

# Inspiring Women

## Episode 6: Joanne Burns

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.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women. Today we are speaking with Joanne Burns. Joanne Burns is a board and C-suite healthcare business and technology leader with strategic operational and governance experience in companies ranging from fortune 500 to early stage startups. Now just a little bit about Joanne's background. She started off as a registered nurse at Memorial Sloan Kettering, went on to Stanford, and there from being a nurse she went into IT and started to learn the ropes of management, project management, management of teams, which led to a switch from the clinical setting and actually over to the vendor setting.

Laurie McGraw:

Joanne was many years as the chief strategic officer of Cerner, a global HIT company, software and systems used across almost every corner of healthcare in the United States and globally. Post Cerner, Joanne "retired," I say that in air quotes, and began her board service. Today's Joanne is on the boards of SNOMED, Availity, ATI Physical Therapy, as well as Innara Health. And, Joanne, we're really excited to be speaking with you today.

Joanne Burns:

Well, thanks, Laurie. It's great to be here, and I'm really excited, especially given it's International Women's Day.

Laurie McGraw:

I know, what a great day to be talking. This is so exciting. So why don't we start with what are you doing now, Joanne?

Joanne Burns:

So now, as you said, Laurie, in your intro, I'm doing mostly board service, and I'm really enjoying it. It gives me an opportunity to bring together all of the experience I've had across the clinical, operating, technology, and strategy sectors from providers and from a publicly traded

company all together, and to be able to help other companies really thrive. And so it's really, to me, a very rewarding part of my career.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's great to be at the pinnacle of your career and be able to provide all that experience and background. And part of what the reason I wanted to do this podcast was just to speak with both women like yourself who've done so many things, but also really give some of the backgrounds to women who are early stage in their careers. So I want to go back a little bit. You started out as a registered nurse, now that is traditionally a female oriented profession, not so much anymore these days, but then you went into technology. Technology also, not so more these days, but back when you made the switch, much more male dominated. Why did you make the switch way back when?

Joanne Burns:

It was really a matter of where I felt like there was a need, and it was more about providing operational and clinical expertise to the technology side of healthcare. Healthcare technology was, especially in the software industry, was really, if you will, starting out, and getting going, and really kind of taking hold. And I felt like the software that we would get to use as a clinician really was not fit for purpose and meeting the needs. So I felt like by going into technology and into the IT side, I could lend that perspective and bring that to the table so that, hopefully, for the lives of clinicians and patients everywhere, the world would be a better place for the use of technology, which I think is a key foundational element to improving healthcare.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think we know that it's a key foundation for health care, and certainly I came from HIT as well. And a lot of the criticisms of technology systems in the clinical setting is there are not enough clinical voices at the table in figuring out the workflows and everything else. So I think that that perspective, obviously, very, very helpful, but let's move over to the executive side of things, Joanne. I mean, you've been an executive leader for some time now, and you spent the good portion of your career at Cerner. Cerner today has a far more diverse team, executive leadership team, than it certainly did when you began your executive leadership there. So I wanted to talk about what is it like to be one of few, or maybe the only female executive leader at the table? What did that look like, and how did you deal with that?

Joanne Burns:

I think that's a great question, Laurie, and I think there's a couple of elements to it. And one is, first, it is incredibly humbling, if you will, to be representing half of the human population and the females, if you will, and so many healthcare providers are females, being able to provide their voice at the table for this organization. I think the other piece about it is that it can be a little overwhelming and daunting, and just really kind of figuring out how to find my voice in a way that made sense, and that was meaningful to people, and could bring the most value.

Joanne Burns:

I try to think through, "Where can I provide the most value in any situation, and what does that look like?" And sometimes it could mean being the clinician in the room, sometimes it could

mean being the female in the room, and sometimes it can mean just being a different perspective, or maybe it meant providing a similar perspective. So I think it really just kind of transcended whatever role that we have, and which goes far beyond just our gender, but it allows you the opportunity to have that seat at the table, and to be able to share that perspective.

Laurie McGraw:

Did you feel like sometimes women talk about that they have to work harder, or feel like they need to know more than anyone else to feel... Whether it's being recognized, or just dealing with their own confidence sitting at those tables, how did you deal with it? Did you work harder? Did you try to know more? It sounds like it was a bit strategic in terms of how you approached those tables.

