

# Igniting a Passion for Your Mission with Pam Sherman



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## Full transcript

**Rob Parsons:**

Welcome to the Paychex HR Leadership Series. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and we write extensively on a variety of HR topics, covering everything from HCM Technology, to team engagement, to compliance with state and federal regulations. Joining me today is Pam Sherman. Pam is a nationally syndicated columnist, actor, recovering lawyer and leadership consultant, who was profiled in People Magazine about her career transition from attorney to actor. Today, Sherman conducts programs and coaches leaders all over the world about leadership communications and how to present themselves and their mission with passion and to find their own leadership edge. Pam, welcome to the podcast.

**Pam Sherman:**

Thank you, Rob. It's very exciting to be here and especially gratifying to be on a Paychex podcast, talking to HR leaders across the country because of the partnership that I've had and the incredible growth in learning that I've had in my work, working with Paychex leaders for the last, eight years, I guess. Yeah.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah. It's been a long time and a great relationship. And actually I want to start by going back a few months because you had a leadership session with our own leaders, in March, right before everything went sideways. What was that like?

**Pam Sherman:**

It's funny, I travel all over for my clients. I have always said that if I'm going to work on how a leader shows up and their presence, it has to be in person and present. And I flew back from a client engagement on March 11th because I had a closing session with a cohort of leaders within Paychex who had been going through, about, a year-long program. There were about 15 of them, I think, in the room, and we'd been working together over the year. And I entered the room on a Thursday, March 12th, and as you all know, everything got shut down literally the next day. And it was really an opportunity to bring together all the learning that we had about as an individual leader, how you show up impacts those you serve. And so you have to take the time to work on you, even though leadership isn't about you, it's about others.

**Pam Sherman:**

So we actually spent that time, and I'm still moved by the rich discussion we'd had about courage because everybody was sort of concerned about what was happening. I think the stock market was going crazy that day. How do you get attention? Show up, really be present for your people when there was chaos, as you recall on March 12th, as we all settle back. But what we did was, we started sharing stories of times when we had to show up with courage before, and these leaders tapped into, "Wow, I've been through this before. I've been through a moment like this before, something that feels like it." And sharing those stories out loud. I think they left that room with the kind of resilience and the ability to pivot and show up with courage for their teams at a time of chaos. And that's really it, people are looking to their leaders with hope and with possibilities. Back in March, in the beginning of this, we just didn't know what to expect. And I'm still moved by that session, by how everybody walked out, actually energized to impact their teams by showing up authentically as themselves.

**Rob Parsons:**

As a writer, I live for good stories. I love how common narratives can really help bring people together, bring teams together and really point the way for a culture.

**Pam Sherman:**

Absolutely.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah, for a vision.

**Pam Sherman:**

Well, and that's my definition of leadership, it actually... The funny thing is, it appeared on my husband's first boss' credenza, he was working for General Foods and his boss went on to become chairman and CEO, and he came home one day. These are the things we talk about in our house. And 35 years later, we're still talking about them. He said, he had this plaque and it said, "Leadership is the ability to communicate a vision and gain commitment to it." And Rob, that has stuck with me through all my many careers. And it finally got me to get this "aha" moment as I heard it, that leadership is ultimately about gaining committed followers and to do that anybody can be a leader at every level, because we can all have a vision for our day, for our career, for our teams, for our company, for our families, our communities.

**Pam Sherman:**

And what we have to do is show up in a way that connects to, not just the minds of those that we serve or our audiences, but their hearts. And suddenly that has taken me on a path because, if you think about great storytelling, it really creates an emotional connection between the listener and the teller and takes them on a journey. And that's what, if you think about it, we are all on a very new journey in this world. And even as things have settled down, I think we've been able to, it's been those leaders who get that, how they show up will help their teams be productive, be inspired and run, not from fear, but from hope and service.

**Rob Parsons:**

It's really interesting because it's -- a lot of what I hear about in leadership is having the vision... Constructing the vision... But your focus is on communicating that vision and getting buy-in, which is a really interesting angle on that.

