

EPISODE 199

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 199 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. If you're feeling like we've become a little less connected with each other, you're not alone. This week's guest, Shola Richards, says it's not just your imagination either. His latest book, *Go Together: How the Concept of Ubuntu Will Change How You Live, Work, and Lead*, looks at how recognizing our connection to one another can change the way we treat others.

Live Happy Editor, Chris Libby, sat down with Shola to learn more about this topic.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:35.9] SR: Thanks for having me on the podcast.

[0:00:36.6] CL: Well, thank you for joining us. First, I think we need to get this out of the way so everybody understands what we're talking about. It's the term "Ubuntu", and I hope I said that correctly, and why it inspired you to write a book about this philosophy about how people can apply this to their everyday lives.

[0:00:56.9] SR: Year, no worries. You did pronounce it correctly, Ubuntu. Yeah, it means, "I am because we are and it's a really powerful African philosophy that is really deeply refers to the power of our shared humanity and connectedness. That's why I love it so much and, you know, if you take a look right now what's going on in the world, there's so much division, I mean, not just going on in the world, to stay at home in the United States.

There's so much division going on and for me, the opportunity to write a book about how to really just reframe our view of the world around connectedness, around – and this may sound hard to conceptualize but what if we look at our colleagues as not being separate from us or people who don't pray like us or dress like us or look like us as not separate from us, and we're able to look at our shared connected skills and traits versus what makes us different? I think I

could change how we behave and certainly will change how we lead and I think it will change how we live as well.

[0:02:04.6] CL: So essentially, you're saying, which we say here at Live Happy all the time, "Instead of like focusing on those negative aspects, why don't we focus on the things that are working, the positive things that work together."

[0:02:16.1] SR: Exactly. I mean, the idea is like, I always wanted people to understand when I talk about Ubuntu, it's like, are differences should be celebrated. It's a totally important valid thing for us to do. What I always am afraid of is when people just focus solely on the differences and don't take a time to look at the things that we do have in common. I think all of us want to live in a safe environment. We all want to be in an environment where we feel loved and appreciated for what we do, we want to just feel happy, no pun intended, based on the Live Happy Podcast.

But the idea is like, the idea is that we do want to live our best lives and I feel that we can't do it alone and nothing meeting have ever been done in a vacuum by yourself. When I get on stage is I talk and go to work places about how to bring the spirit of Ubuntu into a practical application, what it really comes down to or what are the shared traits that we have that allow an organization to move together, allow us to get together, as a community and as a country to really offset some of the instability that we see in the world? That's really kind of where my main fight is, is eradicating instability through the power of Ubuntu.

[0:03:27.2] CL: Can you tell us how, specifically how individuals and companies can work together in a more positive manner?

[0:03:36.1] SR: Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the easiest ways and most powerful ways to do this is through a process that I work on, it's creating shared norms on a team. This is something that is certainly not new to anyone who has done team cohesion work but the idea is, whether you're talking about how to trust or how to communicate or how to be accountable or any of the – how to recognize employees.

These require people to have an idea of, "Hey, I may have an idea of how I would like to be recognized but that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone on my team must be recognized

the same way.” Or, “I may communicate in a way that feel is my personal style but that may not be how the team would prefer that we communicate.” So, the Ubuntu mindset, “I am because we are”, does take into consideration different viewpoints for members of the team regardless of your individual contributor or the CO of the company, the idea is everyone’s opinions and thoughts and contributions all matter.

Creating shared norms around certain areas around — and what’s cool about this and why I love shared norm idea is that it gives people an actual jumping off point. They’re like, “Okay, we’re talking about trust. Trust to me means this.” They go home and we talk about, “Tell me what it means to be trustworthy?” “Well, doing what I said I was going to do,” for example or creating what’s called psychological safety where people can actually raise their hand and say like, “Hey, I don’t know what’s going on or I’m scared or I’m confused.” Those type of things.

If we want to get even more specific, I have eight keys that I talk about in the process of actual creating norm. We’ll go over them super quick.

