

Dynamic Foresight in HR: A Deep Dive with Dr. John Austin

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Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Dr. John Austin, the Dean of the University of New England Honors College and a partner at Dynamic Foresight. John, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

John Austin: Absolutely. My pleasure.

Shari Simpson: So we are here at SHRM at 24 and we're on the expo floor. It's such a great day. It's the last full day of the expo. So I'm so glad that we were able to do this. You know, you have an interesting background. You spent much of your career working on issues of change leadership, but you changed to what you're doing now and shifted your focus on strategic foresight. Tell me about that.

John Austin: Sure. And to be clear, I still do change leadership. I love it. It's been what I've been working on my full career. And really what it is, is that a lot of my writing has been in the area of change. So it's what a lot of people know me for. And for your audience, probably it's that I did work with I wrote the report for the Sherham Foundation on leading change for HR professionals. Yeah. And so I still do that. I love that. I will never say no to helping organizations help their employees become better change leaders. In the background for the last 18 years, I've also been doing work in the foresight field. The only thing is I only wrote one book chapter on it, and that was back in 2015. But back in 2006, I started working for a strategic consultancy that was known for scenario planning and managing uncertainty. And through that work, I started to realize that this foresight work, based on my organization development background, was really transformative in the way it helped change the framing of leaders and their mindsets towards creativity and innovation. So really, since then, I've been trying to figure out how can you take this tool, which was designed for strategic planning, and really use it in a way that is less labor intensive and more cost effective as a way to really help transform leaders mindset. So that's why I'm so excited about it. I see it as something that works as well as a lot of the OD tools that we have to do this. It just was developed outside of organization development.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. How do you help employees get to a place where they can be comfortable living in uncertainty? I feel like going through, you know, the height of the pandemic and the speed of change that we live in now, there's a lot of uncertainty all the time. How do we help our employees live in that?

John Austin: Well, that's a great question. And I think the first thing to think about is where that comes from. And we There's something called the ambiguity effect, which is that we run away from uncertainty. We really try to avoid it as much as possible and uncertainty creates anxiety. Once you realize that that's kind of about who we are, it's sort of a natural thing. A lot of what we want

to do is try to find ways to reduce that anxiety around uncertainty. This actually happens at the organizational level as well. When organizations talk about lowering risk, it's useful to remember that the risk is still going somewhere. They're just offloading it outside of their organization. And to the same effect, when we try to avoid uncertainty, the uncertainty doesn't go away. We just don't look at it. So what I would say, that's kind of a long setup to a really quick answer, which is really what we want to do is look directly at the uncertainty and engage with it. And that really gives us a level of control over understanding what we should be looking at to monitor it and do that type of work.

Shari Simpson: It's the same concept, I think, as an individual living in their feelings in the moment, right? Like if you're in a tough meeting and you're starting to feel angry or anxious or sad or frustrated, you know, how do you acknowledge that feeling and not try to shove it down and acknowledge that it's happening and kind of go through it? Is that similar?

John Austin: I would say so. And this is actually where it connects with change as well. It's because it's that fear of the unknown that really gets in our way. And so whatever we can do to reduce that unknown is something that really helps. And that's where I think the dynamic foresight work, it gives us a tool. to understand and make sense of uncertainty, and in some cases actually benefit from it by seeing opportunities in that.

Shari Simpson: We've talked on the podcast before about resiliency, and I think that's really important. I think you have a different perspective to add about adaptability. How do we breed adaptability in our organizations?

John Austin: So one of my partners that I work with right now, Justine Bassett, is an expert in design thinking. And foresight and design thinking go well together. And what I think we can borrow from design thinking as it relates to resiliency is starting with that notion of empathy and understanding. And if you are in an HR professional, understanding that there's a reason that people are anxious and trying to understand it from their perspective is a great starting point with that. And I would say one other thing about resiliency in organizations is that we spend so much time trying to predict what's going to happen and getting frustrated at our inability to do it. That actually sometimes creates more of a fragile organization where we're putting all of our bets on one future. And so one way that you can build some resiliency is getting people confident that They're really preparing their organization to be future-proofed, right? To work no matter what the world throws at them. And that gives us this confidence that I think really does help with that.

Shari Simpson: Do you have an example of where an organization has used Foresight and it's made such a significant impact for them?

