

Inspiring Women

Episode 34: Lara Dodo

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. Today, we're speaking with Lara Dodo. She is the Chief Growth and Operating Officer for Nutopia. Nutopia is a company focused on helping people with chronic disease manage their conditions. We'll hear a little bit more about that. Now, Lara has been at this company for a little bit of time, starting off as a consultant, then moving into this key role leading the organization. She comes from a long background of leading companies. She was the co-founder of Bedrock Effect, a Toronto based branding and marketing company. She was also a key executive at an entertainment company called TimePlay.

Laurie McGraw:

She also has done quite a bit of international speaking. She coaches women, in particular. She's the chair of the board of directors of Women in Technology, which focuses on helping women in technology and mentoring them, and getting them into positions of leadership. Lara has a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of South Africa. Lara, I am so happy to be speaking to you today.

Lara Dodo:

Laurie, it's such a delight to be here. Thank you for having me.

Laurie McGraw:

Great. Well, I always like to get started on Inspiring Women just talking about what are you doing right now? Tell us a little bit about your professional job, your career, and how you got here.

Lara Dodo:

Well, right this moment, I'm, I think, like many working moms out there. I'm managing the onslaught of Zoom, school, COVID, pets, trying to grow a business, manage a team who also have their own unique emotional requirement working remotely, and trying to have a lot of fun at the same time. I think I'm probably like most of us out there at the moment, Laurie. That's a reality today.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I don't know if most of us are dealing with the pets, and the children, and everything else. That's its own unique blend of things to juggle. I hope you are managing to have some fun along the way. Tell us a little bit about the job, the company that you're at, and what you're trying to do with Nutopia.

Lara Dodo:

Absolutely. Nutopia, it's very rare Laurie, that you have an opportunity to bring together the best of your skills. In terms of with in my case, it's growing teams, building commercial operations for a business as a Chief Operating and Growth Officer, and being able to target and aim it at a cause that really has heart and soul to it. For us, that's fundamentally intervening with individuals who are at risk of developing heart, stroke, diabetes, and other preventable diseases.

Lara Dodo:

Right now, working with large employers at looking at how we can make a difference on folks' daily choices around nutrition, exercise, and wellbeing in a way that's sustainable to really prevent them from heading towards a chronic disease trajectory. And while we do that, ensuring that we enrich their mental health by looking at better strategies around sleep, anxiety, mood, fatigue, and other types of emotional wellbeing issues.

Laurie McGraw:

And how did you come to this space, Lara? I mean, you have a degree from South Africa, you're in Canada now. I'm very familiar with the health tech landscape in the United States, but you come at that from being in different parts of the globe. Maybe a little bit the trajectory of where you studied to where you started working and your movement around the globe in this space in healthcare.

Lara Dodo:

Absolutely. I'm actually going to start at the end and then I'll go back to the beginning. I got to Nutopia through two parts. One, I was recommended to one of the directors of the board to be able to come on board the crew at Nutopia to help scale the business operationally. Really, leaning into my commercial and operational experience like growing teams, and just foundational best practices of how to scale a business.

Lara Dodo:

What it was for me that made Nutopia so compelling, because to your point, I come out of more traditional, large, corporate enterprise dealing in professional services, technology and marketing, it was my own personal health story. I had struggled with my lung health for many years. And in my case, it was literally common sense, sleep, nutrition, wellbeing, working out. That I couldn't live on caffeine, and candy bars, and three hours of sleep a night. But I was really making myself very sick and was in the hospital frequently with lung issues.

Lara Dodo:

And it was through the intervention of a phenomenal naturopath and a team that made me realize my daily choices ultimately are what turned my health around. And so when Nutopia came along, just the very cause as to what we do. Intervening in individual's lives and helping to help folks make better choices around these lifestyle issues, was very close to my heart. As we discussed earlier, being able to take what I love about building teams, and I'm very passionate about building teams, and scaling business, and putting that in with a cause close to my heart.

Lara Dodo:

It's very rare that you have something so uniquely tailored to a point that seems so left field come in one's pathway. That was how I ended up making the change. Now, how I got there, born and bred in South Africa. I immigrated when I was literally five days married to my husband. We've been married for almost 23 years, and so our honeymoon was immigration. I had just completed my Bachelor of Commerce degree in economics and law undergrad, and was actually looking to, I had this passion about being a lawyer. When we moved to Canada, well, reality hit pretty quick that actually I just needed a job.

Lara Dodo:

And so I'd gone to a consulting firm, head of finance and accounting because I'd done a fair amount of work in finance and accounting in South Africa for last completing my undergrad, and was recruited by their company to actually go work within their professional services group and that was Robert Half International. Fabulous firm. And so a few things. Immigration means I had to go restart certain studies. I've got old fashioned pay the bills and I put certain dreams on pause while you deal with the reality picture, and the fact that an opportunity presented itself.

