

Inspiring Women

Episode 37: Brook West

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:

This is another episode of Inspiring Women. And today, we are speaking with Brook West. She is the chief commercial officer of Carrum Health. This is a digital health company, and Brook has led a number of sales organizations across many different organizations as a senior leader. In her most recent role, Brook was responsible for building the go-to-market commercial plan at 98point6, which resulted in the acquisition of that company for 3 million members in just two years. She is a natural sales leader. She's done this at many different organizations. She's built very high performing teams across a number of different groups. She has a background in linguistics and Russian, so I don't know how those things relate to sales leadership, but Brook is going to tell us. And Brook, I really appreciate you being here today.

Brook West:

Laurie, I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me.

Laurie McGraw:

Great. Well, listen, Brook, at Inspiring Women, the audience here just loves to hear the stories of women like you who have accomplished so much in your career. So why don't you just tell us, what are you doing right now? What do you do at Carrum Health?

Brook West:

Thanks Laurie. So I'm the chief commercial officer as you mentioned, and really, what that means, it's a fancy word for sales. I am in charge, responsible for all things sales, so growing the company. Our product serves the employer market so we are out talking to employers in many different ways to share the story and the value proposition of Carrum Health.

Laurie McGraw:

And in doing that, you've joined just recently. Right, Brook?

Brook West:

Yes. I think I'm nine months in or something. It's gone very, very fast. I started in September. I don't think I've slept since September 8th, but in the best way. So yes, relatively new.

Laurie McGraw:

Okay. And so in terms of doing this, this is not the first sales organization that you've led. You've led several others, but tell me how Russian and Russian linguistics sort of leads to sales leadership, marketing leadership, business development.

Brook West:

Oh my gosh. I'm having a flashback to when I was 18 years old and my mother was begging me to take a business course in college. And I told her, I said, "This is ridiculous. I'm never getting into business. So just stop with your pursuit here." But of course, she was right, because our mothers are usually right. I should have taken a business course. The truth is that I love languages. I love how it's a verbal representation of culture and people. But after having that experience in college, and then I worked in Russia for a while in Moscow, I realized I didn't want to really go back if I can just tell you the truth here for my career. And my natural talents kind of started leading me to sales and marketing. So if you get me in a taxi cab with a Russian driver every once in a while, I can probably get home, but otherwise, it's phenomenally rusty, and thankful for some natural talent that has led the rest of my career.

Laurie McGraw:

And that natural talent, Brook, so you recognize some skills that you have. So what are those talents? And then how did that translate into sort of that first job where you said, "Okay. Sales, business development, this is a place that makes sense for me."

Brook West:

Well, to be honest, it was always there. So ever since I was young, I had a drive and interest in achieving, let's call it, from a very, very young age. In fact, I was inspired in elementary school. So Michelle Cohen from Bret Harte Elementary School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, if you're out there, I owe a lot of my career to you. In second grade, my gosh, Michelle Cohen had the best clothes I've ever seen. She had Benneton. She had Jordache. She had it all. We grew up in a moderate income family. We certainly had what we needed, but we didn't have extras. And so if I wanted extra things, I needed to go get it myself. And I knew that at a very, very young age.

Brook West:

I think I had my first lemonade stand in second grade. It was every Wednesday that summer at 8 AM. And the reason why is because that was garbage day and in Cherry Hill, New Jersey growing up, it was very hot and humid, and those garbage men would show up. They would throw down a \$20 bill and they would wipe me clean of my lemonade. And 20 bucks was a lot for a seven year old.

Brook West:

That was really my first business and sales and marketing opportunity, but it continued on from there. And when I was 13, I got a worker's permit from the State of Pennsylvania so that I could work for an actual organization. I worked fast food and I worked at a ski shop because I wanted

to make money and I wanted to go get things. So I had a drive and an ambition all throughout that was always there. And then out of college, I worked for a recruiting and staffing firm that put me out on the pavement to go drive business. And I could not have been more excited. I literally could not wait to make cold calls because I knew that I could drive business.

