Hiring to Firing Podcast — Building a Culture of Growth: HR Lessons From _Hacks_
Hosts: Tracey Diamond and Emily Schifter
Guest: Ted Harding
Recorded: July 30, 2025
Aired: September 9, 2025

[INTRO]

Emily Schifter:

Welcome to *Hiring to Firing*, the podcast. In our episodes, we often dive into a specific HR topic, but today we're actually taking a bit of a broader perspective to talk about how HR fits into companies and cultures more generally. Tracey, I know you've got an HR background. What are some things that come to mind when you think about this topic?

Tracey Diamond:

I was a lawyer for many years and then decided to switch it up and go into HR. For about 5 years, I worked for a not-for-profit in South Jersey, right outside Philadelphia, as their HR director. And I was an HR department of one. It's very interesting to be an employment lawyer and go into HR because I think a lot of employment lawyers always kind of wonder what it's like to be on the other side of the fence.

Emily Schifter:

Absolutely.

Tracey Diamond:

Yeah. Right? I think it's like sort of our dream not to have to bill hours but get to do a lot of the same interesting issues that we do. What I liked the most about the job was the employee relations piece of the job, which was probably most similar to what we do as employment lawyers. I'll have to say, I didn't love the benefits administration piece so much. And then after five years, I actually wound up segueing obviously back, and here I am as an employment lawyer.

I do highly recommend it. I think it does give employment lawyers an insight as to what it's like to be the client and to actually have to execute on some of the advice that we give on a daily basis. Anyway, I would love for everybody to listen in to our guest, Ted Harding, who's chief human resources officer of Apnimed, and his thoughts on the effectiveness of HR leadership.

[EPISODE]

Tracey Diamond:

Welcome to *Hiring to Firing*, the podcast. I'm Tracey Diamond, a partner with Troutman Pepper Locke, and I'm here with my co-host and partner, Emily Schifter. Together, we tackle all employment issues from *Hiring to Firing*.

Emily Schifter:

Today, our guest is Ted Harding, Chief Human Resources Officer of Apnimed, a pharmaceutical company headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, specializing in very exciting clinical trials for an oral pill for sleep apnea. Ted, why don't you tell us a little bit more about the company and your background and role there?

Ted Harding:

Thanks, Emily. Yeah, Apnimed is a privately held clinical-stage pharmaceutical company. We're based in Cambridge. And we're dedicated to transforming the treatment landscape for sleep-related breathing diseases. We just released really positive results from two phase-three clinical trials for a once nightly pill to treat the root causes of obstructive sleep apnea. It's a pretty exciting time for us.

I'm the Chief Human Resources Officer here. I've got almost 30 years of experience in HR, in small companies, large companies, private, public, mostly in the biotech space. I've been the head of HR at different companies for most of the last 17 years.

Tracey Diamond:

I have to say, as a partner of someone with very challenging sleep issues, I am super, super excited for this pill to come out. Because when he gets a good night's sleep, I'm going to get a good night's sleep. I hope these faces continue to be very successful for Apnimed.

Today, we thought Ted would be the perfect guest for us to talk about more broadly the role of human resources from both the company's and the employee's perspective. We've drilled down to various different HR issues on other podcast episodes, but this was more of a broad discussion of what is the role of HR.

And so for our discussion, we thought it would be fun to pull some clips from the most recent season of *Hacks. Hacks* stars Jean Smart as Deborah Vance, a legendary stand-up comedian who hires a young writer, Ava Daniels, played by Hannah Einbinder, to help her reinvent her aging act. The two have a complicated love-hate relationship throughout the show. And season 4 in particular involves a long-standing feud between them as a result of Ava blackmailing Deborah into keeping her on as a head writer of the late-night TV show that she hosts.

In our first clip, Deborah and Ava's bickering reaches such a boiling point that the network forces them to have Stacey, the show's quirky HR representative, chaperone all of their interactions going forward. Let's take a listen.

Stacey:

Which brings me to the final complaint. There's a lot of disruptive tension between the two of you, a lot of reports about that.

Deborah:

I told you, pretending wasn't going to work.

Ava:

Oh, it's my fault? You just said you wanted to beat someone's ass.