Joanne Burns:

I can tell you a story from way back, and this was prior to Cerner, and this was when I first went into IT, and I can remember that I was challenged a fair amount, because I really had no IT background and technology background. And we had a project, and we needed to get, if you will, a server farm set up. And the person who was in charge of really our mainframes, and servers, and data centers really was challenging me on, "Hey, where are we going to put this? I don't have room in my data center." And I really kind of took a step back and said, "We're all providing expertise that's different here, you provide expertise related to servers and data centers, I'm going to leave it to you to figure out where the server farms should go in which data center. To me it doesn't matter as long as it meets this criteria and meets these needs that we have."

Joanne Burns:

And what I took from that moment and learned from that moment was that I didn't allow the challenging, and the testing, and always to be that I had to know everything, and I took that, and I turned that back to, "How do you create a team moment in that and make it be part of a team? And I'm not going to be threatening to you. That's your space. That's what you do. That's important to you, and that's important to us in collectively being successful." So I think that was one of the key things that I learned is not having to always be that person who knew everything. And so I tried to really kind of turn the tables a little bit on that and just make it a positive and outcome focused, and we all can celebrate the success.

Joanne Burns:

I think some other times that it was challenging at the table sometimes, and it wasn't always welcome. And what I learned to really think through is being accepted in the business setting was pretty important, and I needed to fight that battle where I needed to fight it. And I didn't have to fight it per se all the time, but it was more about being invited to important meetings. And if they were important to the business, I needed to be there. It didn't mean that I needed to be social friends with all of the other people at the table, or included in some of the discussions that were more sort of socially focused. I think I had to figure that out for myself, and I had to go find that in other places, but focusing on the battle that was most important was ensuring I had the seat at the table and a voice at the table around the business discussions and the strategy that was happening.

Laurie McGraw:

What I really like about both those stories, so the server farm story is not taking responsibility for somebody else's accountability to the job they needed to do. And again, in some of the things that women do, the traps they fall into, and this is also true for I think early managers where you take on the responsibility that actually is with other people, sounds like you separated that really well, that was helpful. In terms of the other things you were talking about, Joanne, there's also emotion that comes with the strategic thinking.

Laurie McGraw:

And you sound like you really brought a level of calm and understanding that this is where you needed to be. You needed to be in whatever conversation, but I'm imagining maybe this is just a reflection of how I'd process things, that there's emotion that goes with it. So how did you deal with the emotional side of these decisions and working through being recognized where you expect it to be, as well as just what you might've been thinking about? Who were your outlets? Who did you turn to for advice?

Joanne Burns:

I think that that's a question that's a great one, Laurie, just because it's one that's seldom asked, but yet it's absolutely critical to our ability to succeed in whatever role we take on in whatever setting, and whatever the mix of people we're working with. Because I will say that I think that everybody has moments where they're feeling insecure. I know I certainly felt like the imposter syndrome, which we hear about, that would get to me on occasion. And especially when I was experiencing I will say some unconscious bias, and I think that most of the people that I work with were not necessarily kind of trying to be mean-spirited or trying to leave me out of things. But I think that there was an unconscious bias at work sometimes, or in other decisions that were made. So I tended to try to figure out some other ways to network.

Joanne Burns:

And there was times that I felt pretty alone, but I figured it out. And how do I create some connections? And certainly my husband was a huge source of support, as I think we would all expect of our significant others, but I think the other thing is that I found counsel with other women, other successful women, and would ask for advice. I did some reading on some different books. Sheryl Sandberg's book, Lean In. I'd have moments for anecdotal discussion even. And I use humor a lot for a stress relief, and I just found people to laugh with, or I'd bring up situations that I could find the humor in them, and people would laugh with me.

Joanne Burns:

And then sometimes I'd get the most valuable insight from that, kind of where people would say, "Hey, that is not... You didn't do anything wrong," or, "You didn't do something that created this situation." Just kind of let it roll a little bit, and remember what's important, and there's other things that work here, and that actually helped me a ton in figuring that out.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. Building the network and getting encouragement, and just sort of affirmation that you're dealing with something in a way that seems reasonable from an outside voice is always helpful.

And it sounds like you've got that with both your husband, as well as other women. That's terrific advice, Joanne. Let's move to barriers and challenges. There's no way that you did not achieve all that you have achieved without hitting a lot of barriers, and overcoming, and breaking through a lot of challenges. Maybe give us an example of one of those breakthrough career moments for you, and then also a counter example. When did you have an opportunity that you wish you could have a do-over, wish you had handled differently, and what did you learned from it?

