

## # Swell AI Transcript: Navigating DEI Challenges: Mindset, Data, and Psychological Safety with Desmond Lomax

Announcer: 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.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Desmond Lomax. He is a seasoned clinical mental health therapist and senior consultant at the Arbinger Institute. With over 20 years in law enforcement and corrections, he specializes in EDI work and facilitating change through outward mindset workshops. Desmond also serves as an adjunct professor in forensic social work at the University of Utah. Desmond, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Desmond Lomax: My pleasure. Thank you.

Shari Simpson: I'm so glad I was able to catch you on the floor here at ATD 2024. It has been an amazing conference and it looks like you've had a lot of traction in your booth and you've done a session. How's your experience been?

Desmond Lomax: Good. Every year, ATD, for me, becomes more like home, like a comfort level. There's people that have seen me before. Arbinger is all about humanizing the workplace. And so, our capacity and ability to engage people authentically makes our interactions a lot of fun.

Shari Simpson: I love it. Authentic engagement, authentic leadership is a topic we talk about all the time. But what I want to dig in with you is around DEI. So let's start with this. What do you think is the biggest misconception right now in DEI programming?

Desmond Lomax: The biggest, I think, misconception is that DEI is a cause that's not directly connected to performance. So, this conception that, oh, we have to do this training to make a certain group of people happy, or we have to do this training because there's five people in my organization suffering. Instead of recognizing that, people are generally lonely and disconnected in our organizations, and there's an inclusion effort that needs to happen for them. So, let's go beyond race. Let's go beyond gender. Let's go beyond marginalized people. And let's recognize people are struggling in your organization. And our DEI efforts bring them to a space where they can be seen and acknowledged and valued in a way where it improves their performance. So, there's a direct connection between performance and our DEI efforts.

Shari Simpson: You mentioned loneliness and the World Health Organization has actually started a symposium on loneliness following kind of the impact of what the pandemic has done to organizations as we live in this hybrid world. One of the things I keep hearing is, I can't get my leadership on board with DEI efforts. How do we do that if you're stuck in that kind of an environment as an HR person?

Desmond Lomax: That's a great comment. If my leadership doesn't want to get on board, then their definitions of DEI need to be better understood. We need to create definitions around the idea of DEI

inclusion that gets your leaders on board. So, if you're not on board, what's up? What are you feeling? What's going on? How do you see DEI? What's your definition of DEI? Well, DEI is just like, I'm a middle-class white male that's in a position of leadership, and DEI means that I'm the problem. Oh yeah, no wonder you're not on board. I wouldn't be on board if it was reverse. And so, we create these narratives in society, and people have a certain feeling about what DEI is. And if you don't address that definition and create a definition that is workable, no one will get on board. You know the idea is if DEI becomes an experience where people in our organization feel seen and heard and connected to And we all treat each other a little bit better. Oh, you don't want to get on board of that senior executive Like so really like like you want to be on board, but but right now. It's it's a white guilt program And who wants to get on board of that so so one of the Arbingler principles of this is If you dehumanize me, I will resist. Many senior executives feel that DEI has been dehumanizing them. And since they're in charge, they will resist. So, we need to create an inclusive DEI program that includes even the executives in the program.

Shari Simpson: What other bad behaviors, I'm going to use that term loosely, but what other bad behaviors have you seen, not just from the C-suite, but from others that are in leadership that are either resisting or maybe approaching DEI wrong? Maybe they think they're doing a really great job, but there's some behaviors you're seeing that you're like, hey, you're kind of missing the mark.

Desmond Lomax: Oh my goodness, we don't have enough time. My keynote, I had eight points. I'll talk a few of them now. One of them is that we usually create DEI programs where we have 10,000 employees. We have one person in charge of DEI. We give them a cool title. We give them a decent salary. But we give them no power to create any different change. That's a problem. Another problem is, we often create DEI programs that are like, oh, we'll do an ERG group. And we'll do those at the lower levels. I'm like, yay! People of different cultures and backgrounds can talk to each other and have parties and events and empower each other. And maybe as a leader, I'll show up and have a taco or some food with them. Or I'll show up and go, hey, I'm glad you're doing this. But I'm not included in the process. So, there's really no top-down in the organization. Like, hey, how am I impacting you as a leader? That's an inclusion process. So, if I'm a leader, and I'm not having discussions that have been normalized, where we're talking about how we're impacting each other, and that's going from the top to the bottom, then really, not only is inclusion or DEI not going to work, but nothing's going to work in your organization. Because you are out of touch with the humans in your organization because you haven't received the feedback about your impact with them. Those are all things that help accelerate our ability to have a more inclusive environment.

Shari Simpson: So this question is a little tougher. I had an interesting conversation with somebody the other day about religious accommodations in the workplace. And one of the things that we talked

about was as we go into June, which is Pride Month, and we're celebrating that diversity of gender and orientation and expression, that sometimes there are religions that conflict with those things. And so you're left in a situation where you're trying to be inclusive of both things. What advice do you have? When it comes to the employee level, I'm thinking about the HR person who's kind of stuck in this middle of trying to figure out how do I be inclusive for everybody? How do I provide a space for everybody to feel like they belong in the way that makes sense? Is there an answer to that or is it your organization has to decide, hey, we're going this direction and like jump on or get out?

