Building Better Workplaces The Importance of Culture and Leadership with Tom Schin

00:02.346–00:17.331 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.
00:17.751–00:27.735 Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Tom Schin owner at Build Better Culture. Tom helps organizations create stronger, more engaging workplaces by focusing on leadership, culture, and employee experience.
00:31.360–00:33.862 Shari Simpson: Tom, thank you for jumping on the podcast with me today.
00:33.882–00:39.886 Tom Schin: Thanks, Shari I'm excited. We had a little couple hiccups over the summertime, but glad we made it here, holiday season and all.
00:40.426–00:52.075 Shari Simpson: Yes, holiday season and all, for sure. I'd like to start with maybe you sharing a little bit about your own personal journey and how you got into this space about workplace culture where you're at right now.
00:53.424–03:05.209 Tom Schin: You know, I appreciate the question. I find that the most common way for me to explain this is that from my recruiting experience in working with so many organizations, you saw a lot of companies do things really well. right and then you found some along the way that weren't and you know there are always the jerks out there you have a couple of those right that i could tell you we could go on and on about those but then there was these folks in the middle who didn't know they were not doing it the best way. Right. And they could have with some guidance, some context, start to understand what kept people there. And people always say, oh, our company culture is great, but they couldn't define it. Like, yeah, it's sort of bored. This idea that I can go help you with that. I'm a huge culture guy. Even when I started to go down this path, working full time while doing this on the side, it was one of those people were referring to me as the culture guy and like, yes, it matters how you interact with your people makes a huge difference. And I found it. with people that work for me. For the most part, I didn't strike everybody's fancy, and that's true of any organization, but for the most part, as I, from my own practices, folks appreciated The breathing room and the inquisitiveness of finding out who people are and how they connect to what it is that organization's about. Even on the interview side, when I would hire people for different organizations, you'd ask them questions, well, what are you looking for? Well, these people are really about this. And when you made that connection fit, we're like, these people really get me. I'm like, uh-huh. That's that match piece that we talked about. And so over time, this whole culture metamorphosis, we'll call it. uh came through that i can go help people find that magic sauce identify who they are and help them use it as an advantage versus sort of a luck of the draw um yeah so that that's sort of where this came from is the idea that let me come help

some people do a little bit better than they are today
03:06.138-04:00.010 Shari Simpson: Well, and your passion is coming out in your voice and the way you tell the story of people are just listening to this. So I always get excited when I get to talk to people where it just it almost feels like cultures in your blood, like the way you talk about it. And, you know, as I've been looking forward to this coming year, we're recording this in December, but but you're probably listening to it in January or February. So with that being said, I'm I'm thinking about everything I'm seeing and kind of like the top five, top 10 lists of things HR professionals are concerned about for 2025. And somewhere in that top five or 10, there is always this culture component. Now it might say specifically culture, it might say, you know, vision, mission values, it might say employee experience. Why now do you think this is bubbling up to one of the top five or 10 things that HR professionals are tackling next year?
04:01.213-06:00.422 Tom Schin: I think historically. There have been more people than or at least enough people in the job market to fill roles that hiring managers, we as hiring managers, were so busy onboarding them and doing all the operational things and managers were so focused in on producing results. Culture and engagement was sort of swept under the rug in some regard, not intentionally, just we're too busy for that. We have too many things going on. I've got to do X and Y and Z. And now people are realizing People are leaving organizations. They still are. You saw it after the pandemic, when the rehiring surge came through, they know that there's a greener pasture out there. And what that points to is two things. We know there's a long list of things that people leave organizations for, right? Number one, their manager. Number two, their culture. And depending on the survey tool that you're looking at, it could be flip-flopped. Pay is always a question mark for folks. That's not the answer, right? If you're getting way underpaid, absolutely. But generally speaking, if you're paying fairly for what you're asking and what the market's holding, you're okay. But your manager and your culture are the two things that people are leaving for. And ultimately, what I found is that If you have a bad manager, they're reinforcing that bad culture, or they're leading the charge with that bad culture, sometimes intentionally, meaning, I don't give a flying F, or oblivious to the fact that, oh, I'm the problem. Right. And so here we are in the state of culture is very important to realizing this is a huge opportunity, not just a problem or challenge, but it's an opportunity. Like we have something really good here. Let's publicize this. Let's take advantage of this. Let's grow with this to make sure it's something that's sustainable and worth shouting from the rooftop. So people want to come here. I want to be the employer of choice.
06:02.110-06:32.285 Shari Simpson: I've seen that shift as well as in just some of the language I've been seeing, things like focusing more on empathy and care as a business model and those kinds of things. You know, with your mentality of building better cultures, you have kind of a framework or foundation that you think of when you're helping to encourage people to create these positive cultures. What are those,

you know, foundational principles that you lean into as you're coaching people through this?