[0:05:15.1] CL: Sure.

[0:05:17.1] SR: They’re all in the book. One of the first Ubuntu key that I talk about is something that’s called “Address It”. This is really around conflict, around managing conflict among team members and really focusing on not allowing the wedge to get too deep and just allowing people to realize, since we’re in this together, that I am because we are, Ubuntu mindset. We’re going to address conflict maturely and not just let it fester.

My second one is around, something called “Flex It”. Kind of flexing your roles and the Ubuntu team member never says, “That’s not my job.” He or she is just jumping in to help out in any way that he or she can. Third one is “Honoring It” and this comes around recognition where we talk about how you honor and value the contributions that your team member makes and how to make sure that recognition is done in a way that people can appreciate.

Moving quickly, “Support it”, and that’s the fourth one and that’s often talked about when you’re dealing with challenges at work or life in general, how do you support your colleagues? You can’t just say, “Hey, you know what? Listen, we all have drama, suck it up.” That’s not the Ubuntu mindset it’s like, “Listen, I understand your struggle, I honor it.” Maybe you’re dealing

with a sick loved one or financial issues or issues with your kids or marital problems, whatever. The supported aspect comes in like, “How can I help?” Is the key question there.

“Live It”, the fifth one, your own attitude, your habitual way of thinking and it’s an important aspect of the Ubuntu mindset is that when you come to work, you shouldn’t be just rolling into work just spreading negativity throughout the entire work place. Is that how the Ubuntu mindset is really focused on how you show up in terms of your attitude, your habitual way of thinking can spread. If it’s done in a way that affects the collective positively instead of negatively.

Six is “Own It”, which is around accountability. It’s just making sure that you are quick to own and being slow to blame and really thinking about what part of this do I own? No one in the Ubuntu mindset points fingers. It’s around how can I support the team by owning my part in this? Seven is around “Protect It”, which is around trust. Kind of touches a little bit around psychological safety, ability, kind of just say, “Hey, I burned out, I don’t know,” and you’re protecting the team members from, while they’re being vulnerable and sharing something, they’re protecting that vulnerability by allowing them to share their true selves.

Last but not least is “Say It”, ensuring that every one of the team communicates in a way that’s respectful and not just in person but via email or any other way that could possible, you can communicate. The way that you should talk to an individual contributor should be the same way you talk to the CEO, and that’s the Ubuntu mindset in a quick, quick nutshell of how you can do it at work.

[0:08:06.6] CL: You know, what’s interesting about that and it’s my belief that everything you just talked about is what made the human race successful in the first place because if everybody went their own way, we wouldn’t have lasted very long. I mean, we pretty much have evolved on working together, everybody has different roles and it seems to be, and this is something that I read somewhere, when there’s an overarching extreme danger, we come together. But when we’re safe, we kind of just split up into these groups, we keep splitting up.

[0:08:38.2] SR: That’s so funny and so true. I wrote about that in my book and you go together because it’s so funny. When 9/11 happened, which is probably you know, one of the most common – everyone knows where they were at 9/11 and I can’t picture when people are pulling folks out of the rubble in New York City, they weren’t pausing to be like, “Hey, before I save you,

are you republican or are you a democrat?" Or you know what I mean? "Just curious, do you believe in same sex marriage or do you not?"

No one's doing that. They're like, "We are human beings in a situation where we need to save ourselves." In a much less dire situation, depending on how you look at it, but in a hospital setting, when a code is called, which means like there's some really imminent danger like someone can't breathe or they're about to die or in some cases, with babies being abducted from the hospital, it doesn't matter what your cliques are and who you hang out with. They all come together to be like, "We need to save this patient, we need to do what we need to do."

Then, when things are back to normal, everyone goes back into their tribes and to their cliques and that's really unfortunate. So what I'm hoping for the Ubuntu movement is that we don't need to get disasters to come on our doorsteps for us to realize that we work best when we're working together.

