Mervyn Dinnen 0:07

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Mervyn Dinnen 1:09

My guest on today's episode of the HR Means Business podcast is Lucy Adams, an experienced HR director and HR change agent. I first met Lucy, or about 12-13, years ago, when we both spoke at the same conference in Birmingham, I seem to recall and Lucy had just left her role as HR director at the BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation. One of the many roles that she held as an HR director over the last 12 years or so, she has founded disruptive HR, has authored two books, "HR Disrupted" and "The HR Change Toolkit", and has spoken at many events about how HR teams can organize themselves and get ready for change and disruption. That's what we're going to be talking about today. Lucy, welcome to the HR Means Business podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Lucy Adams 2:07

I will, thanks, Mervyn. Thanks so much for inviting me. It's lovely to see you. And, yeah, I mean, I think you kind of described it, you know, my career, I suppose, is two halves really. The first half was about being in corporate HR and heading up HR teams and trying to drive cultural change and improve leadership and all of the good stuff that we do as HR directors. And then the second half has been looking at what I did wrong and trying to put it all right, really. And so Disruptive HR, we founded some years ago, and now work with leaders directly, but also HR professionals mainly, and trying to kind of just help them not just be inspired and feel challenged and but to give them practical ways of doing things differently.

Mervyn Dinnen 3:03

Which is very important, because we live, we live in a world of, I hate to say, constant disruption, but it is. And certainly, if we look around, I suppose the area of human resources, you just have to look at the main platforms that people check out, like LinkedIn and stuff. And almost every day there is some new trend. There is some new thing people are arguing about and debating, and it's very difficult to know kind of you know when you're doing the job, what what you should listen to and what you shouldn't. So hopefully, we'll be talking about the things you should be listening to, and I suppose I'll jump straight in with the the obvious one, because I couldn't, I couldn't run a podcast on HR without mentioning the letters A and I, and it's one of those things that I think is, is everybody's using it. If we go back 10-12, years, it would have been something else, but not a lot of people are really, I think, understanding the impact that it can or should have, and how it might help HR teams function and organize themselves better. So what is, how are you seeing the rollout of AI and the people you speak to? How are they using it?

Lucy Adams 4:14

I mean, you and I were at a conference recently, weren't we in Amsterdam where, you know, there were all of these amazing AI products on display. And a bit of me kind of feels quite sorry for HR professionals trying to navigate their way through and to work out what's the best thing for us. And I think for me, you know, what I hear from the HR professionals that we work with is that many of them have already embraced the idea that AI can help them do things more efficiently. So that could be shortlisting CVS or it could be a chat bot for employee queries. You know, I think already a lot of HR teams have grasped that. Yeah, but I think the the second phase, which is much more around the kind of creativity that AI can can generate, I think perhaps less so. And I think for me, the the really exciting area for AI and HR is the personalization, so the ability to choose your own approach to onboarding, to create a talent marketplace where employees can put in which roles they might be interested in and have served up for them, not just a range of opportunities that link to their career direction, but also the learning and development that would be relevant. So the ability for talent teams, I think, to revolutionize their approach to how employees driving and owning their own careers and leaders developing their own leadership development approach, I think that's really exciting. So that kind of personalization employees owning and driving it for themselves, and that, I think, is kind of less well understood. But I think what I would say about AI is, you know, a lot of HR people that I meet are being served up AI as the, you know, the answer to everything, but they're also dealing with some really kind of perennial problems of but I just want managers to understand that it's their job to have a conversation with their employee, and that it's not HR job to do it for them. So I think we're kind of wrestling with this real dichotomy. On the one hand, it's all super sexy, and you know, kit and tools and product, and on the other there's some real basic stuff that we're still wrestling with. But I was talking with a big betting company, actually, recently, and what they're using AI for is to help with the basics. So they've got this kind of chat bot that they use that to help managers have better conversations with their employees. So I think there's a a sense that, on the one hand, AI was all the, you know, sexy, forward looking stuff, but I think increasingly, HR people can use it for for helping them wrestle with some of the problems that they've had to deal with for decades.

