

## 93. Integrating Your Work and Purpose with Sherri Kotmann – Episode Transcript

**Leah:** Welcome to Her Story of Success, a podcast featuring stories of influential women and trailblazers who have defined and pursued their own versions of success and fulfillment. We hope these stories, lessons learned and celebrations inspire you to believe in yourself and your own journey a little bit more. I'm Leah Glover Hayes, CEO and podcast host of Her Story of Success women's business and media collective.

In today's episode, I'm so excited to interview Sherri Kottmann. Sherri is the Chief People Officer at Forrester, and I actually got to know her because my husband works there! Forrester is a research and consulting company that helps organizations grow through customer obsession. Sherri will tell us more about her career journey in a few minutes, but I just love the fact that she started her career in sales before transitioning into a leadership role and discovering that her true passion was people. Sherri was the Director of Human Resources for EF Educational Tours, and now she's worked at Forrester for 10 years.

I think the past year has shown us all just how important human resources can be at a company, and Sherri is going to share some amazing advice for business leaders and executives looking to lead well during these challenging times. We'll also discuss some of the strategies she uses to help people find their passion, so if you're feeling stuck in your career or just want greater clarity about where you're heading, this episode has something for you too. I also want to encourage you to share this episode with a friend or coworker who might benefit from hearing Sherri's story.

Welcome Sherri Kottmann! It's truly an honor to chat with you today, and I'm excited to share you with this amazing community of women business leaders and professionals. So welcome.

**Sherri:** It's a privilege Leah. I am so glad to be doing this. It's been great to get to know you through this process, and I'm excited we can be together.

**Leah:** Yeah. And so share with us a little bit about what it means to be the chief people officer, and a little bit about who Forester is just as a company. I'm familiar with you, but for anybody that maybe that doesn't know who Forrester is, what is your

company and what does it look like for you to be the chief people officer? Cause that sounds like a very important role at this point in 2020 and in our lives.

**Sherrri:** So Forrester is a global company, and we help customer obsessed companies grow. And so we do that through research, through consulting, through events. And so fundamentally our backbone is research, but our product is people in a sense. I mean, we are the, that is a huge piece of our values, who we have generating the ideas, building the research content and delivering that to these clients that are working to grow both individually and as a company. And so the chief people officer title was there long before me. And I think it makes sense, because the people are very central to this business. They are to most businesses, but I think just in a services business like us, it's just really, really critical to our strategy.

So to be the people officer at Forester in my mind, I feel like I wear three hats. I lead a function. So I lead the function that has a lot of traditional HR content in it, but also I lead an employee experience function. So we have expanded the talent in that function to think about the employee experience, voice of the employee and the programming, and then sort of the strategy and the thinking and the planning that goes along with that. Then I play a role on the executive team, and it is my job to help the executive team be as effective as it possibly can be leading these people, the people in this company. And so I wear the hat of executives that coach or collaborator and, you know, helping that team become as high-performing as possible. And then the third hat I wear is leading the employees, is that, just because I lead the function, the way I talk about it to our employees is just because I lead the function does not mean that I own the employee experience by any stretch, but I am a steward of it. I take that stewardship extremely seriously. And so I am helping our executive team remain informed and educated about the state of the experience, places where it's strong, where it's weak. And my job is to be a responsible and accountable steward and a passionate steward of the employee experience. So I feel like I'm here to nourish and nurture along with the executive team our couple thousand employees around the globe. So those are my three hats. That's how I simply think about the job as chief people officer.

**Leah:** Absolutely. And we have so much to cover in the fact of leading people, being kind of an executive coach to your own executive team. Cause I've met executive coaches that do that as a consulting basis, but I'm interested to have a conversation with you about what that looks like within your own organization for people that you have to see all the time. It's not just a go in and leave. I really want to talk a little bit before we do that about your journey as a woman into the executive leadership team of a global company, because I see that you started out in strategic growth,

and then you ended up in the head of really, the human resources and people function. So let's talk a little bit about where you started in your career that led you to where you are. What was your first role coming out of college?