Desmond Lomax: So an organization needs to have a philosophy. And I don't know if this is a complete answer. The idea is, if my philosophy is being right, I'm always going to come up short. If my philosophy is getting it right, then my philosophy is, it's okay to grow, to make mistakes, to change things, to improve things. It's okay to not be perfect in every situation, but to be curious and to have a deep understanding of what people are experiencing. Because there's no such thing as being right in that situation. That situation is no such thing as being right. So, let's create a situation where I make sure we're aware and awake to different people's experiences and let's celebrate as much of them as we can. And let's help people recognize that in this world, we all don't see things the same. And to have an expectation that as an organization, we're setting ourselves up for failure, that we have to be everything for everybody. Our goal isn't that. Our goal is to do our best to get it right and to support as many people as we can. But there's no right answer to that. It's just more of a philosophy on how I want to do the work.

Shari Simpson: Well, you hit on something that I think is so important, and it's the journey you're on. Obviously, for those that listen to the podcast know that I am a 40-year-old white female, and I am constantly reminded that there is language that I have used in my life that has racist undertones. Through my own DEI journey over the last several years, I've become way more aware of those phrases and terminology that I catch myself and I use it as an opportunity to educate other people when I hear them use phrases that are very outdated or that we shouldn't use anymore. And it has led to so many great discussions because sometimes I have that like, hey, you know what? You really shouldn't say that phrase anymore. Let me tell you about the background where it started and like why it's probably not in your best interest to use this anymore. Sometimes the reaction is like, oh, my gosh, thank you for telling me. I'm so glad I don't want to show up that way. And then sometimes there's this very weird resistance to it, like, oh, come on, I can't say that anymore. What do you do with those people that, oh, come on, you're being like, is that really an issue?

Desmond Lomax: The idea is instead of calling people out, we call people forward. So there is a cultural expectation in your organization that we are going to support each other so that we can all be better. Now, listen, here's the reality. You're a 40-year-old



Shari Simpson: What do you say to the DEI leader in that organization who goes into that meeting and walks away knowing the leadership team is not on board? Do they leave? Do they take the charge?

Desmond Lomax: No, no, no. So human behavior is a part of acceptance and rejection. This is the therapist in me. I'm sorry, but we are so hell-bent. Can I say hell? We are so hell-bent on expecting everything to go our way all the time. That is not life. That is not reality. That is not accurate. The reality is, is any time you do something different, there's going to be acceptance, and rejection. And so as a leader, I need to take them both in stride. I need to take my acceptance and rejection in stride and recognize that every rejection is just a call that I need to shape and continue to work on the work I'm doing. But it is not the end all that be all. It's a part of the human existence.

Shari Simpson: OK, I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about how we educate our managers. You know, they are often the front lines of identifying things that are happening in an organization that do not align with our DEI efforts. What pieces of coaching advice do you have to HR professionals to help coach managers to address both mindset and behavior?

Desmond Lomax: OK, so we have a whole program, the Arbinger Institute. Mindset motivates behavior. So, when I'm talking about these executive meetings and getting to know these folks, we really have to address their mindset. Because if they show up with a pervasive mindset, you're four times less likely to accomplish your goals. Research has shown this. If I show up with a pervasive mindset, I'm four times less likely to accomplish these goals. So, by addressing a manager's mindset, you'll help them do a few things. First of all, most managers are struggling with some of the people they lead. And most managers are just good humans. And good people are often blind to their impacts. So, I would start coaching managers and understanding the importance of their impact. The importance of how they show up and how they engage people is at the heart of getting the accountability and the performance they want. So, my coaching would be around, how do you show up? What's hard? Who's getting on your last nerves? Are you just solely focused on problems? If you are, how's it working out for you? Like, is it hard for you to see the humanity of another person? If it is, how's it working out for you? Do you feel people resisting you? All these are signs that your behavioral approaches are not working and a mindset approach change is due.

Shari Simpson: I'm always amazed when I talk to somebody about mindset because there's so much power in that. My three kids are have served or are serving actively in the military. My youngest is in a very progressive special warfare pipeline. He's very young. He's 18. And his mindset continues to amaze me. The things that he can accomplish and the ingenuity and the grit that comes from just making a decision on your mindset as to what you're going to do.

Desmond Lomax: Yeah. Yeah. So here's the reality. We all have histories. We all have luggage. We all show up in certain ways. I grew up in a family where a lot of times I didn't feel I was enough. And

sometimes at work, that shows up. So, there's a lot to it, right? Like my mindset comes with luggage that needs to be unpacked. so that I can be the type of leader I want to be. And if I look at my history, where I've lost a child to suicide, my spouse had cancer for 10 years, I often have a feeling that I'm easily replaced because of how I was raised. And if I bring all of those with me to work, and I'm not very self-aware of how that can impact me and impact others, I could be really having the type of impact I don't want to have. So, I think it's important when we look at mindset, we look at the origins of it and where it comes from and how, at times, in my own struggles and only difficulties that go unresolved and unhealed, I'm bringing that with me to work.