06:33.035–08:30.292 Tom Schin: Yeah, so really, really good question. And we'll make some assumptions here. There are stats behind everything. I can tell you all the productivity stats for better culture, better engagement, retention. We're not going to do that. But in essence, the framework to build here is who are you? And to say we have a good company culture because people smile here or they like that we give them breakfast. That's not what I'm talking about. Those are activities. Those are items that add to what you're doing. but it's not the ping pong table effect. Ping pong tables are fun, all right? I will be the first to admit it. If you're using it in the right manner and it's just sort of the, hey, I'm one of those people. I get fidgety, I have to have toys. I've got dice, I've got koosh balls, I've got this and that and the other. But how this weaves in as you figure out who you are, who are your leaders think you are, but also who your people think you are and how your culture is interpreted by those employees and the managers. Very important there. Distinction of here's the leaders, here's the employees. So you got very top of the pyramid, very bottom of the pyramid. You get the middle managers right in the middle that are really driving those processes. Once you figure out who you are, how do you make sure everybody's connected to it? Right. Are you walking the talk? Are you just sort of giving lip service? Hey, we care about you, but only when it matters to us or it affects the bottom line or affects revenue. When proverbial blankety blank hits the fan, then forget all that stuff. You can't have it both ways. Your culture needs to be consistent when times are good. and when times are bad or challenging and everything in the middle, how you relate to folks. You can't go flying off the handle with people. You can certainly have more serious conversations about stuff and still have a positive culture. We're transparent. We want to be fair about this. We're going to tell you about this stuff. Here's our timelines. Here's our expectations. So that's some of the framework is who are you? Who do you want to be? How do we get there?

08:31.533–09:34.033 Shari Simpson: What do you say to those leaders who are listening, who maybe have already done this work, they've gone through it, and the conclusion they've come to is, our culture sucks and our leadership is fine with that, that this is actually what they believe in. I think of some of the things we've heard in the news about like return to work mandates, right? There's a lot of chatter about that kind of stuff. And the conversations I've gotten into have centered around what is the culture of the organization? What is the expectation? How do they make money? What are the values they talk about? And if one of those values or the way that they talk about their culture aligns with this return to work mandate, Part of that is having that tough conversations and employee and go, do the values of this organization still resonate with me personally, right? Like you run into that. So what do you say to that HR person who's in that role, who can see so much more, right? Has that passion and excitement to create this great employee experience, but maybe just realized, oh

wait, that's actually not what my business wants.
09:34.984–11:12.138 Tom Schin: Her culture. So two, it's a double-edged sword as many things are in part that I'll put it out there. That HR manager might also be in the wrong place, right? You think about I'm all about this and we're preaching this and how we do things, right? And that's not supported by everything else. Uh, that's an issue. If you're not as an HR leader in your organization, given the bandwidth and the seat at the table that we talk about. then you're not walking the talk from a leadership standpoint. If you're not willing to listen to that cheap people officer, whether that's their title or not, we talk about titles. You know, they're still the voice of the rest of the employee base, and they're advocating on both sides, both for the business and for the employees. You know, there are elements here that scream, you need to have some hard conversations with the people in charge. This is the path that we're taking. And if that's the path, that's fine. You're going to lose people over this. It may not be today, may not be tomorrow, but you know, we'll use the movie lines. We can't say tomorrow and for the rest of your life and all that stuff, but you get the idea, right? But at some point, something's going to break. And I may not be here for that fix. Because I need to be at a place where I feel my resolution. It's not so much, you know, yes, I'm not telling all you HR people who hate their jobs to leave, but I'm telling you to take a hard look, right? Make sure you can bring that voice up. If you can't be clear and consistent and have an objective conversation with the leaders in your organization, start asking different questions. And some of it's internal.
11:13.291–11:44.798 Shari Simpson: Yeah. And I think that's a good challenge is that, you know, don't automatically make that assumption. Like you said, like, Oh, I got to leave this organization. This might be a fantastic opportunity for you to come to the business in a different way than you have before. So I highly encourage you to, like you said, Tom, just start asking different questions. Get really curious about why the organization thinks that it things about culture the way it does, maybe you'll uncover something that they think it equals some sort of business outcome that doesn't actually equal. And you can kind of lean into that.
11:45.479–12:15.985 Tom Schin: And it might also lead you down the path of those leaders seeing that you have greater business acumen than they thought. You understand way more about the business beyond your people role, air quotes. You're understanding the financial implications. You're, you're demonstrating that knowledge and experience to them, or they may take a look and see, oh, you do need a seat at the table. We need you at these meetings. Titles aside, again, it's more, it's like being a leader. You could be a leader in title. You can be a leader as a person.
12:17.779–13:17.240 Shari Simpson: Let's talk about hybrid and remote work for a little bit. This continues to come up from the perspective of, you know, how do we give our hybrid or remote employees the same cultural experience that they've had when they were in the office?