**Sherri:** I started in sales. And so sales and marketing was probably the first seven, eight years of my career. And I think I'm just made to think about work as being purposeful. I've always felt like it should align to your purpose, aligned to your strengths. You know, it should give you things, take things from you that you have, use the things and the gifts you have, but also give more to you, give you chances to grow, but there's this just always been a real purpose centered thought process I had about work. And so when I was in sales and marketing, I thought much more about the purpose of the companies I worked for and what I was advancing there. And so I did that for a few years, and it was through those companies that I ended up, the team that I was working with in sales and marketing, sales wasn't my passion, but people was. And so when I moved from sales into sales leadership, and managing a team, the company that I'd worked for basically said, we don't have an HR team. We need one, we have a bunch of attrition, and we'd like you to join this, start this team, and look at this attrition for this particular group of salespeople. And then, you know, when you're thinking about attrition, it's never the people that are leaving. It's the people that are leaving the people that are managing them. And then, you know, so that turned into a leadership development program and it started my career.

**Leah:** So from sales. To leadership development. So I'm not going to lie, I don't hear that very often that someone goes from sales to the, and I know human resources is a very, very, very broad term, but I love that you took the leadership development path in the human resources world. And maybe share about recognizing when you knew you were purpose-driven, because I feel like actually people now coming out of college are focused on that purpose. Right? A lot of the millennials and Gen Zs and all of that. But you did that early on. So when did you really realize I care about what I'm doing and the purpose behind it, not just getting a job? Cause especially in sales, that doesn't seem like the, they don't always go hand in hand.

**Sherri:** No they don't. I mean, maybe that's why that wasn't the crew for me, but everything that I've ever, when I think about friendships when I think about high school, I don't know. There's just something about, this might be DNA kind of stuff, because I've always felt like I needed meaning. I think difficulty, success, all of it I guess I've always interpreted through the lens of meaning and lasting meaning. And so I think for me, lasting things are often not material, they're more intangible than that. And so I needed to find a path that gave me a chance to feel that every day. And I remember there was a crisis point early in my career, because I had gone to

school for medicine, I'd gone overseas and found this sort of cross-cultural exchange I was more passionate about. So I had some typical kind of identity or sort of at least, you know, career crisis coming out of school. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. And I remember I did an exercise with someone who was focused on identifying your strengths or your gifts. And I walked out of that exercise, learning a couple of things, that I am a person who needs to feel a sense of purpose. It needs to be with people. And I also am a person who really appreciates a feedback loop. So I'm not a sole worker. I'm someone who needs to have a sense of, "Great. So how's this going for you? Do you want more? Do you want less, you know, give me your honest sense of where we are here and then great, I'll get better and I'll tell you the same thing." And so that level of candor and free exchange has a huge bearing in my job satisfaction and my sense of contribution and my sense of impact. And I remember walking out of this thing, this exercise I did with this man that I really respected. And I was like. "for heaven sakes, I could, that didn't give me a direction. I mean, it gave me a sense of, you know, components. Not go this way or go this way or go this way." But over the years it has helped me understand when I'm not satisfied in an environment or a company, I can tell very quickly. When I'm evaluating a job. So it doesn't tell me which companies to go work for which titles to pursue, but it definitely gives me a sense of what kind of team construct I need to be a part of, you know, what kind of work matters. And so I've used that as, as a guide for many years.

**Leah:** That's huge. I think that there's probably somebody listening that needed to hear that, that sometimes when you're looking at, I mean, a lot of people who've been furloughed or this time in our lives has I think really given people an opportunity to pause and reevaluate what they're doing, where they are and what they are looking for next. And I love that you just outlined something that I always talk to people when they're like, "Oh, I'm looking what to do next." And I'd really like to talk about that process a little bit of figuring out who you were or what you needed, because you said the construct that you're in, like the environment and how important the environment is not just, "Oh, I want to be in this industry or I want to work on this project," but what type of environment? And, you know, I look back when I was super young, like I'm five-two, I'm pretty small. And I remember being in middle school or elementary, and I was doing gymnastics and playing basketball, and my mom made me choose. And my gymnastics coach was like, you're naturally talented at gymnastics. You're amazing. You could go so far. And I chose basketball. And I remember asking my mom like, gosh, why did you let me make that decision? And she's like, I had to let you make a decision that you wanted to do. And so I think in my process of trying to figure out who am I, what do I want? It's like, "Oh, I crave people," and I could have excelled at this one thing really by myself, but craving that team

environment and understanding the jobs that I've done and the places that have been happy or discontent, revolves around is there a sense of together?

