

Inspiring Women

Episode 14: Dr. CV Harquail

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to inspiring women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing, women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening, and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of inspiring women. And I am very pleased that today we're going to be speaking with this inspiring woman who is Dr. C.V. Harquail. Now she is a lifelong advocate for feminism. We're going to be talking about her new book, which is *Feminism, a Key Idea in Business*. Now she is an author, a management scholar, a consultant, a writer, a toolmaker, C.V. is the co-founder of Feminist at Work, which is a business practice consultancy. She's also the co-founder and producer of the entrepreneurialfeministforums.com, which is a conference and community for feminist entrepreneurs. C.V. has her PhD from the University of Michigan. She's taught for many years, both organizational change and entrepreneurship at the University of Virginia, as well as the Stevens Institute of Technology. She's published award-winning research, she has spoken quite a bit and C.V. Advocate for us that we craft our work, design our products, set our ambitions, run our companies and partner with our stakeholders in ways that lead us in our businesses to advance social justice and promote flourishing for everyone. C.V. thank you so much for joining us on inspiring women.

Dr. CV Harquail:

Thank you, Laurie. I'm really excited to be here and I'm really excited to have the chance to talk with you and also your audience about how feminist perspectives can really help us rethink what we're doing in business and help us redesign our approach to what we do and how we work together so that we can make things work better for everybody.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I want to spend actually a lot of time talking about those concepts and so I appreciate you kicking off with that. But before we dive into your book *Feminism, a Key Idea for Business in Society*, why don't you tell us what you're doing right now?

Dr. CV Harquail:

Okay. So what I am doing right now is I'm working with a community of feminist entrepreneurs that's loosely based in Toronto, but that's actually all across the globe. What I am doing is building tools and teaching workshops and coaching entrepreneurs in taking feminist principles,

feminist insights, and feminist values, and finding ways to infuse them into the day-to-day practices of startups mostly. I focus mostly on startups because what we found is that it's a lot easier to create something new in a green field than it is to transform something in what we used to call the brown field environment. One thing that's great about working with feminist entrepreneurs is that these are folks who are building businesses from the ground up. Every different decision that they make about their businesses is an opportunity to do things just a little bit differently. Then when you start putting all of these little pieces together, you can wrap them up into a venture, into an enterprise or an organization that when it's all said and done is doing enough things differently, that they can have a real impact. I've been focusing mostly on helping the entrepreneurs in this community, figure out how to put ideas into practice.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, you use that word feminism and feminist and feminist principles throughout everything that you're talking about. Now, that's a word that has a little bit of, I don't know, emotion, taboo. It seems like it's coming back in Vogue now. People wear that badge proudly, but where did the interest come from? Because you are a lifelong advocate for feminism and it has not always been a popular term.

Dr. CV Harquail:

No it hasn't and that whole question of how people perceive feminism is a really important one. But before we touch on that, I'll just basically say that I have been a feminist ever since seventh grade. I put it back to seventh grade because in my junior high yearbook under my picture was the quote, "She believes in women's lib" which is basically I guess what we called it back in the seventies, women's lib. I grew up in a single parent household where my mother worked first as a secretary and a librarian and then later as an advertising executive. I had a front row seat on the challenges of a woman who was trying to take a place as a breadwinner, as a professional, as a creative person, as an executive and I got to see my mom address all of these issues. I had a very real world introduction to the basic issues of feminism, pretty much from the get-go. I always had that awareness in mind. Then also, because of the activities that again, that my mom was involved in, she was also very active in civil rights, and so I also saw the interplay between the efforts to advance women's rights or to advance gender equity, and also the question of civil rights and addressing racism.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that's interesting. C.V. that's where... Lets' just go to the definition that you put on feminism, because I thought this was really interesting. I actually want to read it. So you, in your book, you start with the definition of feminism as, "A movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and oppression," but you make it more expansive. You add, "Feminism seeks to establish political, social and economic equality among women, men, and all people and feminism aims to create a world where people flourish." So just tell us a little bit more about that definition.

Dr. CV Harquail:

Yeah so what's crazy about that definition is the response that I get from people when I share it. I usually share it just as you did, unfolding it in pieces because there's a couple of really important

moves that we make with that definition. The first one is to just name that it's sexism and it's gender discrimination that is the initial, but not the only motivating force of feminism. Also just to name the fact that it's not just for women or for females, but that men and males, and then anybody else stands to benefit from the feminist movement because the feminist movement is ultimately out there to change the world for everybody. But that's the first part, just including everyone in that and naming sexism. That's usually where people stop because we've been taught to think of issues in this world as having a single dimension.