**Pam Sherman:**

Right. It's interesting. So if you have a vision in a vacuum, well, that's just honestly very self-serving, isn't it? But if you have a vision that can make a difference for others that can impact others well, suddenly you have to do the work to serve your audiences, find out what's important to them. The work that I do with

individuals and even teams and cohorts is really about, ultimately, how do you show up? And then what are the stories that you're going to share as a tool of leadership that will help that vision to become clear? And it's interesting if you don't... Yeah, it's great to have a vision. And there are myriad of examples of companies that might've had a great vision, but then failed because they weren't able to energize internal teams around that vision, or even really externalize and meet their customer's needs because it was all about, "We have a problem that we think you should solve and what we need you to do." As opposed to, "Let me find out what's on your mind, let me listen to you, let me be authentic and empathetic." And all those tools.

**Pam Sherman:**

And I just loved that. I've been talking about this for eight years and suddenly when we move into a virtual world, that authenticity and fully being present becomes even more important.

**Rob Parsons:**

Oh my gosh, yes. How easy is it on a call, on a video meeting to not "be here now," which is a mantra we have at Paychex. Be here now, be present, be engaged... And it's easy to check your emails, because you're not in the conference room anymore. You're in your office, separated from everyone. So that idea of connecting and being authentic is super critical.

**Pam Sherman:**

Well, and it's interesting because I have many leaders and I believe that servant leaders tend to be, "Well, of course, it's not about me." But the answer is, no, it isn't about you. It's about those you serve. But if you haven't done the work foundationally to explore who you are, what's important to you, and what are your values in conjunction with the values of your company, then you're not going to get your own mission statement for your own leadership that will serve others. You won't be able to articulate your vision with inspiration and impact. So it's really, to me, a connection between a leader and audience. And that goes back to my acting background because we actors don't act in a vacuum, right? We act for the audience. And often people say, "Well actors are living in a pretend world. And I'm a leader and I'm dealing with what's real and what's happening." And the answer is, our job as actors is to get you to believe our truths as an audience. And isn't that true of a leader as well?

**Rob Parsons:**

Absolutely, absolutely. So we've been touching on it. I've been hearing key words, but maybe you could share your EDGE framework for our audience. Because I think that's a really great way to scope out and talk about the journey that a leader needs to take to make this happen.

**Pam Sherman:**

Yes. And it's interesting, now I only think in this template. Part of this is, I'm a lawyer and we tend to live by acronyms. It's the way we study and learn all that masses amount of information. But I came up with this as I started my business probably about 12 years ago. Because I, and my husband keeps saying, "You're edgy." Like it's a bad thing. I'm like, "Why is that a bad thing?" And it really just came to me instantly. I think that having an edge means that I explore connections to myself and to my audience and to my behavior and how that has an impact on others. I dream and visualize success and take people on a journey with my vision.

**Pam Sherman:**

And then the flip side of the dream is I believe that a story from the past illuminates our path to the future. So that's a critically important part of the dream, a context here. And then I grow as a leader in order to grow my emotional intelligence, to grow my resilience, to grow... You could think of all of the different ways that growing as a leader, we have to pay attention to. And then ultimately my job as a leader is to excite others around my mission. It's not about me being excited, although frankly, taking your energy and putting

it out into the world is a critical aspect of the exciting part. But it's about getting people excited to take their own path of leadership, to empower them, to get them, to take your vision and make it their own. That's ultimately what leadership is all about.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's really interesting. And I think that even goes back to your talk about listening and understanding, because it's a shared vision. It's not just my vision that I'm trying to impress upon people and whip them into shape. It's got to be a collective story, a collective vision that we're all striving for.

**Pam Sherman:**

Well, and as I think about the work that I do, I often come in working with either HR leaders and teams, my background as an employment lawyer probably helps in that. And because I've always been passionate about leadership development and organizational behavior, because I got to see a lot of, frankly, people who didn't do it well on the other side, right? And then I'm also brought in by marketing executives because often they have to create excitement around their brand vision internally and externally. And I was thinking about that, that HR leaders often think, "Well, it's not about us. It's really about the leaders that we're growing." But the answer is, HR leaders actually have to show up in the way they expect everyone else to show up, right? So they have to think about their individual leadership and how they can bring people along on a journey of behavior that is in accordance with the values and the internal brand that you're setting, right?

