

Inspiring Women

Episode 32: Van Ton-Quinlivan

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 the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out.

Laurie McGraw:

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Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women, and today we are speaking with Van Ton-Quinlivan. Now I am so excited about this conversation. Van is a nationally recognized thought leader in workforce development with a proven track record for guiding and implementing large system change, while fostering a culture of experimentation, innovation and collaboration. She's worked in both the private as well as nonprofit sectors. Today, she is the CEO of Futuro Health, and Futuro Health's mission is to improve the health and wealth of communities by growing the largest network of credentialed allied healthcare workers in the nation. And we're going to hear some exciting things about that.

Laurie McGraw:

Now Van has been an executive vice chancellor for the California Community of Colleges. There she started with a hundred million dollar budget. She brought that to over a billion in the state of California. 2013, she was named the White House Champion of Change under the Obama administration in recognition for her notable career in the industry. And she has degrees from Georgetown and Harvard and Stanford, many awards, being noted as a California Steward Leader, also being named a distinguished visiting lecturer and scholar at Stanford. And Van, I'm really excited to be talking to you today.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

I'm delighted to be invited. Thank you, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

Great. Well, why don't we just get started here? So Van, maybe you could just tell us, what are you doing right now? What is Futuro Health all about?

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So Laurie, I'd launched a new nonprofit called Futuro Health. It is focused on the shortages of allied health workers across the nation, starting here in California. As you know, especially with the pandemic, we all want our fair share of skilled healthcare workers, and 65% of the healthcare workers across the country are in this category called allied health.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So imagine for a moment, Laurie, if you and I, hopefully this doesn't happen, but let's say we were in a car accident. From the emergency medical technician who comes up in the ambulance, to the medical assistants who check us in at the hospital, to the x-ray technicians or the medical sonographers, those are all allied health professionals, minus the doctors, minus the administrators. It's a very important group of frontline workers, and we want to make sure that the country doesn't continue to have shortages in these areas.

Laurie McGraw:

Well Van, I mean, first of all, you are no stranger to taking on big missions and large projects, and then taking something large and then making it even larger. I did not realize that you started Futuro Health in January of 2020. So that was right before we went into lockdowns with the pandemics, and I think we all have an appreciation for how important healthcare workers were during the course of this past year.

Laurie McGraw:

How did that go? I mean, in terms of being the leader that you are, how did you steer the organization and starting it out, even while you're dealing with a pandemic?

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

Well, Laurie, we were so fortunate that we launched in January and not a month later. So we had several pivots. We had launched with already a set of education and training roadmap because our goal is to grow the number of credentialed allied health workers for the nation. And clearly with the pandemic, that threw a wrench in a few areas.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

The first learning that we had in the pandemic was that as fast as things need to move in order to move at the speed of business, the pandemic taught us that we actually need to move even faster, and that is to move at the speed of need. And in response to the pandemic our board asked us to really prepare a set of training that could upskill frontline workers, healthcare workers, for the skill sets needed to ready for the surges that were coming in roughly two and a half to three weeks.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

That's a very, very short timeline, as you know, to bring about a set of trainings for licensed vocational nurses and medical assistants. For example, how to move from a subacute to acute settings, how to make sure that they're donning and doffing PPE correctly. But interestingly enough, because the approach that we took for Futuro Health was an agile one, one about creating an agile workforce, we had already begun building an ecosystem of education partners whom we were able to pull together, and everybody contributed different things in order to launch on time this training.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So Pima Medical Institute contributed brand new curriculum. We contributed the build-out of a learning management system. Another one of our partner, SCIU UHW, contributed the mailing, the outreach campaign, and between all of us, we were able to get the training out at the speed of need.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

And I think this is a very important theme when it comes to the future of work, that we need to not just pace at the speed of business, but pace at the speed of need.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

The other major change, Laurie, I'm sure you've seen it, is also the quick cu over that was required into the area of telehealth. All of a sudden, anybody dragging their feet in this area of telemedicine or telehealth, were forced to cut over in terms of providing services in this new way.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

And so what we did was we looked around for curriculum that could help existing healthcare centers who were small in nature, and were not as ready with this capacity. And we found a 15 week program, fully online, for working adults out of the University of Delaware, and were able to underwrite 163 staff from all these small public health centers to go and attend that program so that they can learn, either from the IT function, the quality function, or the clinical function, how do you lift up this service delivery model within a health center.

Laurie McGraw:

That is so many different things and it's actually incredible. I like the theme that you're talking about, which is moving at the speed of need, and what a great business mantra, particularly to have one month before we moved into the lockdown period of the pandemic. What a great place to start from.

