

Inspiring Women

Episode 45: Alerie Stiles

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:

Today on Inspiring Women. I'm speaking with Alerie Stiles. Now Alerie describes herself as on a mission to improve health care for physicians and patients through technology. She is a Vice President of Specialty Solutions and Strategic Alliances at TSI Healthcare. She's been there for 13 years. She started right out of college from a job as a development specialist, and seven promotions later, she's a Vice President there now.

Laurie McGraw:

TSI is a company that's focused on implementing and extending next gen healthcare solutions. Alerie is an expert in working with technology and physicians now, and Alerie, I'm really excited to speak with you today.

Alerie Stiles:

Hi, I'm really excited to speak with you.

Laurie McGraw:

All right. Well, let's get into it. Now, Alerie, I was introduced to you by Nancy Ham, another inspiring women that we both know, and she described you as a dynamo, so I am really excited to talk to you.

Laurie McGraw:

Why don't we start this conversation. I always start on Inspiring Women with, what are you doing right now? What does your day-to-day look like? What does your job look like?

Alerie Stiles:

My goodness. Day-to-day is, there's an Account Development team. So I wear a few hats, you know, small company, which you just wear several hats. You have to be a little bit of a maverick. There's one team, the Account Development team, which that just means cold calling. So that is a team that is looking for new clients in the industry, and you were mentioning next gen earlier.

So TSI Healthcare is kind of the specialty arm of next gen in a few different verticals and a few different specialties. Cardiology is our newest one, pulmonology and sleep medicine, and really our bread and butter and TSI Healthcare owns the market in rheumatology.

Alerie Stiles:

So one of my teams, they are out there cold calling private practice, physician, community practices in all of those specialties to help find new business for our sales reps. So I'm always helping them strategize. Here are pain points that those practices are experiencing, and here's what we've done to solve those problems.

Alerie Stiles:

Another day-to-day, is I have a daily meeting in our Specialty Development, whether it's for one of those specialties, so I'm over all of those specialties, right? So it's kind of having a little business within a business, having a cardiology development meeting of what do we need to be building? What do we need to have ready for this next upgrade? What do we need to be building in rheumatology? Even though we own the market, how do we stay ahead, and not let anyone come from behind, and how do we not get comfortable and always keep developing?

Alerie Stiles:

So running those development meetings. At least a few times a week, I'll be meeting personally with physicians in those markets, key opinion leaders, and getting feedback. What do you like? What do you not like? So running those, workflow or shadow meetings ... what else? We also, with our partnerships I'll have-

Laurie McGraw:

My God, it sounds like so much. Is there anything, Alerie, that you don't do? That, I think, is the real question. Sounds like a lot.

Alerie Stiles:

[crosstalk 00:04:01] person on the Accounting team.

Laurie McGraw:

Let's go back a little bit. You've been at TSI for 13 years, so you started with an internship, you were immediately Rookie of the Year, and then on, seven promotions later, to Vice President. Now was healthcare technology always an interest, or was it just something that you fell into and then had success with, obvious success, given the number of promotions in the years that you've been there.

Alerie Stiles:

Absolutely fell into it. Hands down a lucky moment of mine, of just meeting the right person at the right time, and they took a chance on me. I think they knew my work ethic was there, but absolutely pure luck, and now it's an obsession. How can we eliminate prior authorizations in the entire country, through HR, through technology? Because that's the biggest pain, but ... I started

at the bottom. We had about 20 employees, and we didn't have Salesforce, and I was our first cold caller.

Alerie Stiles:

When I say, "started at the bottom," I mean, if you're willing to cold call, you're willing to grind it out, but we tracked leads through Excel spreadsheets. So now we're over 200 employees, and it's been a really good ride.

Alerie Stiles:

But when I say lucked out, one, it was lucky to get this great opportunity, but two, I started at TSI Healthcare in 2008. That's when the High Tech Act was signed, and that's when EHR is ... you know, the carrot and the stick incentives for physicians to implement EHR took off. So it's really been a ride, and purposeful growth from our CEO to grow strategically, not sell as many systems as fast as possible. It's really stay in your lane and give the best support in the country.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, talk being in the right place at the right time. Starting at the bottom, employee number, small number, to over 200, you've seen a lot of growth, but I also understand, working with physicians who are implementing technology, that's my background as well. That's hard work, and physicians are on all different parts of the spectrum in terms of being tech savvy or not, and we all know that EHRs with physicians are not the most loved technology on the planet. There's a struggle, and this burden that's created from the technology.

Laurie McGraw:

So I want to talk a little bit about, you work a lot with physicians, directly with physicians. What do you like about it? What is hard about that and, how do you navigate, which are undoubtedly difficult situations, intense moments that you have to work through in your career?

Alerie Stiles:

Oh, that's the number one question. That's the favorite part of the job is, we took an approach, and it was about 2010, 2011, we had a couple of physicians who hated our system. There were a couple of rheumatologists, they were saying, "This system is designed for internal medicine. It was not designed for our specialty," so we saw that as an opportunity, as a small private company, "Okay, let's look at rheumatology as a specialty, it's ignored in the market, and let's figure out how to design a system around physician," and we took the opposite approach of most DHRs. Most DHRs develop and design based around what the government tells them they have to do. Everybody sort of [inaudible 00:07:37] and meaningless use or meaningful use as the docs like to call it right? And it's just a ton of clicks.