John Austin: Yeah, I'm trying to think of sort of the one that I really would like to talk about. Initially, it might not sound like an HR one, but I actually think it is. Okay. And that is I've worked with a organization that served the health, they sold products to in the

healthcare field. And I actually worked with their sales organization. And we did sort of future design work. Not for their organization, but for the organizations they served. So we just developed that their sales force developed a whole bunch of futures for their customers to understand their customers. And what this allowed that sales force to do is to go in and speak with their customers instead of as a sales person, as a strategic partner, who in many cases understood the future of their customer's industry better than they did. Uh, and where the HR angle on this comes in as well as what we found is that actually also increased the engagement and the excitement of the sales force that they really felt like they were partnering to help their clients, not just by selling them a product by help, but by helping them think strategically. I think that was an amazing use of this and I really enjoyed it.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, I mean, if you think about, you know, as HR professionals, we get inundated all the time with sales pitches and technology and all sorts of consultants and stuff that they want to help with our organization. And if those conversations can be that valuable to us, I mean, that's a great partnership to know that we have somebody who's thinking ahead and thinking strategically as they walk into our organization. And it's not just about the sale. You know, you build that relationship with that person. So that's a great example. I love that. You know, um, what are some examples or trends that you've seen HR professionals track over, you know, recent years? And as we go forward, what are some things that, you know, you're already seeing that you're like, Hey, HR really needs to be paying attention to this.

John Austin: Yeah. So there's, um, This is an interesting moment to ask that question. This is now the third professional conference I've been to in the last month and a half or so. And I swear that I've just gone to three AI conferences. Everyone is so focused on AI as the big thing. in the big trend. And I don't want to downplay that. It is really important for us to understand it and to really work with that in some ways. But I do have a sense of sort of, as someone who looks at trends, it might be taking up all the oxygen in the room right now. So there's two things, two trends that I'm seeing when I talk to non-HR audiences, as they try to understand their futures, that I think really might be interesting. One of them is, and this might not be a surprise to your audience, but that one of them is that there does seem to be something fundamentally different about employees who are now just entering the workforce. And one of the things that stands out to me because of my background in organization design, I do think there's something real about the career intentions of new employees that may not be interested in the career tracks that generations before them have had. And I think organizations that can get ahead of that could really benefit. And then the second one is another thing that was taking up all of the oxygen before AI. And I do think it also represents a fundamental shift. And that's the return to work and the work from home discussion. I do think that we're in the midst of a uncertain readjustment of the role of work in a person's life. And

that's an uncertainty. more than a trend that I think we all need to study and be aware of. And the one thing I would say about that is I see a lot of leaders in organizations assuming that there's something about this that is just a fact. Yeah. That really doesn't resonate when you talk to any of your friends and how they see what's happening. Yeah. So that's a good to me, a kind of a sign that there's something bigger there.

Shari Simpson: That last one that you mentioned, I'm curious, do you think that that shift is unique to the United States? Because as we look at other countries, they are more cognizant of things like parental leave, vacation time, lunch breaks, all that kind of stuff. Do you think this is kind of our own little revolution per se, maybe?

John Austin: That's a really good point. Certainly in my work in Europe, there's much more, there's more of a legacy of flexibility built in and sort of policies around that. So you might have a really good point there. And yeah, I would say it's, It might be one of those things would be useful for us to study our colleagues. It's coming from a U.S. centric reaction to understand that.

Shari Simpson: How do you see foresight and change management working together?

John Austin: One of the things we talk about in change management, and actually change leadership as well, is you've heard the statement that most change fails. I don't really like that statement because really what it is is some parts of your change will succeed and some won't. The leader is really there to sort of guide that change. And the way a successful change leader does that is constantly monitoring their local environment and modifying the change to fit it. So you want to translate that change to fit your local environment. What foresight is all about is taking a much more humble approach to being able to predict where things are going. And so if you think about that, the tools that make you good at developing foresight skills are really about trying not to force a future, but understand how you adapt. I think that's the exact same skill you need as a change leader, which is to take a change initiative and understand that you have to improvise a little bit to make it work in your local area. And I would also say for an HR professional who's part of a change management team, I would challenge that person to make sure that they are open to the feedback that they get about how a change process needs to be modified in different parts of the organization.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, I've talked on the podcast several times, so our audience will be familiar with this. But when I think about communication that we have to put out, you know, even in my time frame in HR, there was a point in time where I was having to slide flyers in the back of bathroom stalls. Because that was the best way to get in front of our employees. And now when I'm on stage talking about communication, I'm like, have you thought about TikTok? Have you thought about a private YouTube link? Have you thought about a texting system? It's such a good point to think about meeting them where they're at and being willing to flex and to show up in maybe a way that isn't comfortable or isn't the norm for your generation or your

environment. So I think that's really good. How do HR professionals learn this concept of foresight? How do they develop that skill? I don't see a lot of people talking about it, so it's definitely not something that's in HR curriculum.

