

- You are listening to "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 Joy Toney, Senior Program Consultant. And Tawana Gardner, Principal Consultant, both working at Aim for Change LLC. Joy has over 20 years of professional experience in a nonprofit, consumer services, government contracting and transportation and distribution. She's an active member of the Sherm Memphis Chapter and a member of ForbesBLK. A platform championing systematic change in business culture and society. Tawana is a Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt, focusing on minimizing process pain points to maximize results. She has led designed and implemented many ongoing improvement projects and taught Six Sigma principles to yellow belt, green belt and black belt candidates. Joy and Tawana, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today. I'm so excited to be able to chat with you virtually here, and then see you next week at the Sherm Inclusion Conference where you guys are going to be hosting a session. So it's so exciting to have you on the podcast.

- Thank you for having me.

- No, we're happy to be here. Yes, thank you.

- So let's start with this first question. And I'll start with you, Joy. Bullying often dons an invisible cloak, hiding in plain sight at the workplace. I'm curious, in your expert view, what are some of the most, you know, devious, subtle forms of workplace bullying that even some seasoned HR professionals might miss?

- Well, Shari, as you know, HR professionals do have that keen sense of what is illegal harassment rights, so they're all over violations of Title VII, you know, protected classes, sexual harassment, hostile work environment, disparity impact, and you can go on and on. But that's more clearly defined. When we're looking at the more subtle, covert forms of harassment which is not tied to protected status, that just kind of invade and permeate the workplace that cause psychological harm to those who are victims of it. Those things tend to be more consistent behaviors, not really one-time isolated incidents and they are perceived as a little bit more severe. But again, it's more covert. So let's talk about some of those examples, right. You know, you might have constant humiliation of a target. You know, someone being constantly teased in the workplace about how they dress, and they don't have any fashion sense. Sometimes you might have someone to, you know, geographically depending upon what you are. For instance, I live in the south, and so, you know, there's a lot of the backhanded compliment that goes around for, "Oh, bless her heart." You know, and that's not really something that somebody has given you a blessing from God. That's something that someone may be using as an

insult to you. So you really kind of have to be aware of that. Another example would be, frequently taking credit for other people's work, right? So if Tawana is working on an assignment and she did all the heavy lifting on it, and I just come in and say, "Yeah, look at this project that I just delivered." And it's like, I did nothing. But I just took credit for all of her work. So that happens a lot in the workplace. Tawana, would you like to provide some examples?

- Sure. So these are the things that HR really can't see, right? And these are things that are happening behind closed doors. Probably, between you and one other person. And it's things like microaggressions, gaslighting, being left off meetings. "Oops, I must've just missed your name." Not getting the information that you need. You can keep notes on some of those things, but some of those things, it's kind of hard to prove, you know, when you're talking to HR. So being able to keep those open lines of communication and taking notes, when those things happen is very important.

- You know, I've definitely seen these behaviors in my career in HR. Especially, the ones where you have somebody who might be exhibiting some of the things are talking about but also are meeting their KPIs. And so you have this idea that kind of old habits are die hard. And so how do we have these conversations with adults about these behaviors that can be transformative rather than necessarily punitive?

- Well, I like to kind of think about taking of a formulated approach to change the behaviors of people in the workplace because, you know, the workplace is basically organized as humans. Human beings are, you know, capable of change. They're capable of creating those new habits to replace those old bad habits. And so let's try to take advantage of that. And so if you focus on, you know, like a strategy of making sure you create awareness so that everybody knows what the behavior looks like. You know, also kind of following the mantra of Alcoholics Anonymous, right? First, we have to acknowledge that there's a problem and then know what those problems look like in the workplace. And then I would say that the organization needs to take a step towards defining what the policy should be around behavior in the workplace. Again, everybody already knows what the illegal stuff is, that you're not supposed to do, but you know, let's take that a step further and say what behaviors do we expect our employees to exhibit in the workplace? What type of guidelines do we expect for them to follow? How do we expect them to treat each other in the workplace? And that all needs to be kind of outlined and defined. And so once everyone is sort of aligned on what that looks like in terms of employment for the workplace then that includes the targets, the bullies, and the rest of the organization, and especially HR, are all aligned on that policy. Everyone goes through that training to know what is acceptable and what is not acceptable then HR can start holding people accountable, you know, if they don't uphold that policy. You know, and, of course, people who are bystanders, people who are targets need to help HR in