Alerie Stiles:

That's the first question I asked physicians when I get to meet them before a client is, other than not having an EHR that was forced on them from the government, what's your wishlist? How can we get the clicks out of the way? And we really try to design an EHR around a physician, and get it out of their way, so they don't lose that face time with their patients, and it's not one just designed for a physician, but designed for their specialty, and there's so many systems out there,

that are just trying to be one solution for everyone, instead of just picking a lane, and really going after it, and designing around that specialty.

Laurie McGraw:

Alerie, you sound very, very comfortable with the technology and the specifics of how to make a physician successful. In terms of dealing with those people on the other end of the conversation or who you're working with, who are frustrated, is it your depth of knowledge that gives you the ability to navigate those situations? How did you dive into that? When you started at the bottom, you didn't know as much as you obviously know now.

Alerie Stiles:

One, it is your depth of knowledge. Now I have the street cred of, they know who I am in the industry, so they know, "Okay, this company is here to help me. They are willing," but at first it was advice from my CEO of, "Don't show the fear, because they can smell the fear and they might eat you alive."

Alerie Stiles:

And I feel a lot of people are sometimes afraid to speak to physicians, and try to get in there, get in the weeds with them. I've shadowed over a thousand physicians at this point.

Laurie McGraw:

Wow.

Alerie Stiles:

A lot of people are a little afraid sometimes, because in the conversation with the physician, you're usually a patient and it's like, "What's going on?" Where you find, if you get in there and you just want to help, that's all they want, because EHRs, the industry are just, it's such a, it's almost a four letter word, right?

Alerie Stiles:

And EHR is almost a four letter word to providers, to where, if you're now the person that's like, "Listen, I'm here to help. Tell me what you want. Tell me what you like. Tell me what you don't like. Tell me what's too many clicks."

Alerie Stiles:

Then you have to go back and you have to execute. You have to get a concrete list. You have to report back, "Here's what I heard," and now you have to make it happen. You can't just go on-site and make them feel good, and then come back with nothing in your hands. You really have to come back and make sure development change actually happened at a reasonable rate, not two years later, and then they believe you, then they have the buy-in, and then you have a relationship for life. You have to actually make it happen.

Alerie Stiles:

And at the end of the day, I'm not a developer. We have way smarter people than that. They are doing the magic in the background, making things happen automatically, but what's fun is, I get to be the hero. So the docs think that my team did it, where really our Development team, they're the stars. They're the ones making it happen. We're just the face that's translating for the development team, so we're kind of the in-between between physicians and practices and our Development team.

Laurie McGraw:

The passion for your work really comes through, in terms of how you talk about this, and I can tell that you're probably in a situation now, where no one's smelling fear, because you really do seem to know what you're talking about, and that's wonderful in terms of being able to help physicians and others use technology in ways that works for them, as opposed to the opposite.

Laurie McGraw:

But Alerie, let's turn the conversation a little bit. Let's talk about you, in terms of how you think about your career. Again, you've been working at this from the bottom rung to now, a senior position at this company that's grown significantly over a dozen or so years. How do you think about your career? Do you have a vision for yourself, or have you been the type of person who is just pursuing the current thing right in front of them? Give us a sense for that.

Alerie Stiles:

Oh, the current thing right in front me, has led me to a vision, to where, when you've spent so much time in front of physicians, where that's the current thing, and you hear the same thing over and over of what their pains are, and it's a nationwide issue, and you form personal relationships with your clients, it becomes your mission, I see what needs to happen.

Alerie Stiles:

And so that is my career focused mission for the future, is I'm going to say a dirty word, prior authorizations, and that is the future mission of how do we eliminate those, whether it's looking at starting a company in five to 10 years to help eliminate prior authorizations. We're even trying to build little technology in our system, to create clinical pathways, to work with payers, in order to get prior authorizations out of providers' way, right?

Laurie McGraw:

It's a huge pain point for physicians undoubtedly, undoubtedly, but for you, what was the sort of aha moment during the time, you were like, "Wow, I'm pretty good at this, and I'm enjoying doing this, and now I understand not just what I'm doing specifically, but the broader healthcare system." Was there an aha moment where you went from just working hard to having more of that vision, or was that always there in terms of future vision of yourself?

Alerie Stiles:

Yeah. I don't think there's been an aha moment. Maybe when Nancy Ham recommended me, that might be it, because that's undoubtedly flattering and I was shocked, as you already know, but it's really just the mission at [inaudible 00:13:40] and seeing what the bigger problem is and, in order for practices to survive, there's so much legislation and barriers we need to get out of the

way, and I think I'm the person that can do it. So I know a lot of smart people, I work with some of the best in the industry at our company and our partners, and I know this is something that we can do for the entire nation. So it sounds like it's a huge undertaking. It is, but someone's going to have to do it, and I feel like that is my mission.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Alerie, we need it. Healthcare is a big place, and those issues like prior off, are really large challenges out there, so we need your energy to solve some of those very, very significant problems.

