Co-Mentoring Across Generations: Bridging the Age Gap in Organizations with Margaret McDonald

Announcer: You're 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.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Margaret McDonald, an international speaker, pro-aging advocate, and the author of 100 Words on Everyday Ageism, a series that challenges age-related stereotypes. She serves on the American Society on Aging's advisory council. Margaret's work explores how shifting cultural beliefs about aging can enhance our well-being, productivity, and longevity.

Shari Simpson: Margaret, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today. Well, thanks for having me here today. You are speaking on a topic that I actually haven't seen formally spoken about at a conference around being a pro-aging advocate. So let's just start there. What does that mean?

Margaret McDonald: pro-aging advocate. I'm actually, I guess you could say I'm an anti-ageism advocate, but I don't want to be anti. I want to be pro. I want to bring the love. So I call it pro-aging advocate because, you know, the truth is when we talk about aging, it means we're moving forward in life. And who doesn't want to be pro that?

Shari Simpson: How are you seeing everyday aging impact the workplace right now? I mean, we all know that there's so many generations in the workplace. So I think this is such an important topic, especially as the baby boomer generation is staying in the workforce much longer than we anticipated. How are you seeing some of that come to life in the workforce?

Margaret McDonald: Well, it's funny because the way you even say those things are the way that we hear them regularly. A lot of people ask, why are older adults still in the workforce? We're in the workforce for the same reason that anybody is in the workforce. You know, it's a paycheck, it's resources, it's something to do that we're good at. Years ago, we used to ask women, why are you working? Why are you home taking care of children? We don't ask that anymore. And so as we're all living longer, healthier lives, I think that over time, we'll stop asking people why they're still in the workforce.

Shari Simpson: So I'm in the demographic of people who are asking you the cringy questions.

Margaret McDonald: Right, that's true. But that just proves it. I mean, it really is part of our everyday speech. Even when I'm among a bunch of pro-aging advocates, people say surprising things. Somebody said the other day that she saw a group of women with white hair, and yet they were all so stylish. And I thought, where does that yet come from? Why would you not be stylish because you have white hair?

Shari Simpson: Yeah. What other terms of phrase and language are we using that is not supporting a pro-aging community or a mindset?

Margaret McDonald: It's really surprising how many there are. The way people use the word aging is, one, people use that as if it means some

sort of decline. My aging parents need help. I have to take care of my aging dog. There are no parents who are not aging. There are no dogs who are not aging. We are all aging. It means we're alive. And so that's just one way that we think it's a euphemism for decline, but it's not a good way to use that word. People use younger and older to mean good and bad all the time. Oh, you don't look a day over such and such an age as if it would be bad if I did look 64. What's wrong with 64? There's really nothing wrong with that. Let's see, what are some of the other... Talking about retirement, you know, as we were just talking about people staying in the workforce, being asked all the time, when are you going to retire? Aren't you going to retire soon? Don't you want to retire? It's like being told day after day, you don't really belong here. I don't think of you as a professional. Why don't you get out of the workforce? I mean, that's not inclusion. And then there are also just teeny tiny words like the but and the yet and the still, where people are acting as if these assets that somebody has don't go with age, when in fact there's no reason to say that they don't.

Shari Simpson: How do we start to change that language? And I think we've been on this journey from a language perspective, more hyper-focused over the last five years, let's say, in the DEI space. You know, I've shared with our listeners before that I am constantly challenged by idioms and turns of phrase that I learn as a white woman have terrible history, and I need to be cognizant of those and educate myself. This is a category, I'll be honest, I have not gone down the road of, what is the language I'm using that's damaging to this population? What are some ways for us to start to train ourselves on this, as I haven't seen a lot of resources in this space yet?

Margaret McDonald: Right, and you're not uncommon. And really the movement I guess it feels quite new to a lot of people. I'm surprised how often I say ageism and people say, oh, what is that? But as far as thinking of the ways, and I'm with you, learning all of our new terminology, it can be difficult. I misgendered someone a little while ago. I felt awful. It's one of those things. And then I realized it's a learning pain. Sometimes we have to feel pain and that is the way we learn. So that helps us move forward. One of the ways is just to try to think consciously about any time you bring up age. Why are you bringing it up? Does it matter? And what are you saying about it? It's a great idea any time we say age or think about age that we question exactly what we're saying. I was reading a blog post and somebody was talking about using plain language when you write. And he said, everything should be easy enough to read so a grandmother could understand it. Oh, no. And I thought, yeah, why do you say grandmother? Because there's some idea that when you go looking for a turn of phrase, that means, let's see, who doesn't have a clue? Yeah. Let's let's just pull grandmother out of the air. But think through that. Think twice. You know, I write a little essay. I write a tiny essay on ageism every day. And one of the ones that I wrote, I highlighted that story and I put at the end, I said, you know what? Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a grandmother. Maybe you could explain this to

her. So really, it's think it through. And every time you bring up age, ask yourself, am I just hearing the cultural narrative and bringing up the stereotypes that may not be true?

