

From Crisis to Care: The Case for Trauma Informed Cultures with Stephanie Lemek

00:02.346-00:17.312 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.

00:17.753-00:36.941 Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Stephanie Lemek founder and CEO at The Wounded Workforce. Stephanie has over 16 years of experience in a variety of HR roles, spanning various industries and helping businesses create supportive workplaces. Stephanie's passion is helping leaders understand and respond to the traumatic experiences adults bring with them to the workplace.

00:40.963-00:57.911 Shari Simpson: Stephanie, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast. Thank you so much for having me. I am thrilled to join you here. I thought maybe we could start with you sharing a little bit about your background and how you got into this space around trauma-informed workplaces.

00:58.511-05:46.748 Stephanie Lemek: Yes, it is. It's quite a journey. I'll try and do the cliff notes version so I don't bore everyone. But I am one of those funny HR professionals that actually planned to get into HR. So I went to college and kind of fell in love with HR coursework, and at the same time, I had an opportunity to help out at all things at a retail store, helping out with some of their HR functions. And I was like, this is, this is perfect. This is what I want to do for my career, right? I loved and still love kind of that special place where you're helping an organization be successful, but you also get to help individuals. It's kind of the best feeling. So intentionally went into HR. as a career and I spent about 16 years in-house as an HR professional and I say I've done everything from intern to the most senior HR role in an organization. I've worked in big fortune 500 companies and I've worked in small startups so I don't think any HR person would ever tell you they've seen it all but I've seen a lot and I know how different scenarios kind of show up and A lot of different types of workplaces as well, you know, whether it's a tech company or a construction company, these are experiences I've had in-house. A common story we hear from a lot of people and a lot of HR professionals is, you know, during the pandemic, throughout the pandemic, post pandemic, my relationship with work and how I was showing up, how I felt I was able to contribute best. I was kind of rethinking what that looked like. For me, I really want to make an outsized impact on. how we all experience work. I also am what I would say is a change maker. I like to make big changes. I like to be a catalyst. And when you get to the most senior HR role in an organization, that can be great at the beginning, But eventually you do need someone who has, you know, a sense of stability at that most senior level. So I thought maybe the right place for me, both for me and for the organizations and people I support, is for me to take a step outside of organizations and do something a little bit different. So I did that, gosh, about three years ago now. I went out on my own

and started my own HR consulting journey. You know, the beautiful part of that is I had space to really focus on things that I was passionate about, I was curious about. And for me, I have had my own. kind of journey and experience kind of recognizing my own traumatic experiences and how they were showing up for me in the workplace. And at the same time, I was looking how could I better support organizations I wanted to partner with and have different conversations. And as silly as it is, I got into this work because I just wanted to read a book about trauma-informed workplaces. I was like, hey, this could be a great way to change some conversations around mental health and diversity, equity, inclusion, maybe find ways to call people in instead of folks feeling called out, really include people and include supports in our workplace. As we've done in health care and recovery and education, even in yoga, there are these trauma-informed practices. So it's like, I want to read a book so I can help my clients do this. And Shari, I could not find that book that I wanted to read. You know, I found pieces of what I was looking for, but I couldn't find something that really made trauma-informed practices work for our modern workplace and also made them accessible. You know, I don't think everyone should have to have a degree in psychology to understand how to better work with folks and build systems and cultures that are really supportive for others. So I decided, well, if it doesn't exist, I'll go ahead and make it. Hopefully one day I still write the book, but anyone who's been on an authorship journey knows that that is a long one. And for me, you know, I mentioned I see myself as a catalyst. I wanted to make an impact faster. And I'm a big believer in empowering folks to be able to make these changes in their organizations. So that's what led me to found the Wounded Workforce and start putting out resources around what trauma-informed workplaces are and how we can take those principles that are rooted in trauma-informed care, which is originally created by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. how we can take those principles and build really amazing workplaces where everyone can be successful.

