

From Young Professionals to Seasoned Experts Fostering Multi-Generational Connections with Shari Collins

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Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Shari Collins, a consultant in HR, education, and DEI with a mission to bridge connections across diverse fields. She serves on several boards, including the HR Nebraska State Council, and is an author and facilitator in DEI training.

Shari Simpson: Shari, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. As I reached out to you, you are one of few people I have ever met that spell your name exactly like me. So that in itself was important to sit down with you today. I agree. I'm so excited that you asked me. Thank you, Shari. So you have an interesting topic I want to talk about. And it's around the idea of ageism as a DEI initiative. So let's hear your journey. What first sparked your idea or your drive to follow that piece of it?

Shari Collins: Yeah, before I really even knew what ageism was, I always was advocating for young professionals in the workplace, so I always had some sort of proclivity to that. But I didn't really get interested in the topic until I experienced ageism as an older woman. Yeah. And I sadly experienced it with a company that says they do DEI work. So that really cut to the core. And I thought if they can't get it or get it right, what are the rest of the organizations doing? So that was really my impetus to get started.

Shari Simpson: You know, it's fascinating because I think so often we do focus on the younger generation. And we've reinvented what we've called them over the years, right? I think now the common terms are young professionals. But we have all these words that get used in the workplace for those that are younger. You know, I know that in my lifetime I've been called a kiddo at work. When I was like, hey, I actually have kids. Please don't call me a kiddo. That's not it. But in this topic and understanding the other side of the spectrum, there's this language that we're already using that we're not realizing is damaging. For example, asking somebody, when are they going to retire? When are you going to retire? Somehow they're obsolete. I think ageism can fly underneath the radar with DEI initiatives. Why do you think it's overlooked so much?

Shari Collins: Yeah, it definitely flies under the radar for sure. One reason I think is because it's so embedded in our culture that it happens right under our faces and we don't even know it and we don't even know that we are the ones that are sometimes perpetuating it. So that's one reason. And then back to what you said about when are you retiring, that question. So how that is also harmful is, let's say Bob has a 60th birthday, and there's a little celebration at work for Bob, because that's what we do at this workplace. And somebody asked him, so now that you're 60, when are you going to retire? That's just something that people do, and they don't realize how harmful it is,

like you said. But the other side of that is we don't know if it's the first time that said to Bob, or if it's the 77th time. And then that's when also internalized ageism comes in. When people hear it over and over and over again, then they start to believe it. Like, oh, I don't have value here. People must want me to retire. So that's also a harmful piece. What I wanted to mention too, one of the pieces of research that I really love is a study that was done by Deloitte on global DEI work. And I was first really excited when I saw the study because it said 91% of these companies globally have robust DEI strategies. So I was really hopeful and I was like, yes, we're finally getting it. And then I kept reading and only 8% of those companies have anything in their strategies training to do anything with age or ageism. So that's another reason why we can't make strides forward is because we're not talking about it. We're not doing training in the workplace about it. We're not talking about it. We're not interrupting some of those biases.

Shari Simpson: How do you think we need to make the shift from, you know, focusing on young professionals? It's not that it's either or. I'm not saying that. But as we look at the generational landscape, we do know that it's changing for us. People are living longer. They're healthier. The advancement in medical technology is changing things. The fact that our birth rates in the United States are lower than they've been is having an impact on how we plan for work. How are you seeing that all kind of play out as we have these conversations? Because I could see somebody in HR going, OK, one more ism I have to pay attention to. And I don't believe that. I'm trying to play a little bit of devil's advocate because there's so much on our plate right now. I know that's a tough question to ask. So what are your thoughts?

Shari Collins: It's a great question. But if we don't start somewhere, where are we going to be? It's just going to keep being perpetuated. And really, when we look at the definition of ageism, it's for everyone. It's not just you're too old. It's not you're too young. It's also you're too much in the middle. And especially with women and gendered ageism, there really isn't a right age. So it impacts all of us and for any of us to think it's not impacting me.

Shari Simpson: You've mentioned already a couple of phrases. I've mentioned a couple of phrases as well. What are some common phrases or you know coded language that you've heard that are kind of hidden in that age bias that we can start to uncover and You know, we can correct people in a loving, learning way of saying like, hey, let me give you some background on that phrase you're using.

Shari Collins: Yeah. I love to talk about coded language in my workshops because it's one of those that falls under the radar. We say it, we do it, we hear it, and we don't realize the impact. It's like intent versus impact. But some of those might be things like, oh, welcome to such and such a company. Are you the new intern? So nobody said, you're too young or you look too young, but that's absolutely what the message is. So that would be one just easy example. Another example of coded language would be saying, oh, we need five years of

experience to hire you here. So we're not saying you're too young for me to hire you, but we're saying basically that. And then there's the flip side of the older folks in the workplace where I've been told you should only apply for vice president roles here. I've been told you have far too much experience to work here. I've been told your hair color it's really pretty for someone with gray hair. Those kind of things. Those are all examples of coded language which have no place in the workplace. And sometimes in workshops people will say well I think they're intended to be a compliment. And in some ways, yes, they might be intended for that, but the impact is really large. They also some of those could fall under the category of microaggressions, to be honest. So there's that piece that we have to look out for as well.