that process by reporting, right? Because HR can't do anything about the situation that arises unless it's reported. And so reporting is very important. But also HR carrying through with any investigations on what's reported is also very important. And just following that process, I think consistently will help transform the organization's behavior as a whole.

- I think that, like Joy was saying, education and awareness is definitely important. I also think that where she was talking about having leadership kind of step in, and a little bit of role modeling, that helps also with having mentorships for those people that are exhibiting those types of behaviors, making sure that there's a open dialogue. A company I worked for also had a lot of training that was specifically for people in leadership or people that they were looking to put into leadership positions, at some point in time, you had to be appointed for that training but I think it was definitely good. It was like a pre leadership training. So you can already start having those conversations and listen to how these people... It was like situational awareness type training. So you could listen at how do they respond. Are they responding the way that I want them to or the way they should be responding? Because if they're not, they may not be a good candidate for that program. So it's also a great way to kinda weed out those people.

- You talked about, you know, witnessing bullying and I think that there's this... I don't know, silent majority, right? Who kind of witnessed this stuff and we really need them to step up, like you talked about and report it. I think there's probably a fear that if I step up and say something, especially to somebody that's in management, right? If the manager is being the bully, that they are going to jeopardize their own professional career in standing. What are some tactics around that, that we can either deploy as HR professionals or, you know, if you're somebody just listening to this and you're trying to navigate that yourself, what are some tactics they can use?

- Well, the things that come to my mind are the three Ds, right? And they stand for delegate, distract, or direct. If you are a bystander that is in HR, or your bystander that's not in HR, you can always get others to intervene on your behalf, once you kind of let them know what's happening. So if you see a situation that's kind of happening real time and you think it's safe enough to step away, and to grab someone else, so that it doesn't look like you're the one that's doing the intervention, you know, get another manager or another person in HR that can come and intervene some other authority figure perhaps, so that you don't have to come back and witness that, or be party to that in that aftermath. But you trust your delegate and you trust that the delegate is doing something about it. The other thing is distract, right? So you can create a distraction. You can either talk to the bully or talk to the target about something that's completely out of

context for whatever that situation is that's occurring in the moment. And then that distracts the bully from continuing that harassing behavior, right? And so maybe you ask the bully or the target for their help on something, and then that breaks up that situation, right? That gets the target out of the situation so they can go to a safer environment. And then the last thing is direct. So that's really kind of being direct with the bully on what's happening. And sometimes you can mask that with humor so it's not so obvious, but at the same time, it sends a signal, that this isn't okay we probably need to stop and then help dissipate that situation, diffuse that situation. So maybe you just tell the bully, "Okay, I don't know think she can take much more of this today, so let's go call it for now and then we'll pick up and reconvene our meeting later." Or you know, making up some sort of excuse like that, just to kind of, like I said, diffuse the situation and then that way you get the target out of the bully site for the moment. And then typically in that type of situation, the bully does stop and doesn't like pursue it, because then it looks ridiculous for them to keep going.

- I think those are really good tactics, especially, if you can deploy a couple of them at the same time. You know, making sure that you can diffuse a situation and then, you know, reach out to the right people to have it addressed for sure. You know, I think sometimes HR can find themselves unintentionally propagating a bully culture through bias or unconscious bias, or even in different actions. I've seen that before in my career. How do we help make sure that HR is being champions of justice really, and not averting contributors to the problem? And I ask this question because, I think sometimes we have been pushed between a rock and a hard place when it comes to top performers and this behavior that we're seeing. And I think it's our job to change that narrative. So you've mentioned several tactics already, but I'm curious, is there anything that we can put in place maybe at the leadership levels, we're having those conversations with the C-suite about these behaviors in relation to performance that really starts to paint the picture that just because somebody's meeting their KPIs, doesn't mean that they're performing, if they're acting this way.