And so I'm sure that you have mentored a lot of people in your career. What are the types of conversations that you have with people, either looking for a new role or trying to figure out what that next step is. Like, if someone comes into your office and maybe they're not excelling where they are, even within your organization, and maybe you're trying to help them find something either internally or externally, what can those conversations look like when you're trying to help someone decide what construct they need or, or what environment that they need to succeed and to thrive?

**Sherri:** I don't have any real rocket science. I think most of my conversations are rooted in solid sense of self and joy and confidence. And I'll say, you know, a theme that I see is, I see people and I mean, maybe it's just because I've had seasons of this in my own life where your work becomes your identity. And my feeling is that that's the beginning of the end of job satisfaction.

**Leah:** Wow.

**Sherri:** And so I think if you start with, what is your sense of self absent work, you know, where do you get your value? Where do you get your meaning? Where do you get your identity? And then how can you go put that to use, is a really different way of thinking about it, then your work giving you your identity, your sense of self, value. And so to me, it just, it creates a kind of, I don't know, it just, it gives you kind of like a backbone in the process of, you know, who are you and what do you bring? And I just, I think that is essential to most decisions. And when you make decisions with a construct like that, there is a freedom that comes from them. You can say no to things with a lot of confidence and not a fear of regret, you can say yes to things that with the same thing. And if it doesn't work out, then you know, you did it based on a solid sense of self. So I find a lot of freedom in thinking like that. It's not always easy, you know, a journey towards clarity around your identity and where you get your value from can sometimes be layered. But I think anytime I've talked to anybody, who's either maybe lost a job and has a minute, you know, and they didn't want it, I beg of them to use that minute for clear thinking. And I think the payback on that is so huge when you have a solid sense of self and you have a true understanding of your own identity and where you get that from. And I think that changes careers, and it's not about industry, company, manager or team. It's just, it's starting with something very core. And then building from that.

**Leah:** I love that I'm seeing some of it with my business partner right now. She's, I run it and she's kind of the financial wizard, but even just seeing her go from like a consulting role to a corporate role, to looking at a new role, and the process that she's gone through it literally it's like, "Oh, you could have just told her." But I love that it does, and it does take some time, because I think also being able to look at everything that you've done or experienced or learned in the process is going to help you get to that next level or the next role, and being able to. And that's what I, I mentor a lot of people is, think about the last five things that you did, or just even the last few years, and think about what were the moments that you really enjoyed? What were the most frustrating moments, and look at the entire environment, right? Like what was, what was everything going on in that moment in time? And then I look at, I'm like, also think about when you were a child. So this is what I want to ask too. When you were a child, what were the things that either sparked a lot of joy in you, or do you remember like your big dreams that you had as a child of what you wanted to do when you grew up? Or did you have any of those visions? Cause some people that I can point to a moment of joy or they're like, this was my dream that I had. Do you have either of those?

**Sherri:** Yeah. I didn't have a dream, like a career dream or sort of a life dream per se, but maybe something kind of defining about me is that I know that I needed to feel a sense of connection. I remember, there's stories, like I was in second grade or something, and I remember making some new friends, and I remember a conversation where, where we were exchanging addresses and phone numbers with this woman, this little girl, and she gave me her address. And I was like, "Really? That's mine too." And then she gave me her phone number and I was saying "Really? That's mine too." Of course it's not. I was so desperate to connect with her. I was pretending we had the same address and phone number and I guess finding common ground and sort of feeling a sense of connection has been a, you know, kind of a silly, you know, doing it in silly and ridiculous ways as a little girl. And those are by far my most joyful, joyful times where that was real. And I think for me, I need to be myself. I don't know how, I am so unhappy when I'm not, it is extremely apparent to me that I am unhappy when I'm not. And so when I, everything about my social life, you know, relational life, work life, I think that is a huge drum beat for me. And so that's probably my joyful moments, I think are, you know, wrapped in that. Finding ease and connection and safety and things like that were just, I think part of my life at a really early age, they mattered to me really young.

