

Inspiring Women

Episode 15: Sumi Pitroda

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 @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 today we're speaking with Sumi Pitroda and she is an attorney with the American Medical Association, a senior assistant general counsel, actually. Sumi has a number of years of experience being an attorney. And she started her career working at the various deemed firm Sidley Austin in Chicago. Fun fact, that was the firm where Barack Obama and Michelle Obama both worked and they met. She let me know that fun fact. Sumi has a lot of things that she does at the AMA and the area of privacy, as well as technology. She also is the founding member of the Women's Inspired Now, which is the employee resource group for women. Sumi's going to talk a little bit to us about that. And also spends her time as a yoga instructor. So Sumi, welcome to Inspiring Women.

Sumi Pitroda:

Thanks, Laurie. Thanks for having me. It's good to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Terrific. Well, let's get started. So Sumi, you and I have the opportunity to work together, and that's a very exciting thing for me. I really enjoy that, but why don't we start with what you're doing right now?

Sumi Pitroda:

Sure. Thanks, Laurie. I am happy to speak about that. So currently I'm back to practicing law after taking a brief sabbatical a couple of years ago, and I am focusing mainly in the area of data privacy. So my role is kind of overseeing the area of data assets. And of course, in my support of various clients and business units throughout the organization, I bring that specialized focus of data privacy as well throughout

Laurie McGraw:

Well, and I think that you do a fantastic job, that's me. But what I like to do on Inspiring Women is just provide for other people, the listeners, what are the career progressions? How did you get

here? Did you always want to be a lawyer? You started off with a Bachelor of Science before you got your law degree. What drew you to the law?

Sumi Pitroda:

Yeah, thanks Laurie. And it may seem like that's a straightforward question from your end. Did I want to be a lawyer or not? It's not the typical path to get a BS first and then pursue the law. But for me, this is also just a very complex question that involves many various elements. For one, my cultural identity plays a big role in all this, that the culture, my Indian culture, has helped shape me as a professional and as an individual. So being Asian American with Indian roots and immigrant parents, there's obviously a stark contrast between the Indian culture and American culture. And I grew up sort of in the divide between these two. And within the Indian culture, there's still surprisingly, there are a lot of chauvinistic tendencies, less so today, but in the environment that I grew up in women were certainly considered subordinate to men.

Sumi Pitroda:

And so that has played a huge role in shaping who I am today and sort of the things that I've chosen to pursue. And when I look at the progress of women within the U.S., and Laurie, you and I have worked through many of these areas of progress together and have witnessed many of these areas of progress together, I compare this to the Indian culture, which I'm rooted in, where there is very much slowed progress. And so because of these cultural aspects that I was raised in, there was always this deference placed to those generations before us. And this sense of respect and deference to elders and the net effect essentially is there's this tone of do not challenge the system, do not challenge the authority. And so my BS degree, I can actually proudly say this, is a point in time reflection of who I was in that process of not challenging the system.

Sumi Pitroda:

And of course, I went on to evolve and generate my own concept of who I wanted to be within my own culture. But that is just, that BS degree was my succumbing to some of the inertia within the Indian culture. IT is very huge in India. It's considered safe. My parents were both in IT. So while I enjoyed reading and the arts and writing, I did pursue that BS degree. So that was not intentional, neither my BS degree, nor my pursuit of law, which I then went on to pursue. But then what was intentional was I was always attracted to this idea of the Renaissance woman. So deep knowledge and understanding across multiple subjects and deep passion across multiple subjects. So it turns out that my passion for technology science ties very well with a lot of the writing and reading and deep critical thinking analysis that I do in my current profession, my current role with my training. So all in all, I'm very proud with coming closer to that ideal that I had as a child, of this Renaissance woman.

Laurie McGraw:

That's a great description. And so in terms of that progression with immigrant parents who are rooted in IT being a safe profession for Indian women, and then moving to the law, were they supportive of that or was that sort of a challenge that you had to sort of work within the family dynamics?

Sumi Pitroda:

Absolutely, they were. And I think they wanted to see me succeed. And while having immigrant parents, they did not necessarily know or have the tools available to them to be supportive in the way that I needed. They couldn't provide guidance. They didn't know what it was to be a lawyer. We didn't have family members that were lawyers, but they knew that they wanted to support me. And to me that was all that I needed. And that support was tremendous.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, support networks are a really big deal. And let's talk a little bit about the career progression. So you've been at the AMA for a couple of years now, but you also left for a stint and then came back. I've seen that with many people who make career choices like that, I call that sort of a boomerang kind of thing. So you made some choices there. What happened and why did you leave, come back? And what did you learn across those different choices?

Sumi Pitroda:

Sure. Thanks, Laurie. Well, some of you may know this to those listening out there, but after 10 years of being a lawyer, I actually left my legal career to join a startup company as general counsel, but of course, wore many different hats during that time. I was really drawn to the entrepreneurial energy, the freshness, the aliveness, and the fast paced nature of the entrepreneurial world. And I did well in that role. I was of course, chief operations officer, general counsel. I did a lot of marketing sales as well. And one of the things that I learned in wearing those many different hats is that I absolutely enjoy being a lawyer. I love the letter of the law. I love the application of the law, the academic aspects of it, and connecting with clients to build solutions that revolve around the law. So it actually turns out that in law, I already have many of the things that I was looking for in terms of that freshness, aliveness and fast paced nature of things.