Lara Dodo:

And the reality for my husband at the time was I literally couldn't afford to go back to school and couldn't afford to go without working for long. And so leaned into this opportunity with what really was a blessing with a large multinational and learned just incredible skills on leadership, and growth operations, and multi-industry. That really was the trajectory to ultimately how I landed where I am today.

Laurie McGraw:

Lara, in that, that's a lot of different changes in terms of different fields, as well as different types of positions. Being in the services' industry, recruiting, and what you did at Robert Half, and then moving to more technology focused types of organizations. Were those all opportunistic moves? You knew somebody who pulled you into them, or did you think about, "I can actually take skills that I have and apply them to a completely different area," because that's something that's hard.

Laurie McGraw:

It takes a bit of courage and I don't know that you're going into a big unknown when you move from one certain trajectory to a complete different one. It sounds like you've done it three or four times.

Lara Dodo:

Firstly, we're all wired differently and I think anyone listening, it's recognizing we all have different safety zones as to what risk level we have, and risk level for myself even directly. I was primary income earner for my family and there were times in my life and career where I couldn't afford to take a strategic move that might have served me better in certain career paths, but was going to come with a high income risk or risks that were just was out of my family lifestyle at that time. That's the first thing.

Lara Dodo:

We all have different risk levels and different appetites to see opportunity beyond the obvious. My case, and I'm very much at the core like this. I'm a big believer that we should lean into difficult situations and find opportunity where maybe it isn't apparent. So early in my career it was if this was my business, what else would I do? Always was wired that way. I used to drive my mentors and bosses crazy. That wiring is how even we go through from professional services within Robert Half, I got very interested in Microsoft at figuring out technology.

Lara Dodo:

There was a real shortage of certain technology skills in women. I got fascinated and curious as to let me understand more, let me get involved. And in doing that, both had a different network that ultimately became my conduit to making a shift more to technology. And so what was a pathway I did not have to explore was outside of my, these in the early years, our core job description. But that being open-minded and curious, what else? Let me learn more, being a student for life, and learning, and trying to challenge my own knowledge base, really is what opened up that trajectory.

Lara Dodo:

That's been a theme as well, going forward, going into marketing. I don't have a background in marketing, but in going forward to say growing a business commercially, growing teams, leveraging technology, how do we get our message out? The world has changed. Sales of 10 years ago, five years ago, two years ago, not what they are today. We need very strong brand support and digital activity. And so getting curious again, how does it work? I remember that early on, the gurus of even Tony Robbins, like how did he get his message out? Always just being open, and learning, and being humble enough to know if we don't know.

Lara Dodo:

That's really, if you look at these a bit of eclectic pathways I've taken, it's always been with that in mind. To this day, Laurie, this morning I chatted with someone in the cancer field and same thing. Tell me more, let me understand. Because once we open our mind, there are so many ways we can be congruent with diverse partners and ultimately boost our own personal growth, professional growth, and obviously, business growth.

Laurie McGraw:

It leads to other things. I think you're exactly right that different people have different risk levels. However, I would say that the workforce of today and the opportunities available for women in particular, they are boundless and very available, but making those traces is a big deal. It's interesting your process, in terms of how you explore and dig into learning about a particular

field and then make the move. Lara, in terms of doing that, when those strategic opportunities availed themselves to you, did you ever make a wrong choice?

Laurie McGraw:

Did you ever pivot and decide that wasn't the right choice for me and pivot back? Give us some of those examples, as other people think about these different types of things for themselves.

Lara Dodo:

Yeah. I mean, I would preface it that I'm a big believer that there is no wrong choice. And the reason why is if you've made a choice and the answer becomes obvious that it wasn't correct, you're going to make a better choice. You're going to change it. You get to make another choice. I think that's how I would go back to my poor choices were actually where I was holding onto fear and it was paralyzing me from making a decision. Those are my worst decisions is where I was paralyzed by fear. Fear of well, can I financially afford the move? Fear of will anyone even want to hire me? I mean, we all suffer, most of us, have some form of imposter syndrome.

Lara Dodo:

And so those, in my book, worse choices with hindsight is where I had fear that stopped me from making a move. Again, within our parameters of risk-taking, where I've made choices and they weren't ideal, what I've really challenged myself to do is, and I'm a big believer in Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In, is really just confronting the situation and understanding that I'm still empowered to make a choice. I don't do well feeling victim to a situation. I don't think any of us like feeling entrapped or victimized in any way. When a choice has become, okay, this isn't great, this is not what I thought. And an example would be I made a big career leap move.