Joanne Burns:

Yeah. I think the career defining moment was probably the decision to go into IT. That was not a path that I had ever anticipated or contemplated. It was something that I found interesting, and I saw a need and an opportunity arose, and I sort of lept at it. So a fair amount of risk probably in that leap, leaving behind my clinical and operational sort of roles and going in, but I felt like I was at a point in my life where I could do it, and I had support, and so just jumping in. So I think taking that risk on when it may not have been the most intuitive, and it certainly wasn't the safest. So I'd say that that was probably key. As far as something that I didn't handle as well, what I would say is I think there's always things that we wish we could do over.

Joanne Burns:

And I think my key thing is to try to think through things, and as I'm making decisions about them to try to think about, "Will I regret doing this, or will I regret not doing it?" And trying to differentiate, and I try to kind of think through things that way. So I think in the kind of the do-over, or wish I had done differently kind of category, or something that didn't go so well, I think they tend to fall into two categories. So one is where there's outside of your necessarily direct control, things happen, and your reaction to them. And the other is where you are in direct control, and you react differently. So I'll say that there were several times where I was left out of meetings and left out of situations where I definitely should have been involved based upon my role, my job, my value that could be added, how I felt it was important to the organization's long-term wellbeing.

Joanne Burns:

And I feel like there were times that I did not step up and step in as much as I should have to stand up for myself in those situations, and that I wish I had done that. I think on the second type where I wish I had done some things differently that were in my direct control as an outside, I think that sometimes some of the behaviors that I saw displayed by others across my career that I felt I needed to... That were not necessarily the most, I will say, supportive, or the best, or brought out the best in people, sometimes I felt like I fell into that same trap, and treated others probably not the way I wish I would've because of the environment, the stress, the circumstances, or the behavior that I saw being modeled.

Joanne Burns:

And I really did, that was one where I really did a lot of thinking about it. And I kind of went back and said, "This isn't me, this isn't who I want to be." And I really rethought my approach to that. But so I think we always kind of have those situations. What I would say to people is, "Don't dwell on them too long, because what seems huge to you in the moment, or even in a lifetime, people may not even remember it, or may not think anything of it."

Laurie McGraw:

But also calling it out and dealing with it, dealing with whatever a situation is with authenticity, with a sense of yourself sounds like an important part of what your counsel is for both yourself, as well as other women. And I think that's really spot on, Joanne. And maybe to just dig in a little bit further on that, you speak with a level of calm, you speak with clear confidence in terms of how you approach situations, as well as a perspective of, "I might not always get it right, but I'll correct it, and move forward, and not try to dwell on the past," which I think is some of what you were saying there. But on that confidence piece, where's that coming from? A lot of women struggle with confidence, struggle in that sense of confidence. Have you always had it? Did you learn it? Give us some perspective.

Joanne Burns:

I wish I could say I always had it. I think at points in my career I had it, but I'd say it's more learned over time. And as I mentioned earlier, the imposter syndrome, I think that plagues everybody at some point, regardless of who you are and how accomplished you are. You have moments of self doubt, or, "Should I be here," or, "I'm not really qualified to be here." And certainly that plagued me at various points in my career, and was fueled by some things that happened to me, and some situations that I found myself in. So I really had to kind of learn to take a step back and think through how to engage. And the fact that I was given a seat at the table means I should be there, and I needed to step into that, and to own that, and to not let myself, mostly, undermine that perspective.

Joanne Burns:

So it was really kind of a very sort of taken some time, thoughtful exercise, and making sure that I took the opportunity that was there, and owned it, and really made it my own. I think the other thing that I learned, and I went to a program on women on boards and the role of people on boards, and there was some great advice in there. And it was this woman was talking about joining a board of a publicly traded company, and how intimidating that could be, and what was her advice. And her advice was, "You got to listen," and she said, "And then you've got to listen some more and even listen some more." So before you really say anything, or jump in, or feel that you're forced to provide value early on, sit back and listen to what's going on, and take it all in, and provide a perspective, if you have one, that's different or adds value at the end, and do it in a way that's succinct, gets to the point, and gets your point across.