Laurie McGraw:

Again, going to some of the career steps along the way, many promotions over the years that you've been at TSI, how did those happen? Were those just given to you? Did you pursue them? Did you ask for them? Did you have sponsors, supporters? Give us some insights there.

Alerie Stiles:

It's a combination of everything. So a couple of times it was, I knew there was something I wanted to do and I asked for it, and you put together a business plan. I have to give credit. My CEO, if you put together a business plan that makes the company money or saves the company money, he wants you to run with it. So I'm so thankful for his mentorship, but I've had several leaders, managers, VPs over the years, that have really been advocates for me, and occasionally it'll be, I'll ask for something and I'll see an opportunity, and occasionally it'll be, they'll have something that they have an opening for, and they'll come and pick you up and say, "We want you to do this," whether it was cold calling, field sales, sales engineer, just doing demos, going where you're told for sales reps.

Alerie Stiles:

And that was a way to learn what docs like and don't like, so then when you're doing a demo and you're hearing pain points, and docs are saying, "I don't like this," then sometimes you stick your neck out there and you talk to the Development team, "Can we do this? Can we build this?" And then you get into client relations where it's, you're obsessed with their happiness, and in order to grow the business, you have to have happy clients that give referrals, and then creating little entire business units within the company of our specialties. So there's not just one answer. Sometimes you ask for it, but sometimes you really have an advocate that sees something in you that maybe you don't, and they give you some major opportunities.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. Well, Alerie, your energy is just infectious and it just really, really shines through. Another thing I'm curious about, young women, young professionals, as yourself, who are having success in their careers, they have different approaches that, in terms of what I've seen or spoken to, in terms of how they think about mentors and sponsors, do you have a network of mentors and sponsors, either within the company or outside the company? Is that a purposeful thing for you, or just something that you don't think about and they just sort of show up when you need them?

Alerie Stiles:

Yeah, I absolutely have a network, and very purposeful groups out there that I've worked with over the years, and honestly, my CEO is a mentor. I've had several VPs who are no longer at the company, who I'll still reach out to, and just other leaders in our partners, that will help you on the side, and take a call, if you're thinking, "Hey, we're thinking about doing this. What are your thoughts?" That they'll get on the phone with you in a second, and these are major officers of a company, that are willing to take five minutes of their time or 10 minutes of their time to get on the phone with you. You listen, and you take that opportunity and just be a sponge. So I've been really lucky in my work.

Laurie McGraw:

Have you ever cold called someone, specifically to seek them out as a mentor? I've talked to some women who have done that successfully, and I'm just curious if that's been a tactic you've tried, that that's worked for you.

Alerie Stiles:

I have, I have done that once, and-

Laurie McGraw:

I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised at all.

Alerie Stiles:

It worked. I [inaudible 00:18:06] someone's career path. I'd heard about them, and I didn't want to reach out and say, "Hey, will you be my mentor? Will you tell me your story?" They don't have time for that. They're out there crushing it. They don't have time to tell me their story, right?

Alerie Stiles:

But I did want to just say, "Here's what I'm thinking. Here's what we're trying to do at this company. What do you think?" And just have that five minutes. It's so lucky, and it worked.

Alerie Stiles:

So anyone that's thinking about reaching out to someone, don't be scared. I think a lot of people see executives and they're really scared, and what's funny is they're usually executives for a reason, because they're usually hiring people smarter than them, and building the best teams around them that helps all of us grow.

Laurie McGraw:

I think that's very good advice. I encourage that all the time. People who are curious and wanting to learn something about their job and gain knowledge from somebody else who you think might have information, people are flattered, and often just really appreciate those kinds of research and, by the way, learn something in return, in terms of how people who are directly working on an issue are experiencing it or thinking about it.

Laurie McGraw:

So that's fantastic that you have tried it, it worked. And again, I agree with you, to encourage all other people to continue to do that. It's really helpful.

Laurie McGraw:

Alerie, this has just been a great conversation. As we close out here on Inspiring Women, any last closing thoughts or advice that you might give to younger professionals who are just starting out, that they can learn from your career journey?

Alerie Stiles:

Go with your gut. If you see a need and you're hearing something and you're thinking, "I would want that," go with it. Absolutely go with your gut.

Alerie Stiles:

I believe there are so many people who want to say they have success, but they're not willing to put in that extra 5% or 10%, and if you're that person that is willing to just put your head down and grind it out, you'll make it.

Alerie Stiles:

I get inspired by a lot of entrepreneurs. It's always people who took the chance on themselves and started their company. Our CEO started his company over his garage, and I'm constantly inspired by go with your gut, take a chance on yourself, grind it out, you'll make it happen.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think that's fantastic advice. It clearly is working for you, Alerie, and I really appreciate this conversation.

Laurie McGraw:

I have been speaking with Alerie Stiles on Inspiring Women. Alerie, thank you so much.

Alerie Stiles:

Thank you.

Laurie McGraw:

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Laurie McGraw:

I am Laurie McGraw, and thank you for listening.