And, you know, I work for a tech company. And so we have all the tech company things in the office, you know, the free food and the pool tables and the gym and the basement and, you know, cafeteria and staff, all the fun things. But I work remote now 99% of the time. And so those things that I think we defined as culture, which I think you accurately described at the beginning, there are activities or there are items, they're not necessarily the culture. How do we define then for, for those that are like, man, this is the mandate I've been given this year is to make the culture feel real for these hybrid and remote employees. How should they be tackling that? Like maybe see, they already got their values, kind of their head around that. How are they going to make it come to life for that group? Or should they, should they not?

13:18.231–15:32.616 Tom Schin: So two answers, as with most things, right? We'll be vague just because we're in HR and that's kind of part of our course in life. For the hybrid folks, be very intentional about when people are together. If you're going to have them come in, make it meaningful, take advantage of that. Realize that I use water cooler talk as an example. I've heard other people use it as well, but you're probably going to have more water cooler talk time on your hybrid days when people are together. That's okay. Yeah, you have work to be done. Don't book yourself an hour meeting eight hours straight. You have to give them that latitude because they're not used to being around this social climate as much. And so you have a little bit more. I promise you when they're back in their home office, they're probably 120% productive. right? They're pounding away because there aren't the, I don't want to call it interruptions. That's not the right phrase, but you don't have these elements that are pulling you away because someone's got a random question or somebody said something funny or there's a song in the radio and three people started singing it together, right? I'm thinking holiday themes, right? Mariah Carey jumping on and so on and so forth. You know, but realize that it's okay to have a hybrid culture. It's okay to have two different types of subcultures, if you will, how you work and connect with your remote people is going to be different. That's okay. Find what connects them to what you're doing in that virtual atmosphere. And you can ask them, Hey, what have you seen in other organizations or start asking other organizations that do what you do or in other spaces and other parts of the country, other parts of the world. How are you connecting these things? How do you, what sort of things are meaningful for your people? And a lot of times I like to recommend to people from a networking standpoint, standpoint. You have different salespeople in different industries talking to each other. So payroll people like to talk to benefits people. Great. How are they handling that? Find out from them. You're not necessarily stealing any ideas. You're just looking for collaboration. One idea may spin into six different activities and things that you can build into your work style. That's going to work for your remote group, for your hybrid group, for your in-person group. There there's all sorts of answers out there, but it starts with conversations.

15:34.167–16:30.864 Shari Simpson: Well, and that's such a good point in general, as I think about what we need to learn from our employees. You mentioned at the beginning, as you're trying to define culture, that how your employees look at it is such an important piece of it. You can't just define it from the highest level of leadership because their experience is different than your frontline employees. How have you coached leadership to start to create that really feedback rich environment where employees feel safe to share their opinions. They have psychological safety. They know that something's going to be done about the information they're sharing. And and I think this one's as just as important. And managers and or HR have been coached on how to respond to. I hear the feedback. It's it's not something we're going to do because that sometimes is the scenario we're in where we're empathetic. We hear the feedback, but it's just it's it's not going to impact the masses. So it's something we're not going to. We're going to explore.

16:31.825–18:35.994 Tom Schin: So one of the first things managers can do. Put their tech on airplane mode when these conversations start. And what I mean by that is turn your watch to the silence, do not disturb mode, turn your phone, put your screen away, turn away from the screen. There are too many distractions in our life. That airplane mode is critical. You have to give them the attention when you have them live or on screen. Give them the attention they deserve. They're coming to you with solutions, challenges, issues, feedback, venting, whatever it is. You're their work parent in some regard, work, wife, work, husband, whatever you want to call it. They're looking to you for a sounding board to feel validated. And your primary role is to guide them along the path. And if you can't give them 100% of intentional attention, then you're doing something, you're doing a disservice to them. You could be providing some insight. You could be learning a whole lot. And sometimes in those scenarios where you can't do something about something, explain to them why. We're not going to get to that. Not because it's out of my control. That is the last answer any employee wants to hear. That means you don't give up. Poop, right? You just, you're placating me because you don't want to dig into the why, right? Go find out why for them. Get the answer from above and press the buttons. If you think it's a good idea or worth warranting, plenty of organizations have operational brainstorming sessions. Hey, you know, so-and-so suggested this, or I've asked my people and three of them say X and Y and Z. Bring the conversations up the next rung and if needed, go a little bit higher. Suggestion boxes of old are just gone and they shouldn't be. Employees are coming from all sorts of different environments where they've seen different things work or things that they like. That's what makes it meaningful is that people are going to listen to them, that transparency of communication. If you don't have it, people aren't going to be generating new ideas. They're not going to be creative. They're going to feel sheltered or scared or only do the minimum necessary to not get fired. And that's not a culture to have.

