

## The Accountability Connection: Engaging Senior Leaders for Organizational Success with Dr. David S. Cohen

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 Dr. David S. Cohen, author, keynote speaker, and consultant in leadership, organizational behavior, and talent management.

Shari Simpson: David, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

Dr. David S. Cohen: My pleasure that you gave me the opportunity.

Shari Simpson: We're excited to have you here. You're actually going from here to do your session today. So it's perfect timing. Um, we want to talk about a bunch of stuff, but I want to start with communication and accountability. So as we think about HR leaders, how can we effectively communicate the importance of accountability to our senior executives and get their buy-in?

Dr. David S. Cohen: Well, that's an interesting first question.

Shari Simpson: Thanks.

Dr. David S. Cohen: You're welcome. The problem is that they often talk accountability, but then they don't do it themselves. Yeah. So the way of getting a senior leader to understand that people won't become accountable unless they feel they belong to the organization and that the organization is including them. So in order to get senior leaders to understand accountability, you have to ask them questions about what happened in their career when they were told by a senior leader they weren't accountable or what happened because they were accountable. How did it benefit the business? How does it benefit their image within the organization if they are accountable? And what if they let people get away with not being accountable? So what's the kind of, how, you know, the question is, how might I feel if you were holding me accountable and my colleague, I don't believe you are holding them accountable, why are you picking on me? And because they're getting away with it. And so you have to personalize it in order to get them to understand it. And I always say with senior manager, the word that captivates them is what's, how are they going to be remembered? What's their legacy like in the organization? Do you want that to be your legacy that you played favorites, that you seem not to hold people accountable or hold people accountable? And what's the consequence to the business if you do that?

Shari Simpson: Let me back up and tell you a story and then I'll ask my question. So I was in a role where I was a training and development coordinator and where I sat in the organization, there was a leader that sat in a cubicle space, like two cubicles over. And we're going to call him John. That was his name, but we'll call him John. So John regularly would be heard screening at his employees, just treating them terribly. But John always made his metrics, always. Always delivered. His team was one of the top, quote unquote, performing

teams based on KPIs. But there was no accountability on his behavior. How have you coached leadership to think about accountability holistically, where you can say, hey, we actually value camaraderie and we value respect and you're not doing that. Even though you're meeting your metrics, we're going to have a conversation about accountability.

Dr. David S. Cohen: That's an interesting question. Poor John, poor you. I always say that the way to look at it is people are hired for their skill and knowledge. They're promoted for their results and they're fired for their impersonal behaviors. So you look at John, who's getting great metrics, but he probably has turnover. He probably has fear. He probably has resentment. He has a bad reputation in the organization. Nobody wants to join his team. People would probably go to HR asking for transfers to other teams. You're nodding your head yes.

Shari Simpson: This sounds like John? All those things might have happened for John.

Dr. David S. Cohen: Okay. what's the consequence, right? What's the consequence? First of all, is John being held in the performance review accountable for his behaviors? Because you can have all the KPIs in the world you want, and all the metrics you want, but if you're not measuring the behaviors, and the problem is, is the way you use a scale when you measure behaviors. Because people say, you know, doesn't meet, meets, exceeds, exemplary, whatever it is.

Unfortunately, that's not how you measure behavior. Because I can do it once in front of you, if you're my boss, and you think I do it to everybody. The real measurement is how many times during the last year I've had an opportunity to do that behavior, and how many times I've actually done it. So if I've done it once in front of you and 50 times didn't do it at all, I probably should be fired. So by putting it in a context of frequency, and since it's a behavior that's expected, take out the measurement of exceeds because you're supposed to do it a hundred times out of a hundred times. You're not supposed to say, well, if you do it 80 times and offend 20% of the people, that's okay. That's beating and it's exceeding if you do it for everybody. Cause then I can be selective who I do it with. So it's really a lot of people misunderstand when it comes to behaviors that especially values. When you measure value, it's black and white. You have to do it every day, all the time, and you can't slip up if it's a value, because then it's not important. Because the value is important. So stop measuring them by meets, exceeds, whatever, you know. It's either you do it or don't. And if you want to be a kinder organization, it's either you don't do it every time you're supposed to do it, you're in a development mode, which is good for new employees, or you do it all the time. So it's a three point scale, but otherwise people get away with not doing it.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. It's such a good point. Take out that, that exceptional that, that, yeah, it's, it's, it's a great, it's a great suggestion. Um, How does HR start to think about building accountability into their organization from day one? As new hires come