Sumi Pitroda:

And this is not, Laurie, a story about lost time or regrets. This is a story more about taking leaps, and taking leaps specifically on a path that's not necessarily a straight line, if that's what you need. And it's also a story about finding your people. And, Laurie, you know our general counsel, Brian Vanderberg, he is one of the people that I have found and identified with. And I was actually transitioning out at the time when he was coming in. But immediately when I met him, I knew that he would be one of the people in my circle of trust. Had I not kept in touch with him, had I not stayed invested in him in the same way he stayed invested in me, I would not have found this opportunity back at the AMA I would not have completed or found my path back to the role that I'm in right now. Even if you're not in the same space, just continue those investments.

Laurie McGraw:

I like that advice because I think that, for women in particular, always continuing to build your network. It's wonderful that you pursued opportunities that were fruitful for you, that gave you learning opportunities that allowed you to expand your skills and grow in your profession. But also you continue to keep the network being built and investing in that network is terrific advice. Let's talk about some of the other things that you tend to like to do, Sumi, and you have a newsletter for privacy. One of the things that you are known for at the AMA is that you are the

founding member to create the Women's Employee Resource Group. So I want to just tell a little story, because that is when I first met you, we were having a coffee and you just wanted to have a community of women. And we were chatting about that. And that just seemed like a great idea. There were not employee resource groups at the time, and then it became a thing. What drew you to that? Why the desire to do something extra than just your day job, where you're pretty busy?

Sumi Pitroda:

Yeah. And I'm smiling, Laurie, because the coffee that you and I connected over, that was actually one of the best things that happened to me at the AMA. I mean, just the energy that was created from that discussion that ultimately led to the creation of our women's group, Women Inspire Now, that's been one of my greatest experiences here within AMA. And what really led me to have that discussion with you and then subsequently others within the organization is of course I talked about being raised in a male dominated culture, but also professionally I've always been the minority, whether it's as an Indian woman or just as a woman generally. And so working in the technology space, and then even in the legal profession within the technology space, I was sometimes the only woman in the room, oftentimes the only woman in the room.

Sumi Pitroda:

And don't get me wrong, in a room of men, I feel safe. But in a room of women, I feel energized. And so I thrive off of that energy and connecting with other women. And when you look at the cultural revolution of women in power taking place today, things are constantly changing, right? There's nothing static about that. And it's ever evolving, ever changing. And so we as women, I feel the need to constantly be reinventing and redesigning what we need. And actually more specifically, the space that we create for ourselves based on what we need. And so that's sort of the discussions that eventually formed the women's professional development group. And I specifically want to identify this as a professional development group, because there are of course social groups out there, but within the WIN, Women Inspired Now, we've focused on professional development specifically.

Laurie McGraw:

And one of the things that you created, a lot of times when I speak with inspiring women like you, they talk about mentors. They talk about people who were there to support them, to help them, to give them that really direct guidance on difficult decisions that everyone faces as their career progresses. You created something called mentoring circles. Tell us about that Sumi, because they've been very successful for so many women of the AMA.

Sumi Pitroda:

Sure. So the mentoring circles was an initiative that launched last year and it was tremendously successful. The concept is instead of relying on one-on-one mentoring connections that may sometimes feel forced, we create small group environments for women from different levels, from different groups, from different stages in their career to come together and discuss things, whatever they want to discuss. Each mentor circle sets their own goals and their own path. And that actually opened up and facilitated a huge opportunity for us. As you know, Laurie, with transitioning to our work from home environment in the pandemic, women were still able to connect with each other and thrive on that, the connection they built with other women.

Laurie McGraw:

I think it's been a terrific resource. And I think that the more those type of opportunities get created for women, they're just extraordinarily helpful. Let's come back to some career kind of thing, Sumi. So you are doing a bang up job. You have had plum assignments at many different organizations prior to what you're doing now. Where do you see yourself going? What are the next big challenges for you as your own career progresses?

Sumi Pitroda:

Sure. So I think going forward, I am really looking forward to of course, redefining the space in which we work. We're dealing with a lot of history within our organization and history in terms of how we've always done things. And so breaking out of that mold and refreshing the way that we view things and do things as an organization, as a team, as the legal team, I think is what I'm really looking forward to.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think the more you stay focused on that and just continue to dive in, I mean, you talk about yourself, sort of having a micro view of details with a macro understanding of some of the larger issues. I think that also is a really good approach. But you're also, I would just say a younger person, maybe that's just a comparison to myself, you have a family. Let's talk about balance. And a lot of women who are very focused on their careers at the early stages, they have challenges with how they fit it all in. Whether they're a power mom or just trying to find some balance. You do yoga, I mentioned that. How do you keep your balance? How do you think about that, Sumi?