Mervyn Dinnen 7:26

One of the things that I often get talking about when we're on on these podcasts, we're talking about AI, is about this, I suppose, theory that that it's Is this an employee experience enhancer or an employee experienced killer, Is AI now doing some of the things that our people actually enjoy doing themselves, you know, being creative and things, or is it something that is helping them manage their time better? Because it's, it's allowing them to focus more on the specifics of their job?

Lucy Adams 7:58

Yeah, I mean, I think it's a bit of both, isn't it? You know, I think there are definitely some areas, you know, if you think about researchers or, you know, PowerPoint operators, or whatever, you know, there are certain both creative knowledge-based roles, that wherever there is a pattern, there is the ability to replicate it. But we talk a lot, don't we, in HR about the fact that they're not AI is not going to wipe out jobs, but what it will do is take away some of the grunt work and hopefully allow for people to elevate their skills and capabilities. But of course, it's not always that simple, is it, you know, is there the motivation to do those higher roles? Is there, is there the intellect to do those higher roles? I mean, I was really taken the other day with IKEA, who have taken their customer service representatives, which have largely their roles, have been replaced by AI and chat bots and are retraining them to do the kind of kitchen design piece using AI, but retraining them as kitchen designers and and other interior design functions. And I was thinking, that sounds brilliant, but is that going to work for everybody? And of course, I think the reality is that there for some people, it isn't going to work. And I think all we can do in HR at the moment is, you know, try and create places where our employees can have a play, where they can try stuff out, where they can engage with AI in a way that's non-threatening. Of course, there's always going to be those employees that you know are stuck in their ways that don't want to progress. And they, you know, we had them at the BBC where, you know, journalists were having to get to grips with going on social media. And they had to, in the old days, tweet, I don't know what the verb is on x, but so they had to suddenly go from producing these beautifully, beautifully crafted pieces of journalism to these click bait sound bite tweets and and social media posts, and many of them embraced it and could see the future, and absolutely were happy to retrain and get engaged with it, and others really won't at weren't. And unfortunately, I think HR role with a with AI is going to be encouraging, supporting, developing, creating the conditions where it can thrive and our people can thrive with it, but also dealing with the fallout. And there's that, there's bound to be some.

Mervyn Dinnen 10:38

Now, a lot of your work is around culture change. So I suppose the main conversation I wanted to have with you is, is how you prepare HR teams for culture change, how you organize them, how you focus them. You know? What is, I suppose, what is the, almost, the blueprint at disruptive HR that you use for, for getting your teams ready?

