

Inspiring Women

Episode 27: Valerie Sullivan

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 today we're speaking with Valerie Sullivan. Now, Valerie is the president and CEO of etectRX, which is a digital medication and pill delivery company. Very innovative. We'll hear more about that. Valerie's professional background includes experience in pharma, digital health and pharma services. She previously has held many leadership positions, including being the president of Inventive Patient Access Solutions, a company which she sold to Xerox back in 2015. She was the leader of, part of Peer Therapeutics, and she began her career in pharma when she was at Pfizer for about 15 years.

Laurie McGraw:

Now, Valerie serves on several different boards. She is a faculty professor at Bentley University where she teaches on management issues and women's issues. And Valerie, I'm really pleased to be talking to you today.

Valerie Sullivan:

Oh, thank you, Laurie, I'm thrilled. I really appreciate you inviting me here and I love what you're doing with your mission of women needing women. So I couldn't be more happier to start my weekend soon with you.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, this is great. Well this is like two women from Massachusetts speaking to each other so we were already talking about how we hope we don't fall into our Boston accents. But so Valerie, you've got this long career in digital health and pharma and tech and innovative companies, but why don't you just start with what are you doing right now? What are you focused on at your current company?

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah, thank you. I want to start off Laurie by letting the audience and you know a little bit about who I am, whether I'm the CEO or a mom, or someone who likes to read. But at my core I'm

super results oriented and goal oriented. And I like to take on a lot of responsibility and accountability, but I also love people. I love connecting with people. I love learning about people. I love working on teams and solving really tough problems and then high-fiving. Especially at work where we high five, we got it done, we take our money and we deposit it in the bank. Nothing gets me more excited than working together to solve something really tough and having a reward at the end that shows for it.

Valerie Sullivan:

So my position at etectRX is really my dream job. I'm CEO of a digital health company and we have a digital pill system that's FDA cleared and our technology is easy to use, and it ultimately helps people be empowered and to be in control of managing their diseases for positive outcomes. And I learned early in my career at Pfizer that we people, patients, all of us are patients and people, we don't take our meds always as we're supposed to. And there's just no way for a physician or a healthcare provider to know.

Valerie Sullivan:

And that's where our digital pill comes in because patients can be empowered to know that when they take their medications, that they'll get better. And there's so many behavioral reasons why people don't take their meds. That sometimes they feel sick from it. Sometimes they're expensive. Sometimes they feel shame. And so we're addressing something that can really help save lives. And to me, that gets me really excited. And so I'm thrilled to have this opportunity. I feel like everything in my career has led up to this. I feel really fortunate to be in this position.

Laurie McGraw:

Well it's an exciting space and you sound excited about it. Digital health and digital pills, I mean, that is a, perhaps the wave of the future. I'm sure it's a space that you're learning a lot about. But let's go, maybe Valerie, talk about your, a bit about the career trajectory. Because you are in this position, you're a CEO, and congratulations on that because you are in the elite club of being one, female CEO of less than 10% of CEOs who are women. So how did you get to that point? You've led many things across your career trajectory in businesses before, but now you're at the top. So give us a little perspective on that.

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah. Wow. Well, thanks. You know, I really feel like everything I've done in my career has prepared me for this role. And I will say that in the beginning of my career I really didn't think of myself as a female leader. I always thought of myself as just a leader, results oriented, get it done type of person.

Valerie Sullivan:

And I'm one of three girls in my family. So we didn't have any brothers. And my mother was very strong and determined. And she was hell bent on making sure that her daughters did all the things that boys did. I mean, she quite frankly demanded it of us. And so I was good in math and science and I really didn't focus on there are different standards for men and women until I began teaching at Bentley, and probably dialing it back to when I was first a vice president in one of the

specialty pharmacies that I worked in. There were signs, but again, so goal oriented, I don't know if I ever stopped to think, hey, I'm being treated differently because I'm a woman.

Valerie Sullivan:

And so I don't know whether that's good or bad, but it really was the case. And it sounds naive, but it is true.

Laurie McGraw:

I don't think it sounds naive I think it sounds excellent, quite frankly, that you didn't have this sort of differentiated experience or expectation of yourself. I think also though, some of these things they may sound obvious but I want to draw them out a little bit. You've got a degree in economics, you've got an MBA. You've received your MBA. And in doing that usually the path to CEO requires managing a P&L, being good at math, understanding, those things. Was that true for you to make that next leap? Or, was that just a natural progression based on leadership skills?

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah, I think Laurie, it did make a difference. I remember when I had to be responsible for turning around a specialty pharmacy that was losing \$6 million a month. I looked at the numbers and thankfully I had good people to help me think about, how do all these pieces fit in? Our services, our mix of margin, our people, our burn rate. All those things that you learn in business contribute to both the top line as well as what your costs are. So I do think being good in math was helpful. I also think being focused on goals and being able to discern where should we focus our efforts, and being able to make decisions. Leaders have to make decisions and in order to get results you have to choose a path forward.