Sumi Pitroda:

First off, I will say that being a mother, I view as an incredible asset to my profession. It is through being a mother that I have learned really mad problem solving skills. I've learned to be patient beyond belief, beyond even my own comprehension. I've learned persistence and then handling crises sometimes seven times a day. So being a mother, I view as an incredible asset. And specifically being a working mother, there are obviously infinite number of commitments that come with that responsibility. I view this as a privilege and you mentioned, Laurie, yoga, meditation, that gets me about 50% of the way there, but I also think that balance is a subjective term. And so is stress. So a lot of this is in the eye of the beholder. It's important to manage your own perception of stress because it's easy for stress to overtake your space.

Sumi Pitroda:

So just managing that perception and reconfiguring the way that you think about things. Do I really need to read every single word of this memo or can I perhaps delegate it to someone and get the summary? So also being smart in the way that you go about your work. I actually like to create systems that minimize fatigue. I do this both at home and in work. And that also helps with a lot of the burnout that tends to happen, specifically with the work from home environment. And I can go into that in a little bit more detail, but really it's around the concept of building your network at home, building your network at work. I do this at work mainly through accountability buddies. So I have two team members that I rely on. They tell me when I'm going beyond my scope of what I need to do.

Sumi Pitroda:

As women, I think we oftentimes take on more than we need to because we are constantly striving to not necessarily prove ourselves, but to be relevant in the discussion. And that's something that's always been important to me, but if we're doing it in a way that causes burnout, then that's not particularly healthy. And so having those accountability buddies also to provide just general advice has been extremely valuable to me. At home, I like to have this structure in place so that I know my kids are safe and protected and well. I do this through my nanny and through multiple layers of a caregiving network that I have. And then I like to create rituals at home. A cooldown ritual that I actively involve my kids in so they can be part of the process. I can look at them and identify and associate a stress-free environment and including them in that. And then of course, there's always, when in doubt there is... when everything else feels, there's also a ton of gelato in the fridge. And so that's how I deal with balance.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that's awesome. Well, through the course of this pandemic and working from home, there's a lot of discussion, a lot of things being written right now about burnout. Burnout in a new way of just trying to deal with and cope with work. And there's also a lot of writing about how women are bearing the brunt of the responsibilities at home, with children at home, whether it's schooling or things of that nature. So these rituals, these structures, and maybe a ton of gelato, are they always working? How do you deal with the ebbs and flows of whether the rituals that you are creating are really addressing the burnout that you may or may not be feeling at any point in time?

Sumi Pitroda:

No, of course not. Of course they are not always working and that's not how it was intended to be. I mean, just viewing this as a dynamic process and giving yourself some flexibility is always important. I sometimes if I want to balance across all aspects of my life, you have to really own the fact that not everything is going to be at 100% because you don't have 300% of yourself. Being intentional that perhaps on certain days, I'm not going to be able to participate in this training that I really wanted to do, so that's going to have to go. And being able to prioritize in a meaningful way. And perhaps even at home sometimes.

Sumi Pitroda:

Talking to my children to let them know that I really want to be there for them for a particular occasion or to go play outside with them when they really want to but I do have things to focus on. Not meaning that other aspects of my life are more important, but really owning and controlling the intentionality of it is really, really important and critical to me. And sometimes I'll have good days, sometimes I'll have terrible days, but either way, I like to have the intention and control the way in which I processed it. And that to me has made a big difference in terms of how it's internalized.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, you have a lot of great advice in there, Sumi, and I liked the way that you're thinking about all of these different choices and how to set up patterns or ways to interact with your family that also accommodate giving yourself a break. That's a thing that women certainly have trouble with

at times. So this has been a really terrific discussion. Sumi, as we close out here, do you have any just sort of parting advice as this audience is women who are learning from others, just other advice for younger, aspiring, inspiring women that you want to give us?

Sumi Pitroda:

Absolutely. The first thing I would say is just embrace your journey. The ups and downs, the places that fall outside of that straight line, and owning your leadership style. I have a leadership style that is not necessarily typical. I'm not always the loudest voice in the room. I like to be thoughtful and provide my contributions in a meaningful way that makes sense to me. And so really avoiding that thought or idea that leadership means one thing or one type of style, a style that's attributed to those before you, or a style that's attributed to people you aspire to be, but really owning and embracing your own style because that's how you will thrive and you will succeed as your own leader.

Sumi Pitroda:

And then another piece of advice I would share is something that you've taught me, Laurie, and this is something that I've seen time and time again in working with you. And that is, don't just ask for what you think you'll get, but ask for what you think you're worth. Because I think we as women oftentimes underestimate, undervalue what we want and we end up negotiating against ourselves. So go all out, go above and beyond, and you will end up in a good place. You have to have trust in that process.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Sumi, I think those are great pieces of advice. This has been a fantastic discussion. This has been Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I have been speaking with Sumi Pitroda and thank you so very much.

Sumi Pitroda:

Thank you, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

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