

Shelly Smith: Hi and welcome to another episode of the Culture Hour. My name is Shelly Smith. I am your host, hostess with the mostest. Everything that we talk about here on the Culture Hour is absolutely workplace culture related. So if you have any information that you would like to gather to give input on, we love the questions, the answers. We love the referral for people that you want me to interview. Obviously love all of the questions that you have and input around workplace culture. That includes turnover and retention and hiring and maybe a toxic manager or how do we shift into forward feedback and everything that and above.

But today our guest, and now let's see if I can get the name right again. I always have to ... see, I said it right. Just so you guys know, we're actually rerecording because of a hick on my side. So, Brenda Neckvatal actually came to us. Brenda and I go back a little bit. We both were working with the Honor Foundation, helping Navy Seals, Special Ops do a transition out of their military careers into what do they do after life. And that's actually when Brenda and I first met. She's an incredible human being that I began to stalk a little bit. She's got a new ... Now you know!

Brenda Neckvatal: Now I know.

Shelly Smith: Now you know. She's got a couple of new podcasts that she's going to tell you about that I've actually seen and watched lately, and ran into her at a recent event. And said, "Oh my gosh, you've got to come on this show because we definitely have conversations that we can talk about." So, let me introduce to you Brenda. Brenda is the president of Best Practices, and she's launched two new ... websites. Two new podcasts recently that she can tell you a little bit more of. She's called the HR, #theHRLady. So if you want to go on Twitter and pull up some of her feed and past posts you can do that, as well as the HR Force of Nature. So it's my pleasure to introduce you to Brenda. So Brenda, why don't you tell the group a little bit about your background and what brought you into the podcasting world and your own HR consulting that you're in today?

So I do know that you started in a retail line.

Brenda Neckvatal: Yes.

Shelly Smith: And on our first recording, you actually were talking about all of the different aspects. If you could tell the audience about that and then move it into your early 2000 HR and where you are today.

Brenda Neckvatal: Yeah. Absolutely. So, I actually started ... I have a very lengthy career. First off, I want to thank you. We did this in the first go around. I almost forgot to do this

on the second one. So I thanked you the first time, now I'm going to thank you again. If that isn't a big ego stroke, I don't know what is. Thank you for having me on board, this is a real thrill. It's a lot of fun working with you over at the Auto Foundation and I have an absolute blast.

So I did start in retail, so I have a very lengthy 30 year retail career. If you want to know anything about business, if you really want good business experience, go into retail management because you learn everything. You learn everything from sales., you learn finance, you learn, maybe not so much financial management, but you learn aspects of it, you learn marketing, you learn operations, you learn risk management, you learn safety, you learn human resources stuff. You learn, and that's usually shooting out at you by a cannon, but you learn how to recruit, learn how ... loss prevention. So you really get a really good 360 degree touch on business in general. And I really liked the HR side of it. I was doing the HR work without realizing I was doing HR work. But I was doing all those other things that I listed, too.

So in 2001, after taking about a six month hiatus, the company that I was working for at the time, it just went down, went out of business. I took a break, because I was fried. I was in management and I just want to work. I just want to work, that's all I want to do.

I was hired on by Carmax in 2001, and probably my greatest mentor still is over there, he's a regional vice president. I actually wrote about him in a book that I wrote called Holy Cow, I Have to Talk to My Boss, and ... it's going out tomorrow, so he's going to get it soon.

I wound up doing some stuff with him. I was kind of backing the HR person up a little bit in certain areas and I got a glimpse into it. I really liked it. So I became officially an HR sprout, so to speak, in doing so and progressed into the actual position in 2002. And it was really great because I hadn't gone back to school at that point. I was still not, I still didn't have my ... finished my college degree. I had started it, but I hadn't finished it. So I got the benefit of really ... it was a magic combination. I mean, talk about the stars and the moon aligning, right?

So I got the benefit of doing the work as an influencer in the store. At the time, we had about 218 employees. We had all the activities that you would need to do in HR, but I had no decision-making capability. But if I needed to, I could sign in and return a \$25,000 vehicle if I needed to, so it was really kind of interesting. So we have access and ability, but we don't have authority and permission. It was really interesting. My job was the trouble-shooter, right? I also, just naturally who I was, the ... Tom actually started utilizing me as the morale booster a little bit.

One of the things that was the biggest morale booster was every payday I would walk around the store three times, we had three shifts working around the clock, and I would hand people their paychecks. In doing so, people would say, "Hey, listen, I got a quick question for you." Or, "Hey, listen, I can't find this." Or, "Hey, listen this." And I would be able to tell him what kind of the pulse of the issues were going on in the store. He absolutely loved it.