Lucy Adams 11:00

Well, I think, and the second book that I wrote, "The HR change Toolkit", deals with a lot of this. Because I think, unfortunately, many of the approaches that we've taken in the past have have, haven't worked. You know, I think is it McKinsey say that 75% of change programs don't deliver their objectives, and that's largely because we followed a model which has been firstly, change being top down. So we've got to get the senior leaders on board and then the middle management, and we're going to cascade it, whereas, of course, in reality, people don't particularly like having change done to them. I'll come on to alternatives to this in a minute, but let's just look at what's wrong? I think the second piece is that we tend to think that if we put forward a clear business rationale, the logic of why change needs to happen, and then put on training and maybe some incentive program, that people will miraculously kind of embrace it and go along with it. But of course, the reality is that you know, any change, even if we don't like the status quo, involves some kind of loss, and just a pure business rationale and logic isn't enough to inspire people to action. So I think what we're seeing is HR moving away from many of the traditional approaches that we've taken to change management, which has largely been create the business case, put in place the training and the new processes, make them do it, and then use some kind of compliance measurement to make sure they've done it. And instead thinking much more like marketeers, using product design techniques, using neuroscience, and then the understanding of the way that people's brain functions at work. So examples of that would be we're seeing, for example, instead of doing the cascade, the traditional cascade of change, we're seeing HR using early adopters, and then getting those early adopters to work out the wrinkles using minimum viable product techniques and trying it out and refining it, and then encouraging the early adopters to persuade their peers to come on board, and so that much more of that advocacy approach. So I think we can look to product design. We can look to marketing to give us some clues. I think there's also and this is where the neuroscience piece comes in. And I'm not suggesting that we all need to be psychologists, but I do think HR needs to embrace what we should be good at, which is understanding human beings, and instead of thinking that a process will change behavior, really spending time with leaders, managers and employees working out, why would they want to change? You know, what is it that would make them want to try a new skill, potentially put themselves into a situation where they're not as confident, where they risk perhaps losing a bit of status by getting it wrong. And so we can learn from organizations like Spotify, where they have really gone hard on the whole psychological safety piece. They have something called a fail thicker. A thicker is a Swedish for coffee break. And they have these fail figures, which are facilitated ways of what did we learn? What could we do differently? I think as we, as I said, I think we need to be really clear on, why are they perhaps resisting really understanding that, and it will vary. You know, for some, they'll be frightened, they'll be anxious. For others, they don't have the skills. For others, it will just be a blanket resistance to anything new. You know, we've all worked with leaders and managers like that, and so sometimes, using a technique which is classic kind of, you know, as the kids would say, FOMO is in rather than making these leaders and managers who were resistant go. On mandatory training and pushing them is saying, You know what? You don't need to worry about this. We're working with these leaders over here, and we've tried this, and it's fascinating how many of them actually do then come on board because they feel that they're missing out. So I think we can use these, might want to say manipulative techniques, but real kind of sales and marketing techniques to understand what's the key resistance. Another example would be we often hear, Oh, you know, leaders need more data. They need more analysis before they come on board. My experience, the ones who are asking for more data and analysis, they're not actually needing more data and analysis, because actually what they're doing is using that as a kind of camouflage to cover up the emotional response to change that many of us have. Instead of always going with a big campaign and trying to make it sexy and giving it a three letter acronym, and I've done tons of these in my past, is actually looking at how we shrink the change right down. Because actually, if people feel that it's going to take five minutes, I could try it out, there's low risk. Then they try it, they do it, they get a bit more confident, then they might be more willing to try something again. So I think there are lots of things that we can do. So one of the things that we advocate is, you know, don't necessarily look around and learn from other HR teams, but learn from the way that marketing does it, the way that product design manufacturers and consumer products, you know, where they use persona, and we can use employee persona to really understand who we're trying to change what might be the techniques that that work for them, and I just think we need to get a little bit more sophisticated.

Mervyn Dinnen 16:50

Yeah, definitely the I suppose there are three or four main topics at the moment in the workplace, which will bring about change, either be naturally or be suddenly forced on them. So I just want to look at maybe two or three of those with you, to see what your current experiences of them and and what some of the some of the pitfalls, some of the areas where people are going wrong, and the first one is barely a minute goes past without some debate about RTO mandates and needing to be in a fixed location, and that's not what people want anymore. And from your perspective, and from all the people you speak to on a day to day basis, what are, what's your perspective on that? I suppose, you know RTO mandates and and how they're being handled at the moment?

Lucy Adams 17:49

I mean, I think it's such a shame to be honest Mervyn, because I think we made such huge strides during the, you know, the COVID crisis, around creating environments where people had greater choice about where they worked. And I think the the kind of the the blanket return to office mandate has really set us back quite a bit. I do think that that equally, our response to hybrid working in HR wasn't particularly helpful, because I think what we did was the classic centralized policy of, well, we're going to embrace hybrid working, but hybrid working means three days in and two days out, or whatever it might be. And that doesn't make much sense, either, because you've got some people who might it might be best that they're in the office all the time, either through personal preference or because they're working on a particular project that needs that. Equally, there might be some people who don't need to come in hardly at all. So I think for me, the ones that got it right were the ones that said, first of all, this is going to take us some time to make this work effectively. We've gone to our place of work for 200 years, since the industrial revolution. So the idea that we can suddenly become brilliant at managing a hybrid model, I think, is naive. So those that said we're going to take time, we're going to we're not going to rush to we're going to do it like this, everybody in, everybody out, three days, two days, that kind of old fashioned concept of what matters is the amount of days that you spend in the office. And instead, what we're going to do is to leave it to individual managers to have conversations with their people. Could be on a team level, like they do at an engineering firm that I know called Archiva, where they've said, HR's role is not to set a centralized policy, but instead, what we're going to do is to help managers work out where could there be greater flexibility. Because for some, they they can have huge amounts of flexibility, and for others, because their engineers on site, it doesn't make any sense at all. So let's help managers work that through. So it could be on a team level, like Archiva, or it could be on a one to one level, like they do at Swiss Re, which is a big insurance company, and where they say, you know our mantra is own the way you work. So that means you're a grown up. You know your caring responsibilities, your social responsibilities, your working preferences. You know what your clients need. You know what the team needs. You're not going to get everything you want, because when it's not anarchy, it's not a hippie commune, but we do want to embrace as much flexibility as we can for you, and so individual managers are equipped to have conversations with their employees to find out what works for them. Or I like the approach that the HMRC, which is obviously public sector body here in the UK, where they say to managers, people need to come into the office when it has purpose and value. So it's a judgment call. It's not this black and white approach. So in summary, I think that there are some organizations who have said, Look, actually, hybrid working is a fantastic way of addressing issues around well being a fantastic way of improving productivity, of increasing our talent pool, because we can draw people from all sorts of different areas, and we'll still get the work done, but will work in different ways, but that does require managers and employees to have grown up adult to adult conversations. What we're not going to do is to set a blanket policy from the center so everybody then blames HR, and we've got some kind of, you know, literally, a hybrid situation that doesn't work for anybody.