Valerie Sullivan:

So I feel like I was blessed with a focus on results in my first P&L job. And then when I saw how fun it was, like how the pieces all fit together, I took on another turnaround and another, and I really started getting good at understanding what are all the criteria that have to be in place for success in business. And the last spot that I truly put the pieces together came from this course that I teach at Bentley. Understanding how my love of people, trying to figure out that all people are different that you manage.

Valerie Sullivan:

And I had this bias that everyone's like me, so everybody does like solving problems. And when I learned that no, no, people really don't get as excited about that as you do Valerie. So you have to figure out what gets them excited and that got me excited to say, hey, like let's put people together who have ideas versus people who can get things done, versus people who can see where the quality issues are. And when you think that way it really does accelerate business performance. And so as you demonstrate more experiences you get more opportunities to deliver results.

Laurie McGraw:

And I'm sure now being the CEO of a growing company for almost two years, you'll have continued opportunity to deliver results. I mean, that's what boards are for. And certainly it sounds like you are focused on that. Valerie, maybe let's move to sort of the how you got here. And you said that maybe you were naive and didn't necessarily experience gender differences, whether it was expectations or what you were striving for. Has that always been true? You worked at some very large companies like Pfizer, and were there points along the way where you felt there were different expectations of you than men? And I'm just curious about what your experience has been.

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah. I was very fortunate at Pfizer to have such a long career. It's a terrific company today, it was a terrific company back then. And it really believed in its people and it invested significantly in developing leaders and culture. And I learned a lot from that. And I feel very fortunate that I was able to progress into a role as a vice president in specialty pharmacy and leading the inventive patient access solutions group. And I will tell you though, Laurie, it wasn't until I decided to raise my hand and articulate, hey, I want to be a CEO. And it took me a little bit of time to embrace that desire for me because I thought, well, nice girls don't raise their hand, they just wait to be picked. And that wasn't working for me. And so I had to do some practice and I had to find my power. And do it in a way that didn't give away my power, but also allowed me to pursue my dream and land in this position.

Laurie McGraw:

And how did you do that? Was somebody helping you? Did you have a mentor? Did you have a group of people or peers or friends or someone that was pushing you? Or was it really self-directed in terms of how you thought about it and then made those next steps?

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah. I don't think anything is self-directed. I mean, I think we're all connected in some way. And so every single person who gave me the gift of feedback and rooted for me, or sometimes foiled my path, all of those learning experiences, I think I'm pretty analytical and I can see what lesson it had in that for me.

Valerie Sullivan:

And so I had to practice. I had to practice saying like, hey, I want to be CEO, and feel that pit in my stomach wondering, does he, or she, think I'm up for it? And again, I just had to keep saying, this is what I want. This is where my goal orientation helped. And the more I did it, like anything, it's hard at the beginning. But I wanted to stay focused on where I wanted to go because I truly believe that I have the opportunity to build out businesses that leverage the best in people, and also drive results. And being a creative type I'd like the opportunity to see how well I could do at that.

Laurie McGraw:

Well Valerie, maybe I want to dig in a little bit more because I think the advice of practice is really, really excellent advice. And also something that sounds obvious, but people don't actually do it. And the other thing that you said is, I had to ask for things. So tell us how you did that.

Because again, these are things that people hear all the time, but how did you actually make that happen? Because you know, that pit in the stomach, the feeling nervous, the skirting around, the big questions and not being direct are kind of the typical traps that women, what I see and hear, tend to fall into. How did you really go about asking for things, practicing for the things that you wanted, and then what did you hear when you did ask? Either the great answer of yes, you can have that, or, guess what? Not so much.

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah. I remembered in one of my training sessions at Pfizer that this is, I started off as a sales rep, so selling is in my blood. And every situation is selling situation. And I remember-

Laurie McGraw:

Also great experience for being a CEO.

Valerie Sullivan:

Right, yeah. No, no, every situation is selling. And I remember one of my bosses says, hey, you don't get what you don't ask for. And another one of the trainers said, hey, I would just practice asking for an upgrade every time I checked into a hotel because, hey, you never knew if you would get it or not. And so that advice came back to me when I was looking for my next opportunity and I wasn't getting asked to be a CEO. And I'm curiously thinking like, why not? Like I've got all the experience I've been at this for a while. I've got all these proven results. And so that advice came to me. Again, grateful for all those moments of advice that I got throughout my career. So that's why when you ask, Laurie, do I have one mentor or several?

Valerie Sullivan:

I feel like everyone that I've worked with in my career has helped me get to this place and I couldn't be more grateful. But I had to ask. And the first time I asked and the second and the third and the 50th and the hundredth, like, hey, well, what are you looking to do? You know, I would come out and say it. And I would really practice the approach because you just never know what people's biases are. If they feel like a woman should be CEO, if they feel like a woman has to be a CEO 10 times before they're successful.