Shelly Smith: Yeah.

Brenda Neckvatal: So when I told him I wanted to go back to school and become, finish my degree and pursue human resources, he told me I didn't need to do it. And I said well that's really funny because all the other HR people over here are telling me that that's what I need to do, so even though I believe you. But that's what I did. He eventually moved on, I worked with some other really great leaders that gave me opportunities. Eventually, I went to the corporate office, so what was really cool was that starting in 2001, was really an onset of change in progressive HR.

I came from a background growing up where, you don't like the door, there it is. You don't want to get the work done, there it is. Here, in the 70s and 80s it was about being a personnel manager. It was more of the administrative and tactical side of making sure that stuff got done. And then when progressive HR really started coming to the plate, it was taking into account an individual's level of engagement, job satisfaction. We saw a massive boom in technology. We started seeing things called an HRIS, which is Human Resource Information System. We started taking applications online. We started doing not performance-based evaluations online, although that did come a little bit later, but then we were doing applicant assessments online. And now we introduce IO psychology, and validated tests.

It was really neat. By the time I did go back to school, I started back in 2005, I transitioned to the corporate office down in Richmond, Virginia from the chilly winter of Wisconsin, and worked at the corporate office for three years. So I was with CarMax for eight years. I really got a chance to see a lot of different things on the back end, but then I was also able to pull in my experiences being a field associate. And I can tell you right now that in retail, field employees and corporate employees, two completely different cultures under one big corporate culture. Because the dynamics of the environment are very different. And that was something very difficult for people to understand at the corporate office. Conversely, it was difficult for people to understand why people at the corporate office didn't understand people in the field. There's always this back and forth. It's the same dilemma that occurs between sales and service. It's

always going to be there. One will never fully understand the other, right? No matter how hard they try.

I graduated with a Bachelor's in Human Resource Management and a minor in Leadership in 2009 from the University of Richmond. The week that I graduated, CarMax decided to downsize, so they eliminated 128-some positions.

Shelly Smith: Oh my God.

Brenda Neckvatal: And added only 32. So it was, I got my notification on Tuesday, I had people flying in on Thursday, to walk across the stage on Saturday. Now this happened right when the economy was crashing, it was crashing at this point. We had already seen President Bush, at the time, had, already signed off on several bail-outs. The economy was still sliding downwards. It was the time when ten percent of the workforce now all of a sudden didn't have a job. I was one of those ten percent, so I was the early adapter, right?

But I was smart because I paid attention to what was going on, and I saw the writing on the wall a year ago. I wound up talking to a friend of mine who was a district manager over at PetSmart, and he says, "Look, I'm going places, I want you to be my HR director." I was like, fantastic, I'm still employed. And he goes, "Yeah, I'm not a regional VP yet, so that works out great." So we always had this plan that the day I knew that I was going to be released, to call him up and put our little plan in motion. So I joined on at PetSmart, and I joined PetSmart as an Ops Manager. We had a district of 11 people. Oddly enough, we had to put our friendship on hold, that was a smart thing to do. I was responsible for the entire district's safety program. Because I had experience of working with the balance between the corporate office and what was going on in the field.

I did that job for two years. I went over to ADP, so my fourth Fortune 500 company was PetSmart, and then ADP was my fifth. Went over there, two years later became a human resource consultant, and eventually senior human resource business partner in less than a year and a half with ADP, and that's where I really ... That's where I got to do a lot of hands-on working with the CEOs, having a seat at the table. My book of business over the year, just that job alone contributed to over 300 companies. In five years, to be able to touch 300 companies, you see a lot of different things done a lot of different ways.

Shelly Smith: Absolutely.

Brenda Neckvatal: So that's the short version.

Shelly Smith: Oh my. Oh my.

I'm going to dive into a couple things. I know you still have other things going on in where you are today, but you, I took some notes while you were talking, I want to talk about three things. You talked about the retail side, which I completely agree. My daughter is, my middle child's actually an intern this summer, she's a management major out at Virginia Tech, and she is doing retail internship with Target.

Brenda Neckvatal: Oh, good company.

Shelly Smith: First of all, it's an amazing, and they're not sponsoring this podcast, but they do have an amazing internship program. I'm pretty impressed with what it is that they're doing. It brought me back to my early retail days, when I was just working and you're right. Everything about retail is every single aspect of it. And she's already come back to me and because they let her go through each department and each piece, and is living out everything that you're talking about. But she's already starting to see very quickly, even though she's only four weeks in, the things that she likes, and what's gravitating her towards it and it is an interesting lesson. It is the HR side and I'm getting a big kick out of that.