Laurie McGraw:

So Michelle Cohen is the person that sort of said, "Hey, I want more financial ability." So she's the driver behind that. And then the lemonade stand is where you'd learn to hone the sales skills, but then somewhere along the line, it turned to technology and technology as a key aspect of the types of companies that you've been with. So how did you go into that particular avenue?

Brook West:

Oh my gosh. Okay. So now we're going to all age ourselves here, meaning me. It was around '97, '98. I had continued to stay in the recruiting and staffing industry. And a friend of mine told me about this new internet company. And it was a data center company. And I just thought, "Oh my God. Well, what is the internet exactly?" We'd kind of started to hear about it, but not really. It wasn't incorporated into our daily lives. I think I'd tried to "log in" and go to a website maybe once or twice before that. And it all just sounded like the new frontier. This was this new thing that was coming and it was going to be huge and I could not have been more attracted to just those concepts.

Brook West:

And so I remember I went and interviewed for this inside sales role and the senior vice president asked me, "What do you know about the internet?" And of course, I knew absolutely nothing about the internet. And I just responded with questions right back and said, "My God, what's not to know?" I was like, "It's going to be huge." And I left that interview going, "Oh my God, I have no idea what I'm talking about." But I think my energy and excitement was kind of all that they were looking for.

Laurie McGraw:

I think there's a lot to be said for enthusiasm and being curious. I mean not bluffing, but literally just saying that there's a lot more to be learned here and I'm excited about that. That's often the start of a great career trajectory. Women though in sales, women in technology sales specifically, in terms of the numbers, it's about 25% is the numbers that I have seen. And the more you move up the ladder, the numbers from again, statistics tend to decline for women specifically. Brook, what's your experience?

Brook West:

Well, clearly, I'm one of the ones that have gone up. I think that for me personally, I don't think I knew that I couldn't do something. In thinking about doing this interview with you, Laurie, I did a lot of reflection on, "Why is that, that I didn't know I couldn't do something?" And I'm not sure I've gotten there. I probably need to have several therapy sessions to get to the root of it. But for me, I just never knew I couldn't. And so I just kept going and going and going, and I wasn't intimidated. I'm still not intimidated. I think that all of us humans, we're all the same, and that we

are literally just doing the same things. We all have insecurities and fears and confidence about certain things. And I just kept going.

Brook West:

I think that for a lot of women, it is about confidence and trying to figure out their place in this world and maybe getting intimidated. And I think it does take just sitting with yourself and asking what you want and why you shouldn't have it and why you shouldn't just go for it. Everybody in this world is scared. Everybody in this world comes with insecurities and fears, but it takes courage. It's being scared, but going forward anyway.

Laurie McGraw:

So you didn't see differences nor did you have obstacles just because of gender, which is fantastic, and so that is really helpful to hear. In terms of the teams that you build and both here at Carrum Health, as well as others, is it equal in terms of the gender differentiation? Are women more in the few? What are you seeing?

Brook West:

I would say that historically, it's been fairly split as I reflect on the teams that I've built over time. Male, female. Right now, it skews slightly more female, but certainly not by design. For me, what I look for in hiring, "Do you believe?" I've always said, "Give me a believer over a non-believer and I will take lack of experience over anything. Because if you believe, anything's possible. So do you believe? Are you coachable? Is there evidence of hustle? And can you get through hard things?" That's what I look for, above experience and education. Certainly, experience and education could be threaded into belief, and evidence of hustle, and can you get through hard things? But that's the fabric. Those are the things that are the fabric that makes a successful sales professional.

Laurie McGraw:

Fantastic. And Brook, in that, in your own career progression, you've been at a lot of different companies, just look at your background, looks like 10 different companies over twice as many years. Why all the moves? Give us a little bit of the sense of why did you move from one to the other? And it seems like the majority of these positions fall in the realm of sales and business development. Clearly, you're passionate about that space.