[0:09:54.4] CL: Yeah, why do you feel incivility? Because to me, like you said earlier, to me I do think that there's been an uptick in incivility and there could be a number of things. Like you pointed out, in your book you point to technology. We are kind of losing touch with each other. Physical communication, why do you think, is this just not my illusion or do you think we do have an intense incivility problem?

[0:10:17.9] SR: Oh, it's intense, and it is not imagine. It's actually statistically improved. When I was doing, when I was writing the book, I looked at a global communication firm, Weber Shandwick and they did an amazing study called The Civility in America, the state of civility, it's a yearly study. When I wrote the book in 2017 before it came out. 2017, civility was at its lowest point.

Basically, when we're talking about civility, we're just talking about just basic kindness amongst one another. How we treat each other. Just really the basic, I guess, you know caring for each other and it was at its lowest point in this 10 year study and it was so, so bad. Actually, let's see, it started in 2010. So a seven year study at the point and we're talking about really people feeling like it reached crisis levels. That's over three quarters of our memories observes three quarters of people say that it had reached crises levels in 2017. It has actually gotten worse since and you were right, I feel like people feel like they don't have to be as kind anymore.

Maybe they feel for whatever reason and the cost is tricky because you could go so many different areas for what is causing it but I think we are becoming less connected. We are using our devices as a way to connect us but in a sense we are removing our human connection and our ability to communicate with kindness to one another and I feel that people now are less willing for whatever reason to sit down, acknowledge our differences and acknowledge and share humanity. I think they are more willing to just be like, “No this is who I am, this is my tribe. I am going to stay here because it is safer,” and it really comes down to a non-willingness to step outside of that which is too bad.

[0:12:12.9] CL: Because you do make a great point in your book about embracing the uncomfortableness and why choosing the safe route is an illusion. Can you talk a little bit about that, about how we can benefit from getting outside of our comfort zone?

[0:12:27.5] SR: Yeah because I mean, here is the deal, if we decided to stay with the folks who we are the most comfortable with and you are never going to really experience life. That is one thing. But to really ridge this instability gap that we are dealing with, we’re really going to have to sit down with people who don’t look like us and this requires courage and courage in a few ways. So I am glad you mentioned this, Chris, because there are these couple of ways that I want to really lay this out.

One is the courage to be vulnerable and I am African-American, so I am a minority, but I always recommend to many of my friends who aren’t to be in a situation where you are the minority. Go into a situation where maybe other – or you going into a place where, a different church where you pray with folks who maybe don’t pray the same way you do or be in a group where you are surrounded by folks who may not look like you.

This is a way – I mean, when people go to foreign countries, often times they come back changed because they’re not the only one. They are not looking around at faces that are just like them anymore and they get a different view of the world literally while traveling as much as they can and I think you don’t have to get in an airplane and cross the Atlantic or the Pacific to be able to do that. You can just go to different parts of towns in some cases or even different clubs in your college and be able to connect that way because it gives you that empathy, that edge that I feel allows us to be kinder to others as we realize, “Wow I always thought that she

was so different from me, come to find out that we into the same things, we listen to the same music, we just look different.” That is only one aspect, right? That is only one aspect of it.

Maybe the bigger one at least for someone like me who is non-confrontational is standing up to really egregious bad behavior. I feel like this is a huge issue that folks don't necessarily want to do and you see it where you see now where people recording hideously awful behavior.

Whether it is racists behavior or people just yelling out racial slurs at others or doing crazy stuff like that. Having an actual the courage to stand up and say, “Hey listen, stop doing that. That is not okay,” is something that I have been doing more. When I wrote this, and when I was writing this in the book I was like, “Listen man, I got to practice what I preach,” so I have been standing up and doing that more.