in the door and you're going through the onboarding process, what kind of conversations should we be having with those employees?

Dr. David S. Cohen: Well, I always say if you've done a proper interview, you've already know how to have your first performance conversation. Because you hire this person based on knowing that they're good on some things and probably need development in others. And since most people today, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, I was just reading last week, there were 4.2 million people left their job in May. Wow. So, you know, this war for talent is still going on. Yep. They said 97% of those they surveyed said if they were given a development opportunity, they probably would have stayed. So day one say, we know, we hired you because we think you're really going to be good at the job. Nobody's perfect. Explain to them what their assignment is. Explain to them what it means to be successful. Explain to them the values, the behaviors, everything else. And then ask them, what area would you like to have development in? What area? I noticed from the interview that you need a little bit of help on, you know, team relationships. So what I'd like to do is, one of the guys on our team is really, really good at that. And I've asked him to mentor you on that. Day one. why wait three months and say, I got you. I knew it was going to fail. And instead of waiting to see them fail, because by the way, they probably made a decision to leave already say to them, I want to make you successful. But the other thing you have to do is be really clear. You can't say, I want you, let's say it's a talent acquisition person and you want them to increase, you want to increase our visibility on LinkedIn. Now, what's that mean? So I got 10 more people to join us on LinkedIn. I technically increased it. No, be real specific. Say, I'll find it acceptable. As a matter of fact, really outstanding if you get a thousand new contacts. If you get 1,500 new contacts, I think you're doing an incredible job. Anything over that, you'd be exceeding my expectation. So on day one, you've taken any arbitrary feeling out of it. And then the other thing that people do that allow people to get away with not meeting their goal is they, and I'll talk about this tomorrow, they allow, you know, the, what I call the corporate salute where somebody crosses their arm and says, blame them. Right. They get away with blame them so I can meet my expectations because you know, it's not mine. I'm a Teflon employee. Don't allow blame them. If they weren't helping you, you're supposed to find another way of getting it done. Yeah. That's accountability. So explain to them what you'll accept and what you won't accept. What are the behaviors? What are the expected outcomes? And it's not the little Prince and Machiavelli. It's you can only get those outcomes within the context of our behaviors. If you get them outside, we're going to have to have a real conversation. But I know up front. And if you do it that way, and somebody's not performing, you can simply say, I mean, you know, I have an expression I always use, if you treat somebody like an adult, they might act that way. You know, at the end, you can say, why did you choose not to want to work yet?

Shari Simpson: Yeah.

Dr. David S. Cohen: I gave you the ground rules, play within them. And that's a big problem with accountability and empowerment. People don't realize they work only with confinement and ground rules. Empowerment isn't, I can go out and change all the products we're gonna do. I gotta do it within what we're doing in the organization.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. The good thing about, an additional good thing about what you just shared is, as we look at Gen Z coming into the workforce and the questions that we've been getting from Gen Z about, when do I get promoted? Like those things, they're very quick to want to know their path. And your model that you just shared, right? Get in front of them with expectations, with development opportunities, with how we think about accountability in our organization. you're going to circumvent those, Hey, when am I getting promoted questions? Because they'll have a path and they'll know kind of where they're supposed to go.

