

- 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. Joining me on the podcast today is Britt Andreatta. She is the chief executive officer at Brain Aware Training and former chief learning officer for lynda.com. She is somebody who is knee-deep, head-deep, arm-deep in brain science, and so, really excited, Britt, to have you on the podcast today.

- Thank you, Shari, I'm super excited to talk to you and connect with your listeners.

- I would love it if maybe you could start with sharing a little bit about your background and your passion for brain science-based solutions.

- You know, I came to it a little bit accidentally. I was learning about things in therapy, of all things. I learned about the amygdala hijack in therapy. I'd grown up in a fairly stressful environment. I had PTSD, so my therapist was explaining how our brain can do all these things and kinda take over our rational thinking. And that was where I first learned about it, and then at the time, I was the chief learning officer at lynda.com. And I thought, "Huh, I wonder what brain science says about learning?" So, I did a deep dive. I already have a PhD in Education Leadership and Organization. So I know my way around a good scientific study. So I started kinda researching it and I was blown away by how much we were learning about how the brain actually learns, forms habits, changes behavior. So that became my first kinda, you know, foray out into talking about this stuff. And then it became a very well-received keynote address and then people said, "You should write the book." And I thought, "Okay, I'll do that." So I wrote the book and I thought one and done, I'm good. But that was when LinkedIn was purchased lynda.com and I was certified in all the change models, and I realized as we were going through that very positive journey that none of the models were explaining the emotional roller coaster I was on and that I saw my colleagues on. So I was like, "Huh, I wonder what brain science says about change?" So that became book number two, "Wired to Resist." The first one's "Wired to Grow." And then I realized, well, I guess I'm doing this. I guess I'm gonna be the person that kinda translates neuroscience research to our business challenges, and the third book is on teams, "Wired to Connect." And I just find it fascinating. There's just so much that we are learning and still learning. I mean, it's not a done science at all. There's still discoveries every day about this fascinating thing we carry on our shoulders every day.

- I have always been fascinated by that intersection of neuroscience and HR and business. When you go down the road of things like neuroplasticity and epigenetics and, you know, all of those really

amazing concepts that affect who we are and the decisions we make today. You know, you had a session at SHRM this year titled "The Science of Building a Culture of Innovation." And that really jumped out at me because that's something we talk about a lot is innovation and organizations that are innovative and creating the right type of innovation and the right space for it. But when I think about it, often, I think about, there's like these two hats. There's creativity and innovation. How have you seen the difference between those two things?

- Yeah, great question. They actually are very different, and creativity comes first. So, creativity is coming up with concepts, ideas, brainstorming, it's kind of unleashing the potential of the mind to conceive new ideas. And oftentimes, creativity happens in those aha moments, those flashes of insight. They're really all the things that we do to allow ourselves to have new ideas. And we can set up the brain to do that. There's a whole neuroscience of how we have aha moments. Innovation, on the other hand, is once we have a great idea, all the work we do to make that idea viable. So, it's all the things we do in the organization to move that idea forward. It can involve a process like design thinking. But really, if creativity is coming up with an idea, innovation is capitalizing on that idea. Another way to think about it is, creativity is spending money to generate ideas, so all the investment you put in to helping people come up with great ideas, and innovation is spending ideas to generate money. So of all the great ideas, which ones become the most, you know, marketable or profitable for your organization?

- How do you see brain science playing a role in that innovation?

- Great question. So, two things. There's a couple researchers who study those moments of insight, those flashes of insight, and we can see that the brain has a couple things that it does right before we have that aha moment. So there is a burst of gamma waves in our brain. There is also, we do a thing where we kinda suppress our eyesight a millisecond before we have that flash of insight. So, they've been able to study this on the MRI machine. This is the research of Dr. Kounios, and he wrote the book "The Eureka Factor." So if anyone wants to geek out on the science of it, check out the book "The Eureka Factor." So there is something that happens neurologically when we have that great idea, and it's why a lot of us, you know, when I'm speaking to a large audience, I'll say, "Where do your best ideas come from? When do you have them?" And the biggest answer is, the shower. But people also say, "While I'm walking or exercising, when I'm out in nature, while I'm cooking." And there's science behind that. So we can spend a lotta time learning information, studying things, trying to come up with a good idea, but it's actually when we take a break and we let our brain wander, we take the focus off of concentrating, that that's typically when it happens. And the reason why the shower works is it kind of takes away sensory input. It, you know, we're in a warm

space, usually the lighting is pretty bland, the sound is, we've got the white noise of the water. And so, it, we can now actually replicate this if you do what's called sensory gating and putting yourself in a state where you're not getting a whole lot of sensory input, you can help generate flashes of insight. So taking a break, sensory gating. The third thing you can do is kinda front load your thinking machine. So, study lots of information, take in lots of ideas, particularly from sources you don't normally go to. So this is get outta your comfort zone a little bit. So we front load, then we take a break, we do sensory gating, and we can actually generate more. We can create the environment where people can have better ideas. So I talk to organizations all the time about, are you creating that kind of environment, you know, where we're setting people up to have good ideas? The second key component of it is Dr. Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety. That people have to feel like, when they come up with a good idea or even better, if they take a risk and make a mistake, that they're not shamed or blamed for it. That we know that making mistakes is part of the learning process. So, to have a culture of innovation, you also have to have psychological safety, and it has to be okay to take those risks and break some glass on your way to having something turn out right.