And it is scary but it is also super life affirming to look someone in the eye who's scared and you are stepping up to support that. That is one aspect. But even more than that, you do it your love ones like across the table at Thanksgiving or a holiday dinner for Christmas or Hanukah or Kwanzaa or any holiday that you celebrate that is spreading hatefulnes, racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia or whatever and to stand up to that person and even though it is your Uncle George who that's who Uncle George is. It is the time to be like, “That is not okay and that's not accepted and I would prefer that you stop.” This is where the courage comes in and I feel with the Ubuntu mindset to create that connectedness, it is also equally important to make sure that people who are spreading division are told to stop.

[0:15:39.7] CL: And finally, before we part ways today, this has been a great conversation, but this topic that you cover briefly in the book is I think it's a very popular topic right now and that is self-care. Can you explain why before we can go out and start helping anybody else, we have to first start working on ourselves.

[0:15:59.6] SR: Yeah. You know, I know it has been so beaten down the whole cliché of you hear in the airplane about, you know, “Put your mask on first before you help out the person next to you.” I look at it and I mean that is very true by the way and there's a reason for that. But the idea is no, it's simple. It's like you can't give what you don't have. So if you want to give kindness to someone but you are not giving it to yourself, if you are not taking care of yourself by giving yourself the proper rest or allowing yourself to just have some downtime where the need to be busy is more important than you need to be effective that is really hurtful.

I will even take it a step further. I think now the self-compassion is important maybe even more important because the most important words that you say to yourself, the most important words that you can say are the words about yourself to yourself and if you make a mistake and you first think, “Oh, I am a loser. I am idiot!” Then who wants to give love to an idiot? Who wants to give love to someone who doesn’t feel — that you don’t think is lovable? These are things that I remind myself of constantly, is like, “How am I talking to myself?” Because if I talk to myself with love, the way that I would talk to my two daughters and my wife, I love them more than anything. So I deserve the same love that I give to others.

By that, the means if I love myself, I should give myself time to renew, I should allow myself to be able to take a break and regardless of what goals and dreams you have for the next year and beyond, the idea is you’re never going to get there if you don’t give yourself the time to refresh and renew and give yourself a break. It can be in so many different ways, reading a book, putting your feet up, mindfulness, meditation, going for a run, hanging out with friends.

I mean, the thing that’s troubling to me is that we’re trending towards burnout at a rate that’s so toxic and can just cause no meaningful benefit. Now is the time to be like, “Okay, we need to pause and just take a break and allow ourselves to renew,” and the way to do that, I think before we can get to that is being kind to ourselves so we can allow ourselves to feel like we’re worthy of taking that break and renewing ourselves.

[0:18:14.4] CL: Perfect. Thank you for taking the time today, I know you’re really busy. The book is called *Go Together: How the Concept of Ubuntu Will Change How You Live, Work, and Lead* and also, if people are interested and they like what they’ve heard today, then you also have a text?

[0:18:30.5] SR: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, gosh, thanks for that Chris. It’s grown pretty significantly, which is really cool. So people who are interested in learning more about me and also getting a free gift, I have a Monday morning positivity solution email list. People have always complained that Mondays are the hardest days at work so what I’ve done is created a Monday morning email to get you pumped up every Monday morning. If you want to be a part of that list, all you have to do is text the word “positivity” to the number 444-999.

As a free gift to you, right in your inbox, you'll get my definitive guide for dealing with extremely difficult people. People love this guide and it's one of those things that's really — I wanted to give them something that they're really going to use. If you know anyone in your life, relative, coworker, neighbor that you're struggling with that is difficult. That guide will hit straight to your inbox and you can get that just for texting "positivity" to 444-999.

[0:19:39.2] CL: Excellent. All right, well, thank you and have a wonderful day.

[0:19:43.1] SR: Thanks, Chris.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:19:48.8] PP: That was Shola Richards. Author of *Go Together: How the Concept of Ubuntu Will Change How You Live, Work, and Lead*. Please visit us at livehappynow.com to learn more. Of course, we hope that you're already a subscriber to live happy now but if you're not, you can find us on the Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, Soundcloud and on iTunes and Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platform and then hit subscribe so you'll never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week, we'll meet you back here again next week for an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felps, reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]