**Pam Sherman:**

And then you also have to think about, I like to think about the HR leaders as the caretakers of the brand, and the marketing leaders as the curators of the brand, but all of it eventually comes down to, what are the core values and how do they show up in our behavior. And Rob, I think that's really critical. I've seen leaders the minute they identify three to five core values that they want to pay attention to... That might be personal to them and perhaps a creative to the brand values of the company... But they start behaving in a way that's true to those values -- keeping a journal, looking at their actions and behavior, creating a mission statement for their own leadership. It's amazing how they start to impact, empower, and actually collaborate well across the company because they develop an inner confidence. But more important, they realize that their behavior has an impact on others and makes a difference.

**Rob Parsons:**

You just gave me such a great segue because I was curious, it's a very personal effort you're talking about now -- me working on myself, me thinking about my own self. But as an HR leader, I want to operationalize this, I want to push this out. How do I make that happen in the organization beyond the work that I do personally?

**Pam Sherman:**

Well, it's interesting because if you think about HR as a business partner, I think part of it is how you advise those leaders within the company. And HR leaders tend to say, "Well I'm not the leader." And those who live by hierarchy, I think are not well served by this. But part of it is, "let's all decide as an HR team." And I do a lot of work with HR teams about, what is our mission as an HR team? How do we want to show up so that we can have people model the behavior? And then creating in leadership and development. I love this -- creating cohorts that actually do this work for themselves and pay attention to their individual behavior and how it impacts the collective. So a lot of work that I do with companies, and creating these kinds of cohorts is, and by the way, the head fake Rob, is, they're like, "Well, I never take the time to work on me."

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah. You're busy.

**Pam Sherman:**

You're busy. Right? And I always say, you need to stop the "doing" and think about how you're "being," because, by the way, you're working with human beings, you're not working with human doings. And we all know there's all sorts of studies about, is it better to be feared or loved? Well, which do you think it is? It's to be loved. What creates greater ROI and productivity? It's teams that know each other personally.

**Pam Sherman:**

I often get a pushback. So when you ask about operationalizing it, storytelling should become a required tool of leadership before knowing how to tell a great story and making sure that it has an impact. I'm often told, "Well, can't tell that story because it's so personal." And the answer is, if it's done intentionally for the audience, with an objective to meet their needs, even the personal becomes relevant. And if you think about it, HR is dealing with all of these personal stories of people in the company who are trying to do great work for your customers. So why shouldn't HR be really the -- if you think about it -- the caretaker of the great stories of leadership, great stories of inspiration and help people become more impactful in how they communicate with each other.

**Rob Parsons:**

I love that idea of intention you brought up, because we can be authentic about a lot of things. It's now unthoughtfully authentic. I'm intentionally authentic. I'm really bringing out something meaningful in myself, but it's to a purpose. It's to an end, it's not just to share an emotion.

**Pam Sherman:**

Right. And that's why, if you're going to tell a story, if you're going to... Look, I was just quoted in a great New York Times article about, and I love the headline was, "Pass The Onion, It's Okay To Cry." And it was about, because of the challenges that we're... You can look it up by Jessica Bennett. She's a great reporter. And it was a gender-oriented article about men and women and crying and are we more open to it. And my theory is always, if you're crying and it's just about you, well, that's frankly just again, egocentric and not productive. But if you are emotionally transparent, because of a moment that has to do with the other person, the teams, the collective that you're working with and how much you care about them deeply, your people get the difference.