Lara Dodo:

I'm very recently, you mentioned that I moved to a gaming company away from Nutopia. Had a fabulous time until it wasn't fabulous anymore. COVID came, there was a strategic redirection that was potentially great for that company, but not great for me. And I really did. I thought, what did I do? Should I have left Nutopia to begin with? And I really leaned into that with my husband to say, "We have a moment in time to think about what's right for our family, not what's right for anyone else's business or agenda because there's lots of agendas out there. What's for our family?"

Lara Dodo:

And really reflecting on my values, in terms of the people I want to work with, the industry I want to be part of, and the story I want to tell. And in looking at that, made another very tough decision to leave what was, again, a great organization. Just wasn't aligned anymore with where I felt I should be and returned back to Nutopia. Courage to know when you've made a bad decision and more courage and confidence in yourself not to be afraid to make another one.

Laurie McGraw:

And sounds also like you have identified things that are important to you and you're making career decisions based on values that you've come to just really know for yourself and for your family. I want to tap into that a little bit, Lara, because I've heard you in some other speeches that

you've given, talks that I've listened to, that you've given, you seem to have an awareness of some privilege that you have. And I found it interesting that you talk about that out loud.

Laurie McGraw:

You speak about some of those things that are available to you just being an English speaker, that that's a privilege. I was wondering if you could comment on that and how that influences your thinking about your own career trajectory and perhaps how you work with others?

Lara Dodo:

Absolutely. In the early years being an immigrant, I remember a few things that it struck me that in the world of new Canadians, or new Americans, or new to any country that wasn't home, there's this understanding that immigrant you have different experience. You need to start and rebuild your resume. But what I ran into was almost not being believed as an immigrant. And I've started to unpack that to understand it was because I spoke English, number one, as a first language, and with an accent that although I talk quickly, most people can understand.

Lara Dodo:

And realize there was a lot of discrimination out there for non-first language, English speakers in North America specifically, and also with accents that were deemed undesirable. And I encountered that in the recruitment and professional services field where it was horrendous, Laurie. Folks were underpaid or paid differently based on often how they communicated. Not that they couldn't communicate well, but it was more the how. And so very early, I recognized that I had a privilege purely by the fact that I, again, spoke English as a first language.

Lara Dodo:

And it was an interesting realization that now move forward to 2020, 2021, with privileges where we all understand in a very different way. Understanding that it really has afforded me probably opportunities that I didn't realize before in ways, again, that weren't apparent to me at the time. I'm sensitive to it and really stretch ourselves when we hire to make sure we really are looking at the fundamental skills of individuals and the contribution they can make.

Laurie McGraw:

How does that influence how you work with people? I speak with lots of women who talk about having allies, and how to be a good ally, and things of that nature. Understanding that from your own personal perspective, how does that influence how you work with others? You've mentioned it's important to you to build high performing teams. How do you bring that into your work to make sure that privilege doesn't outshine or just be a disadvantage for someone else who doesn't have the English as a first language as your example?

Lara Dodo:

The first thing I think we have to all surround ourselves with individuals of quality and integrity, where there's an understanding that we have a shared vision on what good looks like. It sounds very basic, but understanding when you're wanting to build a team with the best people and understanding gaps of skills you have in the organization, or also being able to connect very clearly to the vision and the culture of your company. As a segue, at Nutopia we took an

anecdotal look at our data on diversity and it was such, and I say, a breath of relief because we always aimed at doing the right thing by hiring, as we're talking about, based on the right skill, right corporate culture fit.

Lara Dodo:

And when we looked at it, we really did hit what our ideal metrics without actually making it a focus. And to me, that's the barometer of a very healthy team at work. I don't think there's a simple potion, but I would say one, surround yourself with people who truly are like-minded, in terms of really of fundamentally bringing the right skilled people to the table and embracing diversity. I look around the room, if the diversity is not obvious, you're probably not doing enough. I remember many years ago, but probably not too many years ago, based on what's happening in the world. Being told by a group in the Midwest, literally like, "Lara, we love you because you bring diversity."

Lara Dodo:

And I remember saying, "What do you mean?" And they said to me, "Well, you're a woman, and you're from Africa, and you're Jewish." I'm like, "Great. That's diversity." And I thought, boy, do we have work to do from this particular group, as were, that there was education to be done. And at that time I said to that team, "I think you need to make a trip to our Toronto office and see diversity through some different lenses." Women can't be the biggest diversity factor. Having someone whose Jewish on your team cannot be the biggest diversity factor. And having someone from Africa cannot be the biggest diversity factor. And so challenge ourselves, educate ourselves, and be curious. Going back to how do you hire that way? Get to know people. It's all about relationships. And when we understand each other's story, it's an amazing thing that happens. We tend to open up much more broadly.