But you're right. Having that scope I think is huge. So I wanted to talk about something that you said specifically there. We're going to come back to that. But you talked about the fact that when you were handing out the payroll checks, and the people were coming in with their miscellaneous pieces that you were able to listen, watch, learn, and take it back to upper management, and to have that different perspective. I think that that's huge and key, and it's an element that I want to dive into from culture.

Then you talked about the turn and the evolution of the AI piece. So the HRS systems of the world, and so obviously there's more and more being discussed about automation in HR as well as, obviously, other dynamics. But I would love to talk to you about the human side that is still going to have to remain. I don't know about you, but for me, I love the fact that the automation is taking away things that are far more tactical that we need to be able to analyze. But we do have to get back to the human side. That's why the HR element was there to begin with. So I'm actually, I have a different view on it that I'm actually happy to see some of that coming.

And then you talked about subcultures. So I want to talk about that as well, because many times people get confused on climate versus culture, and they think that the culture is the culture synonymously throughout the entire, either walls of the company inside the departments, and you're right, out in the field, and that is wrong, wrong, wrong. You can have pillars, but there's absolutely

when you have a fleet, so to speak, you're absolutely going to have subcultures, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's going to happen, because any time you have people, you're going to have cultures.

So those are the three things I would love to unpack. First I wanna come back and talk about maybe a couple of tips that you can give to the viewers and listeners around the importance of never losing grip on the day to day operations and what the team members at every level are thinking, feeling, asking, seeing. And how, over the years for you, you've been able to bring those perspectives back to the leaders in the Fortune 500 companies and to make something happen. Are there some tips around on both sides, giving the employees the courage to have conversations, and then the managers the ability to listen? I would love to hear your views on that.

Brenda Neckvatal: Yeah. Absolutely.

So when I was over at CarMax, and I've seen this now twice over at CarMax and over at PetSmart, both really great companies. I still buy my cars from CarMax, actually. One of the biggest questions was ... It's hard, and at the time CarMax was just a much smaller company than what it is today. When I was there, when I left, it was about 100 stores, they were just ramping up their growth, and we just got done settling a brand new CEO. The company as a whole went through a shift, because the captain is now no longer there, it's a new captain at the helm, it was the executive officer, right?

So now he's in place and he's a very different guy than the prior person, so I can speak for myself that there were elements of the culture that I didn't expect to change, and there were elements of the culture that I expected to change. I was caught off guard with the elements that I didn't expect to change. Now, it wasn't bad, it just wasn't the same as what it was, I thought it was. Personally, it dropped my level of engagement a little bit. It still wasn't bad, I was still in there doing my job, I didn't hate going to work or anything like that. It was a line of delineation for me between absolutely loving what I do, and just enjoying what I do.

Shelly Smith: Let's unpack that.

Brenda Neckvatal: And then there's, there's my dog.

Shelly Smith: I hear it, yeah.

Brenda Neckvatal: You'll hear her, she's big.

Shelly Smith: Let's unpack that a little bit. Can you talk a little bit more about what those subtle or direct, those changes were?

Brenda Neckvatal: Well, both of the leaders were very approachable. Neither one wasn't approachable. One was more adamant about every day being visible to employees. The other one didn't have a problem with it, but he didn't push that mindset. Make sense?

Shelly Smith: Yes.

Brenda Neckvatal: And that was a change that I didn't expect, because I thought it was embedded into the culture at that point. And that was, really, that's a leader's preference, right there. Matter of fact, I actually did a white paper on ... I had to do it on a leadership trait, and I did it on the study of charisma. Which was a really difficult project, wound up being something like a 35 page report that I did. Like a 300 level class, there was a lot of data that had to go into it.

Shelly Smith: Yeah.

Brenda Neckvatal: Matter of fact, I reformulated the white paper to talk about it, and although I've changed the names and identities of those who I studied, it identified specific characteristics of somebody who is naturally charismatic, and how charisma is actually used in leadership, based off of specific distinctions that formulate the definition. Because charisma's one of those things where you know it when you see it, but it's kind of hard to define. So I put a definition to it, right?

Taking a look at the culture from an academic standpoint was fun, it was enlightening. I don't know too many people who'd call it fun, but it was very enlightening. Because it was applying towards my own development of my own leadership style, my own growth, and what it is that I wanted to, what my legacy would have been in the future when I started taking a seat somewhere.

Shelly Smith: Right.

