

Inspiring Women

Episode 5: Meg Barron

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, we are talking with Meg Barron, who is the Vice President of Digital Health Innovations at the American Medical Association. And Meg has responsibility for driving a roadmap of initiatives in the area of innovation and digital health that support America's physicians. She works with physicians, she works with technology leaders and she works with solution innovators across the healthcare spectrum. She's launched a number of important initiatives for the nation during her tenure at the AMA things like the AMA's Healthier Nation Innovation Challenge. She's established the AMA Interaction Studio at Matter. The AMA Physician Innovation Network, and Meg is a sought after speaker. She speaks at a lot of the big tech conferences. She publishes her work in important forums like Health Affairs or Harvard Business Review, Nature, Digital Medicine. She's on the advisory board of a number of health tech challenges. And she's also on the editorial board of an important digital magazine. Meg, we're really excited to be talking to you this morning.

Meg Barron:

Thanks, Laurie. I'm really excited to be here. Thanks for having me

Laurie McGraw:

Well, great. Well, Meg, here on Inspiring Women, what we like to talk about, and we'd like to talk to inspiring women like you. You are accomplished, you are doing things in a tech space, which is really dominated by men and you're making a difference there. So let's start, I gave a bit of your bio, but why don't you tell us what you're doing right now? What are you working on these days?

Meg Barron:

Well, first thank you. I'm flattered to be included in this group and in the podcast itself. As you said, I serve as Vice President for Digital Health Strategy at the American Medical Association and really at the highest level of what we're focused on is improving the quality of digital health technologies. And that means a lot of things to a lot of different people and is a pretty wide umbrella and also working to advance the adoption and optimization of evidence-based

technologies, such as tele-health, remote patient monitoring, all with the end goal of better outcomes and helping to really reduce burdens between the physician and patient relationship.

Laurie McGraw:

So you've been at the AMA, how long, Meg? How long have you been working in this area?

Meg Barron:

It's been almost 12 years at the AMA, which just seems wild to think about, but it's [crosstalk 00:03:12] yeah. It's been in about four to five different roles. So it's been a really interesting journey and almost a management program of sorts, if I think back on it, but there's just been a lot of steps along the way in the journey, which has gotten me to this place.

Laurie McGraw:

Let's talk about that a little bit more. From what you're doing right now, you've got your hands on a lot of innovative areas and you get to work with innovators across a pretty broad space, digital health medicine. And so what you're doing right now, is this what you dreamed about? Is this where you wanted to be? How did you get here?

Meg Barron:

Yeah, great question. So I'd say, to first take a step back. My parents were both entrepreneurs or had small businesses, I should say. And I think that's really been embedded in my DNA since a child and really most of my family have their own small businesses. So I've seen the pros and cons that come with that and the trade-offs and balances that also come along with that. I was actually really one of the first in my family to go work for an organization right out of college instead of starting a business myself.

Meg Barron:

But with that, I think really has come a sense of entrepreneurship and all of the work that I do. I started my career at SmithBucklin Corporation, which is the world's largest association management company, working for business and healthcare clients. And really they're set up more as an agency. And I had various different clients and was juggling tasks and got a decent amount of responsibility at a pretty young age and had the ability to move up a few times while I was there, two or three times. And then went to Capgemini, a global consulting firm, working on consumer product goods and marketing and strategy for Capgemini.

Meg Barron:

And then yeah, came to AMA about 12 years ago and was in more of a marketing segmentation management capacity at the time, which really led into starting to develop different resources and products. And at the time AMA then started creating a portfolio and product management team, which really started opening the door to a lot of these different health tech accelerator and incubator relationships, both for internal needs, but also in recognition that we wanted to ensure that physician and patient voices are being represented in all of these emerging and really proliferation of digital health technologies and solutions. So digital health really has been the natural progression for that. And there's no shortage of problems to tackle here.

Laurie McGraw:

There aren't. And it also speaks to sort of how you came into this. Because your degree, you've got a communications degree, you've got an MBA. So digital health and tech is not necessarily the key area where you focus on, at least during your years of education. But now you're a sought after speaker. You are very prolific in terms of research and writing in this area. So as you think about how you've fallen into these things, would you say that you are pursuing this because of the domain or it's more the personal professional opportunity or something different?

Meg Barron:

I think it's a mix of all of the above. But I definitely would say I'm attracted to kind of big, hairy problems. Professionally and personally. And I say that personally, just because my husband and I take on a number of remodeling projects and I see some similar analogs to even digital health and healthcare in general that I can touch on.