- Yeah, and I would say to that without oversimplifying things, right? You know, HR should make sure that we're leading by a values-based policy, and not just what meets the legal standards, right? Because corporate values should be codified and then the employees should attest to those. And that includes everyone, that includes the bullies, that includes people in leadership as well, should be held accountable to those. And then when you do that, when you let the values be your guide, and then you also tie performance to those values that can be a very powerful deterrent on some of that bullying behavior, right? So let's say that you decide to craft some KPIs around acceptance and belonging at your workplace, right? And then you survey and poll the employees on a semi-annual basis or a quarterly basis, right? As part of the input for those performance reviews. And

if people's scores come out very low for their leadership to say that, you know, I don't feel like I belong at this organization, I don't feel valued by this organization. You know, I feel a low self-esteem associated in my work group. You know, these types of things that should be a signal to the leadership to fix that problem, but also kind of be punitive against that leader's performance, you know, not leading the team through those codified values they said they were gonna uphold, right? So there's that like accountability element that goes along with leading the people who are in your charge that you're supposed to take care of. Tawana, I think you might have some other suggestions around accountability and sustaining that momentum.

- In addition to that, making sure that... You know, Joy talked about the metrics or some of the metrics, but I think it's important that leadership understand the impact that that has on the organization and the employees and the work that's being done. When we talk about those surveys that she mentioned, that's absolutely a great way but a lot of times we take the surveys but it's not really connected to anything or anyone. Or even a business unit, it's just a survey. So once we start dissecting and segmenting that data that will help you to actually see what's happening and where it's happening, then you'll be better equipped to address it.

- With the work that you both have done, have you seen or do you have a story where you've seen a culture not only kinda snuff out bullying but really transform their culture from one that was toxic to one that's, you know, respectful, empathetic and really growth mindset?

- So unfortunately, from my position I haven't seen a complete transformation end to end when it comes to the bullying culture. I've seen it where leaders start and try to take an approach to slowly implement that culture, but I haven't seen one that just has done the end-to-end journey. Personally, even though there are some published case studies about cultures that have had really great success, especially the ones that you see listed on great places to work that have implemented, you know, true, transformative, cultures focused on employee belonging. And so I think the organizations that I've been a part of so far have been more aspirational. So, of course, they're not there yet, but you know, there are cases where those organizations exist.

- I haven't seen the end-to-end either, but as we were looking at some of the case studies, what I did see was organizations that did not have programs on anti-bullying. And after someone complained, and complained, and complained, and it ended up going to court and there was a large settlement, we're talking, you know, 20,000, \$50,000 for several different cases, then it's like, we need to put a policy in place. So sometimes that's where change starts, unfortunately. It would be nice if we could be more proactive than reactive but that's a lot of times how it gets the ball rolling.

- Yeah, I think if you're listening and you don't have a policy in place, this is a really good reminder that that's not only a great way to help with the legal risk involved around this, but also start to make that shift from a cultural perspective, you know, to signal that this is important to you and that it's important to the values that you have in your organization to put a policy behind it. You know, as we wrap up our conversation, I'm curious from both of you, you know, how do you see empathy playing a role in, you know, changing this narrative? We've talked a lot the last couple years going through COVID around empathy, and how that's, you know, a business imperative right now. And I would just love to hear from both of you, how have you seen empathy really help address this?