Deborah:

Yeah. And you want to know who?

Rob:

Ladies. Here is what is going to happen. Per the network, Stacey here is going to be the dedicated HR chaperon for our show. If you're in this building, Stacey's with you. The two of you will not be unsupervised together ever again. Got it?

Ava:

No, I'm sorry. I think that's going to be really disruptive to our workflow. We can't do that.

Stacey:

You're just not even going to know that I'm here. It's going to be fine. Sorry. Wrong pipe.

Emily Schifter:

Ted, you're about the perfect guest for this episode. You've held some interesting and diverse HR roles both in-house in the pharma industries and as an outside consultant for a variety of different companies. We'll start with the broad question. What do you see the role of HR being in an organization?

Ted Harding:

Yeah, I think at a high level, I see the role of HR is helping employees perform at their best and in alignment with the goals of the company. In theory, it's not much different than a CFO managing a variety of financial assets or a chief technology officer managing a variety of

technologies. But for me, it's more exciting because whenever you have people involved, things can go in all sorts of directions.

And what I think makes things most interesting is figuring out the kind of culture that's needed to make a company successful and how to go about building and reinforcing that culture, which it involves bringing in people with the talents the company needs, helping them grow individually and together and providing the right kinds of incentives and support.

In the clip we just heard, there's clearly tension between Deborah and Hannah. The challenge is that the tension actually helps fuel their creativity. From an HR standpoint, I wouldn't be asking myself, "How do I prevent the tension?" because that might actually hurt the business. I'd be asking myself, "How do we make sure the tension stays at a more healthy level and doesn't negatively impact other members of the team?"

Tracey Diamond:

Such a good point. Actually, my initial gut would have been we have to keep these guys apart, right? This is just not acceptable behavior. But you're right, their bickering actually helps create a process. And that's much more challenging, right? Keeping them bickering but at a healthy level.

Emily Schifter:

And a civil way.

Ted Harding:

Right. Right.

Tracey Diamond:

Do companies differ in how HR fits in and what facets of the organization HR touches?

Ted Harding:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, at some companies, HR can really be more of a tactical administrative function focused on the core aspects of hiring, firing, compensation, benefits, administration, training, that kind of thing. I think if that's where you stop, you potentially leave a lot of value on the table. But I also think it depends on company strategy. If you're in an industry that has a lot of unskilled labor that's in high supply, you got low margin products, maybe that's all you need to invest in HR.

But in industries where talent is scarce, roles require advanced skills and thinking, margins are higher, competition for talent is significant, I think HR can play a more important role. And by working with leaders and employees in a strategic partner, we can help create and nurture a differentiated culture that attracts and retains talented employees. And the kind of analogy I use, I'm not a cyclist, but just visually it helps me think about it as I think about the peloton in the

Tour de France. That group of bikers that all bike together. And you think, "Why doesn't one of them break out?" And sometimes they do. But as a group, they really figure out how to work together so that they benefit not only themselves but the group. And so if you can figure out how to do that with a company and a culture, that's how you create, I think, the best organizations.

Tracey Diamond:

I think that's such an interesting point. You made the point about HR is interesting because it's people, and people are unpredictable. And I think you're absolutely right, that when you're dealing with an organization where maybe you're just making products, it's less of a concern about how to manage those people. And HR maybe has less of an important function, or not important, but maybe less of an involved function than in a business where the people are the business. And you've got to really figure out how to optimize those people. It really underscores how important it is for HR to be a true business partner.

Emily Schifter:

Widgets, we kind of know what they're going to look like, what they're going to do. It's rare that they're going to change. But with people, you never know, right?

Ted Harding:

Exactly. Exactly. That's what makes it fun.

Emily Schifter:

Getting more specific, one of HR's roles is traditionally employee relations. Why do you think that's important for an organization?

Ted Harding:

Yeah. Well, I think, back to my peloton analogy, each person working together can have an additive effect to the group, right? They can go faster, use less energy, be more efficient than when they're riding alone. And that's the same within a company, right? At Apnimed, for example, we don't have anybody here who could develop a drug from scratch on their own and go out and market it, right? It takes a wide variety of skills and abilities. But by working together over the last several years, we're on the precipice of bringing a drug to market, right? That couldn't happen with just one person or a bunch of people working individually. You really have to work as a team.