Dr. CV Harquail:

It's about gender, it's about race, it's about class, it's about whether or not you use a wheelchair, it's about whether or not you speak English as a first language and it's about all of those things at the same time. Bringing in all different kinds of oppression is very important. The second part of it focusing on equality, that's political, economic, and social is critical too, because, we want to get rid of oppression, but what do we want to get rid of it for? Well, first off so that we can all be equal. When I say equal, I use a very specific understanding of equality, and it's the sense that we are equal as human beings. We all matter equally, just the way that we know when we have more than one child, we understand that each of our children matters equally. They're all important. When we start recognizing that all people are important, not just some people, it changes the way that we organize together and that we figure out how stuff should be done.

Dr. CV Harquail:

The third part of the definition of feminism is also really important because most people think of feminism and anti-racism as just being against oppression. Feminism actually asks us to think, once we're equal, what do we do? What's the real goal of life? What's the real goal of society or economics? Feminist philosophers long identified that flourishing and flourishing for everyone is the ultimate goal. If you think about feminism as both a movement intended to stop oppression, it's also a movement intended to create a better kind of world with ideas about how you get there. Feminism is both a stopping or an opposition movement, and it's also a whole set of propositions about what we could do in the future and that becomes really important.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I also like the concept of going from the women's libber from back in seventh grade and stopping oppression to this area of flourishing. So let's bring it, some of those concepts, that you bring towards business. You said, you're working with a bunch of women, entrepreneurs, feminists entrepreneurs, and it's easier there, but you also say that it's very important for standing businesses to begin to embrace these concepts. Let's start with the obvious question. Why?

Dr. CV Harquail:

Yeah. That is a great question. and it depends where you stand in this world how you answer that question, why? Why should we have businesses where everyone feels equally respected? Why should we have businesses where everyone feels they're getting their fair share of the value that the business is generating? Why should we have businesses that create products that don't pollute? Why should we have businesses that create products that are priced sensibly so that all the people who need these products can buy them? I mean, how you answer that question really depends on your position in the world. Historically, businesses have been organized so that they

make money for their owners and all the stuff that they do, the products that they make, the way they sell them, is all around generating wealth for the people who are in charge. What feminism is asking us to think about is how do we create businesses, build products, organize with each other, share revenues, share values. How do we do that in a way that works well for everyone?

Dr. CV Harquail:

That question of why should we think about feminism? Or why should we think about anti-racism? Or why should we think about ableism? When we think about businesses? The very first reason is obviously the moral one, which is that it's the right thing to do. Why should we have businesses that take advantage of some people so that others can have more? Well, we shouldn't, it's just morally wrong. The second answer to that question of why should we bring feminist perspectives into business? That one is actually fun because if you start to think about what feminism asks us to consider, it helps us look at a whole lot of business related problems differently. For example, if you take a feminist perspective on product development and you think, "How are we going to create products that actually serve the real needs of people and don't take advantage of them?" You come up with different product ideas and those are blue ocean strategies, if you will, for building out your business. But if you ignore what women need, if you ignore what females need, if you ignore what less powerful or less visible people need, you miss all those business opportunities.

Laurie McGraw:

Those bigger mission, blue ocean ideas, they definitely have a component that is, I'll just call it social justice in terms of what you're embedding into that thinking. But let's go to some of the hard questions. I mean, you are right businesses they do run with economic value and that economic value usually goes to shareholders and owners as the main constituent. Did the business models hold up? Do they hold up to the scrutiny? That doesn't seem to be a lot of evidence to support that those models work financially, which is a primary driver for business.

Dr. CV Harquail:

Yeah and that's an interesting question, Laurie, because like that question of is there doesn't seem to be much evidence. That is a... I don't know how to describe it, but to say that that is... People will often say to me, "Well, prove to me that a feminist business model makes sense." And it's kind of like, I don't even have a good analogy for it. I have to say, "There's this game that people play, where they say, oh, you want to argue for that? Prove to me that it already exists and that it's already successful." And I have to say, "I can't prove it to you cause we're still building it. We're still making it happen. So we don't have a fully formed feminist economy within the one that we currently have that I can show you."

Dr. CV Harquail:

It's like saying, "Show me a fish who has feet." Well, it takes a couple of billion years for those fish to develop feet and get out of the ocean. It can happen though. But also in answering that question, there are a number of businesses and also business ideas that are based in feminist principles that we have seen taking hold and making a difference. One of them, for example, is the flattening of an organization's hierarchy and the focus on horizontal relationships or peer to peer relationships within organizations and in ecosystems. We know that reducing hierarchy

really helps to free up a lot of energy and eliminate a lot of distracting power dynamics so that different pieces of a business can work better together. So that horizontalism is a key feature of feminist business thinking going back a hundred years. We see in tech companies all over the U.S. The adoption of this kind of flattened organizational hierarchy and I guess the efficiencies or the opportunities that are released as a result.