Brenda Neckvatal: So that was really interesting. The dynamic of a corporate office is going to be much different than the dynamic of your client-facing employees and your client-facing group, right? Employee service exists in a corporate office at the corporate office for internal clients, which is the field. But your field employees are your client-facing team. I think, and I'll throw this out there, our definition of what customer service is today is vastly different than what it was in 2008, what it was in 2001, what it was in 1989 when I graduated from high school. See, I

gave you guys a date, so you can do the math now. And in 1985, 1970-something-or-other, it ...

Shelly Smith: Yes.

Brenda Neckvatal: 1942. It's all vastly ... different.

Shelly Smith: Well, that's because the leadership piece that goes along with each of those as well. But I'm going to pull you back into the charisma comment, because I actually like that. When the differences in charisma, if you will, you saw taking place between top leadership, the differences in the changing in the guards, what impact did that say, you talked about it personally for you that you went from a high-level engagement to just the engagement piece. Talk to me a little bit more about how you felt, because I'm sure people came to you as well to talk to you, right? About the differences? How did you feel about that?

Brenda Neckvatal: Not really.

Shelly Smith: No? They didn't?

Brenda Neckvatal: No, not really, not in the position I took. Well first off, when you've got a major change in companies, there's this façade that exists out in this digital world that we have, that when things change, it's this massive upheaval, right? And things get flipped upside down, and they kind of do to some point, but when you're in a corporate environment and you go to the [inaudible 00:21:11], and they took that seat today, well, tomorrow it's still business as usual. It has to be, because all those things are still currently in place. Just because we have new leaders in place doesn't mean our SOPs immediately change in 24 hours. Or a week, or a month. It means that strategic direction is changing. And vision is changing. It's those things that impact what an individual's perception is. And in the book that I wrote, there's four different laws, or four different rules, and the first rule is that your boss is going to have more problems than you, guaranteed. All the time.

Well, imagine that as a CEO. The CEO has the most of anybody in any company. And the fourth rule is that if you are ... you won't be part of the problem for very long ... He's going to take care of their problems.

Shelly Smith: Yes, yes. Amazing how that works out, right?

Brenda Neckvatal: That's right.

The second rule is that problems are always based on money. Always. In HR, I can quantify anything in the company. I can quantify time, I can do time studies. I can quantify everything. Everything. Human capital and everything, right?

And then the third problem, the third rule, is if you don't understand, if it's not money issues, you don't understand it's not a money issue, and if you don't understand it, you're contributing to the problem, so ...

Shelly Smith: Yeah.

Brenda Neckvatal: Those are four major categories that I talk about. But that's exactly what happens to any shift in dynamic. And when you look at the dynamic change curve, when you have forming, storming, norming, and performing, it's the exact same thing, and everybody's going to go through it. They're all going to feel it. Some people feel it at different paces than others, and that impacts culture. Some people feel it together, and that impacts culture. Some people don't feel it, departments won't even feel it at the same time. Because maybe the strategic focus initially is a change in financial management. Or it could be a change in marketing structure and marketing campaigns. So those teams are going to feel it, therefore, that's when silos start popping up, is because everybody's focusing in on what they need to focus in on, and we as human beings have a tendency to start thinking, okay, so this is what I'm focusing in on. My support mechanism, my support networks are not on the same page.

So that means one of two things. Either I work to get them on the same page, which ideally is the best way to go, but their objectives may not be the same, either. Their priorities are going to be different. So that's the puzzle. That's the formula you have to figure out. How can I get that team, who historically supports me and I need them to support me, on my page? And conversely, what can I do to help them accomplish their goals? Because this even exchange of help, amazing, it's amazing how far things go, right? It also puts more work on your plate, but it's worth it in the end.

And then ...

Shelly Smith: Go ahead.

Brenda Neckvatal: The other piece is that if that doesn't happen, well, now we get tunnel vision, and these silos come up. And now it's like, I have all of this that I have to deal with, and if you're not willing to help me, you now no longer are anything of value for me, I've got to focus in on this. Well, they may be looking at you as a

support mechanism. But they may not be able to support, so we have to take the mindset of me out of thinking sometimes and really look at the big picture.

I think there's an element in place right now in today's workforce where that is no longer being influenced. It's not as taught, and there's a lot of people that complain about millennials, because millennials look at life a different way, it's not bad. But here's the other piece of it, is that those millennials who are now going into leadership positions are now learning those lessons that have been in existence for a long time. So now they're taking hits in the chops, but they're bringing different types of perceptions and views and experiences to the table to move things forward.

Shelly Smith: Which every generation has, and does. I don't think that millennials ... I always get a lot of looks when I say this, but, millennials just want things faster than we did. If my parents had not reinforced that you don't job hop, that it's all about steady and consistent, as soon as I started working for Marriott, I'm like, what do I need to do to get promoted? I may not have articulated the same way, but I definitely took action. They're just articulating it quicker. They don't want anything different than what I have wanted my entire career. We just have taught them, each generation has taught the next generation to speak up, and to be able to communicate and ask what it is, and that nothing should hold you back.

