

- Hey, and welcome to PCTY Talks. I'm your host, Shari Simpson. During our time together, we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro. And together, we'll explore topics around HR thought leadership, compliance, and real life HR situations we face every day. On today's episode, I have with me David Samson, former president of the Miami Marlins Major League Baseball team and current host of the daily podcast called Nothing Personal with David Samson. So David, thanks for jumping on.

- Oh my pleasure.

- I also have with me behind the mic today, Cheryl Johnson, our CHRO here at Paylocity. So Cheryl, thanks for joining us.

- I am excited to be here.

- So David, as a business leader with over 18 years of baseball team management experience, what did you want when you were working with your HR team?

- Well, I used my human resource department as someone who was always the gatekeeper to doing the right thing. So there would be many times during a course of running a baseball team when something would happen that would require my mind and immediate dismissal, whether it was someone on the field or off the field. But I knew that I could not dismiss anybody without first going to human resources. It was such an important VP for us. Her name was Anna Hernandez. And I actually inherited her when I got to Florida in 2002. And I started getting to know her, and realized that she was exactly what I wanted in an HR person in that, I was someone who was front-facing. I had to make decisions all day long, every day, and sometimes I had to do them very quickly. And she made sure that I had all the information. She made sure that I did everything exactly by the book. And she also made sure that I took a breath once in a while when I wanted to do something immediately. So when I call her a gatekeeper, I don't mean that in the "Ghostbusters" type of way, although maybe I was the key master, but what I mean is that she was someone who understood not just the law, 'cause I'm a lawyer. So we had lawyers, outside lawyers, we had labor lawyers, we had HR lawyers, we had everything. But when you run a human resources department, your responsibility is both up and down. Up, it is someone able to manage me and work with me. Down, what I mean by that, is someone who is not looked at as the mold to the C-suite, but someone who is looked at as a person of the people. And I say that in the best possible way because I wanted an organization long before any of these things have been happening in these sports organizations where they're hiring people because they've such toxic workplaces. I really was thinking about that 20 years ago. And I wanted to make sure because baseball can be, this is gonna come out wrong, but we're on a podcast, so I can say it, it can be a little bit like a locker room. And so I wanted to make sure that everyone was

comfortable, and that everyone was acting appropriately. So I would make sure that inside the clubhouse, it was a quiet atmosphere where people knew when they were safe to talk, when they weren't safe to talk. And then I needed my HR department really to be in charge of hiring at all levels, and to make sure the organization was running perfectly. So to me, HR is the most important department in any business.

- Okay. So I have a natural follow-up question to this. So I love that you observed that HR is a gatekeeper to help you make decisions and help you facilitate those decisions. I have found, in my experience, there are some leaders who learned that the hard way. That's why they believe HR can really help them. And then there's some leaders who just instinctively knew that they needed someone to balance them out. I'm curious where you fall in that spectrum, and how you kind of got to that conclusion.

- I got into baseball when I was only 31 years old. And I had already been on Wall Street, I'd already run a company in Europe, and I was a lawyer. I just wasn't practicing. But none of that mattered. The most important skill I had, and I knew I had it back in elementary school, quite frankly, is I always was one who knew what I knew and knew what I didn't know. So when I give speeches around the country and talk about leadership and talk about running companies, to me, that is the single most important quality to have. The biggest issue that you can have when dealing with an HR department is you pretending to know something that you don't know. And that's why I surround myself with professionals. I surround myself with people who would not genuflect in my general direction. I did not want yes people around. I didn't want sycophants. I wanted people who would challenge me and would talk me through the decision-making process, and we really would be in lockstep. That doesn't mean that I agreed every time. It doesn't mean that we were always on the same page every time, but it means that we had the relationship where had communication. And that is key. So knowing what you know, knowing what you don't know, so I didn't have to learn the hard way because that's something that I've always been good at.

- Great.

- Do you feel like Anna made you a better leader?

- So in certain regards, I do believe that, actually. I think that, you know, I wanna be very clear, there are HR issues in every company, and I'm not gonna say that Marlins didn't have HR issues. We had employees who sued us for wrongful termination. I mean, in baseball, you have lawsuits every month. And goodish tickets it's every day, there's a different lawsuit from someone. But so there's no such thing as a perfect company because then you wouldn't have an HR department and there's no such thing as a company where everyone feels that they

understand the reporting structure and they're happy with who they report to and they're happy with who reports to them. There's no such thing as having the perfect hire every time. But what the HR department did for me, I talked about the balance that I had, but did it make me a better leader, for sure. Because anytime you're surrounded by smart good people, by definition, you're gonna be a better leader.