**Leah:** I think it's so beautiful how you can relate being in second grade, wanting and needing connection, to now you are a chief people officer of a global company. And I just want the person listening to really think about that. Because when I was younger,

I got in trouble all the time for talking too much. And I just remember like adults telling me their like life story. Like it's always been, people have always loved, I don't know what it is. And it's so funny, to be like, man, that thing that I loved as a kid, talking and hearing stories, and now I have a podcast and get to do it all the time. And so I love, and I like to ask that question about when you were a child, there's so often a connection to, when people are doing what they love in a job that is fulfilling, there's so many times that it connects back to who you were or what you desired from childhood. So I think, back to your point of if you're listening, and you are in that moment of trying to figure out next step, it might be good to come back and think about what brought you joy or what was something that was defining about you as a child, and then start looking at who you are outside of your career, what is it that fills you up and then let that be the basis of what you look for on that next step?

**Sherri:** I couldn't agree more. It's great advice.

**Leah:** Well, I do this, like, it's so fun. People are always like, you know, "How do you find people to interview? Like, how do you make decisions on that?" I'm like, you can always tell where I am in my life, because I'm looking for people that I'm trying to learn from and gave me. So I'm like, this is really just a big mentor session, and you being a chief people officer and me, I, you know, I run a company now that is, you know, we're virtual. We have been the whole time. And I'm like, I want to learn from you. Like, what are the important things about having so many different personalities and different roles? And it's so overwhelming to think about quote unquote, like being a good leader because people are different. And so I'm excited to just learn a lot from you about how to lead organizations. Because the thing that I love about you is that, you know, so many companies do focus on being customer obsessed. But what I love that you talked about was the employee experience and how that's so vital to you as a company. I think of, you know, Southwest Airlines and how they're so employee focused that it lends their company to be so customer focused. Right? And so I love that you get that.

So I do want to talk a little bit about your role as a chief people officer and a global company and a global pandemic. So, you know, you did start as strategic growth, and then you moved up into leadership development and now the chief people officer, what has that looked like since this hit? Like take us a little bit through that process of your role and how you've seen it shift a little bit during this crisis and some of those big decisions that you had to talk through with your executive team.

**Sherri:** Yeah. I mean, so I've been in this job since I was the interim chief people officer appointed at the end of 2018, we were in the middle of our largest integration.

**Leah:** When you say integration does that mean?

**Sherri:** So we had purchased a company, we were integrating that company into Forester, and that was a new experience. And let me just be clear, when I took the interim role, I didn't plan to be the chief people officer. In fact, I felt very sure that I shouldn't be. And so

**Leah:** Do you think that was imposter syndrome or what was it that made you feel?

**Sherri:** I don't think so. It may have been, but I felt so sure. I mean, when I think about our company, I've been at this company for 11 years. So it was just under 10 at the time. I had been a part of this team the whole time. I knew exactly what kind of talent there was. I know the challenges in the company. I know the weight we carry and I just, I wanted somebody with chops. I wanted someone that we could, they could come in and stretch us further. I wanted like, to your point, Leah, I wanted to learn from somebody, you know, I wanted them to bring us things we couldn't see. And I just, I cared so much about that for the benefit of the company and for the benefit of the team that I was on, and maybe even for my own benefit. Right? Just cause I felt like I, you know, had so much, I wanted to learn. It was a chance to really learn from the next great person, and our CEO said, "You know, yeah. And you know, maybe you want to think about it." And I said, "That's, you know, that's fine. I just, I think I've thought it through pretty carefully and this is the right move."