Shari Simpson: So you've had the opportunity to talk to people not only in the U.S. but globally on this topic. What is the landscape not in the U.S.? What are what are other countries and other cultures experiencing in this space?

Shari Collins: Other cultures and this is a stereotype so I'll just acknowledge it with that. Other cultures have a different perspective on aging. Many cultures have utmost respect for their elders. They want to care for their elders in their homes. They think that's the biggest reward that they can have in life is caring for their aging parents or grandparents. And we so much don't have that. We're kind of a disposable society. You've served your time. Now you can go on and do other things and we'll fill your spot with someone else. But that's been generally the case when I've worked in other countries. I've spoken in Costa Rica this year, Ireland, England and Portugal. And a lot of them have that perception just of they just have a different framework or a mindset of aging.

Shari Simpson: It's fascinating because there's just so much knowledge there that I'm just continuously amazed by when I have the opportunity to sit down with somebody who has lived such a rich life and just hear their experiences. And vice versa, you know, I talked about this with somebody else the other day that I'm obsessed with Gen Z. I'm biased, meaning that I have a Gen Z that I have raised. And I'm just fascinated and excited to see what they're going to do and how they're pushing limits and asking questions and all those things. But I know that I'm bringing bias to that as well as I even talk about that, you know. So how do we get started with this? If there's like one or two actionable items that you're telling HR professionals to do, What are those? Yeah.

Shari Collins: So a few things that are what I would call easy to implement would be mentoring or reverse mentoring programs. And reverse mentoring programs are where the learning goes both ways. It's not just the mentor sharing all of their wisdom with the young professional, but then the young professional gets to share upward their knowledge as well. So reverse mentoring is a great strategy. multi-generational friendships, which sounds like super easy, but it's a real thing. In my workshops, I call it, do you have a Nancy? Because my old lady friend at work was named Nancy. She was 77. I was in my 50s when I started at this workplace. She was 77. I will never forget

how she treated me on my first day. It was a luxury sales company. So all of these people were standing in this room like watching me come down the steps to see who was the new person. Everyone staring, doing the up-downs, the first impressions, all of that. She walked up to me and said, I love your glasses. And I said, I love yours too. And she took me by the elbow and said, you'll come with me today. And she just took me under her wing. She introduced me to everyone across the city throughout the years that we worked together. And after she left that work and I left that work, she was still my bestie. And we talked every single day. She actually invited herself to Valentine's dinner with my husband and myself. That's how close. And I said to my husband, Can Nancy come to dinner tonight?" And he was like, of course, because that's just the relationship we had. But I learned so much institutional knowledge from her that I never would have learned in a booklet or a handbook or even in conversation with other people. So it's so important to break down those silos and realize all those wonderful things you can learn. So just setting up places where that can happen. One of those places where it can happen is within ERGs. Like we definitely know that they're gathered for affinity but within that affinity there's still an age range of people there so why not take advantage of it and use that as one way for multi-generational conversations. And then another way it takes a bit of planning but it's called a shadow board and it's a research evidence-based practice that you would do in a workplace and it's really setting up a shadow quote-unquote board of directors. So those people who make it onto the shadow board get a real project, not a made-up project, but a real project to work on from the viewpoint of a young professional. But maybe an executive that's older just doesn't understand. Maybe with social media or influencers or something like that, if you're in sales or fashion or something like that, but they work on those products. One of the organizations that have successfully implemented it says their sales went up 136% because of a shadow board and the CEO specifically called out and gives credit to those people who helped do that work. So that's a beautiful example.

Shari Simpson: It's fascinating and to hear your story about your Nancy, you know, it sounds like She was able to kind of usher you into some of these concepts in a very safe space and maybe not even intentionally on her end, right? But through those years and that time you got to spend with her, you had your own kind of light bulb aha moments. I don't want to diminish your relationship with Nancy, but how do we replicate that? that in our organizations? How do we help people get to those light bulb or aha moments on this topic?

Shari Collins: Yeah, I think conversation, right? We got to start talking about it. There's a real interesting study that LinkedIn did in the UK, and one in five young people said they have not had one conversation with anyone in the workplace over the age of 50. And then when you reversed it, people that were 55 and older said they have not had, 40% of them said they have not had a conversation with somebody in the younger age group over the last year. But yet, 74% of them say, we know it's valuable, but people just don't do it. So perhaps

creating those times, and maybe it's just built into the schedule. Shari Simpson: What do you say, though, to those leaders? And again, I'm playing devil's advocate a little bit, and I'm trying to think through all of the leaders I've supported over the years. And I guarantee you there are some leaders that I went to them and I said, hey, I have booked you to have a lunch with, you know, Julie, our newest employee. She just graduated college. I'd like you to spend some time with her and get to know her. That leader would be like, well, why? What's in it for me? How do we answer that? I mean, some of it's obvious, right? There is all this data we can pull in, but I'm sure HR professionals are going to hear that.