- I'm curious how you dealt with talent issues from player performance perspective on and off the field. You know, being that they're under contract, did you partner closely with HR or did you have other people you leaned into for those situations?

- So there's two types. If we're talking about players on the field, I did not speak to the head of HR when we decided to release a player or trade a player or sign a player. That's something that I did with the general manager and with the owner and with the manager of the team. And those players are under contract and they are a part of the union. The rest of our employees were not part of a union. Really all non players are non-union members inside an organization. So I really did keep that separate.

- Do you think there was a difference as you looked at that separation on just ways you approach things? You know, a lot of our audience could fall into that same scenario where they have union and non-union in their organizations and they're trying to manage both sides of that and knowing what the contract stipulations are and the things that they have to follow that and treating maybe their non-union employees a different way. Did you run into that at all?

- Yeah, I mean the most important thing is to understand termination clause is. This is to understand what kind of employees you have, whether some of them are at will, some of them are under contracts that's guaranteed, some are under contracts that are not guaranteed. And I'm talking about non players. And then players are under contracts that are guaranteed, but they also contain termination clauses. There were times when we had to fire people who were in uniform, but not players. And then we would use the HR department because the players union would not get involved in that at all.

- What are some of the biggest changes that you are seeing or have seen on what someone needs from an HR leader now, with everything that's going on in society versus several years ago? And how has that shifted from your perspective?

- So I was pretty early to the game in terms of understanding that the HR department has a role in the operation of the company and giving them the autonomy to serve that function and to come up with the proper guidelines that the employee handbook is something I took very seriously and not all baseball teams do. And we made all of our

employees read it. We gave them training. We had harassment training before it was popular. We had sexual misconduct training before it was popular. Because it was so important to me because it's such a testosterone filled business, right? You're dealing with professional athletes. And people make a mistake when they take a job in the sales department, they think that they can act like a player or they think they can hang around players. So it was always was important to me that HR would set the stage for what was expected of our employees. I also did something different where with the Marlins, we had a huge internship program. And I had HR run that internship program because that gave us an opportunity to bring in 40 or 50 people every single year, they were annual, we had them all year long and it was a very, very detailed by the book written on the page program that really set these people up. One of my interns in ticket sales is now the assistant GM at the Marlins. So one of them in marketing went on to be the traveling secretary, which is a great job to have with the baseball team. So one of them became a vice president, like so there's opportunities for people who start with the internship program. And my view is, like training a newborn to sleep, like training a toddler to use the bathroom, it is critical to train your employees. And some people think it's not worth it, or they're not gonna stay long enough. I never viewed that because I always thought that even if I'm training someone who leaves after two years to go to another team or go to another market, another sector, they will take that training with them and they'll remember what we did and what we taught them. So I always thought the investment was well worthwhile.

- That's awesome. I couldn't agree more. You know, we really value training in our organization and are always looking at ways to kind of reinvent that and rethink it and create a great experience.

- I wanna add something because times right now are different than they were in 2002 through 2017. And that's when I left baseball. And I would say that since 2017 HR departments are under a great deal of scrutiny because there is a big push and pull between what owners want, at least in our industry, but really across all industries. There is a huge focus right now on workplace misconducts that's sort of centuries in the making, not too late, but man, it is sort of late, but it's never too late to make it better. But if you don't have a strong human resources department, you have a problem. But then even if you do, if you have a team owner or a president or a GM who ignores the HR department, you have the same problem. So you read about all these teams who once they get in trouble, they really hire into the HR department. They bring in the head of diversity and inclusion and equity and they do it just as eye wash. And unfortunately that is a reality as I see it today is so many companies do not understand the importance of these positions other than from a PR standpoint. Which means they're gonna make another mistake. And it only will be when their backs are against the wall, when they're under unbelievable pressure. And even the Washington Commanders, I don't think are at

that point yet because of the unbelievable ego of Daniel Snyder. But the reality is you asked whether or not I learned the hard way or the easy way? There are organizations who are still learning the hard way, even in this day and age, which I find a hard to believe.

- Well, and to that point with all the social media and the press and everything around highlighting workplace misconduct and bad decisions that company make and the direct impact it has on whether or not people will decide to consume your product or be a customer of your business, it's shocking. And it really is connected to how you're treating employees, like how you treat your workforce, how you treat your suppliers, how you treat anybody who comes into contact with you. And I remember years ago, previous life when there was a lot of companies in the news and at the time Uber was in the news for treatment of employees. And there was a, oh gosh, like a 68 page document or something crazy long like that. I printed the whole thing and I brought it to one of our resource groups, an employee resource groups. So not the HR team, I brought it to the employees. I'm like, I want you to all read this and then I want you to tell me, how do we make sure we don't do this kind of stuff? Like from the employee voice. Like there are probably things in here that we aren't realizing are triggers for people or could create some ill will and to have HR teams who are empowered to do that, I was certainly empowered to do that and then have some bite behind your bark. Like you actually can go do something. So you can't not just talk to employees, but you actually are empowered to make some of the changes that help facilitate the organization being in a good position.

