

# Inspiring Women

## Episode 52: Sarah Oremland

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](http://inspiringwomen.show) or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening and I hope you will be inspired. Today on Inspiring Women, we're speaking with Sarah Oremland. And Sarah is a social worker, but she's actually a leadership development consultant and executive coach. That's what she's doing now at YSC Consulting, which is global leadership strategy firm working on workforce development. Previously, she's got a history of doing sales management for software and services. So a really interesting background, as well as her certification as a social worker. She went to Bates College. She received her master's at the University of Chicago, and Sarah, I'm really excited to be speaking to you today.

Sarah:

Same to you, Laurie. It's really great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Laurie McGraw:

All right. Well, let's get started. So I always like to start on Inspiring Women getting oriented, what are you doing right now? So you're an executive coach. You work on leadership development. What is your day to day work look like?

Sarah:

Yeah, so it's a great question. The simplest way that I like to put what I do to people who aren't in this world is, I'm a business psychologist. So, really what does that mean? I do work for YSC Consulting. They are a leadership consultancy who's been around for about 30 years. They were started in the UK by a small group of psychologist who really saw the need to bring more of, what I would say is a psychological lens to working with leaders. And so, what I do on a day-to-day basis is work with organizations to say, "Okay, how do we identify and develop the leaders that they need to achieve their business strategies?" And that's both looking at presently, but also in the future. So my day-to-day, it looks very different.

But it involves really anything from doing things like deep dive psychological assessments on leaders for both selection and development purposes. So if a company is hiring a new CFO, we will really understand, what are they like as a leader? How have they showed up? What is their self-awareness? How do they influence people? It's a really in-depth conversation. We also do, and I also do, CEO succession work, board effectiveness work, some diversity and inclusion

work now. And I would say as a whole, it's really about getting the chance to work with leaders, teams, and individuals, to imagine new possibilities for current challenges, understanding what are the drivers of change, building alignment and strengthening commitment to the business cause. And so I love what I do. My role [crosstalk]

Laurie McGraw:

It sounds like it Sarah. What I'm really interested in, so I just came back literally from a pretty significant large technology conference. So a lot of companies out there, a lot of venture backed, PE backed companies. And in terms of all the dollars that are flowing through healthcare and healthcare technology, organizations always look to leadership teams in terms of where the real opportunity is for driving success or not necessarily potentially at a company. So, assessing leaders, developing leaders, critical, critical function in the area of business. But let's just, before we dive into leadership, tell me about you. How did you get here? You started in social work, you did work in sales, and now you're an executive coach. So how did that pathway happen?

Sarah:

Yeah. So, what I would say, it's been a nonlinear path when you look at my resume. But hopefully when I explain it, it starts to make sense. And usually that's what happens. And so, I graduated college and I thought, "What do I want to do with my life?" I was not somebody who knew from a very young age what I wanted to be when I grew up. And I always knew I had an interest in people. I had an interest in human behavior. I had an interest in the mind. I had an interest in relationship building. But I didn't know how that was going to play out or even if that was going to be a career path. And so I started my career in sales and sales management working for, like you said, two different software as a service companies.

What I found was, I was successful at the business development aspect. But what really motivated me was not so much the selling itself, but managing a team of people many of whom were actually just starting their career themselves. And what I loved about that was understanding, "Okay, what makes you tick? What gets you up in the morning? What do you want to do with your life in the next three to five years?" And then I was also interested in, what's the psychology behind the buying decision? So, why do buyers buy? And so that led me down a path of really thinking about, okay, wanting to go into the realm of psychology. And I went back and forth between, "Do I get my PhD in clinical psych? Do I go to school for industrial organizational psychology? Do I get my social work degree?"

Anyways, I landed on a program at University of Chicago that focused not only on the individual, but on the systems at play. So both taking a micro and macro lens. Which really is what I wanted out of a program. I knew I needed the kind of direct practice clinical work. And so that's the route or path that I took, but I knew there's so much more to the picture here around, how does government interventions plan to this? How do hospital systems work to support the mentally ill and so on? And so, while in grad school, I worked with really interesting population, one of which was, I was working in an inpatient adult psychiatric unit here in Chicago. And really there is where I saw, "Okay, what happens when the brain is really sick? And what happens when everything in life is really against a person?" And so we saw people when they

were in crisis. And it was a fascinating journey for me to learn, not only about various diagnoses and medications, but also, how does the hospital system as a whole work to help support the individual in times of their greatest need?