Laurie McGraw:

Maybe Van, if I could move to sort of like the fact that you were able to do that, and you had all of the experience and perhaps tools to work with as a leader, to move at that speed of need, maybe move to a bit of the story of how you got here. I mean, you came from Vietnam, 1975, I think is what I read in terms of your background. You've got numerous degrees. I don't know that your family could have envisioned that you would become the leader that you are recognized as today.

Laurie McGraw:

Give us a little bit of that history and how you got to where you are today from where you began. What you were thinking of, maybe perhaps when you were early days in your career.

Speaker 4:

So Laurie, I would say that I didn't begin at the starting line. I actually begin sort of way behind the starting line. In 1975, my family escaped from the war in Vietnam. And so we were refugees that came here to the United States. So I actually am a product of lunch tokens and English as a second language, all the infrastructure that you'd have to have as someone who has newly immigrated to the United States.

Speaker 4:

My father was a neurosurgeon over in Vietnam, which as you know, is quite the alpha of medical doctors. And my mother was a teacher, which is a very venerable profession in Vietnam. And what was so humbling was that both of them had to restart from scratch coming here to the United States. My father had to redo his residency all over from scratch, and my mother took a bookkeeping job in order to pay the bills.

Speaker 4:

Now, interestingly enough, neither of them were bitter about the transition, about the fact that really all that they had in the past, really the white board got wiped clean for them, and they had to start from scratch. Instead they were just extremely grateful that we had the opportunity to rebuild. And really, so in the work that I do in education, in training, in workforce development, I feel like I continue to be grateful for the opportunity we had and really to pay forward opportunities for others, because education certainly opened up the door for me repeatedly in order to be able to access the roles that I've had. And I worked to make sure that others could come from behind the starting line to being able to be competitive at the starting line.

Laurie McGraw:

And Van, that's just an incredible story. And to be starting all over again, having expectations of who you are as a family with very accomplished parents, and then starting at the beginning again, is an incredible start. So education, clearly an important thing that was helpful to you. But as someone who has become an incredible business leader, and you didn't start with that end in mind, what were some of the things along the way? I've heard in different discussions that you've been in, being a Vietnamese, female leader, the cultural overlay of that. How do those things manifest themselves in experiences that you've had, and how have you removed those, if they were barriers to you, to achieving something that you might want to have accomplished?

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

Laurie, we all work with the expectations of others, right? Whether it's our parents, whether it's our culture. And we have, I consider it like little voices of judgments that sit on our shoulder, whispering to us saying that we ought to be doing some things or we're not good enough on something else. And so being able to conquer these voices of judgment, especially the negative ones, are really important.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

I had to go from being able to conquer some of the voices of judgment that set expectation for how I had to be, especially in Vietnamese culture. There were expectations on how well I could cook, and I'm a pretty mediocre cook. And there were no expectations for me in terms of professional achievements. So in a way, I had to come to acceptance of myself that I'm going to be very good at certain things. And I'm okay with not having the cleanest of house or being the best of cook. And fortunately, no one in my family, neither my sons or my husband is expecting for me to excel in those skills.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So once I wrestled with my own voices of judgment, then I was able to really sort of unlock my own capacity. I had this wonderful mentor, Betty Steiger, who was in Silicon Valley at the head of a Xerox Park. She would have been a CEO of a company had she been born a decade or two later. And she was a great mentor. And she, in mentoring me, advise that you have to kind of give up your perspective of who you are in order to become the person who you could be. And I didn't fully understand her coaching and mentoring until a little bit later, but it was once I gave up all of these voices of judgment that I was holding of what others expected for me, and really became connected to the things that I wanted for myself, then, not surprisingly, my career was able to just take off, and I was able to tap into this passion of creating opportunity for others.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

And that allowed me to go from the private sector, where I headed up workforce development for a company of 20,000 and brought them to national prominence, to growing public workforce investment in the California Community of Colleges as the executive vice-chancellor, which is the largest system of higher education in the nation. And now launching a nonprofit to show the way on how else you could do workforce development, especially in healthcare, where healthcare is so much needed.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. And Van, those are really some incredible experiences you had along the way. I mean, taming those internal voices of doubt that so many women grapple with, how you went about that, that is just a very important nugget there. And then that advice that you took from your mentor in terms of envisioning what you could be versus sort of what you're currently doing now, sounds transformational, in terms of what that opened up for you.