But the other part of this is the technology piece, which is pulling into the AI piece, the more we have access to everything like this, why would we not want everything now. Hence, this is why ... we're talking about the millennials. I've got two millennials and I've got one in the Z generation. The Z generation wants it even faster, so there's an eight year gap, everything is why not now, why not now? Literally everything.

The poor millennials. The poor millennials. Just wait, people. The next generation, the Z workers are going to be something else. We'll be able to shift and start, the millennials will finally get a break and then they're going to start talking about the Z generation inside of that.

We're going to have to put a wrap on our conversation.

Brenda Neckvatal: No problem.

Shelly Smith: Just because I always tell the viewers, that if you ... easily consumable and not actually an hour. So what I would like to do, is I would like to have a couple things from you. Is there a favorite book, or quote, or kind of your tip or mantra that you live by or you recommend? And then, give us the best way that people

can contact you, follow you, and to find out more information about yourself, your business, and your podcast.

So first. What is it you're going to tell the audience as a final take away?

Brenda Neckvatal: Man, we covered so much.

Shelly Smith: We did. And that's why I was like, oh, the time. I mean, you didn't get to two things. You'll have to come back.

Brenda Neckvatal: I know, but that's okay.

Well, yeah, I'll be happy to come back. I love this stuff.

So I would say, based off of what we talked about today, and I'll tell you my number one rule in life. And I had a boss that taught me this. I don't think he really fully understood how much it impacted my world, but in the absence of information, people make stuff up. Human beings do not do well with not knowing or having a justification as to why something is. So why not be very clear in your communication behind it, right?

And that also goes true with in the HR field, is that when you're looking at a situation, we instantly make judgement based off of only what we perceive is going on and not actually go deeper into the subject matter to understand it. When somebody's showing up late, and they show up late consistently, well we automatically think that they're a bombhead, because they can't seem to get here on time, right? So that's their justification. And we all do it, even me, who lives and dies by this rule, I still am just as a human being am wired to make that decision. However, I'm very quick at turning around and wondering, okay, so what's going on? Why is this actually happening? I'm not afraid to ask the question, have a conversation with the person, and you may actually learn that they're probably caring for an ailing family member, or there's something bigger than what's out there.

We tend to get very snappy and very judgemental, so I challenge everybody on this planet to be mindful about being snappy and judgemental and remember that there's always, always more to the story than what is on the surface.

Shelly Smith: Absolutely.

Brenda Neckvatal: Yeah, and if you guys ever want to have those kinds of conversations with me, and you guys are welcome to find me. I'm the only Brenda Neckvatal in the country, so it's really hard to miss me. I know, right?

Shelly Smith: You've been blessed, but I have the generic name. I tell my husband all the time that I, of course, Shelly Smith is an ESPN person, so usually when you look that up, that's what you get.

Brenda Neckvatal: Yeah, you get ... Sorry.

Shelly Smith: But I told my husband I was marrying him early on when we were dating because my last name was, my maiden name was Groce, G-R-O-C-E, and of course I grew up in the area of everything was ew, gross. So I was quick to get rid of that name, but probably if I would have kept that, I could have been found easier.

At any rate ...

Brenda Neckvatal: So they can find me at the website at bestpractices.org. You can find me on Twitter with my name, Brenda Neckvatal, though nobody knows how to spell it and that's fine. You can find me on Instagram and Facebook at Best Practices in HR.

Shelly Smith: Beautiful. Well, thank you so much for your time today. I definitely think that our conversation, even though we went in different pieces, it does boil down to communication, and I always say communication is the king and the queen of everything. And I am one to be, sometimes I'm a little bit too transparent and honest in my demeanor, outward, everyone kind of knows what I'm thinking. But I would rather have truth and transparency myself so I always try to give that, and I do think a lot of our words and our misinterpretations of things could have been stopped and paused if we just would have had better communications and to be able to look at the other side. So as you said, I completely agree, and I absolutely love that.

Again, thank you so much, Brenda, for being on today. For those of you watching, you're going to be able to see Brenda's information scrolling at the bottom of the screen, and for those of you who are listening, you can go deeper in and look at that as well. Of course, you heard Brenda talk about how to contact. Again, my name is Shelly Smith, I'm your proud host and founder, the owner of Premier Rapport and the Culture Hour hostess. I thank you for listening and watching and viewing. Keep submitting your questions, because I love getting that type of engagement going. Until then, remember culture matters, and have a fantastic day.