Dr. David S. Cohen: Yeah. Yell, lay off that yellow brick road for them. Hopefully their parents haven't come to the interview with them because I keep hearing that 20% of interviews lately, people come with their parents. Now I heard this 15 years ago and I laughed at it. So one day I was sitting in a client's office and two parents showed up and the, the, uh, talent team had to say to the parents, you know, it was like a doctor's waiting room, wait over there. We'll interview them by themselves. But, um, no, I think that that's really important because, you know, the big joke is you hire an MBA. They want to know when they're going to be CEO. Well, you can be CEO, but you're going to have to prove yourself and go through all these steps. And if you're lucky here, maybe 20 years. Oh, but by the way, the last three CEOs had no university degree and came from the mailroom and worked their way up.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, absolutely. How do we, uh, what kind of metrics should we be looking at when it comes to accountability?

Dr. David S. Cohen: That's a tough one because every organization's going to be different. So every organization has to define accountability for themselves. What does accountability really mean? And accountability usually means ownership. If I make a mistake, I own it. Accountability is that if I didn't help somebody, then I admit I didn't help somebody. So because they're behaviors, they're harder to measure. And accountability, therefore, is not like your problem with John. His accountability was guys KPIs. So he made his metrics every time he thought he was done. So you got to set a clear measure of what your accountability is. And it's got to be looked at every three months, because if you don't look at it every three months, I learned from a guy who was a chief operating officer for one of the largest grocery chains in North America. He never finished high school. He started as a butcher when he was 19, and he said he learned his mantra from his first boss. You can only expect that which you inspect. And so, what gets measured gets done, but not how well it gets done. But if you say, this is what I expect, I expect you to communicate, I expect you to be kind, I expect you to do this, and I'm talking to your people, I'm getting feedback on it, then, yeah. And if I know

that I'm gonna talk to you in three months about it, you're more likely to follow up and do it. So, set up the measurements, and they gotta be frequent.

Shari Simpson: And it's a good example to think about why skip-level conversations are so important, while reviews that incorporate feedback from your peers and stuff like that, it's just, it makes a case for that for sure.

Dr. David S. Cohen: If it's performance reviews, I'm not an advocate of 360 unless it's anecdotal. It's time-consuming, real time-consuming, but it should be anecdotal, and it should be done by somebody hopefully outside of your department. So even if it's the HR business partner, do it for a different department so you don't ruin relationships, but do it honestly. And then it comes to the boss's responsibility of accountability for holding people to the behaviors they're supposed to demonstrate if the feedback isn't. But the bigger part is to celebrate it with those who have. because when I am, especially in the US, if I go up to you in front of your peers and say, congratulations, I really liked the way you spoke at that conference or that person, everybody listens, says I want that kind of feedback, I'm going to do that well. So it's really interesting the nuance of how you can give positive feedback and where. In Canada, You don't want to do it unless you talk to the person first, because you do not want to give them public positive recognition. It might embarrass them. So ask them first.

Shari Simpson: I love that. Well, that's just it. It plays into making sure you understand the culture you're in. As you think about how accountability has changed or how it's looked differently over over the years, how do you see the future impacting the way we think about accountability now?

Dr. David S. Cohen: What do you mean by the future?

Shari Simpson: The future of work, having remote employees, hybrid employees, having the younger generation, all that kind of stuff.

Dr. David S. Cohen: I'm not sure. I don't think it's going to. Everything's changing. AI might help it if it sets up ways of giving people advice on how to achieve certain things. It might give people, you know, AI might be able to open up a dialogue with somebody. But I think that accountability is going to boil down to human relations. Do I feel that I belong? Do I feel it's safe to ask questions? Do I feel the organization's helping me learn? If those are in place, you're going to get accountability. If you go further, where I can suggest new ideas and come up with differences of opinion, you're going to get into empowerment. And if I really feel the organization really is an open organization where I can challenge the status quo, then you're going to get ownership. But I believe it's a sequence. And the first thing is you'll never get accountability if people don't feel they belong. don't feel they're respected, don't feel they're included. So for me, inclusion doesn't, you know, it's not superficial. It's not related to any, you know, physical traits. Inclusion is an emotional feeling that I'm recognized here. And I had a client recently that downsized the organization. And one of the things we found out, Tony