Mervyn Dinnen 22:06

I suppose the next one, because RTO is very, I suppose, linked to the next one, which is Gen Zed, Gen Z which the Amsterdam event that we were both at, you might recall I was, I did a session about kind of Gen Z, and it was, it was very well attended, and it's one, it's one of those topics a bit like RTO is what everybody wants to talk about. What is your perspective? I mean, I, you know, I hold my hands up here. I do participate in another podcast from time to time, where I talk about the workplace with with a Gen Z influencer, about kind of what it was like in my day, what it's like in their day, but in terms of your perspective and the clients you speak to, the HR leaders you speak to, what's what's the belief with, with Gen Z, or Gen Z?

Lucy Adams 22:59

Well, I think people do worry about it, and it's one of the top things that comes up when we talk to business leaders about what are they worried about? And there is a view that this breed, you know, the Gen Z breed, are impossible to deal with, that they lack resilience, that they're this awful title of snowflake, that they're overly demanding and entitled and and I don't really profess to be an expert in any way, shape or form on Gen Z, you know, but I do feel that we are in danger of labeling an entire group of people with having a certain set of characteristics in the same way that the over 50s, over 60s get labeled as being, you know, stuck in their ways, not great with technology, unwilling to change and so on. And of course, the reality is that for every one of those that you've got in the over 50s, and every one of those you've got in the Gen Z population, there'll be other types of people. So anything which tries to define a whole generation as having, you know, a concrete set of characteristics, I think is wrong. I think it's a myth. Having said that, I think there are clearly aspects to being somebody who's grown up in a Gen Z environment that are different to our generation, Mervyn, and so what I hear are, you know, the need for authenticity. So they are very that, you know, their bullshit meters are very, very strong, and they are much more relaxed with something being perhaps less perfect, less scripted. But the want authenticity, and unfortunately, I think a lot of our corporate communications isn't, so they spot it quick and they're vocal. And that's the other thing that, of course, frightens the life out of people like you and I, where we were used to being, you know, do as you're told and speak when you've spoken to not that we're Victorian, Mervyn, but probably not far off. I think you know this idea that they don't expect to have a voice. Why wouldn't they? In fact, many ways, why wouldn't we welcome that? But of course, I think if you're a leader that perhaps isn't very comfortable and confident in your own people-leadership capabilities, that can be quite threatening. I also think that there, there is a you know, and I think it is a myth: I don't think that the Gen Z are, you know, lacking in resilience, but I do think that many of them, from what I read and what I hear do have a different view about how much they want to commit of their life, to work. I don't think that that means that they lack resilience, or that they're snowflakes. I think many ways perhaps they're just more sensible. You know, I know from my own daughter, now she's older than Gen Z, but she had a very clear view that, that she looked at what I was doing when I was, you know, a young mum and killing myself trying to get to all the meetings and missing the sports days and doing all of that, that that's not what she wants. And fair play to her, really fair play to her. So I don't profess to be an expert, but I do think that there is a need for HR to find a way of helping Gen Z understand the older generation and the older generation to understand Gen Z. So I think it's all in the conversation. It's all about finding a way in language where it's not about writing people off as woke or snowflake or, you know, stuck in the stuck in the mud, but it is about trying to find a helpful way to enable different generations, different perspectives, to have better conversations, to find out. We hear about reverse mentoring, for example. And, you know, I think that's, that's great. I think that, you know, the idea that we can learn, and I do think we can learn, not just from Gen Z, but we might come on to talk about DNI as well, you know, from learning from different people. And it's all in the conversation, I think.