Laurie McGraw:

I think Sarah, as you're talking about this, it really does sound like a nonlinear path. And I would also just say as a parent with 20 somethings, that it also sounds a bit like just bumping around not really sure where you want to land. Which I actually think, quite frankly, if you have those opportunities, it's fantastic at a young age to explore a bunch of different things before locking in and landing on a certain pathway. I mean, if you don't already know, those are really tremendous opportunities and enlightening experiences. What was your aha moment that the coaching and leadership development really clicked for you and you felt like, okay, this is something I could actually do and be impactful in?

Sarah:

Yeah. So it was after graduate school. So, I actually got straight into consulting right after graduate school. I actually, in graduate school. And again, this sounds like a bump around, which I think in many ways was true. I was trying to figure it out. Right? And I knew I missed the business world, but I knew I wanted to somehow combine psychology and commercial lens into one. And so, I started working with sales leaders and their teams to understand, okay, what does good look like in different sales roles? And what I started to notice was the aha moment was probably about eight years ago. And it wasn't so much that leaders were coming to me to say, "Okay, how do you define what a good account executive looks like or a good outside sales representative? But leaders started to ask me for, I guess, my counsel on more team dynamics. How to create an inclusive team? How to deal with work-life balance and their own sustainability? How to plan, in one case, plan for retirement and identify the shift that comes with that?

And what I noticed was, that it didn't really matter that I was 20, 30, actually sometimes 40 years junior to some of these leaders, what they actually needed was a coach. Someone who would actively listen, someone who asked thoughtful open-ended questions, someone to help connect the dots for them or with them, rather, and help define what is their leadership purpose? And the good news is, I looked forward to those conversations more than any of the conversations I was having. And so that's when it really clicked is, I could potentially make a career out of this.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. And it also sounds like people would come to you, but that means that they probably had comfort with you, trust in you, and also what you were telling them was probably insightful or gave them a new piece of information or something to think about. I liked your term of business psychologist in terms of what you're doing in executive coaching. So I want to move to that a bit and leadership development. First of all, who needs it? At what stage in someone's career do you actually need executive coaching or leadership development beyond what you're doing in your day-to-day job?

Sarah:

Yeah. It's funny, the typical consultant answer is, it really depends. Which in [crosstalk]

Laurie McGraw:

Give us the non good consultant answer.

Sarah:

But it depends really on where the leader's at in their career. The organizations openness to involving a coach in their leadership development practices. But really the biggest thing is the leaders openness themselves to working on their own personal and professional development. I truly think everyone can benefit. Every leader could benefit in some way from coaching. Where I see the biggest impact though, is when a leader, there's a level of self-awareness where they say, "Okay, I could use a thought partner on this. I could use somebody to help me get to answers that I may not have, or that questions that I might not even be thinking about."

And so, at YSC, we take a really time-bound framework to focus on what the individual needs at each stage of their career and craft, what I would say is like a bespoke coaching program and development plan. And so, leadership or executive coaching, it can range from transition coaching for people who are either promoted into, or starting in a new executive role. We do the maternity and paternity leave coaching, which has been really interesting. I actually went through that myself when I was [crosstalk]

Laurie McGraw:

When was that?

Sarah:

Yeah. So it's for individuals who are on a journey towards parenthood. And so what it looked like for me, and I was so thankful to go through this myself. I started at YSC when I was 12 weeks pregnant with my first child. And as a new mom or soon to be mom, I thought, "I don't know what I'm doing. I just started a new job. I don't know how to take care of a baby. So I, I linked up with actually a YSC coach who happened to be a mother herself, not to say that you would need to have that experience as a parent.