Brook West:

Yeah. There's no question that's where I'm supposed to be. Why do I move? So I would say, again, it's around belief. So you've either stopped believing in something or you believe in something else more, believe that it's more of the right thing, can have more of an impact on the human race. So I'll tell you, two companies ago, I worked for an electronic health record company that sold into the Medicaid space, delivering a behavioral health focused electronic health record. It was the first time I dipped my toe in the healthcare waters. And at that point, I did not know that I was missing it until I had it, and that was being able to impact the human race.

Brook West:

Prior to that, I always believed in what I was selling, but it was some sort of utility, or certainly, it was a good product or service. I wouldn't have gone to the company if I didn't believe in it. But this time, I really believed, and I had now purpose to what I was selling. I wasn't just performing cashectomies and contributing to the tax space by virtue of what I was doing but I was impacting a human life by virtue of getting to do what I love to do, sales and marketing in technology. And it bit me quite a bit. And I've been in healthcare ever since. And I don't think I'll ever leave.

Laurie McGraw:

So being in this space and being tied to what the products are, the space that you're in, that you're adding value. And I really do believe that if you are in sales, that you, the best people in sales really do believe in the product that they're selling. It's not just the skills of a salesperson. The actual being tied in some way is particularly helpful. But with moves, in sales, usually there's a financial incentive people, and you've already said that with financial motivation is important to you, that makes a lot of sense, just being a sales professional and leader. In all these different move, has it always been a career advancement move for you? Have you taken lateral moves? Have you taken different types of roles to change course? Give us some sense for that, Brook.

Brook West:

Yeah. Great question. So except for one time, it's always been up in the form of level and/or responsibility. I did go lateral one time because it was a shift to a new market. And I'll tell you, Laurie, I would not do that again. Learning a new market is academic and I have proven that I can do that many, many times, learn a new market. So in retrospect, I should have known my worth and demanded more in terms of that role. I got scared. I didn't have confidence. I couldn't go in and say, "I know this market cold." But what I did know was sales. I do know sales cold and could do it with my eyes blindfolded. So learning this new market was just an academic effort.

Laurie McGraw:

Women always ask or seem to ask or have questions about knowing your worth. So given that, you say that, Brook, that you should have known your worth, what does that mean to you? How would you have known that? In retrospect, hindsight is always clearer than current state. How would you have known that? That would be really helpful for the listeners here.

Brook West:

I don't know if I would've known that. I was nervous about learning a new market. I was intimidated by it. So I think I had to learn that lesson in my career life. In fact, it helped me with another role where... I won't share which role exactly, but they wanted to offer me something lower title-wise and level-wise. And I put my foot down very, very hard. And I told the recruiters, I said, "If this is their decision, I'm out. I have other opportunities. I have the experience. I know what I can do. And I'm not taking anything less than what I'm worth." Because I knew that if I did, I'd be starting a role feeling sick to my stomach that I didn't believe in myself and it'd be starting off on the wrong foot and it would just unravel in a super negative way.

Brook West:

I don't know if you've heard this story. It's kind of one of those stories that's floated around on social media, but about a father giving his daughter a car for graduation. And it was a used car. And he told her to go to three different places to get the car valued. One was a junkyard. One was a used car place. And one was a fancy collector's car kind of a place. And she got three different quotes and they were all completely different and varied. And the moral of the story is go with the highest offer, go where you are most valued. If you're going to go somewhere where from the beginning, when they know that you're not all recognizing your value together, it's going to unravel negatively.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think that that is great advice. And when you are in a search or having to evaluate opportunities, knowing that, and being strong in putting your foot down, as you say, Brook, is just, I think, fantastic advice for listeners. Have you ever made a bad choice? Have you ever walked away from a choice and then regretted it later? Any stories like that?

Brook West:

I wouldn't be human if I said, "No, I've never done that." Of course, I've done that. Yes, I've definitely done that. So one time... Two different times I'll mention. One was I went to Microsoft. This was a million years ago. Shame on them. Shame on me. That was an interview process that did not vet the right result. I should not have gone there. I'm not a big company kind of a gal. And so I stayed there as long as I could stand it, which was five months. So I recognized it very, very quickly. For another time, I'll share with you the stories that got me to that decision so quickly. They're probably not appropriate for this podcast. They're very funny. But I did do it another time. And I recognized it very, very quickly.