Shari Collins: Yeah. If you don't take care of your people, you're not going to have retention. So, and especially the young people, they will not stick around. They're very interested in inclusion and feeling included and their voice being heard. And if we don't figure that out, they will not stay. Where some of the older people, we were just transitioned to believe that you stayed at some place for 25 years so you could get the Golden Watch. That's just what you did. But younger people are not going to do that. So we've got to figure it out.

Shari Simpson: The Golden Watch is interesting. My dad, in his career lifetime, he got rings with diamonds in them. And it's like that's so gone, that idea that you're working for this item, you know, your Rolex or whatever. You know, you've got to spend some interesting time working in this space, in HR, in education, in DEI. Is there a different perspective in any of those fields or something that's helped shape your perspective?

Shari Collins: I think all the different experiences have just made it better for me, easier for me, because I've been able to see it from so many different perspectives. When I was a classroom teacher, I always was thinking about inclusion and making a space for the kids who maybe were a little different, the kids who weren't on the football team or that weren't the cheerleaders, for example, that had their own little group. So there's always been that piece of inclusion that's somewhere just part of my DNA. And then when I went into the workforce, I experienced some of that business of like, are you the intern kind of thing when none of that feels great. So just those experiences in different schools, when I worked with the AEA in Iowa, I was a consultant at 69 different schools. So I did with one of my wonderful colleagues, Marlon, we ran a mentoring program for first and second year teachers. So those experiences in mentoring, it was like, oh, this is the thing, right? This is what we have to do. And it was a retention strategy to keep teachers. And then when I started to work for the National Education Association, I did a mentoring program across the entire country for first, second, third year countries, first, second, third year teachers, excuse me. So all of those experiences in education, I can apply that to any industry. It doesn't matter if you are a tech company or if you are insurance or if you are legal. All of that just is a really great, vast experience that I can bring to any industry.

Shari Simpson: The education field is so fascinating because as teachers, you're forced to address differences in the classroom. You don't get the choice to decide, am I going to do this initiative or not? It's by nature of their work, they have to do it. So there's a lot, I think, HR can learn from the education field. So if you're interested in learning more, definitely go down that road if you're an HR person, because there's some fascinating articles out there around classroom management that teachers have to read and to learn about how they can be culturally responsive and some of those different things. Absolutely. You know, as you add in ageism to your DEI initiatives, how do you make sure it doesn't get lost in the shuffle, that it sees the right kind of attention it deserves? Like anything doesn't get overflexed into one area or another. Is there anything we should watch out for?

Shari Collins: It's a great question and I don't have a super great answer for that. I think all isms are very important. I think the intersectionality is very very important because not only so my identity for example being an older woman But then what if we intersected that with someone who also has disabilities or neurodivergence? How does that show up at work with the ageism piece as well? So I think thinking in terms of intersectionality is really important because there's where the power imbalance really shows up as if it's not showing up enough already with ageism. When you view it from that perspective, I think that's really helpful. I do a lot of different work in DEI. Ironically, I do joy and happiness work, which is kind of my antithesis of some of the work that I do on a daily basis. But I think connecting those dots is really, really helpful. And not just saying we only have to look at ageism, but incorporating it with many of the other things that we're doing.

Shari Simpson: Well, that intersectionality piece is so important. You mentioned ERGs and I love that idea of, you know, taking your women's ERG, for example, and then breaking out that sectionality and say, hey, you know, we're going to do a workshop on ageism for women. Yes. And hey, or we're going to do a workshop on ageism with women who have been recently diagnosed as an adult with ADD. Like there's all those different types of intersectionality that show up and impact our employee population differently. You know, as we wrap up our conversation, what's one misconception around ageism in the workplace that you wish you could just erase from everybody's mind?

Shari Collins: Probably would be the piece of internalized ageism, where we just don't know how impactful those things are that we're saying to people. And then when they start to believe them, the other outcomes that come with it. It can be really, really troubling. So I think that's probably the piece, just because we don't know the impact our words, our actions and our thoughts are having on other people. So I think that's a big piece. Also, just the stereotypes that we keep bringing up. Actually, one of the action steps is to stop using generational terms in the workplace, believe it or not. We need to stop calling out Gen Z or boomers or whatever because those are just loaded with stereotypes. So rather than using those, just say younger

or older. And I can get through like a 90-minute workshop without using any of those generational terms. That's usually how I wrap up. I say, did you notice anything I didn't say? And people are like, you didn't use the terms. I'm like, right, because then I go into the explanation. It's just another way to other. It becomes us versus them. And again, it's just that stereotyping piece. So that may be something to leave with your listeners as well.

Shari Simpson: Well, Shari, this was such a great discussion and an important topic for us to think about, especially with all the data that we talked about that, you know, the changing landscape of our workplaces. So thanks for sitting down with me. Absolutely. Thanks for having me, Shari.

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