18:36.837–19:27.672 Shari Simpson: Yeah, I couldn't agree more. As I

think about how we're running out of time here, I have a couple more
that I want to make sure we get to. And you mentioned the feedback
box. And the reason it kind of made me think about this is because
we've leaned so far into technology now, you know, the pandemic really
forced us to go through a kind of a digital transformation a lot
faster than I think some organizations had planned. And in the last,
you know, two and a half years we've been inundated with all this
language around A.I. and how we should be utilizing it. And, you know,
I as well have talked about on the podcast a lot. How do you see that
marriage of A.I. and technology and this need for feedback and great
culture all kind of coming together and influencing how we see, you
know, workplaces of the future?
19:27.692-20:13.691 Tom Schin: I think the A.I. piece is a what I call
it, purple squirrel. Right. The unicorn that it's always going to be
shifting. It's going to constantly evolve. That's going to keep
bringing new ideas and new ways to get information. And I think it's
something we can take advantage of and learn from and adapt to. You
know, I use it from time to time for idea generation. Use it as a
tool. You know, if you think about woodworking, maybe it's the hammer
and chisel. Maybe it's a router. Maybe it's a drill. But it's a tool.
And so as you weave that into things, use it as such. Morph it, teach
your people how to use it, see what creative ways they can use it. And
then as you evolve things with people. Reframe the last bit of your
question for me.
20:14.790-20:48.116 Shari Simpson: Well, I'm just curious how that
technology is going to influence how we think about culture in the
future. You know, I've been considering this idea around, you know,
remote work and how we define culture for our remote environment, that
it should match what our internal environment is experiencing. Maybe
that's not the case. Maybe there's a flip the script on how we are
defining things, which makes me think how we think about AI and
digital and the things that are changing, how we define work going
forward. How do you see that influencing culture?
20:50.970-22:06.095 Tom Schin: Like I said earlier, they can be in two
different silos. You can't be everything to everyone in the same
approach. And I'm not saying play favorites. There's a different
conversation to be had there all along. You have folks that are
performing, you're going to naturally do more for them. You know, when
you have little kids and you have four kids, two of them are
listening, two of them aren't. The two that are listening, all right,
you can have your ice cream. You know, the other two, no, go to your
room. You're going to need more work. You need to practice saying
please and thank you and so on and so forth. You have to kind of morph
the approach to the audience. Some of your remote audience, much like
your in-person audience, is going to be tech averse. Some of it's
going to be tech forward. Find ways to reinforce and have that
technology meet them where they're at. I was at some SHRM meetings
recently and they talked about AI isn't going to replace the employee.
It's going to replace the person who doesn't know how to use AI or
hasn't taken the approach. The AI tool is there. If you don't know how

to use a hammer and you're in a woodshop, you're not going to be in that woodshop very long. Right? You have to learn how to use the tools. And if you need some guidance and some programming around how to develop that skill set, all right, now bring in some experts who can teach your people how to do this, create the path for success for them.

22:06.936–22:22.726 Shari Simpson: And that's a great example of a topic we're not going to get into, but upskilling, right? Are you thinking ahead and upskilling your population? All right. As we wrap our conversation, what's one piece of advice that you'd give to leaders who really want to start improving their company's culture today?

22:24.898–23:04.671 Tom Schin: I think you take advantage of both what's working, right? Realize what you're doing really well and celebrate that and be. be the person that's looking inside and find that gap where you have a shortfall. And it doesn't need to be a huge shortfall, but find an area we could be doing better in this one thing. Let's start there. Let's get that from point three to point four. And that's the whole like I chose my company name very specifically. You don't need to be a 10 on everything. You just need to be a little bit better at one thing. Once you're a little bit better. All right. Now the game changes. So just get a little bit better at one thing, then add to it.

23:05.765–23:20.592 Shari Simpson: Such great advice. It reminds me of earlier in my career when I was told if you can think of the concept of plus one every day, can I be plus one better than yesterday? So such great advice, Tom, for our audience. And I appreciate you sitting down and chatting with me today.

23:20.952–23:30.997 Tom Schin: Shari, thanks so much for having me. This was a lot of fun. I enjoy it. And getting to have these conversations with lots of people, I feel like is what we're doing is really meaningful and helpful for the audience.

23:33.692–23:35.616 Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode.

23:35.897–23:39.804 Announcer: You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com.

23:40.245–23:43.612 Announcer: Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.