05:48.138-07:23.682 Shari Simpson: This is such a needed resource in the HR space. And I, and I'll share, you know, two personal stories because I think it, it just highlights the work that you're doing and why it's so important for HR to have a perspective on it. So the first one is, you know, I was in a situation as a HR business partner at the time. And I received a phone call from an employee who was clearly in crisis. They had barricaded themselves in a washroom and were clearly having some sort of breakdown in the moment. And as an HR person, I wasn't sure what my responsibility was or necessarily how to handle the situation because they weren't on site. They weren't even working that day. It just happened to have this phone call. And, you know, fortunately there was other people that I could tap into, but not everybody has that. And then the other thing I would share is there's not enough content about these types of situations in conferences that we're going to. You know, I sat through a session two years ago and it was one of those, you know, like side stage sessions. So it wasn't

even in a room and it was about supporting employees who might be demonstrating suicidal ideation. And it was one of the most impactful 20 minutes I have sat through in my HR career. So this is definitely something that's needed. And I think the place to start obviously is with HR. So how do we help our HR leaders recognize that there are these subtle signs that we can start to pick up on that employees might be dealing with trauma?

07:24.502-14:41.080 Stephanie Lemek: Yeah, I'm going to maybe surprise you a little bit with my answer. And I'll kind of give you a twofold. First of all, we do need to be talking about this. And I'm so grateful for you giving me the opportunity to talk about this because a lot of folks are scared to talk about trauma. They hear the word trauma, they hear the word suicide, and it's like, oh, we're not going to talk about it. But these things that are scary, the more we talk about them, actually, the less scary they can become. And the more empowered we can be to make the difference for ourselves and others. So again, I have to say thank you so much for giving, you know, me the opportunity, giving your listeners the space to learn more. You know, I'm going to share a pretty staggering statistic. I know I was surprised when I first heard this statistic as well, is that 70% of US adults self-identify as having one or more traumatic experience in their lifetime. So these are the folks that are raising their own hands and saying, I have experienced trauma. And so if we're, you know, taking this statistic at face value, if we are looking at this and saying, okay, you know, let's ignore maybe folks who don't recognize an experience as traumatic or don't recognize, you know, a past challenge as something that has, you know, potentially long lasting impacts. 70% is still an enormous amount of your employee population that is directly impacted by a traumatic experience. And then even when we kind of extrapolate on that, 70% of the people we know we care about have been impacted by trauma. Even if we are one of those lucky few people who haven't experienced trauma directly, we may be experiencing it or impacted by it in a secondary way. So those things absolutely show up in all aspects of our life including the workplace. So really this is something that is showing up regardless of whether or not we are taking the time and talking about it and addressing it proactively. When it comes to thinking about HR professionals and how to think about trauma in the workplace, I actually am going to give probably some surprising advice. I know as a fellow HR professional this probably would have surprised me too. I would be ready to get out my checklist, all these new programs, all this new information to learn and research about. I actually don't want you to do that. I actually want HR professionals to start with themselves. I actually think HR professionals have an incredibly challenging job. And this is a conversation that we've been having over the course of the last five years for very good reasons. It continues to be a very challenging climate for HR professionals, even as we look at the first few weeks of 2025. The thing about HR professionals' work is I think they're absolutely more susceptible to experiencing trauma at work than we recognize. A lot of times we think

about folks experiencing trauma in the workplace as first responders, people working in hospitals, kind of those obvious things. But as I began to learn more and do more research about trauma and trauma-informed workplaces, it became really clear to me that a couple things came up a lot for me as a professional and other professionals I knew really well. And those were the concepts of secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. And I'll get my little nerdy hat out and talk about these. But I think these are really eye-opening concepts when we think about the wide and broad range of traumatic impacts for us and why I really want HR professionals to start with themselves on this journey. I really want anyone to start with themselves on this journey. So the concept of secondary trauma is the idea that constantly being exposed to, witnessing, watching, hearing about someone's traumatic experience can create the same physiological reaction in you as a person experiencing trauma. So you are essentially traumatized by being exposed to these experiences of trauma over and over. This sounds pretty, you know, That sounds pretty specific. That sounds like something we would think of for, you know, a paramedic or a police officer to experience. I also would say think about some of the things HR professionals engage in, in terms of leaves of absences, navigating really challenging parts of the workplace. Sometimes it is severe illness, deaths. Sometimes it is serious harassment issues I know during the Me Too movement. You know, HR professionals who are investigating some of those allegations absolutely experience secondary trauma. A slightly different but similar concept is the idea of compassion fatigue. So compassion fatigue is what I almost like to refer to as emotional burnout. Because you're constantly drawing from this well of empathy, of compassion, about caring for others. and you're not refilling it in the right way, you kind of get to this place of emotional numbness or being unable to feel, unable to kind of access that full breadth of your emotions, that best version of yourself. And these things are fueled by those same things we talked about with secondary trauma. HR professionals absolutely experience this. Then layer onto that social media, news, all of these things where we are constantly inundated with really potentially traumatic images on an almost daily basis, there's a high probability, if we're not pretty thoughtful about it, that we ourselves could be not operating from our best HR leadership capacity because we're experiencing some of these things. So I'm a big believer in kind of taking that step back, taking stock and where we're at. I think some of the conversations we've been having about burnout is really incredible and really helpful around this to really understand, hey, how am I in terms of my own mental health, my own mental wellbeing, and then how can I kind of check into self-care as a way to get better. And then I want to talk about next steps of how we can start to bring in those trauma informed practices for your team. After we feel like you as that leader, you as a person spearheading this, really have the space to do this work because I know the people who want to do this work are also probably the ones most at risk to experience secondary trauma and compassion fatigue because you do care

so deeply about work, about others. And so that's why I always like to start there.

14:42.372–15:47.272 Shari Simpson: I definitely witnessed compassion fatigue as the height of the pandemic continued with my peers, not just internally, but externally and the HR community in totality. I think we all had to take a little bit of a deep breath and figure out, and we started to see more webinars and content around setting boundaries and having appropriate kind of work balance, if that's even a thing, balance with work. But let's, so you get to the point where you're, where you're able to identify in yourself where, where you sit. What's your next step as an HR person who wants to bring this into your organization? And Ingrin, we've talked about on the podcast before things like psychological safety and you know, having good communication and good cadence hygiene in some of those kinds of things. But this is such a specific type of communication. So how do we take that next step so that we can become educated in this and ultimately educate our management team on how to do this?

15:48.217–25:28.101 Stephanie Lemek: Absolutely. So becoming a trauma-informed workplace sounds intimidating. And it is and it isn't. I'll offer that. It is this and isn't. And like most things that I would put in the bucket of cultural change, it is a journey. It is something to, you know, have a game plan for and have some patience around getting to that point. It also is one of those things, every change you make is going to be incredibly impactful. So when we look at what a trauma-informed workplace is, it comes down to four things. It is an organization that understands what trauma is. So that's step one, is do you understand what trauma is? And this is, again, we're not expecting anyone to become psychologists, mental health practitioners. It is as simple as learning the definition of trauma and what some of its impacts could be. The next is understanding and appreciating the prevalence of trauma. Fun fact, you have a little bit of understanding just from this podcast alone and some of the prevalence and impacts of trauma, how it shows up for adults and how it shows up in the workplace as well. So those are the first two of four steps is basically an understanding of the definition and prevalence of trauma, getting a better sense of what it is, how it shows up, and creating a space of shared understanding. Because one thing I get a lot is, you know, oh, we have folks who are from older generations, and now we have Gen Z entering the workplace, we have these wild different understandings of trauma and I always say yes of course we do because our knowledge around trauma and the neuroscience of the brain has advanced wildly in the last decade. So I would expect to be there to be different understandings so level setting that definition and understanding among your organization is really important too. Once you get past that, the next two things are kind of the journey phase of a trauma-informed workplace. And it's simple and complicated at the same time. So the simple steps are, as an organization, as a leader, as an individual, you are actively avoiding re-traumatizing survivors. And four, you are actively seeking to minimize harm. So those things sound pretty simple. We wanna make sure we're actively minimizing

harm, we're actively avoiding re-traumatizing survivors. That gets a little bit tricky because, as I mentioned, we're not mental health professionals. We're not psychologists. Our job isn't to diagnose or treat trauma. In fact, we never want to do that. That's not helpful. And that's a lot of pressure to put on ourselves. We don't necessarily need to understand someone's traumatic experience. We may not want to hear that traumatic experience. We may not have the space, and they may not want to share that. That's not part of a trauma-informed workplace. What we use to build those steps to avoid re-traumatization and actively minimize harm are the seven principles of trauma-informed workplaces, which are based in the original principles of trauma-informed care from SAMHSA. And so these are the tools and the lenses that we use to evaluate our processes, our systems, our decisions to make sure we're thinking about the impacts of trauma, the root of trauma. And so as individuals in our workplace show up, we've thought about those potential impacts without needing to know anyone's story. And what I love about it is this very intimidating sounding concept of trauma-informed workplaces I actually think can become the easiest way to infuse a very mentally healthy organizational culture because it infuses it into the day-to-day activities of the workplace versus, you know, relying on extra steps having to happen. So that's really very broad overview of what that looks like, but that is how to begin the journey. And like I said, a long-term journey in terms of shaping those processes. Could you walk us through those seven steps? I would love to walk you through the seven principles. So the seven principles are pretty straightforward, but there's a little bit of nuance to them as well. And as I talk through them, and even as I experienced, you know, this research, when I first started doing it, I was like, Oh, these are things that we should be talking about and doing in most workplaces anyway, just doing them in a more deliberate way and leveraging this research that we have. So first and foremost is safety. I think we all kind of understand safety as a foundational need. So safety, when we look at it, has kind of three components. I like to think of safety as kind of that three-legged stool. If one of these legs is missing, we don't really have a strong sense of safety in our organization. So we want physical safety. So that's kind of the obvious one. So if you are talking about OSHA rules and regulations, if you're talking about emergency procedures for natural disasters, that is physical safety. It is the physical safety of your physical person. and the workplace. The next is, you know, the hot sexy topic we've been talking about the last few years and that is psychological safety. So that is that felt permission for candor, that ability to show up in a genuine way, to challenge things, to ask questions. And we know there's a massive benefit to creating psychological safety in workplaces and on teams. Tons of research around that. And lastly is financial safety. We all know most of us work well to pay our bills, to provide for ourselves and provide for our families. So let's think about how that is obviously connected to our work in our workplace. So in creating financial safety is really important because if someone is always kind of worried about their ability to provide, It's pretty

hard to show up as the best version of yourself. I oftentimes will share with people, think about the last time you had a major financial concern and how often you thought about it. It's pretty disruptive. And financial safety, a lot of times we talk about it in the framing of financial wellness, but that can be everything from paying a living wage having emergency funds or resources for employees to offering budgeting services or 401k. So there's a wide range of things that fall in there that most organizations actually do a really great job with. Perhaps we just don't talk about it in the context of safety. Next is trust and transparency. Pretty obvious one, pretty basic. The idea here is I like to think about it as building trust through thoughtful transparency. Leave it to a almost 20 year HR professional to be thoughtful about transparency because we know we can't always be transparent about everything. Can't share confidential information. We think about thoughtful transparency in how we empower people, give people the right information and leverage that to build trust and not only build organizational trust, but trust throughout the organization within teams and individuals. Next is the concept of community. So a strong supportive community is so important when it comes to supporting individuals who have experienced trauma. In mental health or psychological communities, often this is referred to as peer support. I think a better term is community when we think about the workplace. It's the idea of building community and allowing community to happen in your organization and to be thoughtful about how we bring people together. For example, folks listening in probably have people who talk about community in terms of an onboarding program or a new manager program. Next is collaboration. Collaboration in the sense of trauma-informed workplaces really looks at power imbalances inherent to the workplace and how we can overcome and mitigate those. Next, we have empowerment. And empowerment is a big one. And it has four distinct parts we talk about. Choice, strengths, leverage, recognition, and growth. Next is humility and responsiveness. This is a super important one. We know that imperfection is avoidable. So we want to make sure part of how we conduct ourselves, how we conduct our organization is making sure we're humble enough to understand when things don't go right. And then we move forward to responding and correcting those actions and learning from them. And last, but certainly not least, is cultural, historical, and gender issues. I like to call this principle a happy partner to DEI initiatives, but really what this encapsulates is cultural, historical, gender issues, how they play into experiences of trauma, and also systemic and generational issues that come into play with trauma as well. So there is a lot there, very high level overview, but those are the seven principles kind of quickly.

25:28.881-25:55.861 Shari Simpson: Stephanie, this was such a great conversation. I feel like we probably could spend a podcast on each one of those seven. Yes. So if you're listening and you're interested, definitely go down that rabbit hole because I think there was a lot there to unpack and a lot we can bring back to our organizations to make them trauma informed workplaces where we are making better

decisions and providing support in a different way. So thanks for taking some time of your day to sit down and have this really important conversation with me.

25:56.354-25:58.738 Stephanie Lemek: Absolutely, thank you again so much for having me.