- As you were talking, I was thinking about this concept of sensory gating. How have you seen that utilized? And I'm thinking about, you know, hey, you've got that upcoming team meeting. You know you're fiscal year planning for your goals. And you wanna be innovative and creative this year, and so, you wanna create this environment. How have you done that where you can build that sensory gating, like manufacture it in a way that you can utilize it? 'Cause, I mean, I know that kinda goes against the being in the shower and having that time, but have you seen a way that we could do this in the corporate space to kinda manufacture that?

- Absolutely. And it's not one thing. It's kind of a collection of things. So, first of all, have work environments and cultures where psychological safety exists. Second of all, workspaces where you have high ceilings, views of nature, you're around nature. We know that nature is conducive to creative thinking. Water features. These are all things you can do. You can have quiet rooms. You can have places where people can go walk and kind of noodle and take that break. So, you can literally create a work environment that has some of these elements, and you're going to boost people's creativity. You can also design, one of my favorite things to do is a five-day sprint. And in fact, I recommend people look at the book called "Sprint" by Jake Knapp, K-N-A-P-P. He was in charge of innovation at Google and he's written an amazing book and even better, he has a website called [thesprintbook.com](http://thesprintbook.com) where he has put all the exercises, everything is for free and available. But what's cool about the five-day sprint is you spend the first three days doing what would be considered silly, crazy exercises, but each one of them really break your traditional

way of thinking about things and then you keep building on those and seeing things from a new way, and a new way, and a new way. And so, it's playful, it's fun, it's engaging, it's interactive. And because it's a five-day sprint, everyone's going home at the end of the day, they're getting that break, they're sleeping. So, you know, you're naturally kinda preparing people to have those aha moments. And then you spend the fourth day prototyping what you've come up with and you spend the fifth day evaluating and finalizing what you're gonna use. So, you can actually construct events. Hackathons are another example where you bring people in and you have a competition, a playful competition. So absolutely, there are tips and tricks and strategies we can use in the work environment to help people get there. And the last thing I would say is, none of it works if you have managers who are not good at leading their people. So, if you have managers on a day-to-day basis, you know, are shaming and blaming their people or they don't know how to acknowledge good work or they don't know how to create an open environment, all those other efforts get undermined. So you really also have to invest in manager training and make sure your managers, 'cause they're the ones that have those day-to-day conversations. They're the ones whose eyeball roll or whose lack of access really tells employees what the culture truly is. So, you can't, you gotta also invest in manager training if you wanna create this culture.

- We've talked a lot on the podcast about psychological safety from a couple different angles. And I'm curious your perspective or if you have any research on this. What happens in the brain when we don't create psychological safety? Have you read anything like that or do you have any, you know, just things we can bring back to our managers if we have those conversations, "Hey, this isn't just good practice. Here's how your brain reacts when you don't have a psychological safe environment."

- Yeah, so let's first look at the definition of psychological safety. It's a really low bar. It is the belief that if I raise critiques, questions, concerns, or mistakes, which are all things workers should be able to do, I do not worry that I will be punished, rejected, or ridiculed. That is a very low bar, right? So it's the environment that yes, I can bring these things forth and I'm not gonna be ridiculed, punished, or rejected. So, to me, it's the bare minimum and I think it's what's driving a lot of people changing their jobs in the Great Resignation. What working from home gave people is a break from those toxic bosses or those toxic workers who no one is keeping in line with their inappropriate comments or behaviors. So, psychological safety in itself is a pretty low bar, but when we create it, when people really believe, like, "Oh yeah, we can make mistakes. Yes, I can raise the issue that I'm concerned about or I can share that I maybe don't know what I'm doing," and they're supported in learning and getting better, it's not like we accept a low standard of performance. We just make it safe so that people can share and then we can get them up to the right