Shari Simpson: When we work on this in our organizations and start to address this idea around ageism and the language and the way we treat people and your example about retirement, you know, I hadn't heard that before and it really hit home for me thinking about times I've said that to people like, hey, when are you thinking about retiring? And granted, I had good intentions in saying that, but that doesn't necessarily matter. My intentions, right? Like. We've learned that, right?

Margaret McDonald: Right.

Shari Simpson: As you've helped coach organizations on this, what are you seeing as far as changes in things like team dynamics, maybe the bottom line, the things that our business leaders are going to ask us about when we come in and say, hey, we're going to start addressing ageism in the workforce?

Margaret McDonald: Right. It's a very slow, small start. And part of that is just even in a lot of DEI guidelines, you don't see the word age in there at all. So it's kind of starting anytime you talk about DEI, bring that in. Some organizations have started ERGs that are They may be called Generations ERGs or sometimes it's Older Employees ERG, although people don't like the word older. You know, the goal actually is to live a long number of years, but people don't want to say old or older. You know, we just still have that mismatch with the language. But there are a lot of different ways that organizations can reach out. And really, it's kind of the ways that we have started with other diversity and equity and inclusion that we have to be aware first, that every time you say something, I mean, it took people a long time to understand that if you are saying, oh, I don't even think of you as black, What's the idea behind there? You're saying there's something wrong, you know? But people still regularly say, you don't look 40. What's wrong with 40? So it's, yeah, it's really still just kind of going back to every time it comes up. And if it, it's very tough in a group dynamic because we're so used to it. It's tough to feel like somebody is being called out. So it really is a matter of calling it in. I think it's a matter of being proactive. get people in to start talking to your teams, talking about, hey, you may not have thought of this, but let's look at what this language does so that it comes up and into people's minds before you have to start saying, you got to really stop giving those birthday cards that are insulting or let's not do this.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. Well, and you're combating society's view of age as well on top of the things that you want to try to do in your organization. So it's, it's, this is fascinating. I feel like this is one of those, those movements that workplaces could really lead the charge on compared to, you know, society leading the charge on it. What strategies have you given leaders to start to bring in some more inclusive language around age?

Margaret McDonald: One of the things that I talk about is when you

think about research into stereotype activation. For example, a lot of people have heard about the studies that if students are taking a test and they're asked ahead of time to check a box and what race they are, Black students will underperform on that test compared to Black students who took the exact same test and were not asked to check a box on race beforehand. Just the word, it just activates the stereotype of things that we've heard over and over again. And that's why I really like to concentrate on the words that are around us and we don't really realize. We have to ask the question. When somebody maybe is struggling with a new technology, maybe they've forgotten something they just learned, to what extent do we know that that has anything to do with biological change? And to what extent is it because of the cultural ageism that surrounds us? We will never know until we get rid of the cultural ageism.

Shari Simpson: So when you say to those, and I'm thinking specifically of females, I'm 45 so I'm reaching that magic age where life starts to change for me and my body and you experience, you know, perimetopause and menopause and it lasts years and years and years and that spills over into the workplace, right? Those things like brain fog and fatigue and stuff like that. How do you find that balance where you can, and maybe I'm not even asking the question, but I'm thinking about all the time we've spent talking about in the past like reverse mentorship programs and, you know, catering to one group specifically. How do you continue to introduce those things like reverse mentorship or... Tell me what you mean by reverse mentorship. A good example would be, let's use AI. AI would be a great example. So let's say you have a senior leader who's been in their role a really long time. They have years of experience. They don't have experience in this one category. You have a Gen Z who walks in the door, they happen to have, you know, a lot of schooling or a lot of hands on experience with AI. So reverse mentorship would be that this Gen Z employee ends up mentoring the leader in the organization on this topic. I've seen a lot of that, you know, that trend to start to talk about it differently. Do those help the cause, not help the cause? What are your thoughts on that?

Margaret McDonald: I think if you think of it as a reverse mentorship, you're still talking about one way, and I think that's not helpful. But pairing people who are bringing different skills to each other, and if you just see it as a co-mentorship, That really does help the cause. You know, we index very highly on tech skills in the modern workplace when the truth is we know we want employees who are emotionally stable. We know we want employees who have great communication skills. There are just so many skills that if you look hard, you're going to notice, oh, that index is higher in some of our more experienced employees. And so matching people up to really share experiences without suggesting that, well, our older employees don't understand tech, so we're going to get our younger employees to teach them. There's just so much we can all learn from each other. That helps the movement.

Shari Simpson: Co-mentoring. I love that term. I haven't heard that

before used in that context. So I think that's just one more great language thing that we can start to change. I mean, there's probably so much I could ask you and you'd uncover all these nuggets as we go through this. How do organizations get started introducing this, changing this, shifting their cultural beliefs, not getting accused of adding one more initiative for DEI to try to address?

