that, but I think that we're still kind of challenging that idea around, does HR have a business mindset, and can we play in that space? We absolutely can, 'cause we bring a very unique perspective. How have you helped HR professionals, beyond writing such a great book on it, have those conversations where they come to the table and they start connecting those dots around, "Hey, if we onboard this way, we can scale this way, and we can reach the revenue we want." Because I think sometimes having, making that leap for some HR people can be difficult.

- Right? So this is a great question. I got asked this yesterday, and my response was, "We talk a lot about, like, where does culture and HR, all of these people things sit in our strategy," 'cause we're going into strategic planning cycle, right? In Q4, every company is gonna do this. And they're wondering, like, is this a separate planning, right, for culture and everything else? Or is it just part of our strategy? And the way we describe it is, your strategy is focused on growth, right, and transformation. And that can be new products, but it also can be transforming the way we work and can be efficiencies and profitability, right? So there's a lot of different things when you think about it. Where I think HR can come in and really show their value, even at a higher level, is when we're working on the strategy, HR's the one seeing all the issues and obstacles, and ceilings that we're going to hit that's going to get in the way of our

strategy. And not in a negative way, right? But they're saying like, "Okay, this piece, or this group of people that we need to scale, were not cross-trained," right? "And they're not ready," or, "We don't have the right leaders in place on that division to get us the results you're talking about." So we need to do some work from a leadership standpoint, right? I think HR's voice needs to be, where are all the obstacles so we can see 'em now and we can plan them into the strategy versus hit them down the road, and then it's a reactive thing and we typically blame it on a lot of other things. So while I don't, you know, want HR to just always be the one that's saying here's what's wrong and here's what's not gonna work. I think if we take it from an approach of here are the ceilings that we're gonna hit as we try to hit those strategic items, I think then all of a sudden they're seen as like a partner. Like, you get the business side of things, right? So sometimes it's how we come at it. It's not whether they're capable or not. It's how we lead them where we need them to be, right? It's change management from an HR standpoint too.

- If you didn't pick up on what she said, I kinda wanna rephrase it 'cause I I think there was some, there was a nugget in there that I think is really important. And you talked about being able to highlight the obstacles and the challenges to get ahead of it. And I think some people could hear that and go, "Oh, well, again, HR is the person saying, 'No, we can't do it.'" And the way you described it is a little different, and that's why I wanted to highlight it. It's not about, no, we can't do it. It's if we want to accomplish this, if we want to be successful, here are the things we need to consider and get ahead of. Because so many times HR ends up being reactive, like you said, to things that are happening in the business and we have this really great unique perspective. So I really like that you shared that because I think it's important to understand it's not us saying no, it's us saying yes, and here's how we do it.

- It gains that respect in a different way because you're still focused on the business outcome, but you're saying there are some things that are gonna impact the business outcome, so let's talk about those now.

- Yeah. As you have worked with organizations, how have you helped them think about the employee as an individual during this growth and scale process through all the things that you've talked about? You know, I think we could, that growth mindset for employees could be overshadowed a little bit at the individual level when we're thinking such big scale.

- Right? So back to when I talk about the strategy and communication framework, it's actually about the individual. It's how we take what's up here, right, at the high level strategy, and how we get it down into the organization, which is what most organizations struggle with. And when we talk about that, it's creating the communication framework

that allows the space for each person in the organization to have a place where they go, right, to feel connected to that. And most organizations don't take the time to do that. We talk a lot with our clients about creating space, and creating space can look a lot of different ways, but it's, are we creating space for these conversations or are we just hoping they happen in the chaos, right, of everyday life? That's never gonna happen. And so, where do we need to create more space? And when we use the word space it again, language matters. It doesn't feel so daunting, and it doesn't feel so like, we need to take care of the people. Well, right? Okay, my defenses are up as an executive because of course I wanna take care of the people, right? Or I wanna connect with the people one-on-one. But if we say let's create the right spaces for people to feel connected, that's a different cultural approach. And I don't think we're creating enough spaces in organizations. People are running on autopilot 150 miles an hour, and we're just, like, surviving every day instead of actually turning on our brains in a different way and helping solve problems. Because the number of examples we've seen in companies where, when we've created the right spaces, where ideas and solutions have come up to customer issues and to product issues, but if we don't ever stop and ask people for their perspective, right, we're trying to answer it at the top, where we're disconnected, right, from where the real issue is. And so I think HR can help to create those spaces and bridge those gaps.