**Pam Sherman:**

I don't think that I like to... there used to be Barbara Walters who was a great interviewer, and she'd always make people cry... And along with Barbara Walters... leadership consultants, I tend to make people cry... But the answer is no, they're feeling things because we feel deeply about the work we do, the people we do it for, and with. And that to me is what emotional intelligence is all about. And at the beginning of all of this, this was really challenging for a lot of the clients that I work with, clients that I work with in industries that have been hugely impacted in healthcare. And how do you not show up as more human? You better have something in your head that clicks and says, "This isn't about me. It's about showing up as human, because it meets the needs of those I serve." And that to me, it's ultimately all about the audience, your courage.

**Pam Sherman:**

Can I share a story about a client I worked with early on... I was working with her about her story of "why," her purpose story. And we worked for days and days to figure this out. It was for investor calls, and as a CEO, it was critically important that she really developed her story of "why." And every time we worked on it, it was really a business story. It was a story about the product that they were putting out, the impact of the

product potentially on business. And I could never get her to share, "But why you? Why did you do this?" And I kept coming back to that.

**Pam Sherman:**

And she was really a great, humble servant leader, but she had software developers who were working around the clock to... This was in healthcare technology space... Working around the clock to get this product to market and to make it impactful and have it serve communities. And she kept getting better at the story.

**Pam Sherman:**

But then finally she shared this story: "I do what I do because 15 years ago I was diagnosed with cancer and I would go to doctors, and I'd have to share with them the results of my tests, because they were flipping through pages. And this was all around the time that our medical records were going electronic. And it was so frustrating to my husband and I, we'd have to carry a green journal. And in that journal, we would write down what the doctor said last. And we would figure out what we would have to say to the doctor. And I am doing this because I don't want any patient to have to carry a green journal again." And I sat there in silence and I said, "Well, why have you never shared that story out loud?" What do you think she said, Rob?

**Rob Parsons:**

Well, she probably said she didn't think it was relevant. She didn't think it made a difference to the investors.

**Pam Sherman:**

Well, that's true. But she also said, "I might cry."

**Rob Parsons:**

You see.

**Pam Sherman:**

I said, "Yes, because you'll get pulled down by the hounds from hell down to Hades for crying in front of your people. Or maybe if you shared that story with your teams who are working into the night, they might be able to see who they're serving, a person. Maybe your investors will know that there's a deep personal investment in this because the customer that you're ultimately going to serve, and maybe you won't cry if you tell them enough. And it becomes a personal story that is all about your business." That's intentional storytelling to me that would make all... I'd want to invest in that company. Wouldn't you?

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah, That's beautiful because it personalizes and humanizes, but not in a selfish way. I'm sure there were a lot of people who had their own green notebooks and weren't able to do anything about it.

**Pam Sherman:**

Yes, exactly. And if you think about what HR is doing as leaders, we are the people in the companies who ensure that employee benefits are getting there, that people are being trained and developed in order to do the work that they have to do. And now we have to work-from-home... And how do we create some productivity, but then also allow people the chance to breathe and step back? We are the caretakers of the humans in the workplace. So HR leaders have to check in with themselves. "How am I showing up? Am I being compassionate to myself? Do I know my mission and all of this? And have I done the work on what are my core values so that I can show up like a leader in an authentic way and share stories around those values so that I can move my audience and inspire them to do the work." Right?

**Pam Sherman:**

If you think about it, we all know those statistics, that employee retention is all about how your manager treats you. So taking the time to check-in and showing people that you care about them, right? Connection

with authenticity in a relaxed way, and in a way that is about emotional connection that you care, I think is critically important for all leaders but, in particular, HR leaders.

**Rob Parsons:**

And I absolutely agree, and I think there's an opportunity that's been presented here. And when you and I last spoke, I think we both shared a sense of optimism, a sense that this was a chance to do something better. Can you elaborate a little bit on your feeling about that, and what you see in the months and years ahead in how HR is going to evolve, and how we're going to take it to the next level?

**Pam Sherman:**

Right. Do you remember years ago there was a terrible headline about HR. It was how people didn't want to call it HR, right? [crosstalk 00:22:55].

**Rob Parsons:**

Right. Yeah.

