

SPEAKER_02 0:04

My name is Mark Mitford, Managing Director of HR Catalyst Consulting, and today I have the pleasure of having a new friend that he just uh started a new relationship, and hopefully this will be a long-term relationship with this individual. Uh Sarah Sheehan. So she has her own consulting firm, Sarah Sheehan Consulting, and she is a transformational change expert. So, with that, Sarah, how are you doing today?

SPEAKER_01 0:33

I am doing fantastic. Thank you so much for having me on your show today, Mark. I really appreciate it.

SPEAKER_02 0:41

Well, thank you. Well, it's going to be my pleasure because it's going to be we we met for literally, we met a couple weeks ago for coffee, and Sarah and I just had this great conversation. We we have some similar type of skills and tools in our toolkit and background, but she has a wealth of information, which I know I'm going to be excited to just get a lot of insights and expertise from her today for you as the listening audience, too. So um, so today our we are talking, Sarah, we're talking specifically about organizational change. So um how long have you been working in the field of organizational change? So tell me the whole story of how you got into this fairly niche, uh, neat niche skill set and and uh background.

SPEAKER_01 1:25

Absolutely. I have been practicing my craft for over 31 years. I um joined Anderson Consulting as a staff consultant here in Dallas and really got tremendous complex project work right away, right after graduate school. And I would really say that the work chose me as much as I chose it. But it really was an opportunity that was filled with great challenging projects where I was learning an absolute ton and able to really hone skills that I could use for the rest of my career.

SPEAKER_02 2:15

Wow, that sounds awesome. So so you it sounded like you um so you've been doing this for, like you said, over about 31 years now, which is great. I kind of fan kind of funny. I started my career in 36 years ago. So I've got you I got you beat by a couple of years. So but so when did you decide? Because I know you've got a great consulting, a lot of iconic companies you worked for. Um, how did you so what what's the story behind you making the shift over to actually deciding to break out of a corporate situation in corporate America into actually starting your own consulting firm? What's what's that story?

SPEAKER_01 2:55

That's a great uh question. Um it was really kind of a natural, um, a natural arc and progression, if you will. After starting and working with Anderson Consulting for a number of years, the um big central part of my career, I spent 15 years with IBM. I was in their strategy and change practice for over 11 years. I had a couple of global roles in their software group. Those were global marketing and communications roles. And the last role that I had there was a role in global process services, where we help clients outsource a major function. I really had tremendous experience at IBM. After that, I spent a couple years with KPMG, and then I have a couple of small boutique consulting firms that I've worked with that I still have relationships with today, but the pandemic really served as the inflection point or the transition opportunity from being in-house to working on my own, essentially.

SPEAKER_02 4:16

Okay, that's great. Thank you. So so what did you find as um what did what did you find? Because obviously working for large consulting firms that had a huge depth of consulting knowledge and all types of competencies and skills, what was that biggest, what did you find is the biggest shift for you to actually go out on your own? And what were what were some of those biggest aha moments for you while you made that transition?

SPEAKER_01 4:43

That's a great uh question. Partly um I found with the stage of life that I was in, that I wasn't getting as many interviews as I would have expected based on my past experience in looking for my next opportunity. And because of that, I really started digging in to see what I could do to create something of my own and what that would look like. Contacting and talking with former consulting partners that have moved out of firm life into doing their own thing, as well as talking with former colleagues that um have made shifts of of many kinds, and then developing new strategic referral partners through those kinds of relationships, interesting clients and projects have come my way, and I'm very grateful for that.

SPEAKER_02 5:54

So, what would you say? Because I know you've done you you have this such a broad um library of clients you've worked with. Um, what is what is one of the most fascinating clients you've ever worked with on a project? What what what was that engagement like what did that engagement look like?

SPEAKER_01 6:14

Um fascinating. There are a lot of fascinating projects in the in the queue for sure. Um in terms of recent, relatively recent engagements where um it's it's during the time that I've been on my own. I got a referral to an HR leader in a regional airline, and she needed assistance with organization design for the HR function specific to HR. She um needed a capability map for where her capabilities are and should be in the future, as well as um we ended up developing a very comprehensive behavior change plan for her and her team because it is a very toxic workplace. And as an as an a regional airline, they had tremendous attrition issues and were constantly having to focus on talent acquisition. Um, but that particular project was very interesting. Um, you're good. Um I just lost my train of thought.

SPEAKER_02 7:55

Oh no. So well you're fine. We can just we'll take a short little So regional airline, you were talking about some of the changes. They were having really high turnover.