- I love that. I couldn't agree more. You know, I have this question in our list here because I think it's always interesting to learn from people's mistakes. You know, so many times in my own career, I've had these catalyst moments where I've gone, "Oh, I made some great mistake," or I had some failure, and it really helped move me forward. So I think about every, you know, every leader, whether you're in the business side or the HR side, has those oops moments, right? Where you've gone through this journey of scaling, and there was a misstep. You know, what are some of those that you've heard of, and how have you helped organizations pivot when they've had those moments?

- So if you dig to the root, right? Sometimes the symptoms are different in the what the whoops and, you know, the mistakes are, but I even myself, I can, is it the wrong hires? The wrong hires in the leadership positions. And again, not bad people. So I'm not talking about, like, people that are horrible and we shouldn't, just the wrong hires. Meaning, we promoted somebody, we hired them into a role that was a leadership role, and they weren't ready for it or they didn't actually like leadership, which happens a lot, you know? Your best sales person is not your best sales manager kind of thing. Or hiring people from the outside, right? That you've taken a chance on or because they're a really big producer or they've got a lot of experience, but they're not the right hires. And so the biggest impact on culture because we talk about culture being a fabric, right? You're all equal threads in the fabric, whether you're an executive or you're

somebody, you know, on the plant floor, is you bring the wrong person in and it can do a lot of damage if you don't catch it soon. And so we talk a lot about in the hiring process is shifting from kind of a culture of fit, like finding people that fit, and I get the values, and we do a ton of values work, so that's important, but we need to look at a culture of contribution instead of just fit. And so, how are they gonna contribute? And I just had this, I was talking, I was interviewing for a board position for a for-profit company. And I said, "How do you think I can contribute to the board?" And they were like, "That's a really good question. No one's ever asked us that before." Well, I'm like, "Well, if I'm gonna take the time to do this and you want me on, like, I have to bring something to the table that you need or that will be different than what you've had in the past." And so I think when we don't focus on that contribution piece, number one, we limit our diversity, right, in how we think and our diversity of thought our diversity, right, of all of the factors. But I think that's the biggest thing right now is, how are we bringing people in that contribute to our culture and help us think, act, and interact in a different way?

- As you think forward to businesses, as they continue to grow and evolve, and adapt to new challenges, and, you know, we continue to talk about the future of work, how do you envision the role of HR changing or adapting to support both company growth and that cultural maintenance?

- So we've talked about, you know, HR having a seat. HR needs a voice, and it needs the strategic voice at the table. You know, some of that's gotta be earned, right? We've gotta, like we talked about, like, we've gotta come in and really understand the business outcomes. And so I think that's the most important thing because the people components are no longer these separate initiatives, you know, three levels down in the strategy that HR owns in their strategy, they need to be at the strategic, the top level of the organization, and they have to be just built in to all of the other business outcomes that we're trying to drive, is where is the people side, right? The human needs and business needs conversation needs to happen for every single strategic goal that you have for 2024. I think HR also needs to be driving different conversations in the organization. So while it's sometimes hard to influence up, I think we can influence across and we can just model the behavior. And so creating those spaces and, you know, having an HR team that gets together and really says, how can we drive different conversations even at this level and down in the organization to really feel like we have a pulse of what's going on? And then, the last one, which I think HR people are great at already, but just continuing to educate yourself, because the more you educate yourself on the business side of things and the HR side of things, the more confident you're gonna be in the moment, right? Challenging and talking about the obstacles, listening to things like this and saying, "You know, there are other companies dealing with what we're dealing

with, and here's what I'm hearing, and I think we should try something different," has a lot more credibility than just, you know, "We need to do something different. Something's broken and wrong." You're bringing that outside perspective, almost like an internal consultant would. And I think that's what's gonna really change is when they can bring those resources to the table to help the business understand.

- I think it's such an exciting time to be in HR. I really, really do.

- 100%.

- As we wrap our conversation, this is the "HR Mixtape" after all. So what's your favorite track right now that's giving you inspiration?

- Okay, so there's, I love this question, by the way. So I'm a music junkie, so it was just like asking me to pick my favorite kid just to be clear, which I can't do. So my first one, I have two. So one that pumps me up is "Legendary" by Welshly Arms. So most people haven't heard of it, but if you just need, you're out on a walk, you're on a run, like, you just need that like beat that's just gonna make you feel like you're a superhero, that's that song. And then the one that, like, on a bad day or I just need kind of more of the calm inspiration is "Be Okay," by Lauren Daigle. She just released it just a couple weeks ago, and I've listened to it, like, seven times a day for the last couple weeks.

- Jamie, what great suggestions, and thanks for taking a few minutes to chat with me today.

- Thanks for having me.

- 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.