Meg Barron:

But I would say digital health, to me, there's no shortage of problems to solve like I was saying. And I have really an affinity for that. I'd say my strengths are, I would say, in really helping to make connections and connecting of dots. And recognizing that collaboration is essential to be able to start to chip away at a lot of the issues that are currently being experienced in today's market. And that there's no shortage of innovators out there looking to attempt to chip away at these. But a lot of times the bridges between these two worlds have not been connected. And to me, an exciting part of this job is being able to help to make those connection points, help to actually bridge different stakeholder groups that historically have really just been separated in the past.

Laurie McGraw:

So that's kind of interesting because in terms of doing what you do, and you do it really well, is the connection point that you've gravitated to. But you're in a domain where you also have to have a certain level of expertise. A common thing that women talk about is just the confidence that they feel in the subject matter. There's no shortage of big, important men who work in the digital health space, who work here. How do you hang with them? How confident are you in your expertise? Where's that coming from?

Meg Barron:

Yeah, I think it comes from doing the work. And I think that's something that has taken time to come into. And I think it's something that in even reflecting in my career today, don't underestimate your ideas, don't undermine or underestimate your voice. Don't underestimate that if you have a question about something being discussed, likely most in the group do too, and the group is waiting for someone ask.

Meg Barron:

So I think I can bring a sense of common sense of just attempting to, or how I try to approach it is from a sense of, how do we think through this, from a both strategic lens, but also from a common sense lens. And I think with that, you obviously have to have expertise of doing the research, being able to point to literature or being able to point to qualitative perspectives that are

collected. But also to think through, well, how can we tackle this and what are some blue sky ideas and who are the right players that have to be at the table if we are going to start to think through ways for a better solution for a better tomorrow, which we all know we need in healthcare.

Laurie McGraw:

It's a lot of confidence that you're talking about and you're speaking from a place of confidence. Have you always been confident in these conversations?

Meg Barron:

Well, I think, like I said, it's been a progression. And I think, I feel extremely lucky that I grew up with a mom who blared Helen Reddy nearly every single day, which helps. But at the same time, no, it's something that you have to, I feel, I had to feel confident in my own skin and to do so you have to take the steps, do the work, learn, repeat, repeat, repeat. And then I think with that comes the confidence to make sure your voice is included and that there's a seat at the table.

Meg Barron:

And that women in general, historically and still today, I think at times, speaking for myself, there's a sense of you feel grateful for an opportunity. And with that, you don't necessarily sometimes feel that you want to ask for more. Or push the envelope or that can be perceived a different way. And I think that is something that you realize once you start peeling back the onion that, that's needed more than ever right now. And that different diverse perspectives, not only from a gender perspective, but from a racial and just different populations need to be represented and their voices heard for better technologies, better solutions, just overall in healthcare.

Laurie McGraw:

I agree with that. And I also, I know what you're talking about, in terms of when you get the opportunity, feeling grateful for it and not necessarily pushing and feeling that you earned it and it should have been given to you. And that's a common thing that women struggle with. So let's just dig into that just a bit more. So have you had situations where you pushed for something next more for yourself? What was it, what did it look like? How did you do it? Have there been times where you should have done that and you just didn't, you're waiting for it to be given to you, just get give some of how you've handled that.

Meg Barron:

Yeah. I think my entire career has been a mix of push and pull. I think earlier on in my career, it was more sit back and wait. And I think it's been distilled in me that you do the work and that good things will come from that. And that you have to follow your gut and becoming at your career, coming at anything that you're passionate about from an authentic lens. That said, when the results aren't coming from that, it's on you. No one's going to ask on your behalf to speak up, to know your own value, know your own worth, know your own work ethic. To be able to advocate for yourself and to make sure that your career progression is being led by you.

Meg Barron:

And if those opportunities aren't presented, then those are decisions that need to be made to either keep going and wait, which isn't necessarily, in my opinion, the best approach always. Or to redirect and pivot and think through if there are different opportunities, either internally or potentially externally, that you have to think about. In my own career, I had three director roles prior to my latest vice president role at the AMA. And prior to my first director role at the AMA, I was at a crossroads in my own career because I had actually started as small startups through the Built in Chicago in 1871 Community in Chicago.