- Well, just really quickly to go back to the previous question, as a follow along to that. You know, you talked about legal risk, the HR team should be prepared for and help the organization prepare for. Just to let you know, there is legislation that is being presented for the Workplace Psychological Safety Act. And that is basically picking up where, you know, the Title VII protections left off, and it's picking up on just protecting all people from harm, from psychological abuse in the workplace which bullying squarely falls underneath that. So that it is taking place, there was actually a hearing in Massachusetts to get this act passed there. And so if they pass that, that'll be the first state that passes that act. And then there is also a road show to have other states pass the act as well. So, you know, with the progress of change and the dynamics that's happening in the workplace, the change is coming. So I think HR professionals should definitely be ahead of that curve and adopt those policies, like we said, just so they can be on the front end of it and be proactive instead of lagging behind. But to answer your current question with empathy, I think that it kind of resonates with two key principles. You know, where I talked about the leadership embodying those values of those policies, right? That have been codified into the organization, so they're demonstrating what that behavior looks like in the organizational culture and they're modeling that behavior, and leading the way for everyone else, right? Because typically, when people see the leaders behave away, they start emulating that behavior of those leaders, right? Because that's how they see, they can be successful in the workplace, so they wanna be just like them so to speak. And I think the other thing, again, the HR can do is to make sure that those policies have teeth, have consequences, right? So we talked about doing the surveys, we talked about making sure that process is in place that we follow for investigations and disciplinary action and all of that. Making sure that people feel comfortable enough to report, so that HR can document, right? And follow up on these things. And I think the combination of these things will help people know that it's real in the workplace and then the bullies will either fall in line with that or they will leave the organization but they'll be no place left for them to run if they don't change their

behavior. And I think again, like I said, it starts with leadership, kind of modeling those behaviors and leading the way. And so if they feel empathetic towards even just the lowest subordinate or lowest employee, you know, even the janitor, right? If they feel compassion and empathy and treat that person with the respect and fairness, and you know, the rest of the values that the organization upholds, then everyone else should model that behavior and follow in line.

- Absolutely, I think that when people are empathetic, they're more likely to detect this kind of behavior. They're going to promote some type of awareness or speak up about it, maybe even help to try to resolve some of the conflict. I think the flip side of that is a lot of people that are promoting this behavior do not have empathy, or they have a lesser amount of empathy. And keep in mind, 60% of people in management are the ones that are actually doing this behavior. So who's gonna check the manager? So I think that also having... I was thinking about the EAP Programs because it's gonna be important, you know. Let me send you to EAP. Let's talk about why you feel like, you need to treat people this way. Sometimes it's because they were treated that way, that's how they were groomed for management. Or it could be something from their past that makes them or triggers them to treat, you know, person a certain way. So I think that that's kind of a two-sided coin.

- I couldn't agree more. And great advice from both of you. This has been a great insightful conversation and it was really interesting hearing about the upcoming legislation. That's something that I think is really important for HR professionals to think about. Any last thoughts before we close out?

- I also noticed you had a previous podcast on the power of empathy and I think that that would be something great for people to check out if they wanted to learn more about empathy and you know, how it could help their organization. If I can add, you had several, like, one was creating space for conversation. Sometimes just having the conversation can help the situation. And the other was nurturing curiosity and then understanding in the workplace. Sometimes, it just may be a small misunderstanding. The reason why I'm treating the other person the way that I'm treating 'em. And also, the last one was, about perspectives and changing narratives. So I really enjoyed some of the podcasts that you already had out there. And I think that they're a great resource for people that are really looking to change their organization.

- Yep, and I agree with that too. You know, especially since they're like, consumable small bites, you know, it takes 15, 20 minutes to listen to each one. So you're not consuming a lot of your time but you're getting very meaningful information and it's easily digestible and it's probably very quick to apply in many cases. So I would totally agree and support what Tawana just said. I also wanna make

sure, before I forget, that I wanna acknowledge that October is bullying prevention month. So thank you for choosing to sit down with us and have this conversation about bullying and its impact on the workplace. And what HR professionals can help do about it.

- Well, Tawana and Joy, this was a great conversation. Thank you for spending a few minutes of your day with me.

- Oh, thank you. It was our pleasure.

- Thank you, yes, absolutely.

- I hope you enjoy today's episode. You can find show notes and links at the hrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.