

- 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 Kim Crowder, founder and CEO of Kim Crowder Consulting. She is one of the country's executive leadership, diversity, inclusion and equity speakers, coaches. She has trainers and consultants as part of her organization. Kim and her team work across industries serving global organizations from leaders and executives at Adobe to SmugMug, the American Library Association, HarperCollins Publishers, and more. Kim and her team provide executives and leaders with actionable tools to build healthy people-centered workplaces long term. Kim, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Thank you for having me. Great to meet you.

- So you have this really interesting background in leadership, and diversity, and anti-racism. And you talk a lot about being courageous, and responsible, and being really intentional in your leadership style. And I'd love to start with your background. You know, you lived in Korea as a child and then in Houston, and I gotta believe that these experiences helped to shape your perspective.

- Yeah, you know, well, let me tell you what really shaped my perspective. I'm the eldest child, and I feel like as an eldest child, you know, there's a bit of leadership placed on you whether you sort of raise your hand for it or not, but I always wanted to be a good example to my siblings. Really, I'm probably the one who stayed out of the most trouble, but I probably also was the most challenging in like, "Okay, explain to me why we have to do it this way." So yeah, my mother has stories, as does my father, interestingly enough. So there's that piece that I feel like has really shaped me as a human. And then on the flip side of that, my background is in business administration and marketing. So I graduated from college in Houston, Texas. Yes, I lived in Korea as a young child in the '80s, which was a super interesting experience as you can imagine. And then did the, you know, came out of college. First job was in the sports industry, really for the city of Houston. It what is now the NRG park, like all of that. So the Astrodome, back when the Astrodome had closed down, but it was still erected. Then we had the stadium at the hall. There were a couple other areas, and focused on PR. I had an internship. It turned into a job. And the reason I mentioned that in particular is because right out of college, I had a Black woman as a boss. And that, in and of itself, for many people is a never experience, right? I got to experience that early in my career, and I saw it was possible, and I also was able to be mentored. I have two Black women bosses in my life, and I call them the Ninas because both of their names were Nina. Fast forward later on in my career I had that, but also I worked for a

man, a LGBTQI+ man, in my time for a Fortune 500 company who I felt was very sensitive to things, and he was one of my favorite leaders. And so I have had the pleasure of working with great leaders. I don't know that everybody gets to say that. I've also, on the other spectrum, had the lesson learning of working for the opposite, right? You see what I'm doing here. I'm trying to phrase it in a certain way. But leaders who just were not held accountable, did not have the skill set necessary. They had the tenure, but not the skill set. And so I got a crash course in not what this looks like subjectively, what this looks like on paper, what this looks like from an academic perspective, and I believe all of that is an important piece of it. You're talking about psychology, you're talking about behavioral sciences, and that sort of thing. And I got to live it particularly as a Black woman in the workplace. And so that is where I feel like I have a unique perspective, as does my team members. I have team members all over the world who have a unique perspective about the approach to what makes a great leader and that that is not a one size fits all. That it looks differently. That we have to be aware of how our own identities and power impact the people that we lead. And so all of that to say, but when we talk about courageous, responsible, and intentional leadership, that is how I came to this as myself being a professional in, you know, in corporate America.

- I love that you started with being the eldest. I am also the eldest in my family, and you are so right that so many times we were in leadership positions in that family dynamic without volunteering for it, so I love that. You know, as you think about leaders now and the topic of equitable workplaces, I'm curious, you know, what do you think leaders are doing that maybe they think they're being equitable, but they're actually falling short. What are their blind spots right now?

- You know, one of the things, I alluded to it as I was initially talking about this, but not understanding the impact of identity as part of our own leadership and also how we lead other people and, right, and not getting that regular training and support. And so I don't know that that always falls just on an individual leader, on leadership teams. It can. Also, you know, what does the organization have in place to prepare you to build a certain workplace culture? How is an organization working backwards so that you have what it takes to be a leader that can create work environments that feel healthy, where people actually want to be, that people enjoy, and that people stay, right? When we start talking about those retention and turnover rates where people stay and that they can attract talent from around the world. And so that is one of the areas. It's not understanding maybe the complexities of what it means to be a leader, and frankly, leaning on a very specific perception of what a leader is. Often that's white men, right? And so even myself, I'll be really frank about this. Let's say I'm, you know, I'm sitting down, and doing some work, and I'm looking at research, one, I'm always questioning who was, you know,