Laurie McGraw:

I think those concepts... Yeah those concepts are definitely directionally something that we see and we talk about human capital and businesses and how to work with that. I think what you're saying is social justice and the moral imperative of social justice actually is critical to address and feminist principles help with that and you don't just need a spreadsheet to make the math work, to support them. You also talk about some interesting concepts, I think, about how to redefine work and you put some new categories out there like care work, and emotional labor that goes into investing in relationships. You're very clear to point out that diverse leadership of companies and organizations are more profitable so we've got support for that. So just maybe talk a little bit about the redefining work and the different categories and why it's even important to recognize them?

Dr. CV Harquail:

Well, yeah, one of the things that we have accepted in our conversation about business is that there are only a certain set of ideas and dynamics that we talk about as being relevant to the business. If you think about accounting, in accounting we talk about the balance sheet and the costs and benefits or the costs and revenues associated with doing a business and then we also have a whole bunch of things that never show up on the balance sheet. Accountants call them externalities. Those can be things like the cost of pollution. Those can be things like the number of people who get sick in your business. They're all things that within our conventions of what is part of the business and what's not part of the business, we've just got these accepted rules. What the feminist conversation about business does is say, "Yeah, it's nice to talk about what's going on in that particular place but all of those things are supported by other systems, other efforts, other people, other resources." A simple one is we show up for work. We're fed, we're clothed, we're in a house that's safe and we're doing our work. Nobody says to you, "How much did it cost you to feed yourself? How much did it cost you to close yourself? How much is it costing you to have that high speed internet so that you can zoom into your business?"

Dr. CV Harquail:

All of those costs are making it possible for you to do work, but none of them are considered in the business. One of the things that the feminist approach has done has been to say, "What are the kinds of work? What is the kind of effort that is necessary to get stuff done but that we're not noticing? That we're not paying people for? That we're not accounting for?" Some of that stuff is very simple stuff like what's now known as emotional labor, which is all the emotional that goes into putting on the right attitude and the right spirit to get work done. It takes energy to do that and some jobs require more of it than others, but we tend not to value it. We tend not to notice it. Other kinds of work like... Somebody was just telling me about a mentoring program in her organization where the five guys who signed up to be mentors all got an extra vacation day for the year to acknowledge the fact that they were spending time doing mentoring. I chuckled because if you're a good manager, you're mentoring all the time, but nobody ever asks you,

"How many hours a week did you work on mentoring?" You just do it because it's the right thing to do.

Laurie McGraw:

Right. So many women I talked to like, this is just part of what they do and C.V. in the emotional labor, what I like about just your focus on that is it also recognizes one of the things that women just tend to be pretty good at, which is putting in the relationship energy to build good collaboration, teamwork, and there's a thoughtfulness or perhaps an instinct that goes with that and you are ascribing value to that, which I think is actually really important. The feminist principles. You also did, just to move to a different area, you do a really nice job debunking a lot of the things that I think about with feminism like, "Okay, aren't we over this now? Is this behind us?" You talk about gateway feminism, which is, I think the feel-good approach of women empowerment, up the ladder ladies and girl boss are some terms you use. So let me just talk about some, I won't call the myths, but you debunk a lot of the sort of, I would say, misconstrued understandings of feminism. Could you talk about a couple?

Dr. CV Harquail:

Sure. When we think about gender equity in business in general, we are working within businesses definition of what's good for itself. Not necessarily what's good for everybody. Inside that idea of gender equity is this concept that really what needs to be happening in order to make business fair for women, and also for businesses to take advantage of diversity. Really what we need to do is increase the representation of women and men of color, or of people of color and women. We just need to increase the number of people to get the right assortment. We need the right assortment of chocolates in the box and once we have that assortment, correct, we'll be able to run much, much better. That idea of gender equity has asked the question, "How do we get more women? How do we get more people of color? How do we get more diversity in the organizations ranks?" There are a lot of strategies for doing that, which basically start with just adding more women or adding more indigenous people, or making sure that your pay and promotion strategies aren't biased towards race or gender or age or ability or whatever.

Dr. CV Harquail:

Those are in general, not bad strategies. It's not a bad idea to make sure that everybody gets an equal chance to contribute, an equal chance to get paid well, an equal chance to feel fulfilled, an equal chance to get a leadership role. That's perfectly good. The challenge with that though, is you're familiar with the metaphor of, "Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic?"

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah.