And just like a peloton, if people get out of alignment, we become less efficient, right? One person getting out of alignment, especially in a small company, could have a huge negative impact on productivity, right? When a member of the peloton crashes – and it might not even be that person's fault, right? It could be they popped a tire or they snapped a chain, but the impacts really felt by everyone. From an HR standpoint, employee relations standpoints, how do we work with employees and leaders to solve those problems when they emerge? Or even better, anticipate them in advance and head them off?

And like in the Tour de France, in companies, sometimes someone's race needs to end early. HR can make sure that there's a fair process to determine how that happens, and both treats people well and reduces legal risk to the company.

Tracey Diamond:

To our point earlier about Deborah and Ava's interactions being kind of necessary, a little bit of interpersonal conflict being kind of necessary to their creative process. Clearly, in season four, their interpersonal relationship had reached the boiling point and was really threatening to cause Deborah's coveted late-night show to bomb. Stacey, the HR person, in her own awkward way, suggest various tools for them to use in communicating with each other. Let's listen to this next clip.

Deborah:

It wasn't a panic attack. And that is a CableACE award.

Stacey:

Okay, let's just lower the volume a little.

Ava:

Okay. Was not a panic attack. Just a little stage fright.

Deborah:

What did you say? Stage fright? How dare you? I have never had stage fright my entire career. Not even when I performed in front of Saddam Hussein. And that was after I rejected his advances. This was a cardiac issue.

Stacey:

Okay. I ladies, I don't want to have to introduce a volume jar, but I can.

Ava:

I was just trying to help.

Deborah:

I don't want your help. This was all your fault.

Ava:

It's my fault you had a cardiac issue?

Deborah:

Yes, because we need a stronger opener. And your bad writing is killing me.

Stacey:

All right. Guys, the beans are getting a little steamed in here. So, Ava, why don't you give Deborah a break to rest, and we'll return to this? Maybe never. I don't know.

Emily Schifter:

Ted, how can an HR leader be effective in resolving interpersonal conflicts and even just encouraging better communication in the workplace generally?

Ted Harding:

Yeah, I think one of the most valuable things an HR leader can do is help people take a step back and see things from each person's perspective as well as from a third-party view. Rarely have I found a situation where one person's really intentionally being mean, or evil, or difficult. I had one great HR mentor who once told me, "People react rationally to the world as they see it." And I really think that's true.

In the clip we just heard, Deborah's yelling at Ava. Really, it's about her own fears that she really is having stage fright or that she's going to be labeled as old or having a medical condition. A good HR person could pull Deborah aside and help her gain some self-insight and figure out how to ask for what she really needs rather than lashing out. They could also help Ava see things from Deborah's perspective. Not that it's Ava's fault that Deborah's lashing out at her, but are there ways she can respond that can enhance rather than degrade their communication? And Stacey did do a good job of just separating the two of them. Because at a certain point, they just needed to be taken apart.

Proactively, HR can work with leaders and employees on things like communication skills, personality profiles, team culture, anti-harassment, all of that to avoid a lot of this in the first place. But to do all that, well, you really do need to understand the business and the people involved, or it's going to come off as a bureaucratic HR training rather than something that is really valuable.

Tracey Diamond:

That makes a lot of sense. Let's shift for a minute and talk a little bit about the role of HR in talent development. How can HR be most effective in recruiting and developing talent?

Ted Harding:

Yeah, I think that goes back to starting out with understanding the business needs and the culture you're trying to build in the company. And by really understanding where the company is, where it's going, you can help leaders think about the people they need to bring in and develop.

And not just to solve today's problems, but to think about how needs, roles, and people are going to develop over time.

One thing I learned from a colleague years ago, especially at small companies, I think you always want to make sure that everyone you hire adds to the company. People talk about hiring someone for culture fit or fit in the role. And really, to me, it's about how are they going to add to and enhance the company rather than fit within what we already have?