- You're using a magical word. And that magical word is called empowerment. We used to do Disney training with our employees. Where we would hire Disney to come and they would show us the Disney way. And one of the most important things that Disney does, it empowers its employees. So a funny example that was made was during a game, if you see a little kid who is walking with an ice cream cone and spills the ice cream, what do you do? Was a question posed to employees. And a bunch of employees said, oh, you say you're sorry, you get a napkin, you call maintenance to have them clean up. And the answer that we wanted them to have, but they didn't have it because we weren't properly empowering them, is you replace the ice cream cone. You empower the employee right there. Whoever sees it, whether you're an intern in ticket sales or the president of the team, if a kid drops his ice cream cone and is sitting there crying, you walk him right to the concession stand and you get him an ice cream cone to replace it. So empowerment is such an important word. I wanna tell us an HR story if you don't mind, this may be out of order for what you wanted to do. But one of the most difficult firings I had in my career, not for me, 'cause this was an easy one for me, but it was a tough one for HR and I wanna tell you the story. There was a employee and it's apropos social media. We monitored our employees social media, I'll say that in public, our employees knew it. When you're hired, we looked at your

social media. When you're with us, we looked at your social media. So one day we're looking at the social media of one of our employees. And there's a picture posted by one of our employees at a Marlin's Red Sox game wearing a Red Sox Jersey.

- Oh no. Oh no.

- And I fired that employee. I went to HR and I said, that's it, we are firing her right now.

- I can guess what they said. I already needed the answer.

- I really got pushback. And I said, let me explain why I'm not listening to you and why we are doing this firing. And I told the story, two stories. One, when I worked at Morgan Stanley on Wall Street, they would give you Morgan Stanley issued garb. You'd have shirts, you'd have a bag that you'd travel with. If we would ever get caught on an airplane, carrying a Goldman Sachs bag, right? We'd be fired. There'd be someone at our desk before we could deplane. The second equivalent is that when you work in New York at PepsiCo Headquarters and you're going through the offices and the chairman of Pepsi walks by and you're drinking a Diet Coke, that's your final moment at the company. It's not even a question. And so I gave that example to the HR people and I said, I'm not budging. And it was said to me, but wait a minute, she wasn't working at the time, that was her off moment. I said, I don't care. There is no off moment in baseball. When you work for the Marlins, if you don't wanna root for the Marlins fine, you don't wear Red Sox Jersey. You can sit there with your hands in your lap, but if you get caught cheering or wearing any garb from a team, that's not ours, that's gonna be grounds for termination. I won that one and I then had a firm wide meeting to discuss the situation because there were some employees who were upset about it, thinking they were being or well in. So I had to explain to them why, and in all of my career, it never happened again.

- Yeah, I'm sure there's a million questions your HR person asked. And then also explain all the potential consequences that were what you described and how I would describe it, and we've had this decision point many times throughout my career in talking with leaders is the potential consequences it worth it. So sometimes you have to make a decision that aligns with your values and your priorities as a company and your standards as a company that may not be completely protected from absence of a lawsuit. But if you wanna stand in your laurels, you make those calls and you deal with a potential.

- I had to do that everyday, right? So there be people who would sue us, whether they were fans who got hit by a foul ball or employees or whatever the case may be. And there's sometimes that I would use our legal weight and our financial sort of strength and I would fight it. And other times I would pay the settlement 'cause the juice wasn't

worth the squeeze.

- Totally.

- And those were decisions that I made every single day. And this was one with that employee that was critical to me so I could teach everyone this lesson and I thought it was worth it. Now I should mention, before she left, she did sign the release and there was nothing to do. There was no lawsuit. Releases are critical as you know.

- Yeah. Releases are critical. Well, I will say I worked in fashion retail years ago and the CEO of that company had the exact same philosophy that if you walked in wearing a competitor's product, when we make the same products, it was a lights out in London kind of moment. So I can relate with that.

- With all of the lawsuits you've had to deal with over the years. I'm curious what advice you can have or you can give to CEOs and HR chiefs listening right now on how to deal with bad press.

