

Nate: Welcome to Illuminate HR. Jen.

Jen: Thanks Nate. Happy to be here.

Nate: From scratch. You and your partner Isabelle built one of the most well respected benefits and HR communication practices over the last 12 years. I've known you probably about that timeframe. I can't believe, first of all, that it has been 12 years.

Jen: I know. Time flies, right?

Nate: Yeah. And I'm sure it feels longer or shorter to you than it does to me. Recently you teamed up with the Segal group to create Segal Benz. What can you tell me about that new team?

Jen: Yeah, we did. It was a big change at the start of the year. On January 1st we joined the Segal group and it has been a lot of fun. Segal is a, an old consulting firm an 80 year old company, really incredible organization. And they had a communications team about the same size as our team at Benz Communications. We each had about 30 people. And so we teamed up joined them in January and combined our two teams and we've hired lots of new people since we actually had seven people start last week, which was really, really fun. I can remember when the whole company was only seven people. So it's been, it's been a nice a nice partnership and really exciting to be part of a larger organization that has had a, a big voice in the benefits industry which we've, we've been very proud to have as well.

Nate: Yeah, absolutely. You guys both have great reputations, so it seems like a wonderful match. We could talk about benefits in HR communications and I think maybe we'll naturally weave some of that into the conversation here. But I wanted to talk to you a little bit about culture and I know you, you have referred to something in the past in our conversations that you, you call a recognition culture. What do you mean by that and why might that be important to you right now? Especially given you know, two companies coming together and two teams coming together really feeling each other out.

Jen: Yeah. This is something that I've been thinking a lot about the last couple of years is really how to create an employee culture and a company culture that is just filled with recognition of all kinds. I think that is something that a lot of people are just starving for in life is to feel like they're contributing and like their work matters. And over the last 10 years or so as we were building Benz communications, it's something that we thought a lot about. Like how do we build and recognition? How do we build in those moments that make the team feel very connected but also make individuals feel like their contributions are really important and that they are seen and that they are seeing not just for the work that they're doing but for the person that they are. And I think that that's so, so important to build a culture where people feel like they can show up and be their best and you really almost can't do enough of it. I don't think you can be. You can over recognize people. I actually thought that we had it really dialed and really figured out and I went to a workshop with the Barry Way Miller company and realized that we

could just take our recognition up another 10 steps and we did that and it [inaudible] and it made things even better.

Nate: That's amazing. So, you know, sometimes culture is hard to define or it can be seen as a little bit of an abstract concept to some people. Do we, and you as leaders, are you defining it, a culture for a company or once you get to a certain size, are you more of a guide for the company culture? How do you think about this?

Jen: Well, I think that culture is one of those things, just like brand where it exists, whether or not you talk about it and it's there regardless of whether you name it or you talk about it or you try to make an impact on it. So every organization has a culture. And I think of it as all of the ways that, that people interact and, and most, most importantly, the, the feeling and, and sentiment that is behind those actions, makeups, so much of an organization's culture. And so you can go through exercises of putting words on the board and trying to define it and, you know, having some cute sayings. But it's, it's there all of the time. And, and I think it's leader's job too, set the example of the culture. And that can be really hard as a leader. And I learned that lesson a lot of times a small business it's that your, it's your job to set that example and then ask everyone else to step up to create the culture that is going to serve them and the organization the best. And it's not easy because it's, that means sometimes having hard conversations or addressing how people are treating each other more, talking about the purpose and the value of the work that we're doing. But those types of things are really, really what matters in an organization. And people spend so much of their time at work, they deserve for it to be a place that is nurturing and supportive and helping them be successful, not creating unnecessary stress and, and negativity.

Nate: Yeah, and I think the thing that I've noticed when it comes to cultures is they're not all the same and they, they shouldn't be all the same. Sometimes I think when we talk about culture, we, we start to look at these things as this is the ideal culture for every company. And they, they are drastically different in some cultures will work for some personalities and other cultures will work for other personalities and sometimes there's not a fit. And that's okay. It doesn't mean you're culture needs to change. It just means that that person needs to find the right fit for them. So how do you, how do you sort of nurture a unique culture and I guess digging a little bit deeper, what role does the HR person play in, in this culture discussion and creating or sustaining or encouraging certain activities and within a culture?

Jen: I do, I, I definitely do agree with you that every organization, Culture is very unique and there isn't one right company culture. But I do think we can all agree that there are a lot of toxic company cultures out there and that's not good for anyone. So I think across the board we should, we should try to eliminate toxic company cultures and the HR team can have a big role in, in that. Bye. Making sure that that people who are behaving badly are, are not allowed to stay in the organization. One of our mentors and advisors, an incredible guy named David Baker who wrote a book called the business of expertise and, and he has a worked with thousands of marketing agencies. He always says that you have to be wary of the highest performing person who is detrimental to your culture because when you have one person who is getting away with misbehaving

[inaudible] and at [inaudible] and many times that person has a really strong performer, so no one wants to intervene with that.

Jen: That can have a bigger impact on a company culture than anything else. And I think that's where HR can really make sure that, that those, those negative behaviors are not allowed to destroy what otherwise could be a good organizational culture and organizational dynamic. But then, but then everybody in the organization [inaudible] is responsible for the culture. And I tell my team this all the time and [inaudible] on my team, the folks that worked with me for many, many years of Benz communications, they were naturally wary of becoming part of a larger organization. Well, what happens to the culture that we have or is that going to go away as we've become part of a larger, large organization? And I remind them all the time, that is not up to me. And that's not up to the larger organization. It's up to everyone and how they act every day and how we work as a team.

Jen: And so I think a positive force that HR can be nurturing and maintaining a positive culture company culture is helping everyone understand that that is their job too. It's not just the job of the leaders, it's not just the job of HR, it's the job of everybody at all levels of the company to be pushing things forward. And I, and I think that kind of seeding that power her to my team is the reason that we have the type of team that we do and that we were able to create such a positive, nurturing culture. You know, it's really interesting. And so another aspect of HR is of course the, the tactical piece of policy decisions, things that we do related to setting up certain benefits or the way we operate. How big of a connection, you know, there's some messaging there. When you put in place a certain benefit or you have a process of checks and balances.

Nate: Should we be thinking about our culture and every little decision we make. And is that sort of a, another form of reinforcing to the population what this company stands for and how we operate?

Jen: Absolutely. And it's the, it's the things that tell a big story and how you design them or what you're asking people to do. Those can have such a big impact on culture. And I think that's part of what goes on recognized in organizations. A couple examples of that. I mentioned that Barry Waymiller company and they do a lot of training around recognition and their CEO wrote a book called everybody matters, which is really about his awakening to realizing that the people in his organization really, really matter a lot. And that they had created a company that was treating them like cogs in the machine rather than as human beings. And he talks about the big

Jen: Effort that they went through to humanize their organization and, and what that did. And it's an incredible story. I think everyone, everyone should read it and there's some videos online that talk about it too, but one of the examples of, of where the CEO, his thinking changed was a conversation with an employee who said, you know, you send me to other countries around the world and trust me with doing business on your behalf. But when I come back to the manufacturing location, all of the expensive tools are locked behind a door. Like you're thinking, I'm going to steal them from the company. So what is up with that? Why, why would you let me go do business in Mexico for you? And then I come back and you think, I've been to steal a \$200 piece of

equipment. And that was one of those disconnects, you know a complete unintentional disconnect in what that organization was trying to do in terms of giving an employee's responsibility and then the message they were sending of protecting the property.

Jen: And in it, you start to look for those things in organizations. You see them everywhere. Benefits are a great place for this. You know, a lot of organizations have these extra, extra perks and benefits and many of our clients have had kind of a, a reimbursement program for health and fitness items or things that are helping with, with a wellbeing. But then they have these incredibly strict lists and want documentation like your you know, applying for college in order to get like a \$200 reimbursement. So why are you making people jump through all these hoops, assuming that they're gonna try to cheat you versus making it a positive experience. One example of this I just saw is a benefit that gives people reimbursements for different things that help with their wellbeing. And there's a really nice component of it that if a close family member dies, the company will give you \$500 to offset funeral expenses.

Jen: But then in the fine print, they want a receipt to show the funeral expenses and the death certificate. Like what on earth would you need the death certificate? So when you start looking for those things within HR programs, you see them everywhere. These things that send a mixed message, you know, we want to do the right thing for you. We care about you in your time of need, but we want to really make sure that you actually are not lying to us about your close family member dying. You know, there, there's so many disconnects like that. And you know, once you go hunting for them, you see them everywhere.

Nate: Yeah, absolutely. In the inverse, I've also seen where a company does something from an HR benefits perspective that appears extremely positive or progressive. Let's say, you know, something with their maternity benefits or something like that, but it doesn't align to the company culture at all. And the population looks at it and goes, well this is really nice, but it doesn't align to anything else we do at this company. So you can be out of step as an HR person if you don't at least recognize what kind of culture you have and understand what kind of culture you want.

Jen: Yes, absolutely. And individual managers have an incredible role to play in that. And I think that that's something that's often overlooked by HR. If you think about any benefits around flexibility to take care of your family or time off or even mental health programs and wellbeing benefits, the managers can play a big part in whether or not an employee really feels like that benefit is there for them or whether it's just talk and you see this in the companies where they've gone to unlimited or non accrued time off. In some organizations that's been really successful because they had a culture of trust, the managers were not, we're not doing things to interfere with that benefit. And in an organization that from the outside might look very similar, but with a completely different culture, those benefits of have been really negative. So there's so much in the culture and then the manager relationship that goes into whether or not programs actually can fulfill the promise or the, or the business value.

Nate: Yeah. And you mentioned trust there. In July you wrote an article for Workforce Magazine Entitled Trust, the biggest workplace benefit in it. You outline your thoughts

around the importance of employees trust in their employer. Maybe walk me through a little bit deeper around this trust issue.

Jen: Yeah, this is a really interesting topic I think. And for a long time we have talked about in there there's been really good survey data out there that we referenced a lot with health and benefits work that employers are a trusted source of health and financial information. People generally trust their employers advice on health and retirement issues more than the financial services industry, more than the healthcare industry, more than the media and so forth. And that's a really precious position that employers have and, and should, should do good things with. But what is really interesting this year is the Edelman Trust Barometer, which is a survey of people around the world that's been done for 19 years. They showed this year that trust of my employer is higher than almost any other entity in the world. So when they did their survey, 75% of people say that they trust my employer to do what is right. And that is more than NGOs business. And the media NGOs had about 57% saying they trust them to do what's right business in general, 56% and then the media 47%. So that is huge. That in that large of a survey around the world people are saying that they trust their employer more than, than other sources of information and more, more than other groups out there. That's incredible. And we should be screaming from the rooftops about it.

Nate: Yeah. And I think it's also probably a shock to any HR people listening out there because I think we hear a lot of times about this, how they don't trust us, how we need to be careful about our communications. So, you know, how do you, how do you take that trust and use it in a positive way with your communications, with your programs, all of these sorts of things.

Jen: I really think employers need to rise to the occasion and they need, they need to say, wow, this is an incredible place that we have in terms of how we can influence and educate and do what's right for our people. And you can do that in, in so many ways. Open and frequent communication is one of the best. More and more companies are becoming very transparent with their business operations and the reasons decisions are made. And that is really powerful for, for building trust. A lot of organizations are taking action on societal issues are really taking a stand for what they believe in within the organization and outside of the organization. And that is very important. And that's also something that that came up in the Edelman survey. A large portion of people want their employer to join them and taking action on societal issues.

Jen: So they don't want their employer to be a, a neutral corporate entity without a voice in these larger issues that are impacting us around the world. So I think all, all of that combined, it, it's just such an opportunity for employers to rise to the occasions and for and for leaders also as a, as someone who had a small business, I couldn't believe the impact that we had on people's lives overall. And you know, I saw that so many times with the individuals. On my team who many of them came from other employers or you know, had other things going on in their lives. And the, the way that we built our organization to support them had such a big impact on them in a positive way. And when you scale that up to an organization that has thousands or tens of thousands of people, that impact is tremendous. And we should all be super, super excited about that

as business leaders and doing everything we can to help that be a force for positive change.

Nate: We'll make sure to link to the article, but any, you talk a little bit about the benefit to employers, companies, their products and their profitability in and leveraging that trust and increasing that trust. Tell me a little bit about that.

Jen: This is another piece that, that there's some nice research out there on metlife's benefit trends study also this year showed a big connection between benefits and, and trust and happiness at work and what they, what they saw in their research is that trust. And primarily that's trust and employer's leadership and their commitment to employee success is the most significant driver of employees being happy at work. And this is a topic that I hear a lot about at HR conferences and so forth. Like we'll do, we really care if people are happy. Like is this really our job to make people happy? But not surprisingly happy people, people are, people when they're happy at work are more satisfied with their job. They're more loyal to their employer, they're more engaged, they're more productive, they have a bigger impact. All of the things that we want out of people. So that element of trust really let's people be high performers and isn't that what almost everything we do in HR is all about trying to get people to, to perform at their best and help the organization succeed.

Nate: Well this has been great. Thank you so much for spending the time with me today. I really, really appreciate it and hope you have continued success with the new organization.

Jen: Thank you so much. This is great.