And so we went on a really intense search, met some incredible people, and many of them I'm still in touch with. I mean, they're amazing. I mean, there's incredible talent out there. And we would have these in these conversations about the company and the talent, and you know, what is the, what is the practice up to these days? And what's important in a leader? And I felt like I was benefiting so much from those conversations, learning and picking things up. And then it was at the end of that process, where some of them started to say, "Well, why aren't you doing this?" And,

**Leah:** The people you were looking to hire were asking "why aren't you doing it." That's amazing.

**Sherri:** Because we had this incredible comradery that was forming in a sense. And I think because maybe this is tied back to the root, I was just me. I was just doing the job. There was no pressure. There was no performance. I was just interviewing and trying to learn about them. And, you know, it was just a very natural environment, and I was doing the job of interim to learn, but also I wasn't posturing, there was no prep, like there was no contortion right in that environment, because it was really open and candid and really free of any, I don't know the dynamics that can really mess up

people's effectiveness and performance when you're in a moment like that. And I didn't realize that that was actually creating clarity and kind of opportunities to see and have a better sense of my own skills and have a better sense of how my skills stack up against others, and sort of by accident that freedom just led me to this place. And there's a lot more to that story and related to some other family moments, but at the end of the day, that was a huge decision, and I'm very thankful for it. But then I went into the integration and, you know, you know, did my best through that. And then, literally, we barely kind of exhaled out of that, and then obviously the pandemic hit. And I felt like the pandemic for us. I really felt like it started affecting my life in January. I mean, we have an office in Beijing, and we have many offices in Europe. And so in January of this year, we started paying attention and hearing things. And we were, you know, quickly, um, our CEO said, I want you to dust off our business continuity plan. I want you to lead the process there, which I've never done before. That's a major operational effort, when you think about it, to do business continuity planning. And we had one, but it's just sort of refreshing it all and going through that work. And he was right. The operators were out running the business. I was the right person to sort of galvanize the people that come together to do that work. And then, you know, it was, I still remember it was March 15th that we had to start. We were managing cases and communication strategies and contact tracing, and even those early stages of, and it was a massive emotional burden. I mean, I think February and March, I was feeling like that was the most intense part of the year. And it wasn't until March 15th that I had made the case to say, "All of our offices globally, we just need to, we need to close them. I can feel it. And the density of managing the emotional health concerns, every time I notify somebody that they could have been exposed to the 5,000 emotional questions that come after that. We're running people through a ringer here and we can, we can handle this at home. So let's do it." And I mean, we, my CEO and I were sort of a year into our relationship, but the level of trust and confidence is always growing, and those are huge choices to make and extremely new circumstances. And I still remember making a recommendation, we said, we'd sleep on it. I sent him a note that night and said, "I'm so sure that we have to do this. And these are the reasons why." And the next morning we made the announcement that we'd work from home. We didn't know for how long, but that was a pretty defining moment. And I think it was the best decision we made, and we've been remote ever since and working to do that in the best and most effective way possible.

**Leah:** Well, and I appreciate that, I mean, I know this because my husband works for your company, but I appreciate that as you're looking at next steps, that you're not making those decisions yourself, that you are going to the employees and asking

them and getting feedback. And so your peers that are listening, what are some of the things that you've done for, but with, the employees, so that you knew that it was the right decision for everyone, because I can't imagine that everyone has the same opinion. Right? So I'd love for you to talk through maybe some of the decisions because globally, we all have the pandemic, but here in the U.S., there's also been a lot happening around conversations with race and diversity in companies and all of that. So you've had the global pandemic and this other massive conversation happening. So I'd love to hear how you're communicating with the employees and making sure that they are a part of the conversation and a part of the decision-making.

**Sherri:** Yeah. So I think when I first got the job, one of the first things we did, we did in 2019 is we changed our approach. We hadn't done a full engagement survey in a long time. And this story matters because I had been hearing from all these different employees about their experiences, even before the pandemic, even before the racial injustice awakening that we all are in the middle of and living through right now, even before that it was, you know, everything from, we need to change this policy, this benefit isn't good enough. It'd be like people catching me in the hallway, and the Paris office, to big voices that show up in my emails every once in a while. But I was so unsure how to look at the entire picture and hear every voice that I was desperate for a more comprehensive view. And so we constructed an engagement survey that was an annual survey. And we changed the tool that we use. And we sort of worked with our own research and we worked with, we're using Glint. They have a methodology. We married that with some of our research methodology, because we write about employee experience, and we built a survey. So there's 45 questions. One of my favorite questions was, there a couple of open-ended questions? My one question was, "If there's one thing, you're going to tell us all these things in these 45 questions, but if there's one thing that could really change your employee experience, tell me what it is." And so from that question, I got kind of like my laundry list, and it was my chance to say, "All these anecdotal conversations we hear every day about how people are feeling when they come to work, you know, what they wish was better or different, what they love". And I got it finally in black and white. I got it in the words of employees. And I got them to tell me which things mattered most, and we can cut that by location and region and office. That became my playbook. And also, it made it possible for me to say, "Okay, number one principal was there's massive transparency in this platform. I needed this data to be ours. So you're going to see this data very quickly and all of it, even the verbatims. Two. We're only gonna do one thing at a time, because when a company tries to do a million things at once, usually we're stuck in a rowboat that's standing still, but we're going to be really