John Austin: Right. Well, it's, you know, one of the things is foresight actually is kind of a rebranding. I think back when I, it was really what people mostly talked about was scenario planning, which was one approach to this. And so what's happened is all these other people who are doing work in this area and using other tools, it's all sort of come together. So it's kind of a newer word, first of all, with that. Anything that's about future proofing your organization could kind of fall into that category. The way I like to think about foresight is to just make a quick distinction between forecasting and foresight. So forecasting is trying to predict the most likely future. Forecasting is trying to, I'm sorry, foresight is trying to anticipate the range of possible futures. So foresight doesn't replace forecasting, it just makes it better. And I say that because when you think about what we can do in HR, is can you think about ways that you can insert discussions of uncertainties into other facilitations that you do. That's one of the strongest ways to just get the conversation going in your organization. It doesn't take much effort to do that. At a bigger end, you could actually develop customized futures for your organization. Once you have those, you can modify them very easily and you can use them to stress test a lot of the things that are going on within your organization.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. Have you ever run into an HR person who's who's using this tactic and the response they're getting from leadership is I'm trying to think of the right word here, but like that they're being sensational or that like they're like, oh, that's really not going to happen. We don't need to think about that.

John Austin: Yes. And you can go backwards in time as a way to react to that. So a lot of leaders are confident that they know what's going to happen in the next five years. I had this great interaction just last week or a couple weeks ago with a community bank that we're starting to do some work with. And one of the leaders in this bank was speaking with another banker about this from another organization. That other banker said, we're bankers. We bank. It's so easy to predict what we do. What do we need this for? And I think that is sort of a common reaction to that. And so the response to that would be, OK, well, let's let's go back five years. What were we right about what we predicted would happen? And, you know, that's probably enough. Yeah. And then the other part of that from a from a revenue perspective is for many of your organizations, the more that you, if you can just see a shift six months before your competitor, what sort of a strategic advantage would that give you? Right. And that's what we're talking about very often when we do this work.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. You know, one of the things that HR is uniquely positioned to do is to be a really great strategic partner to the business. I think, I think it is our next, talk track, you know, for so long it was, you know, getting a seat at the table, right? Now we

have a seat at the table, but we're not often leveraged for our expertise. I think it's one step further. I think we need to be leading the table and bringing that strategic conversation because we have visibility into all parts of the organization. How have you used foresight in your conversations with HR leaders to help them align their strategy with really what the business is wanting to do so that they show up as business strategists who have HR skills.

John Austin: Yeah, right. So one of the recommendations that I have on that is think about what you do with the new employees that enter into your HR team. One task that you might want to consider giving them is to have them build a future map for their organization. So not for HR, but for their organization. And what you can then do with that is basically train your entering employees to understand the strategic need of the organization, often better than people have been in that organization for years. So you could do that with an entire HR team as well. I just find it fun to allow your newer employees to have that confidence that they see the big strategic issues with that.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, what a great idea to make it kind of a fun activity on top of it, not so stuffy.

John Austin: Oh, I agree with that. And one of the things, this is why I'm so excited about this dynamic foresight, which is so the notion of scenario planning from the past, one of the challenges is it was a snapshot of the future taking in a snapshot in the present, meaning that it took a lot of work to build the scenarios and then one month after they were done, something unexpected happens and the scenarios are useless and you have to start all over again. Dynamic foresight is a process where you can actually adjust it on the fly. You can keep adding new uncertainties, deleting them, changing the way things work. And what that allows you to do is to bring a series of customized scenarios to any workshop that you're doing in your organization. And it's just inherently interesting to put people into future stories and ask them to react to it. So it livens up a lot of the work, which is partially why I see it so helpful with the beginning of strategic planning processes, which sometimes can be really dry. This is a great way to engage your stakeholders in something fun as a way to do that.

Shari Simpson: Well, it's the same concept we use in training and development for our managers. We put them in scenarios, employee issue scenarios, and we coach them on how to handle it. So I think that's a tactic that's wonderful and it's already being utilized in other places of our organization. So it would be easy to adapt. We talked a little bit about some of the resistance. How about resistance to change? I mean, we all know that change management is something that some organizations get really well and some don't. And there's often always a group that resists change. How do you see working through that?

John Austin: Yeah. So I always also have a caveat with that, which is that sometimes we see resistance when actually what it is is confusion.

Shari Simpson: Yeah.

John Austin: So we have to be careful of that. And there's a second

thing, which I really love. There was some research that was done, I read, I think it was back in 2016, that reminded us that it's actually our change champions, that those who are with us from the start and stay with us all along, that drive change momentum more than anyone else. And when you lose a change champion, they become the strongest resistors because they've actively chosen not to support your issue. So I like to think of that when we spend all of our time trying to persuade the doubters, we may potentially lose our champions. So as in a weird way, I actually would advocate focus so much attention on making sure those people who are with you stay with you. And maybe don't worry as much about getting everyone on board. Now, of course, we want to make sure we can help those doubters, but don't forget the people who are with you.

Shari Simpson: I love that. What a good point. Well, John, thank you for sitting down for a few minutes with me here at SHRM. This was a great discussion. I'm excited to push myself even more to think about foresight and how I can bring that back to my own organization. So thank you.

John Austin: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

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