Laurie McGraw:

So maybe speak a little bit more, if I could dig into feedback and how you have incorporated feedback that you've received along the way, because clearly you've built quite a set of accomplishments over the course of your career.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

Well Laurie, I appreciate this opportunity to pay it forward, the same gift that I was given, which was the power and the value of feedback. And this is a very difficult lesson learned. I had come out of Stanford University and was a management trainee and my first job. And I received some feedback that I thought was really unfair. I was in this management trainee and they said, "Well, you don't look approachable." And I thought, well, what does that have to do with the work or the quality of my work?

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So I stewed on this feedback for like three months. I mean, that's how long it took me to process this type of feedback. And I would just play forward for you a little bit. Now, when I get feedback, what I do is I say, "Thank you," and I reflect on that feedback to what it is that is true, and that I would like to act on. You don't have to act on a hundred percent of the feedback.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

But it's a real gift, because the people who give you feedback, they only do so because they think you will value it. And if you don't value it, then they will stop giving you that gift.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

Now, what did I do with that original feedback about not being approachable? Interestingly, my HR department said that individuals like myself, whom they've coached in the past, they'd given the advice, for example, that when you're walking, you might want to walk a little slower. You might want to smile more. And they even taught me how to have more casual conversation, but more brief with individuals, in order to come across more approachable.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So HR had actually been working with a lot of individuals who are up and coming, and just to round us out a little bit in terms of our persona or our approachability.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So I'd have to say, whether or not you agree with the feedback or not, it is a real gift to get the feedback, and then to be able to process it and then to come up with some strategies for what you believe you might want to take from the feedback.

Laurie McGraw:

And taking control of it, and taking away the emotion of how it might feel. What do you mean I'm not approachable? I feel very approachable. But taking that and really trying to turn it into strategies for how to incorporate that feedback in a way that works for you. That is just terrific.

Laurie McGraw:

You know, Van, just because you are an expert in the future of work and understanding all the changes that are happening there, I'm wondering if you could give listeners some advice. Things like managing your online reputation or thinking about career changes as there are more and more algorithms that are looking at resumes. What are the types of things that people should be thinking about or looking at, just as you might recommend, knowing what you know in your profession?

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So the future of work, I was invited to the Golden Gate University commencement, and it was all the taxation and accounting students and MBA students coming out of the graduate school. And they themselves were very worried about this topic. Well, what of my careers will be automated? You know, what will be done by robots? And the rule of thumb, if you want to, just for a moment, sit back and reflect on it, is that if 10 years out the work that you're doing is rote or repetitive, then that's very vulnerable to becoming automated. So you might want to think about how to do a little less of that and move in the direction of areas that is not rote and not repetitive, for example.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

Certainly the transferable skills, they call it human plus skills, the communication, the collaboration, the creativity, the critical thinking. Those will be all very important skill sets in the future, because as again, the speed of need is moving much faster. And so those will be kind of the glue types of skills that is helpful to practice and get a greater and greater mastery over time.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

To your point of control, for example, if you think, for example, accounting, if there's elements that are so repetitive, there may be elements that are not. For example, what is the transition to digitization for your company? Well, if that's an area of strategic interest, then maybe that's where you raise your hand and say, "Hey, I'm interested in doing a project on digitization of processes. And let me volunteer. Could you, as a mentor, look out for such a project for me and let me know?" So you can proactively seek out those projects in order to build your skillset and position yourself for this future work.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

I'd love to end on a sort of a provocation, Laurie. When you think about platforms like the Ubers and the Lyfts, really what they are is a matching of work and of workers, right? I mean, it's really, at the end of the day, it's matching of work and workers.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

Well, who else does the matching of work and workers? That's usually the middle managers, right? So I'd like to provoke the thought by saying, well, is the future one where the algorithm becomes our new middle manager? In which case, algorithms, the only things that algorithms read is data, right? And so over time, it's going to be important to think about your reputation as it translate into data.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

So it's not just your degrees, it's your skills, but it's your reputation. How many stars you get. What is your network? All of that will be in the form of data for the algorithm to read in order to match you as a worker with possible work. And so I think that's a future that is yet to evolve, but it's one provocation of how the future of work can unfold.

Laurie McGraw:

That is a future that is yet to evolve, but it is happening now. And I think that is just excellent advice. I think it's inspiring to think about that future, in terms of what can be.

Laurie McGraw:

And Van, I really appreciate you providing all of that information to listeners. This has been an excellent Inspiring Women conversation with Van Ton-Quinlivan. And Van thank you so much.

Van Ton-Quinlivan:

Thank you, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

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