But what it looks like is really thinking about, what are the resources and support you need, or you have currently to help you prepare for a maternity leave? How much interaction do you want to have with your manager, your team, your organization, when you're out? And then, how do you start to think about transitioning back? And so, we would meet about once or twice a month and talk about my worries, talk about what I'm excited about, talk about the unknowns. And at that point, because I was working with a coach who was a mom herself, she was actually able to pull herself into some of those conversations in an advice kind of manner.

Laurie McGraw:

That also sounds like retention strategy for companies.

Sarah:

Yes.

Laurie McGraw:

After consulting for that, and that's very, very interesting. And there are so many reasons that we see people leaving the workforce or changing out of the workforce, this happening at higher and higher rates. So that just sounds like a good program, but also a retention kind of strategy for companies. Very interesting. Sarah, what do you think about in terms of executive coaching versus mentors? On Inspiring Women, we always talk about mentors and mentor networks. When do I need a coach versus just a mentor or a sponsor? How would you [inaudible]

Sarah:

Yeah. So I think, there can be some overlap here where your coach could be a mentor and your mentor could be a coach where I see the difference is though, mentors tend to be people that are personally invested in your growth, where you've either had a past relationship with them, where they're in the same line of business. They don't have to be. Where they know you on a deeper level from likely the start of the mentorship. Executive coaches. We don't need to know much about the leader before the relationship starts. That's how and when the relationship starts is, creating, what I would say is like a psychologically safe space for people to open up, and for people to have honest conversations. And so, while there's overlap, I do feel like coaching is also taking very much the commercial context of the business that the leader is in.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Sarah, I will say, I personally I've had executive coaches over the years. I've hired executive coaches for team members on my management team or teams. And I think it's highly valuable. I look to an executive coach for somebody who has a job responsibility to get a particular leader to a next level. And that next level is performance and performance for the organization that they're working with. So, the difference that I've always seen, the reason that I've been keen to make investments like that, is really about company performance.

And the other thing that I like about it when companies do invest in leadership development, invest in executive coaching, is they are showing a commitment to an individual. And it's a very powerful one. I've never had anyone I've worked with who is receiving a benefit of coaching that hasn't thoroughly appreciated that opportunity. In terms of leadership development at companies and management teams, you've been doing this for a little bit now. So what makes a good leadership team? What makes a team click and what's dysfunctional? And how do you correct for where you see dysfunction?

Sarah:

Yeah. So I would say, in our world at YSC, and I agree with this model, is there's four key elements of successful team effectiveness. And one is purpose. So what that looks like is being motivated, being ambitious, being focused as a team where you have a common meaning. The second is clarity. So being, we always say being operationally adult, what that means means is being operationally efficient. Having clear accountabilities and knowing how to prioritize. And then cohesion is really around, Okay? How do you think about yourselves as united front? How do you show team spirit? And is there a unity that's felt throughout? And then finally, we say there's got to be exchanged. So, basically the ability to respectfully challenge one another, to be open and to share views in a way that's really constructive. And that's giving in and taking in feedback.

And I see dysfunctional teams when one of those things if not more of those things is missing. And so, I'm working with a leadership team now where they're newly formed, there's some legacy members and there some new members, but as a team, as a whole, they're new. And they're really trying to understand, "Okay, what is our purpose? How do we take ownership? How do we take responsibility for the things that we know need to happen strategically in the next three to five years and beyond?" And so we're doing a workshop around team purpose at the moment. And so purpose, clarity, cohesion, exchange, I would say, make the teams that I see the most successful if they've got those four facets.

Laurie McGraw:

And how do you make it impactful, Sarah? So, you're doing this, you've established trust. And in order to make an impact, and change the dynamics of a team, you've become an executive coach and a leadership development person. So why do people listen to you? How does that work? What makes you effective at what you're doing?

Sarah:

I think it goes back to, my goal is always to make people feel safe. And I truly believe, when people feel safe and feel like they can open up to me, that's when real truths come out, that's when people start digging deeper than they may have ever before and saying, "Why am I the way that I am? Why is our team the way that it is?" And so, it's what I teach other or coach other leaders to do with how to create a psychologically safe space for other people, such that you as a leader are creating the conditions where other members of your organization can thrive.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that and establishing that sounds like something that you do upfront in terms of your workshops. You also mentioned DEI work. And so there are a lot of organizations that are focusing on DEI and just changing the complexion and the diversity across the different teams. Sometimes that's aid, sometimes that's race, ethnicity, gender, those kinds of things. Are those dynamics at play in these workshops as well. And if so, how does that work for you?