For example, when I joined Apnimed, we had a world-class clinical operations team that was probably the best in the world at running sleep trials. And while we did add to that group with some diverse skills, we also needed to bring on people in medical affairs to help tell our story to the sleep medicine community and commercial to help prepare us to launch a drug. And these are very different skill sets and often some very different personalities that we brought on. To help people understand inside the company that not only we're recruiting and bringing them in, but how they're going to add to the company was really important.

I think also understanding the future direction of the company, and the gaps, and people and skills that you have, it creates an opportunity to help grow people in their careers and directions that fit the company needs as well. Sometimes leaders across the company aren't aware of the backgrounds and skill sets of employees in other groups and other departments, and they may not have insights into skills that might be transferable to fill their needs. A good HR person who really understands the business and the people can provide those insights.

Tracey Diamond:

Yeah, I think you hit on a really important point. Because, oftentimes, you see departments sort of working in silos, and they really don't have good insight into what's going on outside their own department, and that cross-training aspect could be so crucial to save resources and also just have better motivated employees.

Ted Harding:

Yeah. And create a culture where people feel like there's an opportunity to grow, and get ahead, and maybe move in directions they never thought were possible.

Tracey Diamond:

I think it's so helpful to think about how does somebody add to the company or how does a position add to the company rather than fit. Because I think so often, people say they're not a fit. Or how do you fit into our culture? I think you're exactly right. It's so amorphous. It's so tough to define. It doesn't always help the business. And, of course, it can create legal risk when you're trying to differentiate why one person is or is not a fit. I love that concept of thinking what can this person do to help add to the business or add to the team.

Kind of shifting gears a little bit. Sometimes we'll hear the complaint that HR is really just for the company, and it doesn't have the employee's back, or even vice versa. How do you avoid that perception as an HR department, as an HR leader?

Ted Harding:

Yeah. Well, I think the truth is that just like everyone else at the company, HR exists to support the company's strategy, right? And look, people get upset when a CTO makes a decision to implement a new technology because change is hard. It really shouldn't be a surprise that people get even more concerned when a change can affect their job, their pay, their working conditions, etc.

I think one key is recognizing that people have a real concern that it's valid. I also know that in general, HR and the company benefit way more when every employee is successful. It's in nobody's interest to have somebody fail. That doesn't help the company. It doesn't help the manager. It doesn't help HR. Really helping people see that. We're all aligned. We're all on the same side and having you be successful. I think that can be helpful. But you also have to behave in ways that are consistent with that.

For example, many people think of a performance improvement plan that it's just the documentation that a company does before they fire you. And sometimes that's the case. I've got a very different perspective on that. I want to do a performance improvement plan early before the manager becomes frustrated, before the employees dug a hole that's too deep to get out of. And often, if we can be clear with people about what the expectations are, what they should prioritize, and give them the support and feedback they need, they can turn things around. Employees don't always agree, but when done well, everyone can see that we're all on the same side and we really want the employee to succeed.

Tracey Diamond:

How should HR partner with business leaders and employees for that matter when evaluating performance?

Ted Harding:

Yeah, I think the most important thing is to establish trust, and that has to happen before an issue comes up, right? Because otherwise, you're never going to hear about it until it's too late. Making sure that managers see HR as a partner. And sometimes managers may have had a negative experience with HR themselves, or they're just exposed to the general anti-HR culture that's out there, right?

I did a quick ChatGPT search, just say, "Give me the positive characters from an HR perspective that are in movies or TV." And the most positive one they gave me was Toby from The Office, who I love. Great character. But that is not a positive representation of HR. If that's what people are exposed to all the time, how would they think of HR is anything but positive? But I think if you can build that relationship and help people see how you can help them be successful in their roles, then they start to trust you. And then you have to act in ways that garner that trust, right? You have to keep confidence where you can. And where you can't, you have to let them know, "I can't. And this is why. And let's figure out how we're going to deal with this," rather than doing things out on your own.

Emily Schifter:

It's just challenging for HR to get past that perception of, "We're all not Toby." Right?

Ted Harding:

Right. Yeah, it's a tough situation, right? Because again, there's some reality in that. I mean, just like in any profession, there are people in HR who aren't very good at their jobs, just like there are people in finance who aren't very good at their jobs. But there are a lot of great HR people out there, too, who I think can be really good strategic partners and figure out how do we work with a manager? How do we work with an employee to coach them to really drive a positive environment rather than just be a bureaucratic red tape organization?