transparent about this list.” And so those muscles of transparency and action and focused action, one at a time, was something that I didn't realize how powerful that was going to be through this entire year. And then if you think about the stuff we've talked about already about, “Okay. When I get my confidence, when do I have my confidence? When I'm doing things with people when I'm connected.” And so the, the last principal was solve with and for, and so I would just start to engage employees. So the first thing we did is we changed our parental leave policy. Cause I figured out that was, I didn't realize there were all sorts of problems with that in the U S and so we built a group of employees, it was roughly 25, we journey mapped it, and we didn't just change the policy and get people more parental leave. We changed the entire experience of what it's like to go on leave. Like what kind of support do you get on the front end? What does it, what does your manager know? So we just, those are just truths, it's, that's the way to lead period. And so then yeah, I had this warmup set of situations.

Then you get into the pandemic, there's no playbook, you know, there's no itemized list of things to do that I can go find, but there's absolutely the chance for remarkable transparency stating what you know, and what you don't. There's a chance for constant listening and surveying, and there's a chance to make all decisions with and not for. And so all of those muscles just kept going and almost got stronger. And so I turned into a communication machine, I think just constantly, we've done readiness surveys. We've said, “Here are our principles, and we're not going to run a bunch of protocols for people who aren't going to be comfortable coming in. We have a company, we have a business we're very thankful we can run remotely.” So we didn't have to be in a situation with an essential team of people in the office. We just needed to make sure that people have the support at home. So I think those principles are just, they're just tried and true, but they're essential in a crisis, and they've turned out to be, I think, effective for us to get through it together.

**Leah:** Well and I love that, all of the things that you just talked about, you guys have over a thousand employees in your organization, but I think it applies to whether you have a few employees or a hundred thousand. And to me, it's all about caring about the individual person, and what they're going through so that you can make decisions as a whole. I know that, you know, you all sent a survey out about asking people their comfort level about coming back, because across the country and even across the world, a lot of companies are going back into the office. I know a lot of people that have been back since I think June, or July, and you all sent a survey and went with what your people felt most comfortable. And one of the things that I think we had talked about offline is just being able to understand the fears that people have when they're at home, that they're not coming in. And I don't want to say

inconvenience, like it's an easy word to get over. Because when you have, especially two people that both work, and their children are home when they're usually in school, and maybe their home isn't set up with home offices, just the real issues that people are facing. Knowing all of that, what are some of the ways that your company has shown compassion or empathy or grace for people as they're trying to do their jobs, when they're not in an environment where it's easy to get work done.

**Sherri:** Gosh, I have been trying to find as many answers as possible in those situations. And there's some places I've been really pleased and satisfied, and other places where I've felt, "Gosh, like, I don't know if we're doing enough or if we're doing all the right things," but for us. So the readiness survey is sort of our way to say "Who's ready? Who wants to come back? And not just that, but tell us why." And so when you tell us why, is it for social reasons for productivity reasons? Those are things that help us understand what are the barriers and what's happening at home. And what else do you want us to know? And so that's sort of one channel that, the open text that I get from our employees in that sense, that format has been incredibly informative. So I can see, that's how one of the through, through that channel and through Chatter, I do a lot of communication, that's our internal communication line. I communicate a lot about our policies and our choices and our next steps. I would try to share, I'm a parent of two young kids. I try to share something a bit. I think there's just gotta be a lot of human nature flowing through those communications. And so you start to invite some sharing, and you start to see where the trends are. And so obviously you had parental pressures emerging. That's also where I started to see people who are really isolated, who are in situations at home that weren't good, and it's not really about productivity, but it's about roommates that they didn't know very well. It was that know, they couldn't go see their families. Families that are separated families, and they are normally used to seeing each other's kids and they can't. So just there's a lot of circumstances. I mean, let alone mental health. So I think there's some fundamental things that we did, you know, ongoing listening. We started to create communities. And so definitely a parent community emerged, and there was a ton of support provided for each other. And we did that by, I mean, it's actually taken a new form at this point. So it turned into something that our function was facilitating and then it turned into something where another employee stepped up. And so she started creating a forum for, it had more to do with school adjustments. So it was grade levels of parents of kids in high school, parents of kids in middle school, parents of kids in daycare. What's that like? And so there were some really interesting exchanges about best practices. And so that exchange happened and that became a very important thing. And then just recently I learned that a couple of parents who are single parents who were in that felt a bit isolated. And so then I