Margaret McDonald: One of the things is to think about the fact that ageism is an ism that's coming for all of us. Now, nobody escapes this. There are people who never faced an ism in their life, and then all of a sudden looking for a job in their 50s, they realize, wow, I'm on the short end of the stick this time. I've never noticed it or seen it before. I'm a white woman. I certainly felt a lot of sexism growing up, but the first time that I saw ageism coming for me, I thought, oh, this is different and this is new. So to recognize not only is it coming for each of us if we don't make a change now, but think of our own children. Imagine you're, my kids are in their 30s, and I think about, is this going to be coming for them too? Will they be looking for jobs? So really, I'm not sure if that directly answers your question, but I think the idea is just to open our minds to it, just as we have with so many other isms and so many other identities. These days, we know that the world's population is growing older. Every time we see that article or that headline, if we could remind ourselves, this isn't bad news. This is people living longer, healthier lives. It's also having a lower birth rate on a very crowded planet. This is just the phase that we're in right now. And so recognizing that organizations that are poised to take advantage of the new pool of talent that's out there, you know, the silver reservoir, if you will, are going to be ahead of everybody else who's still clamoring to say, how do we hire all the new college students when there are fewer and fewer new college graduates? With so many identities and so many isms, there's been a terrible, tragic smoking bullet that has really kind of lit a fire to help people understand something has to change. We have been understanding this wrong all along. We are treating people badly and we're going to turn that around. Hopefully we won't see that smoking gun with ageism, it's kind of sneakier out there. So it really does take a thought process of saying, am I opening up? Who's invisible in my company still? Who's invisible in my organization? Who have I not reached out to, to make sure that everything is fair? And to remind ourselves, this is our future self as well. And so it does take work. It's not like it just comes to you and you're going to have to say, oh, okay, now it's time to do that. It does take work to reach out and recognize that this is happening and that there are so many positives to it. We've been trained to think that growing older is a bad thing, that older employees are not as valuable as younger employees, and there's just a lot more information out there to show that this just isn't true. So really, I think starting to see every headline and question, I mean, we know the way news cycles go these days. We know we have to question the headlines that we see. And anytime we see older, younger, anytime we see a generational label, we really have to question that and say, what if that was not true? What

if that was only happening because of cultural ageism?

Shari Simpson: Is there a tipping point to it? And again, this has been a great conversation, so I know I'm showing some vulnerability to our audience as I ask questions. Thank you for doing that. Because I think about, so my husband is a fireman. I've shared that before. There is a tipping point for age when you are in that job. Physically, you reach a point where you can't perform the same way as somebody who is younger. I mean, that's probably a very cut and dry example. Is there a tipping point? Should we not even think about it that way? Should we be asking the question differently?

Margaret McDonald: There are certain jobs, certainly firefighters are one of those jobs. I believe physicians are in that category, certainly pilots, where at a certain age, Organizations will, at the very least, want to test skills. And in fact, you probably want to keep testing skills. You don't have to be over 50 to be out of shape and not able to run as fast and carry all that equipment that you did when you were younger. But really to focus on capability is not equal to age. So saying that somebody can't do a certain job because of their age does not make sense. But people may not be able to do a certain job because of their capabilities. So I think it's really skills testing more than age. And then, as I mentioned, with people living longer, healthier lives, it's great to have. So what is our plan with somebody who has all this knowledge and skill? If they're not going to be in the physical part of that job, what else is out there? that they can be so helpful to our organization and to our other employees and to really have those skills carry on rather than just lose them.

Shari Simpson: Well, and it aligns so well with the transition we've been seeing from, you know, kind of job descriptions to skills-based ways of looking at moving your employees around an organization. So I absolutely love it. That's one more tactic you can use to think about a skills-based organization and putting people where they're going to be most valuable. So that's a great example there. That's exactly right. As I think about this whole topic, I think there's so much we could do in this space, but if you could give, you know, one last nugget as we wrap up for that HR professional who's like, okay, where do I even begin in my organization to A, surface this and B, start to address it?

Margaret McDonald: I think my favorite one would be, one of the most common things we hear is anytime people mention age, there's a chuckle. There's a little giggle like, well, I'm older than you. And that giggle, if you really look at it, it's people letting off nervous energy because there's the idea that we should feel bad about our aging. And if every time one of those came up, if people would start saying, hey, around here, we're proud of our age, and just, I call it, stop the chuckle. I hear it in podcasts every day. That's one of the reasons I decided to call my little column, 100 Words on Everyday Ageism, because I hear ageism every day. It's almost every time age comes up, there's that little chuckle. It's a joke somehow. And if people could stop that one, hey, around here, we're proud of our age.

It's amazing how many positive stories come up when you use that phrase and people say, you know, you're right. And then the stories come out. So I think that would be number one.

Shari Simpson: I love that. Just as you were sharing that, I was thinking of all the times that, you know, age comments have been made to me. And you're so right. There is that chuckle, that little like, ah, that was funny or it wasn't funny or that nervous energy. So what a great tip for our audience. Thank you so much for that. And thanks for sitting down and introducing me to this really important topic. And hopefully our audience is walking away with some knowledge they didn't have before. So appreciate you talking to me.

Margaret McDonald: Well, I appreciate you having me here. Thanks so much.

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