Emily Schifter:

Kind of to that point, of course, as you know, often HR has the difficult job of having tough conversations or delivering bad news. That doesn't always help with the perception, of course, unfortunately. But when you do have to have one of those conversations, what are your thoughts on how you structure them in a way that's meaningful and helpful to the employee?

Ted Harding:

Yeah, I think one thing is to really try to put yourself in that person's shoes to figure out the best way to communicate to them rather than coming at it from your own perspective. It's hard to know the details that someone's going to retain from a conversation. I think coming across with empathy and care, that, they're going to remember. They may not remember all the details. Making sure you give it to them in writing afterwards so they can be clear about what was said and what happened. But showing and sharing that empathy is important.

And I think making sure that you're there. They know you're there to support them whatever the situation is. Yeah, it may be a tough situation. Maybe someone's going on a performance improvement plan. But we're talking about how do we help you be successful. We're asking for their input and how we can help them be successful, and we're following through on that.

I think also being clear. I mentioned earlier on what information has to stay confidential and what information might need to be shared, and how that would happen. Somebody comes to me and says, "I need to tell you something, but you can't tell anybody else." My first response is, "I can't make you that promise. You haven't told me what it is." And there may be things that I have to legally report. But what I can promise you is I'm going to work with you to figure out the best way to communicate that. And I'm not going to share something with somebody unless I told you I'm going to share it. And I think that does garner trust from people because you can be upfront and clear about how you can work with them.

Tracey Diamond:

When I worked in HR, I had that exact same issue come up time and again, where an employee would come to my office and say, "I'm telling you all this, but I don't want you to tell anybody."

And it really puts that HR person really in a difficult bind. And I would always respond, similar to you, Ted, something along the lines of, "Look, this was important enough that you brought it to my attention. You need to let me do my job, which is to investigate the issue. And I'm not going to go around obviously telling everybody, but there may be folks that I need to tell on a need-to-know basis, and you need to understand that it's necessary for me to do that in order for me to do my job. And it's important for me to do my job because this is important to you, and it's important to me, too."

Ted Harding:

Yeah. I think that's a great point, because I say that to people as well, because people say, "Well, I don't want to do anything about this. I just want to tell you." But it was important enough to you to bring to me.

Tracey Diamond:

Exactly.

Ted Harding:

It doesn't mean I have to do something about it necessarily, but maybe I can help you do something about it. And then often, people get so worked up about having a difficult conversation because they view it as a confrontation. And just helping them view it as, look, this doesn't have to be a confrontation. You're not getting along with your manager. Okay. Well, if you go in saying, "I don't like you," well, that's going to be a confrontation. But if you can help them come at it from a way, "Hey, this is what I need to be more effective for the company." Well, how's a manager going to argue with that? Right? At least with that approach, if not exactly with what you want.

Emily Schifter:

Yeah. And I found so often with clients that that empathetic perspective that you talk about is so important, not just from a cultural perspective and building trust, which is obviously vital, but it also reduces legal risk. I mean, there's no guarantee. But so often, if an employee, even if they're being let go, even if it's a tough situation, if they feel like it was done in a way that was respectful and empathetic, they're less likely to bring a claim and they're more likely to say, "Okay, where can I go from here?" And take it more positively. It has that benefit, too.

Ted Harding:

Absolutely.

Tracey Diamond:

But I've also seen it go too far where HR or the manager was so empathetic that they were basically just agreeing with whatever the person said. And just because one person feels that

they've been offended, let's say, it doesn't necessarily mean that it rises to the level of legal harassment, for example.

Emily Schifter:

Right.

Tracey Diamond:

And so by just agreeing, "Yes, this was terrible. Never should have happened to you," is agreeing that it happened and agreeing that it might give rise to a claim, it can go and do the opposite effect. HR folks have to be careful not to take it too far. Empathetic but neutral.

Emily Schifter:

Yes.

Tracey Diamond:

Both those things have to happen hand-in-hand.