started, I had like two or three conversations with people who are single parents. And I said, you know what, if you guys don't mind, I'd like to put you in touch. So now there's a party of three. Now they're hosting their own community around single parenting through this. So I just, I feel like there's just gotta be an approach of connecting people. There are certain other financial support programs, things like that. But I think the most meaningful thing that we've done is tried to stay very present. I've tried to stay extremely hands-on and accessible. And when I find someone who's come forth and said, "Okay, I'm alone right now and I need something," then it's, "How do we figure out where's the network of people that is suffering with them?" Because we're in the same storm, but we're not in the same boat. So how do we, how do we connect people who are in the same boat. And I think that's probably been the most important thing to help keep ourselves safe through this and productive.

**Leah:** I mean, I love that. I'm interested to see how many other companies have taken that type of approach. I appreciate the human aspect. I think you mentioned that word a few times, just having that human aspect of it and understanding it. And I love, and that's what I was actually talking to a girlfriend about this, but some companies have a CHRO, and I love that because you're so people oriented that you have a CPO.

So I want to ask a couple of rapid fire questions. because I always love to learn, like, what are the things that you're learning? And so are there any books, like one or two books that have made a big impact either in your life as a woman or in your career as you've moved up and for growth?

**Sherri:** Yeah. So I'll say, well, the book that I've just finished is, *How to Be An Anti-Racist* by Ibram X. Kendi. And that has been incredibly powerful. I'm trying to read it twice because I feel like I need to sort of figure out how to distill it into the principles that'll help me understand a lot about my own personal growth, let alone how I'm going to lead through this period. So that has been a powerful personal growth book for me lately. *Daring Greatly* has been a major book in my life. That might be a mantra, vulnerability is courage as far as I'm concerned. So that is a huge piece of who I am. And it helped me see more ways for me to live and lead that way and even help others find their path to that too. Other older ones, *Good to Great*, that's a concept of building on your strengths. Those are old school, but they were introduced really early in my career. And I would say those principles have stayed with me. Those might be the big ones that come to mind.

**Leah:** Awesome. And then what are you most proud of?

**Sherri:** So, I mean, for a career, I might say, I don't think I'm different in this job than I was in my last one.

**Leah:** Wow.

**Sherri:** And I hope that's true, but that to me is trying to live out what I've said. A sense of self, a sense of identity that isn't defined by, or necessarily thrown around by the circumstances I'm in. I think that is true. And if it is, I'm proud of it, it's probably not true every day, but I think on the whole, it's true.

And I think as the person I've been over the last several years, learning a lot about what it's like to live at peace with things and not attempt to control. And I think that has made me, I think there are periods in my early motherhood years, in my earlier career years, in my early marriage years, where I thought my job was to control the situation so that I could have a certain outcome, and I have never been more wrong. And so I think the freedom that comes from staring at your flaws and your gaffs and your cracks. And I'm very proud. There was a moment after a couple of intense periods of illness and some intense work. And I just could tell, I wasn't the mother or wife I wanted to be. I went and I worked it out. And then my husband joined me and we had real beautiful time of just freedom of looking at flaw and sin and, you know, just things that just, weren't pretty. And I am really glad to have done that. That was a place of growth and freedom. The voices of control and "Make sure all this stuff works out right Sherri" are still there, but I can see them clearly. And I know that pursuit of perfection, comparison, all that control are just, they're just barriers to happiness.