Meg Barron:

And I was strongly thinking about just going that direction and had an opportunity, actually, to be a executive director for a local accelerator program here in Chicago. I made the decision to stay at AMA and it was ironic because I ended up back at the Merchandise Mart nearly every day, helping to get our partnership with Matter, which is located in the Merchandise Mart up and off the ground. But I reflect on that because that was a moment in time where I think about just where different paths would have taken it. But I do think if you're coming at your career from an authentic lens, your past, most likely, just with my example there, end up leading you down a similar lane, just based on your strengths, based on your interest areas. So to me, that's what I continue to come back to and have perspective on is, if I feel passionate about the work that I'm doing, I'm most likely in the right place, which I definitely do right now.

Laurie McGraw:

You're also always pursuing. And I think that many accomplished women are always thinking about, where am I right now and what's next? And so those moments in time where you did deep introspection on is this the right place and you come back to, yes, it is. Or it's not pursued. They're very, very helpful. And so I think that's just a really terrific point.

Laurie McGraw:

A lot of women that I speak with, they spend a lot of time worrying about those big decisions. And I find that to be just very healthy introspection, to helping your own career progression. Meg, I want to come back to the confidence thing, because that is just ... women I speak to, that is almost the number one thing that people, they worry about. And you are just exuding that confidence. And sounds like in the tables that you sit at, this is something that's really important to you. I've been reading a lot lately about the imposter syndrome. We've got a new book coming out from Amy Cuddy in this sort of fake it till you make it genre. How much of what you're doing, that confidence is coming because you truly have it or are you faking it till you make it. What's going on there?

Meg Barron:

Well, I certainly hope that it's not faking until I make it, but I definitely understand that concept. And actually there was a HBR article on this, I think just this past week, which was interesting and saying that even continuing to talk about imposter syndrome is kind of contributing to this issue in ways. In one hand-

Laurie McGraw:

I'm sorry.

Meg Barron:

No, no, no, no. I think it's really an important topic right now, because I think on one hand, you have to talk about it. And I think that it's not just women, it's you hear about this too and from a diversity standpoint, from men as well, I think definitely feel this, especially in different circles. But it's something that needs to get talked about. It's interesting because I think that this just gets back to some of the original questions about just coming into your own skin and knowing your own value and your own worth. And again, the authenticity that is needed to be in parallel with confidence. That you have to feel that the work that you're doing is compelling and that you have a strong passion and desire to make change. And I think for me, that's just essential to getting me up every single day.

Meg Barron:

And the days are long, the years are short mentality, of looking back even on 12 years here, it feels like it's flown by. But when I think about kind of the different paths slash journey steps along the progression, it's just very interesting to see from point A to right now, I feel like I'm just right in the thick of it and that there's just so much more to do. So that doesn't necessarily get specifically at the imposter syndrome question. But I think what it does get at is having a passion for what your work is, coming from an authentic place for doing the work. And that natural confidence comes from knowing the work that you're doing, having put in the effort. And having the insights to be able to know your own expertise on a certain topic or subject matter expert.

Laurie McGraw:

I will tell you, I think that the overwhelming majority, if not the entire 100% of accomplished women like yourself, putting in the work is just a given. You have to put in the work. So I think what you're telling us, Meg, is you're not faking it, you're making it. And that's really great to hear. I mean, it really is great to hear. And you're talking about where you are in your career journey, you're doing important work. Are you thinking about what's next? So you're in a strong place doing important things. Do you think about the future? Do you have a next place of accomplishment or are you just focused on what you're working on right now? How do you think about things?

Meg Barron:

Well, and this is where you've got a plan. But at the same time, especially with this past year with COVID, it's best laid plans. So I'd say no one in healthcare, no one in digital health, should ever be satisfied with the current state. So there's just always more to do. There's endless amounts of problems to tackle and to think through it from a comprehensive lens and the right players that need to be at the table to be able to tackle big, hairy, audacious goals. So to me that keeps me very, very energized and I think relationships matter. And I think that even the relationships and inspiration that I drawn from the colleagues I get to work at across the AMA and with external counterparts from all across the industry, really keeps me inspired. Keeps me wanting to keep the train moving towards progress.

Meg Barron:

So I'd say that is what gets me up, gets me going, keeps me on a kind of path to progression in my career. I'd say how that relates to title, how that relates to what's next from a ladder

perspective. I honestly can say, I don't necessarily think about it as much from that lens, good or bad. I think honestly, it's more about the, am I energized and passionate about the work that I'm doing right now?

Meg Barron:

Of course, I think, especially for women, I participated in a session years back where there was just such startling statistics about the small percentage of women who asked for promotions or ask for what they want in their career, which hit me pretty hard on, again, reflecting and making sure that I am advocating for myself, that I am knowing my worth in the work that I'm doing. So of course, bring that lens to the table, but more than anything, want to make sure that I feel like I'm helping to make a difference and that I'm helping to make the right connections and helping to really be inspired by the colleagues that I'm surrounded by.