Valerie Sullivan:

You know, I didn't know so I would modulate my approach based on the feedback I was getting from them. And I had to also make myself a little bit likable, because again, you just don't know people's biases. And last advice is, I couldn't worry about whether people thought I was good enough for it, or if I was ready for it. If they felt that way, then I had to move on. But reach and frequency is what we learned at Pfizer and then messaging. So I put that all into practice and I'm again, really thrilled to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Really practical advice too. And you know, it does take practice to learn what people respond to and whether it is positive response or negative response, those are learning opportunities. But practice, practice. And how you did it, that is terrific. I think I'll try the upgrades at the hotel when we get to traveling again. That's a good one. Let's talk a little bit about the work you do at

Bentley. I mean, you are an adjunct professor there. You teach women. This is clearly an interest of yours that you spend the extra time on that. First of all, like what are you doing there and how did you get involved in that? Why is it important to you?

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah, so I, again, another bit of advice I got early in my career, I was told like, hey, if you have to learn something, go teach it. And so we were masters in most of the companies that I worked with, especially ones that I led, that if somebody needed to learn something, whether it was better selling skills or interpersonal relations, or building a PowerPoint deck, I would ask them to teach a course in it. Whether it was an hour or a day long. And so when I first became a manager I struggled a little bit. I didn't quite understand how to go about getting people to do things because I'd been super successful as an individual contributor but I wasn't having the same results. And I was frustrated being somebody who likes high standards and is accountable.

Valerie Sullivan:

So I started thinking about, well, what if I taught management at night? Then I'd have to learn it. And then I would get better at it. And so for four years I kept sending my resume on to department chairs thinking, oh I mustn't be the right fit or anything. And what I've learned is, when there's a need in department they fill it with adjunct. And so I got this call and I had this lovely department chair say, we have a need for a international business. And I said, oh goodness, I've never been outside the country for goodness sakes. He said, don't worry about it, you'll figure it out. And I taught international management for four years and it was so fun and I learned a ton. And then I ran into a colleague at Bentley and I said, hey, I'd love to teach here. And turns out they had a need for a course, it's called interpersonal relations in management. And they said, would you like to teach it? And I said, yes.

Laurie McGraw:

Fantastic. And I love that. It's like, okay, I'm your person. International relations, never been out of the country. Fantastic. So let's talk about some of the things that you teach Valerie. So do's and don'ts for women in particular. You are mentoring women is clearly something important to you. Now you teach in terms of some of the skills. I know you teach both men and women, but you know some of these issues are hard for women. Communication styles, what are the do's and don'ts that you advise other women on?

Valerie Sullivan:

Yeah, I would say that the first thing is, get in touch with your power and understand it and be aware of it. And don't give away your power. And I would give the same advice to men. You know we start off the course understanding ourselves like, so we do a little Maslow, we do a little bit of Myers-Brigg. And I get the eye roll from the students, but if you can't manage yourself and know who you are, it's hard to manage others. And so that's my first advice. And one that I weave through out all the advice I give to young people is, don't give away your power. The second is, we've already touched on it Laurie, is practice, practice, practice. Like, everything is hard until it becomes easy. And nobody teaches kids in elementary school and high school, human behavior.

Valerie Sullivan:

Like how are we as humans? Like we want what we want. And we like to feel good and we don't like to feel bad. So like, failure's bad. So we don't take risks at work. And so all of the basic that you think, oh, well, that's basic, eye roll. Of course, I know that. Being able to incorporate that into who you are and then practice it and figure out what works. And be diligent and have balance because you don't want to always be forcing yourself and your goals onto others. But at the same time you don't always want to be acquiescent and focused on harmacy and having the ability to discern and know when to be strong and when to hold back is a little bit of both art and science.

Laurie McGraw:

Valerie, these are just such great stories, examples, practical advice. I really appreciate it. As we close out here on Inspiring Women, you've given such a compelling set of things that women can do to advance themselves professionally. What might be your closing advice to listeners today?

Valerie Sullivan:

I would say that, again, I can't repeat it enough, just don't give away your power. And what I loved about your podcast, and I do love about it, but when I first heard about it is your focus on women needing women. And I couldn't agree more. Like really help each other out and support each other, especially in areas where you don't feel like you're giving away your power. Right?

Valerie Sullivan:

But the other thing is, women need men too. And women need to know that we're different than men and there are men who really support women. And so what I would say is, ask for that help. And when you see a man and woman interacting in business and it's not going quite well, it's almost like the importance of seeing that the situation as it is. Ask that man to advocate for that woman and say it's stylistic and not results oriented, because we all need each other to be successful. And I would say that remembering that and being who you are and staying true to your power is really powerful.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been just a great conversation. I've enjoyed this so much. This has been another excellent episode of inspiring women. We've been talking to Valerie Sullivan. And Valerie, thank you so much.

Valerie Sullivan:

Oh, thank you. It's my pleasure. And I really love what you're doing so keep it up. And it's very inspirational to me.

Laurie McGraw:

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