**Leah:** Yes. Well, and I love that you, I love that you did that, or at least part of it with your husband, because one of the things too is as we rise up in our careers and we rise up as people, you have to continually, and this is my belief, but if you're married, you have to continually choose to grow together. Because it's, it's easier to grow apart than it is to continue to grow together. And I think that takes me back and I love that, that y'all at least a part of that together.

**Sherri:** Kudos to him for jumping into that pool. I'm really glad he did. It was really, it was really courageous kind of him to do so. And, um, yeah, I totally agree. It was necessary to do it together.

**Leah:** I love that. So, um, this is on inspiration. I'd love to know who inspired you along your journey and then who inspires you now?

**Sherri:** Yeah, I mean, there have been a few people that I have followed that are just, I don't know how to describe, I mean, we all just know when we're with really, genuinely authentic, real human beings that trust you enough to show you who they are. And I

just feel like I followed so many people like that in my career who just don't put on airs. And so I just, there's names, you know, Christine Healey and Virginia Crosa and Michelle Brooklyn. I mean, these are all just names that, Jeffrey Heely, I mean, they're just, they just showed me what it's like to lead as themselves. And they helped me, I think, figure out what I had to bring to the table. That is not a famous set of inspiration, it's a million examples of great living and great human beings that I just think have kind of that around me always. So that has been in the past. And I think that I wouldn't have ever had a solid sense of myself without people like that.

Today, I mean, I weep a little bit when I, when I listen and think about people like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, it's kind of hard not to talk about her right now. And sometimes I want to, I want to do more with the lessons I've learned and communicate in the way that she does, you know, make the difference that they have, I think for women. So those people, they give me courage. They give me strength. They give me a desire to keep going and keep doing more. And when my voice starts to shrink and I worry about whether or not I'm out there too far or out in front too much, I think about people like them.

There's one anecdote from Ruth Bader Ginsburg that is just, it's been with me all week. And it was, there was an image of her as a singular woman in a room. It might've been on this, on the Supreme court. It might've been just a room at Harvard, and she was alone. She was the only female. And I think that the caption was, "Even if you're the only one you can make such a difference." So a single human being has so much value, has so much capability to make a difference, and not every single one of us will do it in that way. But I think thinking like that sometimes when I'm doubtful or when I need a little sense of confidence, they're great examples to me.

**Leah:** Oh she's a hero of mine and most women for sure. What I loved about her, and when she was the only one in the room, she was focused on not being that again, she was so focused on helping other women get there and bringing equality, but without damning the man.

**Sherri:** Yeah, it wasn't about reducing the impact of others.

**Leah:** So I, I loved it, but she also had a good spouse too. That was a partner. I love that. So last question is how do you define success today and has that changed?

**Sherri:** Yeah. I mean, Oh my gosh. I, you know, there's a quote that shaped a lot of my early life, which is "Comparison is the enemy of contentment." And I just didn't realize how much comparison was a huge measuring stick for me earlier in life. Everything from work to marriage to, Lord knows what. And so I think that used to be probably

more of a metric for my success. And it is so very clearly not that, I mean to me, we're going through school choices right now, and there's so much divide in our community about who's choosing which thing. And I think for our family is just, we have to know what we're here to do. And for me, it's to make an impact on human beings, make a lasting impact on human beings that happened to be put in front of me. Maybe there's people in other countries I should be thinking of and maybe someday I will, but for whoever has been put before me today in my neighborhood at my work, my family, those are the people I'm here to impact and give to and learn from and listen to. And so I think that's what I want to teach our kids. That's what my husband and I believe is central to who we're raising. And so any decision that doesn't advance that is just so secondary and therefore the stakes feel lower. So I think that is success today. Day-to-day.

**Leah:** Day-to-day yes. Especially in this time in life.

**Sherri:** Yeah. I don't think there's any sort of magic moment out there. It's each day.

**Leah:** I love it. Well, I appreciate your time. Um, thank you so much for joining us on Her Story of Success. And I look forward to sharing your story.

**Sherri:** Thank you, Leah. It was a complete pleasure.

**Leah:** Thanks for tuning in! I hope Sherri's story inspired you to take some time to think about what your passions are and how you can integrate them into your career.

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