Laurie McGraw:

And it also sounds like impact matters. So the work needs to continue to energize you. And that sounds like it needs to be making a difference. So let's talk a little bit more and then we'll close out on inspiring. And in terms of the mentors, mentors that are just typically pretty important to accomplish women like yourself. Have you had mentors? You mentioned your mom, have there been others? How that help you?

Meg Barron:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, my mom, 100%. My mom, unfortunately, passed away about five years ago. But it's been interesting to think back how much she really has made me the person that I am, like most moms do. But I think I took for granted the fact that I've had a mom my entire life saying to me, you can do anything you want. And not in the cheesy way, but more in a, if you do the work, you can do anything you want. And I think that is not something everyone has. And that really has made me who I am.

Meg Barron:

My grandma, too, raised seven children and had my grandpa passed away when he was in his early forties. So when I'm having a bad day and I think about the sacrifices that she has made to raise six strong women and one strong son and a slew of grandchildren, many who are women, again, keeps me inspired for sure. And also makes me think, hmm, what am I complaining about? But again, that balance of knowing your worth and making sure you're speaking up for yourself, but also having a sense of gratitude for where you're at.

Meg Barron:

I'd say professionally, no shortage of mentors as well. I mean, Laurie, you, for sure, your drive and passion for your work is 100% contagious and you are always extremely generous with your time. And even the fact that you're doing this podcast, I think speaks volumes. I think Dr. Modena Wilson, Julie Gill, Denise Haggerty, who's our CFO, all have had an impact on my career. I think the work Dr. Aletha Maybank and our Center for Health Equity right now, I'm inspired by that daily, really. I mean the expertise, the, again, collaborations and really more than anything, the amplification of the needs right now for health equity in healthcare is absolutely essential.

Meg Barron:

And then last but not least, I mean, I've been extremely lucky to have amazing male mentors as well. So Dr. Michael Hodgkins and Michael Tutty, who I work for right now, who's our Group Vice President of Physician Satisfaction and Practice Sustainability, all have made impacts on my career. And again, I feel grateful that the mentors have also often been managers in my life or people that I have been able to have a very close working relationship with. And at the same time, there are others that I've learned more so by observing the way that they've approached their careers, where they likely don't even know that they've been mentors to me. But again, their leadership by example has really meant a lot.

Laurie McGraw:

Those things really matter. And Meg, I'm really sorry about your mom. I mean, but the number, again, of inspiring women that I know like yourself, that they come from family support and strong mothers, it is a often theme. And I'm sure it's really difficult to have that loss, but that's also a long list of additional folks that are there. I'm glad to be included in the list, of course, but there are many, many people there. But you are inspiring and I am inspired by you, Meg. And so, as we close out today, what is your advice for younger women who are starting out in their careers, that you'd just like to give them some advice?

Meg Barron:

Yeah, I would say, it's hard to think about this about again, having it come off like a cheesy Eagle soaring in the sky poster, but-

Laurie McGraw:

Don't be cheesy. Give some real advice.

Meg Barron:

But really, it's follow your gut and have authenticity about what you're doing. And I think that's hard to steer you in the wrong direction. And that can also often be difficult conversations with yourself. But again, that's often not going to lead you astray, if you really keep coming back to that. I think have perspective. You can often get really sucked in to work and that's both good and bad. But you also have to continue to come back to what motivates you, what your family, your friends, et cetera, and other passions to help balance out your creativity and what makes you different or sets you apart in your career. And I like a quote that actually came from Meryl Streep, but she says, what makes you different or weird, that's your strength. And I do think that is really important to keep in mind. That authenticity, that little voice in your gut that tells you, I feel like I'm doing my best or being my best self in this situation. Keeping yourself grounded in that is incredibly important.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think that is great advice and I'm really glad that you shared it with everyone. Meg, this has been a great conversation. I really appreciate you taking the time to speak to us on Inspiring Women. And you can find more inspiring women talks like with Meg Barron, Vice president at the American Medical Association on the Inspiring Women website. Meg, where can people find you?

Meg Barron:

On LinkedIn is probably best. So it's just Meg B A R R O N. I'm on LinkedIn. And look forward to connecting.

Laurie McGraw:

Meg, it's been great talking with you today. Thank you so much.

Meg Barron:

Thanks Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

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