**Pam Sherman:**

And that's changed. I think we have really made a difference in how HR is the cultural caretaker. We all agree and know that it's our job to engage and excite people. And that is the HR leaders' -- frankly, I think -- core function, right? But I'm actually really excited because this idea that HR is going to have to figure out what's safe. How do we safely come back to work? How do we pay attention to the needs of the 5,000 individuals within our company to get them to continue to be productive while they're managing being a school teacher for their children and/or an elder caregiver for their seniors that they love?

**Pam Sherman:**

So suddenly HR, my shift has always been, and when I work with HR leaders and building their presence, you want to create that kind of connection to your audience where they don't say, "I have to call HR," but, "I GET to call HR....These are the people who are going to help me do my job better. They're going to develop me. They're going to recognize me and help make my manager a better leader and help me on a path of development where I can grow and fulfill the vision I have for my self personally, for my family, for my community." And just think about how HR... I'm really excited about how, frankly, the virtual has actually made us more personalized in our leadership. We're in each other's homes, Rob, for goodness sake.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah. Right. Right.

**Pam Sherman:**

I get to see where you live, and the dog barking. It's suddenly, like... I remember as an attorney, writing a dress from home policy, a casual dress policy. And for me, I think it's like... Isn't that ironic, where we are now 30 years later? And casual Fridays is casual every day. But it's also, "how can I still show up professionally excited and grow my presence in a way that will impact others?"

**Pam Sherman:**

I think HR leaders will be on the forefront of helping leaders within their company show up in the most human way possible in order to ensure that the humans that they care for, both internally and externally, can really grow to exponential heights. I'm actually really excited. And the leaders that I work with globally are seeing that they're connecting on a global level. We're able to have these virtual events. I'm finding myself speaking for much larger audiences than I ever spoke to. And then also creating -- doing intimate leadership presence exercise virtually, where people have to learn how to show up in the virtual way and, frankly, live with an edge, even in the virtual setting. I'm very excited about possibilities for the future because it is that hopeful way of leading, and being, that I think will help all of our people thrive in the future.

**Rob Parsons:**

You and me, both. And I sense it in the HR community, and I think it's great. I want to take a moment and step back from the Sherman EDGE. You've also been talking about something called outlaw leadership. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

**Pam Sherman:**

Well, I'm really excited because for about two years, I have, my agent is waiting for... I've written a book, which is a compilation of his columns. I've been writing stories all my life, but for 15 years, I've been writing on the USA Today Network, a column called The Suburban Outlaw, which is really about personal storytelling that has impact on others. And it suddenly occurred to me that the work that I do in the EDGE is really about how can we create outlaw leaders who are driven -- visionary -- and who lead from authenticity, empathy, and really excitement that explore who they are, and who dream and grow out of their comfort zone and ignite passion for a shared mission. And it's suddenly coalesced for me and the person that I am as an actor, as a writer, and as a leadership coach is really all one thing: it's an outlaw leader who does it with irreverence, and does it with heart, and does it with hope.

**Pam Sherman:**

So that's the book that I'm writing. And I'm really excited to take people on the journey that I've been on myself and that I've done with leaders all over the world. And we think about it as really a compilation of the work that I've done for the last 15 years to help grow leaders... And honestly, take them to the EDGE in a world that's on the edge. I'm really excited about it.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's great. I love it, Pam. Any last thoughts for our listeners as we come to the end here?

**Pam Sherman:**

Yeah, I think it's really about remember that you are all leaders, that at every level, wherever you are, wherever you're listening, you decide how you're going to show up in order to make a difference for others. And you get to do that. Your presence is precious. And is a present to those that you work with, and lead, and serve.

**Rob Parsons:**

Love it. Thank you so much for joining the podcast, Pam.

**Pam Sherman:**

Thank you. This was so much fun.

**Rob Parsons:**

It is, you are a joy to talk to. To learn more about Pam, the Sherman EDGE, and Outlaw Leadership, visit [thepamsherman.com](http://thepamsherman.com) Courage and vision and excitement have never been more important, and Pam certainly brings all that and more to the table. Thank you once again, Pam.

**Pam Sherman:**

Thank you.

**Speaker 3:**

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