Mervyn Dinnen 27:36

This brings us nicely into my final question as we're coming towards the end of this conversation, sadly, which was about DNI under the microscope. And it's, it's difficult to tell for me, as sometimes I read a lot and think, oh, this, this is a much bigger thing than I realized. And then other times, it's kind of, it's not part of the conversation is, you know, it's accepted. And I know, I know, obviously in some in some countries, there are leaders who maybe do not fully align with the concepts. And so the what, again, from your perspective, from the people you talk to and consult with, and what are their I suppose, thoughts about de and I and have you seen any shift recently in in how it's approached and how it's it's embraced within organizations?

Lucy Adams 28:32

I mean, obviously we, we, you know, we heard from a lot of particularly U.S., but not just U.S. business leaders who have appeared to row back on a number of DNI commitments. And I think that whilst I probably look at those those announcements, and think that they might be regarded as slightly opportunistic and maybe indicative of the fact that they weren't terribly committed in the first place. Personally, I think actually this could be a great thing for DNI, because I do think that the way that we have approached DNI, implemented DNI, has led to a level of alienation in organizations. I think it has become seen as something that is quite accusatory. It's not a place for people who are in perhaps, if you're white, middle, aged, male, it doesn't feel like it's got anything to do with you, whereas, actually, ironically, we're talking about being inclusive, aren't we, so you can't, and why? You know you can't, then exclude a whole part of your workforce, particularly when that part of the workforce is in power. So I think that again, back to what we were talking about with Gen Z. And it being in the conversation, all about the conversation. If we can shift DNI from being less about big campaigns, less about naming and shaming, less about compliance and targets, and more about empathy, understanding, curiosity about the way that other people think, then I think it could be a really good thing. And so whilst the slightly opportunistic approach that we've seen from from some CEOs, I think is potentially going to get them into trouble in the future, as they perhaps then change their approach and say, no, no, it really does matter now; I think a little pause and a reset is not a bad thing. You know, we're already seeing organizations, and this was perhaps, you know, before they were doing this, before the recent announcements, just rethinking their approach to DNI. So, for example, Atlassian, instead of having conversations and looking at minority groups, they talk about, how can we build balanced teams? Just by changing the language? It makes it a more inclusive conversation, instead of it being all about targets and unconscious bias training and all some of the initiatives that we've had actually just having leaders question and challenge each other, like they do at all of foods, or like they do at E and Y when they're interviewing and just queering with each other. Would you have felt the same about this person if they were the same age as you, or would you so checking the bias in the moment? I do think that there are lots of small tweaks that we can make. We're seeing small nudges being used rather than big training programs to just like they do at Epic Games, where they talk about the second look rule. So it's just a small prompt just before you dismiss that CV, because it doesn't look like the person who's always had that job. Just take a second look. Now. It's not going to change the world, but it's a slightly less bombastic, slightly less aggressive, slightly less alienating. Approach to actually getting people to just reflect, perhaps have slightly different conversations, and using our again, back to HR, embracing its understanding of how people can change their behavior, it doesn't People don't change their behavior, if they're feeling threatened, or if they are, or, you know, they're they're not going to change their attitude. You might see some changes in behavior, but the deep seated views are not going to change. But actually leaning in, being curious, making it a place where it's not about purely minority groups, it's about embracing a diversity of thought and perspective and experience that feels a more attractive place. I think for many people who currently feel excluded from DNI.

Mervyn Dinnen 33:11

Lucy, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you today. We've covered a lot of ground, and you certainly have. I think listeners will be able to feel the sense of energy you have about these topics. How can people connect with you or contact you?

Lucy Adams 33:28

Our best way is probably the website, disruptive hr.com, or just connect with me on LinkedIn.

Mervyn Dinnen 33:34

Okay. Lucy, it's been a pleasure, and thank you for your time.

Lucy Adams 33:40

Lovely to see you. Mervyn, thanks for having me.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai