

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



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KHALILAH OLOKUNOLA – HR, Skydiving, Gangs, and Beer

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Khalilah “KO” Olokunola is the Chief People Officer of TRU Colors, where she is the force behind defining a company culture that drives connection, team cohesion, personal & professional growth. She also oversees developing and executing a Re-Engineered People strategy for the seven main areas of traditional HR in support of the overall business plan and strategic direction of the organization. She was born and raised in New York and spent much of her teen years on the streets with Brooklyn & Troy’s most notorious street gangs. KO remained adamant about the importance of education & making impact in the lives of others. KO is an advocate for workplace diversity, inclusion, and second-chance hiring. She has attended college both in NYC & NC and has completed additional coursework at MIT uLab & Harvard University on Entrepreneurship, Leading from the Emerging Future, and Deliberations of Social Change. KO has been named one of the top twenty influencers in the People Operations industry by Lattice & Top 22 leader by Conscious Companies. She has been featured online, in print and on TV notably in Forbes, on Good Morning America & Dr. Oz

In this episode, Khalilah talks about

- How she works as the HR lead for a company staffed by active gang members;
- Why skydiving is part of her onboarding process;
- How you can use the techniques of public interest HR for your corporation;
- Why the future belongs to impact companies;
- What she means by “Three the Hard Way”;
- How and why to make an individual purpose plan to help your company;
- And more!

Michael Lee

So Khalilah. Welcome to At the Edge. And thank you so much for being here with us.

Khalilah Olokunola

Thank you for having me today. It's my pleasure and honor.

Michael Lee

You work for a very unusual company.

Khalilah Olokunola

TRU Colors is a for-profit brewery with a closely knit social mission to unite gang rivals and decrease violence in our city while uniting communities across the country. So we do that, of course, through beer.

Michael Lee

Yeah, of course, obviously, through beer. That would be the obvious thing to do.

Khalilah Olokunola

TRU Colors started in 2015, after a sixteen year old was gunned down in Wilmington, North Carolina. Our founder, and CEO at the time, had a Google-type office not too far from where that shooting happened. And he had no idea that there were gangs in Wilmington. And he wanted to understand why people would shoot guns out of cars.

And so he reached out to a friend of his friend David, who was district attorney at the time, and is still district attorney right now. And he asked him to connect him to the top gangster in town. And that began a conversation that sparked the conversation that shaped the idea of TRU Colors.

We ran a test where we brought in three guys who were in gangs, and they were integrated into his company On Tap. We thought there would be a huge cultural divide, because On Tap is filled with white, educated millennials. But after twenty-four hours, they were the most popular people in the building. And what that showed is that they were able to authentically adapt. They could adapt to new environments and workspaces.

Something else happened that was powerful. They actually still hold the record for the most demos booked. They'd never worked in software. They'd never worked on the phones. But they were able to apply some of the skills that they learned in the streets inside of this environment.

We thought that maybe we just got lucky. Let's try it again. So we hired eleven more people, who were from gang leadership, and we brought them in and asked for a few things: no violence for

ninety days, we want you to show up on time, do what you say you're going to do and inject positivity. And we need to also make sure that if we throw all this knowledge and information at you that you're going to be resilient enough to handle it, and that you would be able to process it and apply it to what we want you to do.

After forty days, it happened. TRU Colors existed. Those eleven guys not only showed up on time and did what they said they were going to do and inject positivity, but there were also no shots fired during that time. So that showed that they had influence. And when you're hiring people from backgrounds like second chance hires, or from gangs, you're not necessarily looking for your briefcase, which is your resume track record. You're looking for your heart case, your head case, your cognitive ability, and your motivating factors. And you take those things and you apply them and you realize that people can go from what I call the block to the boardroom. And when we realized that transition was possible, from our perspectives - the founder's perspective, the president's perspective, and for me as the HR person's perspective - that we could actually build this business. And by providing education and opportunity, we can become peacekeepers. and reduce violence in our city.

Michael Lee

So I imagine working as the head of HR for this kind of an organization is a very different job than most HR professionals.

Khalilah Olokunola

It is very different. There are some traditional components to it, you know, standard payroll, compliance, time and attendance. But there are also some things that we've had to invent or re-engineer for the team that we currently serve. An example is our onboarding. Most companies do a one day onboarding or one week onboarding. Our onboarding is eight weeks. And that's how it starts. It ends after an additional eight weeks - five months all together. We're teaching you life skills, social skills, business skills and beer. After those eight weeks, you go into a ninety-day internship. But before you get to that ninety-day internship, like any gang, I have an initiation.

So you skydive. I take all teams that graduate from that eight week onboarding to skydive. And most of our guys have never been in a plane. What happens up there is that they leave everything behind. It's kind of symbolic for them of starting brand new.

Once they skydive, they immediately go up to \$35,000 and start their ninety-day internship in the department that they expressed interest in. And that ninety days is filled with stretch assignments and getting over the learning curve, additional training, and they get access to, of course, medical, dental, vision, some professional development reimbursement. And they get company stock options.

After that ninety days, you flow into actual career roles and you become a specialist or associate, and you get paid whatever that role offers, based on the salary range. In most companies, you

can have a recognition and reward system for things like attendance. But I use our recognition and reward system to continue to drive outcomes like unity, peacekeeping, and leadership.

And so I have the team split up into what I call tribes for TRU Community. And those tribes elect a head coach, who is also from a gang. And that head coach leads them through the season. And they compete on a monthly basis based on work performance, giving back to the community because we're still trying to change perceptions. And the ability, because we also learned early on Michael, that we can't teach the team to be a professional success without addressing their personal needs, it wouldn't work, the two had to coexist together. And so it's like Maslow's theory of human needs. When we help them with personal development, professional development becomes a little bit easier.

So we offer PerPro plans for our team members also. A typical month in TRU Community is our team getting a score from their supervisors if they went and gave back to their community, whether it's at the local Boys and Girls Club, or First Fruits, which is an organization that distributes food. And then we're using that system to continue to bring people together, to have conversations, to discover that you have more in common with who you labeled as rivals than what divides you. And so through TRU Community, we shaped brotherhoods.

And so those are just two of the differences as HR in TRU Colors. We've had to re-engineer a lot of what traditional HR has said that we should do. We also had to design some things from scratch.

Michael Lee

It sounds like your job as an HR leader is actually completely different than it would be in most organizations completely.

Khalilah Olokunola

Right now one of the big things in HR is creating a more JEDI experience: justice, equity, diversity, and inclusive environments. For us, inclusion is different. The majority of our active gang affiliates are all minorities, but we have non-gang members who are also in the workspace. Our reverse mentorship program, which I like to call "Inclusiveship" is where we partner gang with non-gang just to have lunch and to start a conversation. Because conversations challenge what you believe. And for our guys, beliefs are foundational for skills. And skills have to lead to opportunity.

I'll go through that process for you. We pair people together for SWOT conversations, because our guys are transitioning from the block to the boardroom. And a lot of the experienced hires here are already boardroom savvy, but they need to come closer to the block to understand the people they're working with. And so we bring them together over lunch. I measure its success with what I call "Perspective Points." Did you learn something new? Would you do it again? Did you find out you had something in common? It's powerful when you realize you have something in common with somebody that has been classified or stereotyped as an active gang member.

And there's still a lot more that I believe that we can do here especially when it comes to shaping culture. Because we are trying to change perspective.

I have wanted to have an active gang member on my team. One of our guys is responsible for TRU Community, which is our tribe system, but also pieces of culture. So every month we have a lunch-and-learn. And they are not learning from other people. They are learning from each other. And other people are learning from them.

We invite groups in for tours of the building and to learn more about who our team is and why they are gang members, because when you go back to the historical place of when gangs were created, they were created as gangs for good, to help shape their communities and make them a safe space to protect the women and children and to provide for people where there was lack. And somewhere down the line, the definition was redefined by a few people who were rebellious, and violence began to take place and take root. And so our team here is working to bring the perception and the definition of gang back to how it was originally created.

When we think about gangs, this may make you laugh, I think about a fraternity. It's a brotherhood. And we are just providing the tools that they need to be successful. This is a model that I believe can be successful in any industry. But you can't just start something that's time-specific. You have to have those enablers in place, because growth doesn't just happen in one spurt. Growth has to be continued.

Michael Lee

The situation with the pandemic, with hybrid work and remote work - how has that impacted TRU Colors?

Khalilah Olokunola

Last year when COVID hit and shut us all down, we did go home for a couple months. I packed these large garbage bags full of supplies, like trail mix bars and sodas and drinks. But I also put in some conversation cards, some play cards, and some other tools that I needed with us.

While we were working from home, our situation was unique. We didn't have any beer. We weren't brewing. And because we weren't brewing, there really wasn't a lot for our team to do. We were just working the social mission. And to work the social mission, you usually have to be on the streets. I have to be able to hit the block.

And so for me, our work-from-home strategy was us continuing to personally and professionally develop our team on an ongoing basis, tasking departments with ongoing responsibility to learn how to present to the team. And you know, when we had to have those peace conversations, or to resolve conflict, we did it in Zoom rooms. We worked from home for I think ninety days at the most. And after those ninety days, we came back in the building. And then we begin to create content, so that we could continuously push out our message. Because we realized so many

people were going digital then and we had already had some things in place set up. And so we started creating content for TRU TV, which tasked our employees not just with something to do, but a way to sharpen their skills, because we were building a team that we knew had to be effective and efficient.

When we finally got our brewery up and running - we also have a gymnasium, because in that eight week onboarding, in the morning, we work your body. So we have a health and wellness class where you're learning about nutrition, you're learning how to take care of your body during certain seasons, or just in general, we have a fitness class, which is hands-on and we have yoga. I want you to close your eyes for a minute if you're listening and think about a tough gang member doing yoga. It's so powerful when you see it.

And what's so remarkable about that, Michael, is that we have a video that we submitted to the United Nations that won the People's Choice Award. And in that video, there's a young man named Dacious Smith, who was an HR specialist at the time. His goal was to become Director of Health and Wellness. He came in the original eleven, and I'm proud to say today that he is our Director of Health and Wellness. So the student actually was prepared and equipped to today become the teacher.

Human Resources, HR, we're in this really sensitive place right now, where we can't look for the things that we need, we have to re-engineer it. We have to create them on our own. There are some things that we know that need to change. And we're hoping that somebody creates a program or tool. We have to take our pen and paper and sit in conference rooms with our teams and come up with a strategy or a new system that we can use to apply to the world of work that we're seeing now in our individual companies.

What works for TRU Colors may not necessarily work for another organization. There are pieces that they can use, and you may be able to translate it, but when you're working with the company, it's based on the industry, based on the vision, mission and values. And so you have to design from that data point. And when you design from that data point, you'll find that HR are not just medical professionals that we had to become last year with COVID-19, and not just pros on talent management or recruitment. We're also intrapreneurs. We have to create internally in the workspace what we need to become and sustain effectiveness.

The world of work today is not going to be contingent on just a program. It's going to be contingent on the people who are running the departments called Human Resources. We have to re-engineer HR, Michael. And re-engineering, when you think about it, you can redefine it, and you can re-evaluate it, and those are all great. But when you re-engineer something, that means that there's an internal fix that's happening. And it is technical, it's sometimes mechanical, it's data-driven. But what you do internally affects externally. And so HR has to be re-engineered. And I'm hoping that I can help other HR folks see that in the coming year. It's a big goal of mine.

Michael Lee

One of the big challenges around hybrid work has been communication, being connected. It sounds like you've got some interesting lessons to share from your experiences with people who are working HR in organizations that are dealing with hybrid work. How do they get people to talk to each other properly? How do they get people to relate?

Khalilah Olokunola

Hybrid work is hard. Especially when it comes to communication, because you can be so distracted when you're not in the office. You have all the things happening in the environment around you.

One of the things that I learned and I can share - I'll share some of these tips - is to make sure that you shape your space for what you need. Remove anything that would distract you, if you can. If you can't, then find a space that you'll be able to maximize. That may be your bedroom for some people.

If you're looking for ways to communicate, I wouldn't just depend on Slack and email. We also added mobile text messaging through a simple text system, because everybody's still looking at their phone when you have this hybrid experience. And so we added a simple text system to get information and to post about events that we were doing that were virtual, or classes that were happening at the time with ongoing alerts.

We looked at what worked best for our team. Zoom is a great option. But there's so many other options that you can use to talk to people on video. And right now seeing people makes all the difference. But people want more than just seeing each other. They want to experience people when working in the hybrid environment. We have this framework for Disrupt U, which is formal training and development activity, a special project "Beyond the Black Experience."

And so if you take that framework, and you talk about more hybrid environments, you're sitting people down inside the office, which is kind of that formal training, but you're giving them activities and special projects so they can present collectively as a team, so they can continuously build ongoing connections, which is important.

That bag that I sent home with those cards, I gamified it. People look forward to Pop-up Beer Bingo, how are we going to secure the bag? So it was experiences. When you are creating hybrid environments, you still have to build company culture. You still want your environment to complete the tasks that are at hand, because the organization still has to function and flow. But you also want to make sure that you're keeping in mind some of the challenges that people may face. And you have to keep in mind some of the strategy that the company wants to achieve.

Maybe you are hosting an Inclusiveship that's virtual, and people are having lunch together to build conversation, and you're measuring afterwards. Maybe you are hosting a game night with

your team. Or even better, maybe you guys are all coming together and you're providing feedback on the last experience that you had.

When we think about hybrid work, we have to come up with hybrid strategy. So start backwards. What do you hope to achieve? You know what you have to achieve for the organizational strategy for the company's bottom line and for the people strategy. And once you define those things, you work your way backward on how you can achieve those results.

Michael Lee

What kind of lessons could you draw from the models that you're working with that corporate companies could use to improve employee experience and engagement?

Khalilah Olokunola

I would tell corporate companies that communication is important. I call it “the language of the learned.” You understand the people you are serving in language that matches the language in the workplace. And so lingo is important. How you communicate effectively is based on the people who you serve in the industry that you're in.

Another lesson I learned about leadership is that if serving is beneath you then leadership is above you. There's been some times that I've had to serve the team in order to lead the team in this space that we're in right now. And that leadership is powerful.

There is a such thing as being too empathetic. You have to draw the line. But when people know that you care, when you activate the KIND code - and KIND is an acronym for Knowledge Inspires New Direction - as you define and design your systems and strategies based on the data that you collect, and you begin to shape from there, people will know that you care not just about the bottom line, but they'll know that you care about them in the workplace. And I think that's important in the way of work that we're in today, to understand the people that you're talking to so that you understand the language that you need to speak to them to.

Because sometimes what we don't realize is that influence can trump authority. People don't always listen or respond because of the role that you're in, they listen based on the influence that you have on their life, or that you've had on their life. If you open up your ears and listen, that will help gain influence. It's great to be a person of authority who also has influence. You can have both. And that is, I believe, the most powerful form of leadership, where your people trust you because they know who you are and what your intentions are. But you also are in a position where you can make decisions.

When I came to TRU Colors, I didn't have any authority. But when I came in that first day, I shared a story about this young girl who grew up in Brooklyn, New York, who went through these things, and who was able to change her life. And the guys could relate to that story. And I listened to what they said. And that began to build trust between us. I listened to them carefully. So even

though I didn't have any authority, I begin to shape the influence I had, because they trusted me, because I was honest and authentic with who I am and what my intentions were for being there. I'm sold on the mission. I believe that better is possible, and that it starts with you and that we all play a significant role and make an impact in the lives of others.

The world of work has changed. They call it the Great Resignation, I like to call it the Great Revelation. People have had aha moments. They're looking at things that motivate them, things that are mission-focused, and that are aligned to their vision and values for themselves. They're looking to work in places that aren't going to affect their mental health. When you're looking at those things, that means that you've made a decision to put yourself first, yes, but it also means that your values are important.

I think a lot of sustainable brands, B-corps, and impact companies are going to do well in this next couple of seasons in the world of work, because all those companies have missions attached to them, and people are looking for a place where they can align their values. Purpose is often predicated from your past, from passion, and sometimes from a pain. And so there's a place that you can relate and something that stirs in you that makes you want to do a thing. Now in this world of work, we've had this revelation that it's finally time to do this thing that's been stirring on the inside of us.

The biggest revelation, though, is that with so many open jobs, companies still haven't removed the checkbox off the application. That's a whole conversation for me. We have millions of people and second chance hires who can work these jobs, but they're not being offered these jobs even though we have a lack in the workplace. And so what this is doing and it's the Great Revelation, is that employees are having aha moments and employers are reshaping what they do.

KO, Khalilah Olokunola, has been talking about "Three the Hard Way" for years. But companies are actually doing it. And Three the Hard Way is, you can be People Focused, Purpose Driven, and still Profit Aligned. You can make money and you can impact people. And you can make a change and a difference in your community or in communities across the country. And now is the time to do it. Because if you want the best employees, if you want employees who want to come to work every day and who want to make a significant difference and impact, who don't just care about what they make but they care about the impact that they make - there's value there, there's a return on investment - then you have to also change what you believe as an employer.

Michael Lee

The stuff you just said, a lot of it gets limited by company culture, whatever that means. How do you deal with overcoming an archaic or old culture that doesn't want to change even though maybe the people want to change and the employees want to change, but the company just doesn't want to change?

Khalilah Olokunola

We can always fight on this line that we're on. But no matter what we fight on this line, it starts at the top and it trickles down from the head. If the CEO and senior leadership is not on board with a change of culture, it makes it extremely difficult for the people at any level underneath them to make significant change. And when they do try to do it, it has to be done on a daily basis. It's almost like a tug-of-war. You have to put something in place to address it because you know the effect that it's had.

Culture has become a stumbling block for a lot of organizations, because a lot of organizations are still stuck in their ways or they're stuck in this way where they believe that they know everything, instead of having this "Each One Teach One" approach.

When you're looking to change things or make an impact with a culture that is outdated or out of style, you have to present from the organizational strategy level why the change of culture would be impactful. And the most important place for the people you're speaking to is usually the bottom line. You have to show the return on investment, not just for the product or the services, but also for the people. If we change this culture, we may have less turnover. If we change this culture, we may have more people showing up on time. Or we have less people taking extreme PTO. You have to present it in the language that they understand and what they are looking at.

Most archaic cultures, or outdated cultures, are ran by individuals who really focus on the bottom line. You have to show them how making that shift or that small change, even if it's in baby steps, can affect and address that bottom line and give them more of a return on investment than what they're seeing right now.

Michael Lee

What would you say to the HR person who really wants to make a difference in their company, who really wants to have that shift happen, who really wants to have the employees engaged, excited, being part of something, but they're frustrated, and they're finding it's hard to make that difference? What would you tell them to do?

Khalilah Olokunola

I would tell them to create a purpose plan. What this does is show you how you can apply some of what you want for yourself individually to your company. You can't be functional for the company unless you're functional first for yourself. I would take time out to re-engineer your perspective, find your why. Simon Sinek says that people don't buy products, they buy your why. When you know your why, you can always figure out your how. If your why is the same, you can begin to put some small tasks in place.

They have these things people do at the beginning of the year called vision boards, and I hate them by themselves. But combined with a bankable blueprint, a binder and a plan, they can be extremely effective.

How do you connect yourself with people who aren't like you? Join a tribe or build one.

Unbelieve that if you don't finish, you fail. Because sometimes in HR, we are stuck in this position where we think if we don't get something across or we don't get something that we present approved, that we fail. Unbelieve that tradition, that if you don't finish, you fail. You only fail when you stop trying.

Invest in yourself, by taking time out to define what you want for you. Put it on paper. When you know what you want for you, you understand what you can present to the company and what you don't have to present to the company. I'm constantly giving myself motivation.

Having said all that, let me condense it. So they have something tangible, like, let's call it a "Formula for Fortitude" to help you get through. How do you find the Formula for Fortitude? Find a mantra, a quote or a statement that you can say to yourself that motivates you. It can be a song. There are songs like "Don't Stop Believing." Come up with something. A mantra for yourself.

Remember your morning headlines. You know when you pick up the paper and you see headlines about what's happened in the news? Remember the last thing that you did that you were proud of, that you were able to complete, and remember that feeling that you felt, remember the success, because you can do it again if you understand your why.

I take time every year to create my purpose plan. I always say things to myself like "Be brave!" I remember the progress, the processes, and systems I created that were successful. I also remember those things that I failed at and how I was able to get back up and forge forward with this plan I had in place.

You have to know who you are. You have to understand your why and what you are called to do in order for you to move forward, especially if you're discouraged. In HR, our bounce-back has to be strong, because we deal with people every day. In order for us to deal with people every day, we have to be able to deal with the first person. And that's us, ourselves.

Michael Lee

Khalilah, thank you so much for being here. This has definitely been a different kind of interview than we're used to.

Khalilah Olokunola

Well, I hope different means good. And I hope that the listeners gathered something from it. I hope that CEOs and corporate companies and founders, venture capital firms, private equity

organizations realize that in the world of work today that is hybrid, that you can create a framework that impacts your people, and that they also understand that they can be people focused, purpose driven and profit aligned. If you're in HR and you're listening, realize that we may not get everything that we need at first, but if we take care of ourselves first and we create a plan for who we are and what we want, we'll be more effective in the workplace. HR sometimes needs HR.