SPEAKER_01 8:04

They had extremely high turnover, and there was a tremendous need to try to stabilize turnover, not only within HR, but within the business as much as possible. And that project was extremely it was compelling. I had a great client that was an outstanding thought partner relationship, and we were able to effect real change in her organization.

SPEAKER_02 8:44

Well, that's correct. How long, just out of curiosity, how long? Well, I guess just overall for our audience, when when you do a change project, is what would you say is the average life project lifespan uh of you getting involved and just so we can so our audience can hear, get a good understanding of what a really good transformational change project would look like. What is the length and what would be, you know, what are some of the typical um lengths of some projects that you would be undertaking?

SPEAKER_01 9:16

Typical length of a project varies greatly. Um, that particular project, I worked with her for a year, and she needed every bit of that. Um many times I'll start out in a fractional capacity, and I may shift at some point to an advisory capacity where I'm available to the client, but I'm not producing deliverables as much. Um that's a very common engagement type with me. Um, but the length of the project can vary greatly. It could be six months, it could be 12, 18, 24 months for a very substantial large project. It's it has varied greatly my entire career.

SPEAKER_02 10:15

Right. So along those lines, just trying to dig into that a little bit further, what do you what do you think are some of the biggest barriers that you run into when you when you actually perhaps even talk to a client or a prospective client, what are some of the biggest barriers you run into and maybe obstacles that you find when you're undertaking that transformational project within an organization?

SPEAKER_01 10:42

That is a wonderful question. When talking with clients, one of the first things that I hone in on is if they are actually going to be a change-friendly person, or are they change resistant themselves as a client? So I'm looking for clients that really want to do the work and really want to embed capabilities in their organization. Why have expertise on your team and available to you if you're not going to actually help your team learn how to do some of these things long term? I'm really a big proponent of building capability in the organization. Some of the big issues and barriers that I see with clients, first of all, lack of leadership alignment at the top of the organization. If all of the leaders are not singing from the same sheet of music, we have a problem. And that doesn't mean that everyone has to agree on every single thing. It just means that they have to be on the same page and supportive of each other outside in the organization, when they're interacting with employees. Second of all, I see a tremendous amount of resistance that gets created in a vacuum when an organization is not communicating. That is a huge barrier. If you are not communicating at all, you're creating a problem for yourself later. And then, third, the big barrier that I see in so many organizations, and this is a choice that many organizations make. It is what I would call the sustainment gap, where they haven't really thought or planned accordingly for what happens when their expert consulting team is no longer there. Are they building the skills where they can do the work? Is there a sustainment strategy and plan in place to catch the ball per se? Those are some huge barriers. And honestly, I'm a huge proponent to if you want to be successful, you have to do the readiness assessment up front. There are lots of clients that just think they can bring someone in and say, start communicating. If you actually do a sound readiness assessment, you're gonna understand the lay of the land in the organization. Is where the pockets of resistance are, what stakeholders need extra attention and engagement, what kind of communication has been done, and what new strategies need to be in place? Does the organization have training capacity to actually address what they need to do later? Understanding all of that really feeds all of the deliverables, and it really needs to be done up front.

SPEAKER_02 14:29

Right. I would go. Wow, we could we could um we could layer that though those um those comments and we could spend an hour talking about that, so that's great. Yes. Um one question before we do take a short break. Um so in your wealth of experience, Sarah, how right up front, too, around your alignment of leadership and understanding, you know, trying to get a good read on like leadership alignment, what would and I know it's not scientific by any means, but you with your experience and you're you you got a really good sample size here. So what would you say is 50% of the time, 80%, 20% of the time, what what is a number that would make sense or sent sense around when the leadership team, when you when they start talking to you, there's not a level of strong alignment there?

SPEAKER_01 15:28

I would say 75% of the projects that I've worked on in my entire career have had an issue of some kind that has to be addressed on leadership alignment. And that all comes from the findings come from the stakeholder assessment, where you're able to understand who or what groups, what individual or what groups of stakeholders may be resistant and what kinds of engagement strategies would actually work. At least 75% of the projects that I've worked on have had issues that have actively had to be addressed to gain leadership alignment.

SPEAKER_02 16:14

Wow. That's that's huge. We're gonna we're gonna take a quick break, but I'd like to continue to dive into that that kind of thought stream, if you will.

SPEAKER_00 16:25

You want to grow your business, but people issues are getting in the way. Managing the people side of your business is complex and can feel overwhelming. Does this sound familiar? At HR Catalyst, People Strategy is our business. We create and implement a people strategy with you

so you can get back to growing your business. HR Catalyst was founded in 2013 with the goal of bringing the best in class HR practices to small and middle market companies. We are your outsourced strategic people experts. We help you solve the people issues in your business that are slowing you down. If you have HR concerns, you can schedule a complimentary call on our website at HR.CatalystConsulting.com.

SPEAKER_02 17:08

We just took a quick break, and so I've got my guest, Sarah Sheehan, back on. So looking forward to the next segment of our conversation here with you, Sarah. So um the next thing I wanted to ask you is around, so when you're thinking of leadership teams and the ones that you the wealth of experience that you have, is do you think right up front when they're actually thinking about going through some sort of a major change that they really understand the effort involved in that change to make it successful?

SPEAKER_01 17:43

Honestly, I would say they do not understand how hard the project is going to be. The project is generally underestimated from a people investment side. They need to consider investing in human capital in an equivalent way that they invest in technology or process, especially today with the challenges that we have now with the accelerating pace of change and the difficulties brought on by AI, we need to really look at where the investment is going on people. And there's one algorithm that I tend to come back to, and this is based on Gartner's research. They say that successful transformations dedicate 30 to 40 percent of total resources focused on people-related activities. Now, I have never been on an engagement in my career that has been that focused on people ever. I mean, most of the time I was reserved or I sold a budget based on agreement with partners that I was working with that amounted to 5% of the total project, or maybe if I was lucky, 10%. Um, but it was usually a very, very small amount. I think the other thing that many leaders underestimate is the amount of time that it takes to actually do these really hard projects. Behavior change, if you really embed the behavior in the organization, it can't happen with one announcement or one training session. It has to be a sustained effort over time where you are reinforcing it. You have leaders that are walking the talk and demonstrating those behaviors. It's it is something that you have to really focus on making sure that adoption is the goal. It is much harder in practice than theory.

SPEAKER_02 20:30

Yes. Aren't most things in life that way, you know. It sounds so great and it sounds so so smooth, and everything's just gonna align, everything's gonna align up perfectly, and you're like, oh, this can't be that hard. Um so are you finding just over the last couple of years, are you finding the pace? You mentioned it just a minute ago. Are you finding the pace of organizational change is that increasing now, in your opinion, over the last couple of years from you've seen from your consulting practice?

SPEAKER_01 21:02

I would say that not only the pace of change, but the complexity involved in projects is are it's much higher. The complexity is a multiple of what it used to be with companies trying to discern the right path and roadmap for AI and considering the systems that they currently have in place as well as processes, it really is putting it making employees incredibly uncomfortable. Resistance is building up at a rate that I think leaders are not in tune with what's actually going on in their organization. And you have to do the restructuring. After you implement AI and a process that may be enabled by AI, any organizational changes that you do from a structure perspective, they need to be done after testing and implementation. You don't do those things before you start the project.

SPEAKER_00 22:22

Right.

SPEAKER_01 22:22

And so that there are some issues with strategy and sequencing that I see out there today. And I would also say that leadership alignment in the C-suite is more important than ever. Having all of those C-level executives on the same page, specifically the CEO, the CFO, and the CIO, they

have got to be in lockstep. That is absolutely critical. I would say that having that sustainment strategy is really, really important after you implement the project. And I'm I'm literally putting a um like a double click on that because I saw so I've seen so many projects in my career not have a sustainment plan.

SPEAKER_02 23:28

Right.

SPEAKER_01 23:28

But I definitely see a tremendous curve on the accelerating rate, pace, and complexity.

SPEAKER_02 23:37

Do you think a lot of that is um and you touched on it briefly in what you just said in your statement there, but do you think it's really is it a combination of technology with all the advancements in technology, with AI, and with also there's a a lot of movement for outsourcing. Do you think are those a couple of the biggest drivers you're running into now when you start talking to an organization about some transformational change effort they're they're thinking about undertaking?