standard of performance. Then you unlock all kinds of great things in the organization. But what happens when you are ridiculed, rejected, or punished, first of all, that triggers survival stuff. So the amygdala gets activated. We can have the fight or flight response. We can really shut down. And it is proven neurologically that when you're in that fight or flight state, your logical thinking brain is shut down. It literally goes offline for a period of time. And then, over time, if we learn that every time we bring up something, we're shut down, human nature is to avoid that. So, yep, I won't bring up a question in the future. I'll just keep my head down. And so, ultimately, over time, the whole team shuts down and they may say and do the things the manager wants to see. They go into people pleasing mode. But they are not engaging in the behaviors that will truly move the organization forward. And this is why HR in particular, every organization I go in and consult with, they know who the problem managers are, right? The engagement scores have been low for awhile. They can see it on the exit interview surveys. They can see where there's high turnover. But I'm always shocked at how often we just let those managers stay in place and really, it does a lotta damage. And this is where, when a team is left in that kind of environment for a long time, that dysfunctional or toxic environment, they move to learned helplessness, which is a psychological state where you give up and you no longer believe that change is possible. And once learned helplessness is in place, you have to do major, major things to turn around a team or a function. Just changing out the manager at that point or a couple employees doesn't fix it because everyone's moved into this really ineffective and depressed state. So, the consequences are big, and I think HR managers can see it happening in their organization. And I'm saying, pay attention to it, handle it, and train people so that they know how to do better.

- I think we could probably spend a whole workshop on learned helplessness and what we could do to tackle it. So, I appreciate you bringing that up. You know, as I think about this model, this relationship between creativity and innovation, I'm curious how you see HR in the innovation space and how we can continue to foster that innovation and ideas that come from us that affect the business.

- It's a great question. So, having been part of many HR teams in my own personal and professional journey and then also consulting, I love my HR tribe and my learning and talent tribe. Like we care deeply about people. We care deeply about the business. Some things where we can get held back is when HR pays too much attention to the legal side of the house and gets too focused on risk mitigation. Inevitably, we suppress creativity and innovation because we're trying to go after keeping as few mistakes from happening as possible. And I'm not saying that's not a bad idea. You know, we want the best behavior from our org. But what happens is, you've got 1,000 people in the organization, and two have made really dumb choices about how they performed on a professional trip or how they used the corporate credit card. And then

all of a sudden, we have rules and regulations to now control the whole body, rather than just dealing with that those individuals. And so, HR, and this is show as kind of a turning point in organizational development, oftentimes, HR, because they're oftentimes dictated to by the lawyers, we start doing everything for the lowest common denominator. And the minute you're focused on the lowest common denominator, you're gonna naturally be suppressing the things that help the majority of your workforce thrive. And so, that distinction is really important. And I think when we look at the organizations that do the best, that have the best employee brand, who keep their best performing people, they have gone back to the focus on talent. How do we help our talent thrive? How do we respect them as talent and not resources to be used? How do we create an environment for them to do their best work? A lot of HR folks can make that transition, but oftentimes, there's things in the organization that hold them back from that. So I would just say, that's important for us all to pay attention to. And also, HR folks have choices of places to work. If your executive team has the doom and gloom, lowest common denominator, risk mitigation focus, that's really gonna dictate your work every day. And there's other great jobs at organizations where the executives get that talent are important and we should be treating them better.

- It's interesting seeing the organizations that have replaced their employee handbooks for, you know, here at Paylocity, we have a culture book, which is still kind of a mix of a handbook and some culture pieces. But there are organizations that have gone even farther and it's just like, it's like a one-page, or it's a comic book. And it really speaks to what you just shared about, you know, treating them like talent and giving them the room to breathe and the room to work and the room to be creative and then dealing with those scenarios that come up. 'Cause they will, right? We're always gonna have those employees that cross the line or do too much or make a poor choice in a moment, and so, you've gotta deal with that. But I just love this idea of fostering creativity and, you know, thinking about all the meetings that we sit in where we have to make decisions. You know, what if we tried something new where, you know, we had 10 minutes to talk about something and then we had 10 minutes to go for a walk outside and then 10 minutes to come back and talk again? You know, I think that could have such an amazing impact on our creativity and how we think differently.

- Yeah, measuring hours, you know, hours in the seat, hours in the office, is not the true measure. We wanna be measuring outcomes. And when we measure outcomes, all kinds of things shift and improve. And you know, we've come from the industrial era and we're still shaking off some of those old beliefs and strategies that don't work anymore. So I encourage HR professionals to continue to learn, continue to grow. The other book that changed my life is called "Reinventing Organizations." And the author is Frederic Laloux. And it will blow

your mind. There's actually an evolutionary, conscious evolution of organizations, just like there is of people, and for some reason, consciousness researchers gave them color levels. But we really wanna be operating in the green or the teal layers of organizational development. And when you read those, you start to go, "Oh, I see." But sometimes we're still operating with policies and practices from the amber or the orange levels, which really don't trust people and kind of assume the worst. And it's the friction between those things. Workers today want to work in green and teal organizations, and they're voting with their feet in great numbers as a result. But once you kind of learn this stuff, you can realize how you can bring your organization's policies and practices to align to better create a green or teal organization.

- Britt, what amazing resources. I feel like you've just given me my whole reading list for the back half of this year. So, I appreciate that. I will make sure to include the link to your work and all the amazing books that you mentioned in our show notes. So Britt, thanks for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

- Thank you so much, Shari, lovely to meet you.

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