who was a part of this research? Like, right, who did you ask? Who was involved in the questions or answering these questions? Whose perspective is this? And then the flip side, when I'm thinking about our customer, I have had over the years to deprogram myself from seeing only white men as leaders in my mind's eye. And that is not something that I think many of us, we don't even realize that we naturally do, right? And so we're then taking this idea of what leadership is from one group, when in fact we've watched countries be led by women and they're better leaders, right? When we think about COVID, like, you know. One intern, she left from me the same reasons many women leave, and they say, "I'm just burnt out. I'm over it," right? But we watched New Zealand. Watching how she led through a pandemic and they saw, I think like it was super mental the way that they saw any deaths. And some of that is attributed to her ability as a woman to see things a certain way. And so that's what I'm talking about. The richness of what leadership can be, the richness of what leadership is, but sadly, we're only taking from a small sliver of that. And how do we open up this idea so that we can eat from this whole beautiful, robust feast of what leadership could be instead of, you know, minimalizing it down to this one piece of pie?

- You know, I had a conversation with Jeff Harry a while back, and he had written an article about feminine leadership traits and how they're missing in our society. And it was really interesting because his concept wasn't like you need to be a female or you need to be a male, but just like you said, like there's all these traits and all these strengths that we're missing because we have a perception of what, quote unquote, leader looks like. So I love your analogy of just, you know, eating from the full plate of everything and not just focusing on one piece. I think it's really interesting. And it's really interesting to think about, you know, when you think of the word leader or the term leader, who comes into your mind's eye and how do you change that narrative? That's so powerful, you know, as you think about, even watching the news and seeing, you know, what leaders are being talked about and different trends and stuff, is there's definitely a narrative there that you see over and over again. And so teaching yourself not to go to that and be more open, that's such a great takeaway from our conversation. I appreciate you sharing that.

- Yeah, and that's part of the intentionality of what it means to be courageous as part of leadership, right? I say, you know, being a courageous leader equals right response, being responsible, and intentional. And so that is a part of it. And without it, we really aren't being courageous. We're just doing what is status quo.

- So for our HR professionals listening, you know, I think they obviously understand the need for diversity. They obviously are going down the road of different initiatives to help their organizations become diverse. How or what is your advice for them on having them really foster that environment where you're tapping into the power of

diversity for things like innovation, and forward thinking, and really moving their organizations forward from a business perspective?

- I would say two ways. One, to have a measurement of accountability as part of whatever the framework is going to be. And so what is being used to hold not only leaders, but your organization as a whole accountable to whatever the decision is? So if you say, "Okay, our goal is to increase retention of those who are historically ignored," right? Or who've been historically excluded. And as a side note, when we look at the data, 49% of Black employees are thinking about leaving their jobs. 49%, right? That's huge. When you think about women, and women tend to be considering leaving a job at high levels when you look at the C-suite, if I'm not mistaken. I wish I could remember. I was just looking at this data the other day. When we think about how long women stay in that C-suite, it's not much more than, I think, it's around one or two years. So it's like somewhere in between there is about as long as women are usually making it in the C-suite. And so when we talk about that, can we pull measurements based on that, right? Like, if this is going to be where we're gonna do, how do we use data like that to hold us accountable? What does that look like in our work environments? And how do we wanna stretch and grow as a workplace and as leaders so that we change that? So that's the first one. Accountability is a big one. And the second one is huge. It's self-awareness. Self-awareness is huge. If we're unable to have a mirror held up to us, and that is not always comfortable, right? I call it having a growth approach to leadership. Can I stretch? Can I hear? What does that look like for a feedback loop? How am I receiving feedback from anyone who wants to share it in ways that are of course respectful? And then when we're hearing that enough, how are we implementing what that feedback is? And so that is, in my mind, that accountability and that self-awareness is top tier and key. And unfortunately, it is often not required as part of being a leader, right? You know, that's not always the case. And then we watch organizations pay for that later on down the road. And so when you talk about this idea of innovation, the only way that we can be innovative is for people to feel comfortable sharing in a space. All of that comes from feedback, right? You think about are people comfortable sharing feedback? Are they safe if they share it? Are they safe if they oppose something to mitigate risk or to expand something, right? And when, you know, when we think about accountability, if we want people to stay in the organization, we have to be accountable to building an environment that creates that. And so all of the outcomes, if we just talk about those, if you just did those two things, right, I imagine you could find yourself in a different organization in 6 to 12 months, easily.