SPEAKER_01 24:11

Well, I think it's a multi it's a multi-layered problem. There are a lot of clients out there that are trying to implement AI tools, but they're not actually implementing a unique process and workflow based on their personal business process. So they're not doing a purpose-built AI situation, they're using it as a tool. If you really want it to work in your business, a purpose-built situation is going to be a lot more effective. To do that well, you really need a consulting partner that can design, build, and operate it for you because they are going to be the ones that are

going to help you govern it and make sure judgment is still involved. Errors are handled. There is a tremendous amount of work that has to be done to make sure that it's doing the job that you've asked it to do, that clients aren't in touch with what that takes long term. And so it's one of those things that people really need to lean into, understanding that sometimes having a partner to help you is going to help you be a lot more successful. Now, on the existing systems side, there are tons of clients out there that are running any kind of ERP you can think of. ERPs that require really formal and complex upgrades to ERPs that live in the ecosystem and get updates. Specifically, clearly, that's SAP, workday. There are all kinds of SaaS tools out there, platforms that people are using. We are at a point in time where I believe clients can take consideration of not ripping and replacing all of their systems, but figuring out how, if the system works, how can you get better information out of it for decision making? More of an optimization discussion. And so I think there are many layers in that conversation. Um, but those are a few of the things that I think are incredibly important for people to consider.

SPEAKER_02 27:06

Right, right. Oh, that's great. No, those that's really that's a huge insight for people who are thinking about going through this right now or have something, you know, for the second half of the for the second half of this year, which we're in in July of 26. Right. That's fascinating. So um so for business owners uh or business leaders, like you mentioned, a number of C-suite individuals who were listening to this, what are are what are some things they can do, do you think, just internally to help prepare for an organizational change uh prior to actually even trying to endeavor it or possibly talk to you and engaging you?

SPEAKER_01 27:48

Mm-hmm. Man, that is a good question. Um that is a really good question. I think that one of the key points that I shared earlier is that leaders really need to assess before they actually act. So they need to make sure that they're taking a really hard look. They are not skipping the step of the readiness assessment entirely. Before you launch anything significant, you need an honest picture of where your organization is, what how your stakeholders feel, where do they sit, how is your communications infrastructure, how is your training organization, are you able to actually do the work that's going to be required of you to succeed in the future? I think that's a really important thing to do at the absolute outset because you will not be able to sustain the

change after the initial push is done. That diagnostic is absolutely critical. These leaders need to really consider if they haven't done it to put a change network in place. The change network is the first line of defense in solving problems locally. They are an absolute winning solution when it comes to cascading communication and getting feedback from the organization. Getting a change network in place even before the consultants arrive, I give clients that do that a massive gold star. And I've had quite a few clients that have long-term change networks and they've kept them in place, and it's been a critical success factor for them. Thirdly, I would say really focus on building your internal capabilities instead of outsourcing all of the work. Because when you outsource indefinitely, you're really not taking the opportunity to give your employees opportunities to grow and learn. Plus, you're going to be able, as an organization, to navigate even bigger projects better when you have those skills in your organization. And I'm sure, Mark, coming from your experience, that you've seen success with some of those tactics.

SPEAKER_02 30:37

Right, exactly. No, it's it's interesting, it's nice to hear that there's a lot of synergies here between the way I would approach that, we would approach it at HR catalyst versus how you're doing it. So which is which is always which is always affirming to to make sure, you know, yeah, well, there is a I jokingly say it's a little bit of a method to the madness. There's a little bit, there is a methodology which is very scientifically proven over thousands of transformations people have done and organizational change efforts. But um yeah, this has been um yeah, this has been fascinating, Sarah. So now I'm gonna, I'm actually now we're gonna, we're going to find out really insightful conversation. We're gonna find out a little more about just um some of the things you work on because I in just that little bit of time we've known each other, you really are a strategic thinker and thought leader. So um, so a couple of fun things for you. So what are some you know, books or what for your audience, what books or what podcasts would you recommend to our audience that you enjoy? And maybe some people are podcast fans, others are book people, but what are your what are some recommends that recommendations you have there for our audience today?

SPEAKER_01 31:54

Well, I love both books and podcasts, but because of the topic that we're focusing on today and our conversation, I did want to mention three different books that really resonate for me on the

topic. First of all, James Clear's Atomic Habits. It is an absolutely outstanding book, and I recommend it to every leader that I work with because it may seem like a personal productivity book, but truly it is a master class in behavior change that you can start to experience on yourself by just learning to practice habits and see how easy it is to embed a new habit once you've done it enough. He recommends 66 times. That's when the neurons in your brain actually connect and you're going to it's going to feel comfortable to do that behavior in the future. Second, do hard things by Steve Magnus. This book is a really great book, and he really takes the idea of mental toughness and being the kind of person that white-knuckles through everything that's hard and difficult, and he replaces it with something that is a lot more useful in terms of genuine resilience and your personal self-awareness, community with others, and setting yourself up for sustainable performance. I think that there are a lot of people that have gotten away from putting themselves in a position to do something hard. Um, and I think it's really important for us to not be scared of it, um, to get a plan in place and get the support that you need so that you can do something that's hard or challenging. The third book that I'd recommend is Eduardo Braisenho's The Performance Paradox. He is an absolutely fascinating person. He has worked with Carol Dweck, the founder of Growth Mindset. And this book is all about the tension between learning and performing. And when you're in a role that requires you to perform 100% of the time, that means that you're really not going to have an opportunity to learn anything new and what leaders need to do and consider if they actually want their people to be able to learn. He has a wonderful TED Talk on this topic as well that has millions of views. It's over a million. He's a very fascinating person, and um, he has been on my podcast as well, Transformational Thinkers. And I um would be glad to introduce you to him because I think you could have a great conversation with him.

SPEAKER_02 35:33

Oh, that'd be awesome. Look at that now. So um, yeah, so what advice? So the last question I'm gonna ask you, so what advice would you add, what what advice would you give to your 16-year-old self today?

SPEAKER_01 35:47

That's a really great question. Knowing what I've learned at this point, gosh, um, the first thing that I would say is that at the outset, you are good as you are. Like, do not be stressed out. I

spent a significant part of my early career in the performing capability rather than trusting what I know and what I can do. My uh top five Gallup strengths are really resonant for me. They are strategic, futuristic, achiever, relater, and a ranger. And I would say that my top ten strengths really ring true for me. They are totally part of who I am. And I would say focus on your mindset and self-care to support this. That's the first thing that I would tell my 16-year-old self. The second is I would say find mentors early. I wish that I had had the right mentors early in my career. It is absolutely transformative to have someone in your corner that sees your potential before you do. Along with having the right mentor, I would say stay coachable because if you have the right people around you and you're coachable, magic can happen. The third thing I would tell myself is that the relationships that you build are what matters infinitely more than the titles that you accrue. Because honestly, I define success today probably differently than I would have expected. It's much more multidimensional. Personal happiness is really important to me. Having meaningful relationships is very important to me. Being able to make a difference and contribute in a significant way is really important. And then finally, the quality of the people around me, as long as I have people that I trust and care about around me, that's really going to set up happiness for me personally. And then the the last, the fourth thing I would tell myself is that you have to set aside time to learn and not just be in a performance mode. Because even if your company doesn't pay for it, you need to do it yourself. Invest in learning and bet on you, because the return on investment is going to be huge.

SPEAKER_02 39:07

Right. Wow. That is that's a that's we could dive into that again. We could probably have this conversation for a few more, several more hours there, but thank you. Thank you so much. The last thing I wanted to ask you, of course, is how if people want to continue this conversation or talk further about what you do, um, how can people find you?

SPEAKER_01 39:27

Absolutely. My LinkedIn profile is at LinkedIn.com slash I-N slash Sarah S-A-R-A hyphen sheen s-h e h a n. My website is at www.s-a-r-a w she and s e h a n dot com. And my email address is Sarah S A R A at Sarah W Sheen.com.

SPEAKER_02 40:08

Okay, great. That's wonderful. So lots of ways to get in touch with you. And um again, I would just this has been um I know we've been speaking for a little bit here, but it seemed like we, like I said, just very honestly, we could we could have this conversation for a couple more hours because we could keep on we could keep on unlayering and unpacking some of those really great insights you shared. So thank you so much for your time, uh, Sarah, and just appreciate you as an individual. You're just you you're also just a and again, I've only known Sarah for a short amount of time, but just a very affirming, very, you know, lots of affirmations that are positive. So even the conversation we had over coffee a few weeks ago, I just felt good. I just felt like you were just a very great listener and very much very uh one of those people who makes, I'm sure you make a lot of the people in your life very uh feel good. And as you work with clients, I'm sure you help them kind of work through some of those challenges they're working through. And um, you know, again, this has been a pleasure talking to you, and I wish you uh the uh have a great rest of the day, Sarah, and we'll talk again really soon. Thanks so much.

SPEAKER_01 41:20

Thanks so much, Mark. I really appreciate the opportunity.

SPEAKER_02 41:23

You're welcome. Thanks, Sarah. Okay, take soon. Have a great week.

SPEAKER_01 41:26

You too.

SPEAKER_02 41:27

Bye bye.