Sarah:

Yeah. It's a really important question to be asking. And I would say, even if we aren't doing a "DEI focused workshop," it's always in the backdrop. We always take the lens of having a diverse and inclusive environment. Yeah. I was just doing a workshop with an organization on resilience. And part of resilience is thinking about, "Okay, your support network." So, it's not about bouncing back, but it's about pulling the right strings, the right triggers, the right support network in to be able to help you recover effectively. And even in that, we had a conversation around, what is your support network look like?

Are you going to the same people over and over again? Or are you bridging to other people? And how are you creating both emotional and practical support for other people? And are you creating an inclusive environment where you're offering what the other person needs in terms of their support? And so, DEI, it's huge now. Right? And it needs to be. It's definitely manifesting in organizations now and capability building, but I'd even like to pivot it to talk about it as a talent imperative. So really in order to remain competitive for top talent, particularly millennials and gen Z, it absolutely is essential that companies show a consistent and clear focus on the importance of DEI. And how do they make sustained progress on public DEI commitments? So it's more so beyond the leader, beyond the team, it goes organizational wide. And how do you make those public statements known?

Laurie McGraw:

I do think it's also a competitive advantage. You're either walking the talk or you're not and it's very visible. I agree with that, Sarah. What about other considerations? So in the pandemic has changed the landscape for workers, teams are remote or sometimes in person, sometimes not in person. How does that change the team dynamics? And what are you seeing in terms of best examples of high performance in these mixed environments?

Sarah:

Yeah. I have a lot of conversation about hybrid or back to work plans. Companies are definitely now paying attention to employee wellness. That's a big hot topic I would say around my coaching experiences now with leaders. And the other one is, talent retention is a biggie since the job market is popping now. We're seeing that leaders and organizations are really investing in growth. They're investing in development and making really clear pathways to promotion clearer. And so the organizations that are doing that well and understanding, the world doesn't look like it did before and it's never going to. We are in a new world in so many ways. And having conversations about how that impacts teams, but how that impacts the individual. Everyone's lives are so different. And so, it's important to have open and honest conversations about, what is your life look like now and what do you need from me as your leader and what do you need from the organization?

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. Those are great points to focus on Sarah. And I agree with you, there is a need for organizations to really focus on keeping their talent and their top talent and continuing to develop them. This is really just a great conversation. There's so many things that we could talk about Sarah. I would like to close out probably on, just for women, and women who are developing as leaders, just as you look at some of the best that you're working with, what are the tips or just advice you might give to women specifically?

Sarah:

Yeah. So a big one for me is knowing your strengths and knowing where you might think about self development or professional development. There's tools out there that can certainly help with StrengthsFinder and the Hogan assessment. But I want to acknowledge that leveraging your strengths and being open and self-aware about prioritizing self-development is where I see the most effective leadership focus happening. And so, there's ways of actually developing your emotional intelligence. And so, what I am seeing is leaders who work to refine this quality are actually more adaptive, they're more resilient, they're more accepting of feedback from others, and that's one big one.

I would also say there's something around being inspirational. So embodying impactful and inspirational leadership, and making the organization's vision tangible and clear so that others can understand and align behind shared goals. And I would also say there's something around role modeling inclusiveness. I mean, we talk about diversity, equity and inclusion in conversation constantly today, but it's really championing the creation of an inclusive, collaborative workforce and role modeling and valuing and leveraging diversity in multiple forms.

Laurie McGraw:

Sarah, I think those are such great comments. Being a role model yourself, as well as just being inspirational, to having energy and bringing that to your leadership approach. This has just been a terrific conversation on Inspiring Women with Sarah Oremland. And Sarah, thank you so very much.

Sarah:

Thank you, Laurie. It's been a pleasure.

Laurie McGraw:

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