and employees, people love working there, was There was enough time always in the beginning of the day, one of them would bring in donuts or something, and they'd all get coffee, and they'd sit around with the boss and talk about family, the night before, the local sports team, how they were doing, and they got to know each other as people. Well, when they downsize and cut down to have two people doing one person's job, they don't have time for that. And it was only through the discussion that they came to realize the anxiety of work was generated by not having this half hour conversation of the people I know and trust that I know they're always there while they're gone. And I can't, I don't have time to build new relationships. So, you know, it was penny wise and pound foolish to lay off so many staff because they lowered motivation, they lowered accountability, they lowered productivity, and there were some serious issues in manufacturing as a result. So, you know, it's interesting. Organizations always say that our people are our most important asset. The problem with that, if you look in the dictionary, assets, equipment. Companies that say they're our most important asset are saying, you're not human, you're replaceable, you're a cog in the wheel. Instead of saying humans are our most important, people to get the job done. Without our people, we can't get the job done. Because I say to executives, you know when to replace a machine. You know to go get a loan from the bank to upgrade your, you know, innovation. But then you downsize your organization to save money. I always say, people are most important asset the third quarter when we need to hit money on the bottom line. So we let them all go. And then when we hit the bottom line, we hire them back. So you have to be real careful about that.

Shari Simpson: As we finish our discussion, I want to ask you this one last thing. How have you seen organizations shift in how they're teaching managers about psychological safety? I ask it because in the talks that I've given this year around equipping our middle managers, I have a section in there about psychological safety, and I am consistently surprised at how many people in the room on the first time saying it to them. That that's an important component and that they need to teach it in their organizations.

Dr. David S. Cohen: So one of the things that HR is accustomed for too, or is known for, is coming out with new words or new phrases. You know, we were personnel and then we were the SHR and then we were talent management. Don't call it psychological safety. How do you feel, you know, in order to feel belonging to this organization, in order to feel that you want to get up on Monday morning and when you get up and your feet hit the floor, you're looking forward to going to work. What do you got to do to make people feel that way? You know, when was the last time you thanked people for doing a good job? Not what they're expected to, but for going above and beyond for helping somebody out. When have you asked them to ask you questions? So psychological safety, I think, is essential. You're not gonna get it, but it's been around a long time. Organizations have had it a long time. J&J has had it since the Credo was created, because that's what

the Credo is. We will protect the consumer, that's you and me who take the pill, because they're customers, the doctors, the pharmacies, et cetera. So every employee at J&J, even if you hear employees from J&J get fired, they'll still defend J&J. Why? Because it is a psychologically safe place. They didn't say that, but that's what it is. So, and there's a lot of places like that. So find a different way. What is the end result of psychological safety? And begin with the end result. say, what would it feel like? Think about the best place you ever worked, where you really were looking forward to go to work. We had a boss who really appreciated them. What were the attributes of that place? How do we recreate that for your team? What would be the impact? Oh, they want to come to work. They want to do that. Oh, they give discretion or effort. Oh, very good. Well, that's accountability. They're doing it because it's psychologically safe. So I'd say stay away from the word. Because like DEI has become for a lot of employees, it's a red flag. Psychological safety, I think, might become, it's an I got you. I use it as a weapon against the organization. So just figure out what you got to do and do it.

Shari Simpson: I love that advice. I was talking to somebody about DEIA is what we call it in our organization. He had kind of the similar, similar feedback is, hey, there's this kind of this bad rap happening. Just call it something different. Like we all know we need to have these components. So I think that's great advice.

Dr. David S. Cohen: Hopefully I made somebody think.

Shari Simpson: You did. You made me think. So I appreciate you taking a few minutes of your time here to chat with me.

Dr. David S. Cohen: My pleasure. Thanks for inviting me.

Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at [thehrmixtape.com](http://thehrmixtape.com).

Announcer: Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.