Laurie McGraw:

In challenging the status quo by digging a level deeper is a great approach and definitely from a position of leadership, being able to state those kinds of things without apology is very good advice. I appreciate that, Lara. I also want to talk about your work with women in technology, and really being both a mentor, and understanding and appreciating that there certainly aren't enough women in technology. The numbers support that statement. And so why do you do this work? What are you seeing? How do you think we might change the current status quo to bring more women into the field of technology?

Lara Dodo:

Right. There's been some incredible work done over the last 10 years of bringing Girls Who Code, Women Who Code, Ladies Who Code, all types of fabulous initiatives. I do think there have been tremendous steps forward and that should continue. I started, going back how I got involved with women in technology, was really through curiosity through the Microsoft Partner channel and was mentored by some fabulous folks there. Just understanding the role that women, how underrepresented women were. You could see that certainly, as you were hiring, there were very few women candidates.

Lara Dodo:

That was the curiosity part. Moving forward, it became more looking at just simple leadership. It wasn't so much just about technology anymore, but more about just women in leadership in general. And so my coaching or passion, if you will, has expanded beyond just women in technology. It's just women in general and leadership in general. I do a fair amount of work with the youth as well so new graduates, and just really helping to open minds to what leadership really is. That it's a role of responsibility for your own actions, as opposed to I follow with the youth or feel it's just an opportunity to be in charge.

Lara Dodo:

Just expanding much more broader, but tech is still very close to my heart in terms of passion.

Laurie McGraw:

Lara, in terms of being women generally, and women in technology also pretty generally but specifically, there's a feeling of needing to know more of the answers to feel confident of having an equal voice at the table. How do you encourage women to do that? Not being a person who grew up in technology yourself, but now being a leader in a technology space, how did you have the courage to have confidence there, and what can others learn from what advice you might give them?

Lara Dodo:

Laurie, it took me a long time and it's always a work in progress. And what I got to was, and I encourage anyone and everyone I work with, if it doesn't make sense to you, it doesn't make sense. In any business ultimately, tick doesn't work in a vacuum. It has stakeholders from the business side, the finance side, external clients, internal clients, marketers, investors. There's a very large ecosystem. What can happen and certainly has happened is the deeply entrenched tickers who would maybe like to, and I don't believe intentionally.

Lara Dodo:

But my feelings feel a little bit intimidated. I didn't have that background and really understand. And for sure, I have had the comments hurled at me. "Well, Lara, you're not technical." And having got to the point of being able to say, "Yes, but if we're going to take this to market," or "Yes, and how would we explain this to a client so it's not technical." Because if it doesn't make sense to me, I'm not going to be able to sell it. Help me again, understand in simple language, because if I can't understand, we're not taking this any further than out of this room.

Lara Dodo:

It's been able to really put it in and have the confidence to be able to, again, lean into what is not your expertise, but understand that the folks that actually make the decisions and drive all these organizations aren't wanting a highly technical conversation. They want to know that the high level story of the impact and how it's going to work. The practicalities of that whole famous piece of less is more. I think empowering yourself that you don't have to be the most technical person. You don't have to have all that schooling, but you do need to be able to understand what's being said in simple language. And if the tech team can't help you put that story together, you do get to ask questions. It's healthy and it's good.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. I like that. I also like that you're asking people to change the narrative and not asking them to dumb it down for you, which is a really common approach as well. I really, really like that advice, Lara. This is really been a great conversation already, and we're running out of time. As we close out here, Lara, what might be some just last advice you might give listeners from your own learned experience, being in the C-suite, where you are today that you might want to give to listeners?

Lara Dodo:

The journey is short although again, I think we already spoke about it, being self-doubting sometimes, sometimes be overconfident at the wrong time. Don't hold yourself too harshly to account. You're going to put your best foot forward, have fun. If you make the wrong decision, the answer will become obvious and you're going to make a better one and just trust in yourself. And again, this is supposed to be a fun journey. If it's not fun, lean into it, and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Lara Dodo:

There's some amazing mentors around you. You may not even know they're right there. Ask for help. Lots of great people willing to lend a helping hand. Everyone likes to contribute to others. Wishing everyone well, and very important, keep a sense of humor. Make sure we laugh at ourselves in good humor.

Laurie McGraw:

That is a great thing for us to close out on. This has been an excellent Inspiring Women conversation with Lara Dodo and Lara, thank you so very much.

Lara Dodo:

Absolute pleasure, Laurie. Thank you so much.

Laurie McGraw:

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