Dr. CV Harquail:

Yeah. It's a lot like that. Basically what we're doing is changing the assortment of people in organizations that are currently not very healthy. They're currently in an economic system that is also not very healthy. Basically we're rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, which is fair. We should have a fair assortment of people on the front deck, we should have a fair assortment of people in the lifeboats. There's no reason for that to be biased by gender or by race, right? But

what we really want is we want different people making the decisions, using different criteria so that the boat doesn't slam into an iceberg and sink.

Laurie McGraw:

What you're asking C.V. is you're really asking for businesses to dig deeper than just, I'll just call it the window dressing, in terms of the different ideas to get to that flourishing for all. I want to talk about one more challenging topic that you covered before we close out here. You talked a bit about sexual harassment and violence and there's lots of training and businesses really embrace that this will not be tolerated and things of that nature. You get into what I think are some of the nuances of more normalized behavior condescending, you call it, "Selective incivility-"

Dr. CV Harquail:

Selective incivility, yeah.

Laurie McGraw:

... Yeah. You talk about it as low intensity types of harassment, which is just as harmful to women. Can you draw that out a little bit?

Dr. CV Harquail:

Sure. One of the things that we don't like to think about very much is the way that how we organize at work often has the threat of violence or the threat of harm behind it. We often don't think about the idea that when it's all said and done, if that person doesn't do the job you want them to do you fire them. You threatened them with a loss of income. That actually gets a lot of behavior motivated because people don't want to be punished or hurt that way. The big picture of businesses that there's a lot of potential violence and just a lot of domination, bullying behaviors, coercion control in the worst of organizations. In many organizations it's a lot better, but the general is that in the way that we organize together at work, there is often a threat of violence or harm that's built into the organization systems. There is also a lot of harm that goes on because of the way that people treat each other.

Dr. CV Harquail:

The ways that people treat each other obviously are very informed and shaped by their own biases and their own experience in a racist or an oppressive system. It sounds all very horrible but the net result is that oftentimes we look for big events like sexual harassment situation that's huge and dramatic. Or we look for big events like somebody walks into an office and shoots one of their coworkers and we think of that as violence in the workplace. But violence in the workplace can be as subtle and as straightforward as someone continuing to mispronounce your name or someone continuing not to call on you in a zoom meeting. One of the things that we have learned, that social psychologists have learned is that you can kill somebody with a death blow to the heart, but you can also kill them with a thousand cuts.

Dr. CV Harquail:

One of the things we're realizing as we learn more and pay more attention to negative dynamics in organizations is that every day racist behaviors, every day sexist behaviors, and even everyday behaviors that you don't think are biased, like just ignoring somebody for whatever reason, those

accumulate and they wound people, but they also prevent people from contributing. They also lead people to withdraw and they lead people not to engage because they're trying to protect themselves. One of the things... People will often say, "Oh, I mispronounced her name. That's not a big deal. She can get over it." Well, yeah you could get over at once, but if it happens to you 20 times in a week, that's harmful.

Laurie McGraw:

And it wears you down and wear you down and so-

Dr. CV Harquail:

It wears you down.

Laurie McGraw:

... Yeah. C.V. those are just, I think, excellent comments and insights and also give us ideas about things that as managers, as leaders, as women moving up the ladder can really think about and also address. As we close out today, this has been such an excellent conversation what are your thoughts that you want to leave our audience with in terms of why embrace feminist principles? What are your closing thoughts C.V.?

Dr. CV Harquail:

Well, one of the things that you had mentioned to me earlier was this question of like, "Well, what advice would I give women who wanted to be more successful or have more of an impact at work?" I like to think of feminist advice as being useful to anybody, whether they present as a woman or whether they present as any other kind of category or person.

Dr. CV Harquail:

One of the things I like to ask or that I would always ask the business students that I would teach, the MBA students that I would teach is I would ask them this one question, "As you approach that decision, are you going to be an agent of change or will you be a cog in the wheel?" There are a lot of people who just want to be a better cog so that the wheel moves efficiently and they get promoted and they move up and they make the system hum. And that's okay, but there's another option. The other option is being an agent of change. With that, if you take that role, you then ask yourself, "What's a small thing I could do? What's the next thing I could do to make this better for the people that I work with? What's the next thing that I could do to make this more open for people of different cultures? What's the next thing I can do to make sure that we're addressing this fairly? What's the next thing I can do to help us re-examine that assumption?" I'm always like, "You can be an agent of change or you can be a cog in the wheel and that's a choice that you can make."

Laurie McGraw:

I love that and so this has been just an excellent conversation. This has been an episode of inspiring women. We have been talking with Dr. C.V. Harquail. She has written Feminism, a Key Idea for Business and Society, and she is asking us to be an agent of change. C.V. thank you so very much.

Dr. CV Harquail:

My pleasure, Laurie. Thank you.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw, please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Cruz at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.