Shari Simpson: Let's talk about data. You know, for so long, I think our focus in HR was, let's look at the metrics. Do we have enough ratios correct? Do we have the right amount of black people and white people and Asians in our organization? Data is still important, right? We know that. We know that a lot of decisions are based on data. How should we be using the data that we're gathering to impact our decisions?

Desmond Lomax: Data is wonderful. I think, okay, let me just say this. If my idea is bringing more people that look different than me in an organization, if that's my idea of success, and I haven't assessed the suffering of the people that were already in my organization. So, most organizations have people that are homogenous, they look like me, and they're suffering. And I'm creating programs for people that don't look like me and the people that are in my organization that are like, what about my program? Why can't I be seen and validated? And so, we're using data to pinpoint things that aren't going to help us heal. And then we bring in people that don't look like us. And we're diverse now, but our soul and the culture of our institution is toxic. Those people are going to leave as quick as the people that look like me, they leave. So, I see organizations that go, well, we wanted to bring people in, but they left after six months. Well, that's because your overarching institution has a sense where people don't feel seen and validated and psychologically safe. So, you need to improve the safety of your organization before you can look at an attitude of something like diversity or inclusion.

Shari Simpson: I'm amazed when I talk to leaders how many don't have programs in their organizations to develop psychological safety. It blows me away every single time. Talk about that a little bit more because I think that definitely plays into these initiatives.

Desmond Lomax: So if you Google Project Aristotle, Google did a really fun project like research and they looked at what are the key indicators of team dynamic success. And they found out it wasn't tenure, it wasn't experience, it wasn't these positions, it wasn't all these things we would think it is. The number one key indicator of team dynamics and organizational success was psychological safety. Project Aristotle. Look it up. Google. Go to Google. And so, it speaks to it. So, people are like, oh, psychological safety is the new buzzword. They don't even understand. If people don't feel seen or

validated, if they don't feel they can make a mistake and that's OK, If they don't have any of that stuff going on, they are going to struggle. And it's going to be hard for them to connect with other people. So, a little tidbit. This one's free. Most people show up at work with a fight-or-flight response. They show up at work with fear, and that triggers their fight-or-flight. But anytime my fight-or-flight is triggered, it impacts my social engagement. My ability to socially engage. So, we're not addressing fight-or-flight. We're not addressing psychological safety. But yet, we have high levels of accountability and interaction with people who are going to struggle with all that accountability and interaction because they don't feel safe. There you go. There's your research in a minute and a half.

Shari Simpson: Let's talk about AI. I feel like this, you know, just being at the conference and looking at the amount of AI content right now that exists, everybody's trying to figure it out. Do you have any forward-looking advice for how generative AI is going to impact our efforts in this area?

Desmond Lomax: Use it to create your outlines. Use it to get quick information. Use it to find studies in a split second. There's so many amazing things to use it in. Don't use it to replicate your soul. That's when we've gone too far. When we allow AI to create images and thoughts and things that make it seem like there's a person doing it, and there's not a soul connected to it, then I think we've gone too far.

Shari Simpson: All right, this is the last question, but I think it's a tough one. Coming out of the pandemic, we saw a rise in hiring of DEI leaders. Now we're seeing those leaders be let go. What's going on?

Desmond Lomax: People mean well. There have been some social issues where sometimes in society and in politics, we create problems to develop a solution. And this past two years, where the year and a half or two years before that, DEI was a great opportunity to reconnect people and bring people together. In the past two years, it's been politicized. And it's become a problem that needed a solution. And as a part of the solution of trying to say that DEI is a bad thing, it's really created a lot of fear in organizations who don't want to be involved with anything that's bad. Now, the need is still there. So, I don't have to call it DEI. Call it inclusion. Call it just helping people not feel lonely. Call it a program where people come in and they are a part of something special. But DEI has been politicized into being bad, and most companies want to distance themselves from something that is bad. The DEI issues have grown. And so, there's going to be a reckoning. And the reckoning's going to directly impact your performance. So, either you redefine it in a space where you can grow and continue to grow as an org, or recognize that sometimes when things are this political, you have to make a really key choice to support your people.

Shari Simpson: What great advice to rebrand it. I mean, something that simple could have such a huge impact and could really help you describe or paint a picture or get that buy-in from that C-suite.

Desmond Lomax: Yep, yep. It is okay. Get rid of the names. If they don't help, get rid of them.

Shari Simpson: All right, Desmond, this was such a great conversation. Thanks for taking a few minutes of your time here at ATD to talk to me.

Desmond Lomax: You know what? Thank you. Thank you for reaching out. As you can tell, I love what I do. So I was like, let's do this. But like to all those people out there, go to [www.arbinger.com](http://www.arbinger.com). We have a new culture report that talks about what we do and how we do it and how we impact organizations.

Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at [TheHRMixTag.com](http://TheHRMixTag.com). Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.