- The feedback piece is so interesting to me because there are so many like low hanging fruits to start that process. You know, I think about performance reviews, and typically performance reviews are, you know, you might be requested to get feedback from your peers or people that

you've worked with in the organization to include in your review. And then you sit down and have a conversation with your supervisor. Typically, you don't have your skip level, right? So your boss's boss coming to you and asking you for feedback for your supervisor. That's not very typical. But what an easy thing you could change to start creating a culture where that type of feedback and those types of conversations are more forward focused, more development focused, more based in how do we improve ourselves?

- They could be, yeah. And I'm gonna tell you why I say could. When I say could, the reason why I say could is that, and I don't know how much data is out there around this. It is something that I hear from a qualitative perspective, right, where people come in and share this information and they say what we're finding is that particularly for folks with historically ignored backgrounds, often women, is that when they hold space, and I would imagine women in general get this, and then let's add, and I'm gonna tell you why I believe this because there's actually some beautiful data around job performance reviews and we have a resource that we can share. Textio also did an amazing study on this. There's a strong Forbes article that I was quoted in along with Kieran Snyder who is a great colleague. I can send that information 'cause I think people need to see it about how feedback is given depending on your identity. So often women are giving feedback, particularly women of historically ignored backgrounds, about their personalities and things that are not actionable. Then we hear white men are often called brilliant at higher rates than most folks. Asian men are often, are they receiving, or not? Black men don't receive as much feedback. I think Asian men receive a good amount of feedback up to a certain point. So it's really interesting 'cause it digs down into how this feedback happens. So here's why this matters to this conversation. What I have found, and actually somebody stood up at SHRM and shared this, and they said, and I myself experienced this, is they had a Black woman who was a leader in the organization and some of the folks that reported to her did not like the idea of reporting to a Black woman. I have personally been there. Like where it was stressful enough. And so that kind of thing spreads, right? People see that level of disrespect, and if there's not someone who can catch that, a leader who is responsible enough in their leadership to understand, or has that skill set available, or a sounding board available, right, however you get that, that can see that that could be a possibility. Then what we find is that that leader of historically ignored background is pigeonholed into looking like the problem when in fact that may not be the challenge. And so it is complex, it's messy, which is why I say could be, right, when we start talking about the 360 peer. But are we seeing any, you know, can we spot and kind of lean in and go, "I notice you keep calling this person aggressive. Can you name an exact example in the work?" But do you know what I'm saying? Sometimes we don't question the other folks enough about it. Or if someone in the leadership above that, you know, whoever that person is who's receiving that feedback, they themselves

have their own level of discrimination or bias, and I'm saying this from personal experience, then sort of welcome that level of feedback, right? And so I think we just have to be sensitive to understand, again, what are the nuances of this? What does it mean, especially at that leadership team level to build skill set around what it means to be courageous and know that responsibility, intentionality is a part of that? What are the skill sets needed to grow in that way? And so I think understanding that data exists around this in the ways that feedback shows up for different groups is a big piece, right? So that at least to some degree you can sort of go, "Hmm, this could be lining up with this data. Is there a deeper issue here that maybe we haven't quite understood?"

- I am anxious to see that information, and I'll make sure to include it in the show notes so that those listening can pull that up. What an interesting thing to build into how we teach leaders about conversations around feedback and performance, and as HR professionals, right? Being open and having our eyes actually opened to what's happening in our organizations. I think if you're walking away from this conversation, that's definitely a challenge to those listening is be more open to those things. 'Cause, you know, as you were talking, I was thinking back to my own performance cycles, and there have been plenty of times as a female where I have gotten very vague feedback. And when I've drilled into it and said, "Well, can you give me an example of where you've seen me do that?" it's like crickets. We should stop doing that. Stop doing that to women. Stop doing that to, you know, underserved communities. They deserve the same amount of feedback to be able to grow as anybody else.

- Yeah, and until organizations create some guidelines around that, this idea that they can even stop is not, you know what I mean? Like, there has to be some framework around how feedback is given. What's, you know, what is the accountability around that? Most folks who become leaders never receive any training on how to give responsible feedback. Were you ever? I wasn't. You know, like I didn't. I did have folks raise their hands at SHRM in the two sessions, and I saw a few organizations that said, "Yeah, we provide training," but then the question is what's the accountability? How often are you all providing that training? Is it year over year? You know, what are the, you know, what's a part of that training? And so I say all this to say is that we really do have to be more intentional. One of the things my team and I say is social media is a new accountability partner.

- It's so true. It's so true.