- So start by having thick skin. And that is something that again, I was just born with. I never, and here's the key. Whenever someone talks to you about bad press, here's what I tell them. Don't let bad press bother you. But in order for that to be the case, you cannot be seduced by the good press when it comes. And I was able my entire career to ignore both. And that was critical for my success because there were nice things written about me there were not nice things written about me. And I treated them both the same. So many people when they read about themselves in the paper, see themselves on TV, they want to only believe the good and the problem with only believing the good is you're then dismissive of the bad. You can't actually make a true unemotional judgment about what is causing that bad press. Therefore you cannot effectively lead. So the best way to do it is to just ignore both. Now, if you do not have thick skin or you do not have that ability, then you have to hire someone who is your consigliere, who can do it for you. And I can't stress that enough. In the business I was in, which was a very, very public business, I was the way I was, so I was okay. But there are many presidents out there in baseball and other sports who are not that way. And those who do not have a strong head of communications or a strong person on their shoulders saying, all right, we have to react to this, we don't have to react to that. Don't react to that right now. Yes, react to that. But tomorrow that sort of conversation is critical. So that then ties in to a rule that I had running a team. And it was called the 30 minute rule. And it's something that I suggest to all leaders of any business. After a game, whether we won the game or lost the game, I had a 30 minute rule, which said, I wasn't gonna make any player move within 30 minutes of a game because that is based purely on emotion. If your closer blows a save, two minutes later, you wanna release

them. If your closer gets a huge out or there's a walk off home run by one of your batters, you wanna sign them to an extension. So it's very much recency bias. So I had a 30 minute rule and for on the field and I also had the same 30 minute rule for off the field. So people would come into my office, they would tell me something that would elicit a very strong, immediate response. And instead of reacting at that moment and giving an edict of what I wanted done. And even with the Red Sox Jersey, right? The 30 minute rule was not violated. I would wait 30 minutes reevaluate and then make my decision. So I think that when you're dealing with press, you have to take the emotion out of it. But very few people can do it as well as I did because the price is big. It impacted my personal life. It made me much more robotic than I ever had been before when I was not in the public eye, because I really shut off all emotion and I couldn't find a turn it on when I left the ballpark because baseball is such a 24 hour business, but there's so many businesses like that. And it's something I just wasn't good at. And so I compensated not by being emotional in work. I compensated by being unemotional personally.

- Oh, 30 minutes is all it takes for you, I am totally ambitious. Sometimes mine's like, I'm gonna wait a day. I'm gonna wait a day to think about this. And I've used the strategy of sometimes I have to write it out. And so I'm gonna write out what I really feel and what I really want to say and do. But I don't do anything with that until I give myself some time to like, okay, now do I still feel that way a little bit later.

- That's great.

- To make sure you don't accidentally send it. That would definitely be a no go.

- You can't go back into the computer and grab an email and you can't, once the toothpaste is outta the tube, it's out, you can't get it back in. So you gotta be careful if you're gonna ring a bell.

- How do you with the connection to the bad press and being neutral, were you able to apply that same kind of thought process to employee feedback? So especially with social media and

- Great question.

- the fact that people can post anything on anything and how to balance that out?

- So there's two parts to that question, right? If someone's posted on social media, something against the company or against the values of the company or against the mission of the company, I would still let HR deal with that. But that was a termination right there, right? But if you're asking me how I would possibly, when there are things that

can be so impactful to your business and they're happening in real time, do you ever violate the 30 minute rule? But I would never do it alone. So my answer is don't be alone even though you're you're responsible and the ultimate decision is yours. It all goes back to what we talked about at the beginning of the show, which is, if you don't have strong people around you, you're gonna fail by definition. If you don't trust the people around you, you're gonna fail. If you don't empower and enable the people around you, you're gonna fail. So that's the way I succeeded was with the strength of my people.

- Obviously your team ended up winning the World Series. And I'm curious, you know, as companies see great success, did that change the way you manage the team or looked at the growth of the team after winning the World Series?

- No, because winning a world series in baseball while it feels great, right? And you have that forever. They can never take it away from you. And not everybody gets to experience that. It really doesn't change the day to day nature of the business you're running. The equivalent is when you work on Wall Street and you have an unbelievable year, huge profits, the last four deals you've done have all been great, that doesn't inform the way you act doing your next deal. You actually wanna keep doing the same thing you did to get that successful result. So if anything, that makes you double down on your processes, when you have success, it doesn't at all change the way I look at things, Again, that would be leaving the good press, right After you win a world series, there's great press. But I also was the president of a team that lost 100 games. So if I'm gonna believe how great I am after World Series, that means I have to believe how crappy I am after losing 100 games. And I was never gonna fall prey to that.