Joanne Burns:

And it is amazing how people respond to that. And that is some advice I took to heart, and that's why I say this is learned, because I really try. I am not the first person to talk in meetings. I will jump in if need be, I will get called on, and then I usually have some perspective to add, and I try to make sure that it is on-point, and succinct, and gets the message across quickly. Because I think that that's one thing we can do when we're not feeling very confident is we tend to want to prove to ourselves and to others that it's important, I'm here, and I can add value. So you talk too much, you overstate what you're saying, you keep repeating, and it just kind of undermines the whole message you're trying to get across.

Laurie McGraw:

That's great, great advice. I want to ask you a question that one of the listeners of Inspiring Women has asked. And so a younger woman who early in her career wants to know about how do I assess my own value? How do I negotiate compensation? When people ask about their value, I think they're usually asking about compensation. So what advice would you give to younger women earlier in their careers about that?

Joanne Burns:

That is always a tough one, and I think that I didn't always do the best job for myself at that. So I try to help others as they're going through it. And a lot of it can be situational, and depend upon the role, and depend upon the pool of candidates, or even the pool of peers that you've got. So sometimes there's more negotiation allowed than others, but I think the key thing is have in your mind before you go into a situation what you think your value is, or what you're looking for. You may be looking for a job that may feel like is a lateral move, but you want more compensation for it, or because of the expertise you bring to it. Or you may be thinking about taking a step up, and then what should that be?

Joanne Burns:

And it's sort of like selling a house, sometimes our perceptions are not aligned with the realities, but I would say is have an idea of what you think you want. I think the other thing is try to figure out what is a win-win for the organization or the role that has the role, what is a win-win to ensure that you're going in with, "What do they want to achieve, and what do I want to achieve?" And what they want to achieve might not necessarily be in the course of compensation, but it might be the value that you bring to the table. So being able to articulate, "Here's what I bring to this role that you need that is going to improve the outcome or success."

Joanne Burns:

And I think the other thing is if you have the opportunity, keep going through the interviews, don't talk about salary upfront, and get to the point where it's hard for them to not select you for a role, because you've met with all the people, everyone likes you, everybody wants you for the role. And then it comes down to the salary, and either the hiring manager or HR is like, "Oh, no, we can't pay you," then they have to go back and tell all those people that you spent all the time with, "Hey, we couldn't hire her." "So make it to the point that you improve your negotiating position to the best you can," is what I would say, as you're able to.

Joanne Burns:

So it gives you a chance to prove yourself in the interview. Sometimes you're going to take a job because it's the right job. Take the job, even though it may not be at the compensation you want, and then go back and negotiate for more, because the job gets you something else. It might get you a title. It might get you experience. It might get you an opportunity to work with some great people. So don't hesitate to take a job, even if it's not quite at the compensation you expect, because you can go back and do that once you have hit it out of the park.

Laurie McGraw:

Joanne, that's unbelievable advice. There are a lot of women who... And we're in a hopefully post pandemic world soon, and a lot of job volatility out there, so that is just terrific advice for many

people. Joanne, let's close out. This has been a great conversation. I've really appreciated it. Any last advice you'd like to give women, and more specifically younger women who are just starting out?

Joanne Burns:

A couple of things that I think I mentioned. So first is take risks, especially if you're early in your career. Many of us get into jobs or with companies, and we stay with them for our lifetime or for a really long time. Take a risk, get out there, try something new, move, try a new geography, a new company, a new role, do something different that might feel risky at the time. I think you'll be happy you did it. I would say, "Don't settle." If you're not being treated or you're not valued in the way that you think you should be, or what you're bringing to the table, don't settle for it. Start kind of either speaking up or looking elsewhere. And I would say the third thing is be true to yourself. Don't lose yourself in trying to fit in, or be something that you're not, or being somebody that you're really just not cut out to be.

Laurie McGraw:

Joanne, this is great advice, and it's great advice to close out on International Women's Day. Joanne, if people want to follow you or connect with you, where can they find you?

Joanne Burns:

I'm on Twitter and LinkedIn, and if you want to reach out to me on LinkedIn, let me know you listened to the podcast, it'll make it easier for me to accept you. And I'm happy to expand my network.

Laurie McGraw:

All right, Joanne. Thanks so much. This has been a great episode of Inspiring Women. Thank you for a great conversation.

Joanne Burns:

Thanks, Laurie. Appreciate it.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw, please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Kruse at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on [inspiringwomen.show](http://inspiringwomen.show). I am Laurie McGraw, and thank you for listening.