- Isn't it? Isn't it? Indeed.com. You know, like Monster, all the places, right, where people can go and find out information about your company. All the areas that people can totally post on social media about their true experiences. The ways that people use word of mouth, especially when you talk about folks who are historically excluded.

You know, where we ask, "Do you know anything about this organization of how you get treated when you work there?" These conversations are happening. And so it's not just, it's not only like EOC as a baseline, it's much bigger than that. And you could be headed to that, to EOC as well, right? And so, you know, it is something that organizations really should be thoughtful about. And what I believe is that, especially with millennials and Gen Zers, is that those groups are requiring it, right? Tell me the why, or asking questions, or pushing back even at the interviewing level in ways that we just had not seen from generations prior. And so the truth of the matter is, is I truly believe that organizations that are able and willing, and leaders that are able and willing, to adjust now are the ones that are gonna be here for the future. I always say don't be a Blockbuster, right, who was unwilling to bend and to be flexible around what the industry was doing. I believe people are that next wave of really deciding who, you know, like how you treat your people is a high indicator of whether or not your company's going to be valuable and is going to be around for the long term.

- Kim, I couldn't agree more. And this has been such a great discussion. I feel like we could stay on for hours and talk about all of these different things. I do wanna ask one fun question before I end our conversation. So part of your background is that you are a trained vocalist, and you use that to educate and inspire. I think it's a really unique blend of music and inclusive leadership. So I wonder if you could touch base on that a little bit and maybe give us a little bit of flavor of what it was like to sing with Beyonce as a youth?

- Oh, that's so funny. So one of the things that I have noticed about music, and you can study music, is that music can shape a mood, right? And so for any time we work with partners, no matter what kind of meeting, we kick it off with some sort of music as part of it. We also in our conversations use songs or music as a framework for the conversations because people tend to be a little softer if it doesn't feel like it's like directly at them. And so I'll give you an example. I was talking to a group of board members and C-suite members, and we were doing our inclusive branding work, so we work with organizations around that, and we were talking about what motivates people to work with nonprofits, right? Why do people do it? What, you know, what gets people going? And we did the, what do you call it? It's called the wheel of emotions. Brene Brown's. Brene Brown's, you're familiar? Okay, great. I'm saying it right. The emotions I see. I see a head nod. And so we said, "Okay, what do you want people to feel when they see your messaging?" And everybody's like, "Inspired, enlightened." And I said, "You know, what's interesting is nobody said what we consider, quote unquote, negative emotions. Enraged, angry. Why not, right? Those also are motivators for different people, right? People get angry and decide to change. People get angry and decide. And so we talked about that, and some of the people were really uncomfortable

with that language. And then we talked about Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On?" I was playing it, and I said, "Has anybody heard this?" And, you know, and we talked about how that is a song that is talking about injustice in the most beautiful way, and that it is a timeless classic. If you have not heard "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye, you have not lived. So find that as soon as possible on every platform available, right? Just YouTube it. But it is the most beautiful song. It's got these drums and, you know, Marvin's beautiful voice. And if you listen to the language, it's talking about pollution. It's talking about environmental crisis. It's talking about social justice issues. I mean, it is covering the gambit, and people can grab a hold to that. So then when we connect it to something like that, it doesn't feel as threatening. People are like, "Oh, okay, so we can have these discussions. It's okay to freely have these conversations. Here's what that can look like and it still be a hard and beautiful experience." So all of that, that's how we use music as part of the framework 'cause we just find it is a really great way to get people open to dialogue and conversation. It builds connection, right? Then when you talk about singing as a kid, I just wanna, you know. I sang with Beyonce when I was, I met her at 11. The sweetest soul that you ever wanna meet. I'll just say that. Extremely talented, always an absolute standout. Like you knew there was something with her. But more than anything, you know, Beyonce as a leader, even as a young person, was extremely clear on her vision. She had built a community that was going to support that vision, and also she was willing to do the work that it took to get to wherever she needed to go. Including lots, if you all don't know anything about a child star, lots, and lots, and lots, and lots, and lots of feedback. Lots of feedback, right? And lots of taking that feedback and deciding what works for you and what doesn't. And so even as a young person, you could see her ability to lead. And I even caught that as a child and learned from that. So that is what it was like just singing with Beyonce as a kid.

- Kim, thank you so much. This has been such a great discussion, and I appreciate you taking a few minutes of your day.

- It was a joy. This was so fun. Thank you. Thank you 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.