- I'm curious, you talk about not taking both peaces of feedback to heart, like good and bad. And it reminds me of some mindfulness books that I've read. I'm curious, is that just something you naturally knew or are there books that you've read that have helped you think through it that way?

- No, I think it actually came because I'm short and off, I'm serious about this, through elementary school in middle school, I'm not gonna ever say that I was bullied, but I probably was, but I always use my mouth. I've never thrown a punch or had a punch thrown at me and I've got a mouth on me. And I was always able to talk my way out of everything. And I always would, have you ever seen "Broadcast News"? The movie "Broadcast News"? My God am I that a old, with Holly Hunter and Albert Brooks?

- No, but I'll put it on the list to watch.

- "William Hurt" directed by James Brooks. It's an academy award winning movie, it's unbelievable. So to make a long story short, there

is a sort of geeky high school kid who's really smart and he's got a mouth on him and he's getting made fun of, and he looks at them and says, "You're hitting your peak right now, 10 years from now no one's gonna know anything about you and I'm gonna be rich and famous." Something along those lines. And I just had that ability when I was young to ignore all of the naysayers, to ignore anytime people would do or say things trying to really make themselves was bigger, but really they're just making themselves smaller. And so I just had that understanding really early on in my life. And I just kept learning through experience that if I dealt with situations the way I was dealing with them, I was actually winning every negotiation, I was winning at everything I was doing. And therefore, when you're doing something that ends in a positive result, you'd be an idiot not to keep doing it that way. And so I've just always kept doing it that way.

- That's fantastic.

- So I have one last fun question for you before we jump off, you know, our company is located in the Chicagoland area, so I couldn't have you on the podcast without asking what was it like being part of the Steve Bartman Game?

- So, great question. That's a long answer. But let me start by telling you that I take a offense to the fact that you call it the Steve Bartman Game, because that's not the Steve Bartman Game, it's the Alex Gonzalez Game. Alex Gonzalez was a short stop for the Chicago Cubs and for the Marlins, actually, they both had the same name. But the Chicago Cubs short stop named Alex Gonzalez in the eighth inning of game six of the 2003, National Championship Series made a critical error, and this is a gold glove short stop, we had a double play ball right in his glove and ended up getting no outs. And that kept the inning alive and we took advantage of that. So I really do not believe that Steve Barman had anything to do with the Cubs losing. That said, I remember that game as though we yesterday, I was sitting behind the dugout, we were down three games to two and Mark Pryor was absolutely dealing that night. And I thought we were gonna lose. So I walked into the clubhouse in about the seventh inning and I started working in my head, working through the remarks I was gonna give to the player, the successful season we had had, underdogs making it all the way to the game six of the Championship Series, almost winning the pennant. And our backup catcher Mike Redmond was in the clubhouse who ended up being my manager years later by the way. But he was in the clubhouse and he looked at me and he said, "What are you doing Sampson?" And I said, nothing, I'm just, you know, I'm nothing. He said, "Get your back out there to your seat." And I said, why? He said, "We're gonna win this game." And I walked out and we, I then watched the eight run a inning from my seat. And the other point that I should mention is that the players and the executives were sitting right behind the dugout when that foul ball was hit and Moises Alou

could not catch it, to us it was just a foul ball that he didn't catch. When you're in the game, you don't realize that there could have been fan interference. You don't realize anything's going on. I did remember noticing that there was a bunch of beer being thrown and a bunch of booing. But to me, I go to 160 games a year. That was just a Tuesday, right? It didn't mean anything to me at all. And it was only after the game when we realized what had happened with this guy, with the headphones and the hat on and the turtle neck. But to us, that really had nothing to do with it. It was just really, we got hot and had that one magical inning that you dream about. And the last thing I'll say, and I'm sorry to say this to all of the people who work for your company, the real highlight of playing the Cubs in 2003, was leaving Wrigley field after game seven and looking at all of the people crying, how upset they were. And we loved it. We were looking out the window of the team bus and we were screaming and we were jovial. Winning on the road in baseball is way more fun than winning at home. We would always yell to each other. Let's make them silent, make them cry, because when you win on the road, like at Wrigley after game six and after game seven, there's silence like everyone on Waveland Avenue, they just have their head in their hand and they're just walking home so dejected. It is the ultimate Sean Freud to win on the road. And that is exactly how I felt in 2003.

- Well, David, thank you so much for your perspective. This has been such a great conversation and I really appreciate your time.

- Oh my pleasure. Have a great day.

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