Brook West:

And quite frankly, I took my grandmother's advice, which the quote from my grandmother that I just love is, "Whatever decision you make in life, it will be the right one because you will make it the right one." So I embraced this decision. I gave it my all, and I found ways to make it work for myself and extract experiences that were going to help me get my next career chapter. So in case it's not obvious, I'm referencing when I took a lateral move and that was a mistake, but I figured out a way to extract experiences that could help me charter that next career chapter.

Laurie McGraw:

In terms of, Brook, now making those choices and getting established in a new job, which you've done several times, and having the clear awareness that you're moving up into whatever the next position might be, how do you go about establishing yourself in a new role? And as a leader, how do you go about sort of establishing yourself with your team and building out your teams? Love some perspective there.

Brook West:

Yeah. Trust is everything. That's not new. I think I over-rotate on communication and asking for feedback. So I'll give you some examples. In my current role, I did this, because I'm essentially tasked with scaling the founder sale. Carrum has had ridiculous success all on the shoulders of our two co-founders. And so now, it's my role to take it and scale it. They're essentially handing

over their baby to me, and you got to build trust. And so I incorporated a playbook of just over-rotating on communication. Summarizing the meeting proactively to say, "Do I have all of this right? Are we aligned that this is the approach, this is what I learned, this is the summary, this is the approach going forward? Does everybody agree with this? Okay, great." So over-rotating on communication to build that trust so that everybody knows you've got it. And then doing the same thing with your teams, over-rotating on communication as it relates to expectation setting and feedback along the way so that everybody's aligned. It's really the only way to get it done.

Laurie McGraw:

And then Brook, in terms of also building out your own professional career and your skills as a leader, along the way, you've given me a couple of examples of good coaching advice that you've received from your mother, from your grandmother, any other sort of professional advice from mentors that you've received that has specifically resonated with you? Have you ever received bad advice that you either took or ignored that shaped your trajectory?

Brook West:

Oh boy. I had a mentor a long, long time ago who kicked me out of my own nest. And what I mean by that is I was a very successful individual sales rep, individual contributor. And I always thought back in my younger years, "Why would I go into management? It's so much work. People frustrate me. I can move faster and more efficiently than anybody. I'm going to make more money than anybody. Why would I take on more?"

Brook West:

And I had a mentor tell me, "It's time to grow your career and it's time to move forward." And kicked me out of my own nest. And so I started managing a team and I didn't realize how much I would enjoy it. Maybe it's the mama bear in me, I don't know, but it was the right thing to do. So that was phenomenal advice. From a professional kind of female exec crew that I look to, I'll be honest, I'm thrilled that you have this podcast, Laurie, because I need some more outlets. I want to find others to help grow me and inspire me. So I'm kind of on the hunt a little bit.

Laurie McGraw:

For what? For other mentors, for other allies who can help grow your skills? Give us a little bit more on that.

Brook West:

Yes. A hundred percent. So I'm looking for inspiration and mentorship for female execs that have gone before me and can kind of be a partner for me going forward.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, what I like about that, Brook, is that I think with so many accomplished, inspiring women, they're always looking to continue to grow in their own development so there's never an end state no matter what stage you are in your career journey and that's just a really excellent point. As we close out this conversation, I'm loving talking to you, Brook. This is so much fun. Any sort of last pearls of wisdom that you've learned over your years that you might want to leave with listeners?

Brook West:

Oh my gosh. Well, believe even if you don't. Have the courage. Acknowledge being scared, having some fear, but go for it anyway. Don't let it stop you. And if you think that others aren't doing the same thing, you're wrong. Every single person out there is scared, has insecurities, has fear. So find comfort and validation that you're not alone, but don't ever let it stop you. Just keep driving. Keep pushing forward.

Laurie McGraw:

Brook, this has been an excellent conversation. This has been an Inspiring Women episode with Brook West from the lemonade stand to a high growth digital health company. I've really enjoyed this conversation, Brook. Thank you so much.

Brook West:

Thanks Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

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