Ted Harding:

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. But I did hear one time, and it stuck with me, about physicians. There was a study that physicians who get sued for malpractice, they don't make more mistakes than physicians that don't get sued for malpractice. What they do is they don't ever acknowledge they made a mistake. I think the same is true with companies that get sued. A lot of it is how you handle the person. How you deal with them? Do you treat them with dignity and respect? Not what you do. Companies fire people all the time. But the ones that get sued, I think, do it really poorly.

Emily Schifter:

That balance of treating them with respect but not accepting liability that you don't need to.

Ted Harding:

Yeah.

Emily Schifter:

In our last clip, sort of switching gears, Deborah and Ava are at each other's throats again. And Stacey from HR, unfortunately, has to use the ladies' room while she's chaperoning them, leading to some hilarious results. So, let's listen into what happens.

Ava:

Freda Kahlo didn't consult a focus group about what colors she should paint with.

Deborah:

She also didn't consult a pair of tweezers. What's your point?

Stacey:

I have to pee so bad. Can we just finish this in the restroom, please?

Ava:

You can still sell soap while remaining authentic to your voice. It's the difference between making art and turning out content. I do not want to make –

Deborah:

It's not about what you want. It's not even about what I want. It's what they want. And in case you've forgotten, I am the face of this show. No one in that focus group brought you up even once. If you can believe that?

Stacey:

Uh, okay. Change of plans. Do you guys actually mind stepping out?

Deborah:

Oh, for the love of –

Stacey:

And remember your tools. Compassion, not condescension.

Ava:

Okay, we'll wait for Stacey to finish this conversation.

Stacey:

Well, it's going to be a while.

Emily Schifter:

Ted, what do you see as the core attributes of an effective HR leader? Setting aside Stacey's chaperoning abilities.

Ted Harding:

Yes. On the one hand, I would say the exact opposite of Stacey. But to her credit, I don't think I have ever built a strong enough relationship with anyone, including my wife, to continue having a conversation with them while I'm using the bathroom. I mean, that's impressive. You got to give her some credit.

But I think to be an effective HR leader, you need to understand the business. You need to be able to think strategically and creatively to help solve business problems and to do it from a business perspective, not an HR perspective. And I think that's what any great leader of any function does. They don't solve a business problem for their function. They solve it for the business.

Like we talked about earlier, I think you have to establish trust and credibility across the organization. That goes from the board to the most junior employee in the company. And everyone has to have confidence that your insights, and perspective, and advice are going to be helpful.

I think it's important to be able to articulate and drive a culture that aligns with the business strategy. What does that look like? What are you trying to do? Be clear about why you're doing what you're doing. And it's not just replicating a culture that you may have experienced elsewhere or you may have read about. Like every family, every company's culture is unique, and trying to really craft that in an intentional way, I think it takes a really effective HR leader to do.

I think ensuring there's fair processes in place for hiring, reviews, promotions, compensation. Not everyone's going to perceive them as fair because they see it from their own perspective. But I always like to do things in a way that you don't obviously do this. But if an employee can see everything that I see and know everything I know, that I could at least explain to them there's a rational reason why we're doing it this way. May not disagree with it, but there's a rationale behind it versus having it feel haphazard.

And at the end of the day, I think you need to do your best to role model the values of the company. HR people aren't perfect, just like everyone else. But the best HR leaders I've worked with hold themselves to the highest standards, and they own up when they fall short.

Tracey Diamond:

Well, Ted, thank you so much for your insights today. I think they're going to be really helpful to our listeners. Thank you to our listeners for listening in. Please check out our other episodes on *Hiring to Firing*, and shoot us an email, give us some ideas for future episodes, and your favorite

TV shows and movies. And also, don't forget to check out our blog, HiringToFiring.Law. Thanks so much, everyone.

Copyright, Troutman Pepper Locke LLP. These recorded materials are designed for educational purposes only. This podcast is not legal advice and does not create an attorney-client relationship. The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are solely those of the individual participants. Troutman does not make any representations or warranties, express or implied, regarding the contents of this podcast. Information on previous case results does not guarantee a similar future result. Users of this podcast may save and use the podcast only for personal or other non-commercial, educational purposes. No other use, including, without limitation, reproduction, retransmission or editing of this podcast may be made without the prior written permission of Troutman Pepper Locke. If you have any questions, please contact us at troutman.com.