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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine meets with Sharon Callahan, Chairman, TBWA\Worldhealth Group, CEO, CDM Group and Chief Client Officer, Omnicom Health Group.

Taren: Sharon, welcome to the WoW podcast program. Things have changed quite a bit for you since we last connected a couple of months ago regarding your Woman of the Year honor. So tell me how the evolution of the CDM title now.

Sharon: I have three jobs, believe it or not. I am the chairman of the TBWA\Worldhealth Group. I am the CEO of the CDM Group and Chief Client Officer of Omnicom Health Group. I had what I call re-founded an agency network out of a few agencies that were kind of small, maybe lackluster agencies – Corbett, LLNS in London. We came together and under the TBWA umbrella we became TBWA\Worldhealth. We say we re-founded the agency. TBWA\Worldhealth had existed but lots of kind of disparate offices around the world. I went to school on TBWA. My good friend Troy Ruhanen who is the CEO of TBWA asked me to help him get the Healthcare Network up and running and really become a leading force in that industry. I am so proud of what we've accomplished in just a little under four years. I think our four-year anniversary is next week.

Very importantly, the agency has quadrupled in size. We were Med Ad News Agency of the Year last year. We work with some of the world's most ambitious brands and I think what is most gratifying for me is that we have an amazing leadership team in place at TBWA\Worldhealth led by Robin Shapiro who's now the CEO there. I am able to now become chairman of that group and move on to hopefully have an impact on the CDM Group, which is also part of Omnicom Health Group and make sure that CDM is an even better and more storied agency network than it's ever been before, so really excited for this challenge. I wish we weren't in the middle of a pandemic, but we are so we'll figure it out.

Taren: Congratulations. To assume a mantle of this magnitude in the mix as you say of this virus is quite something, so I wish you all the very best of luck and I know you'll come out the other end in great shape so that's tremendous.

Sharon: Thank you.

Taren: I alluded just a minute ago to your WOTY, which is the Woman of the Year honor where you were honored last year by the Healthcare Business Women's Association. Your story was incredible and left an indelible mark on me as well as so many other women. You were a very active WOTY visiting numerous chapters if not all of them I believe and you participated in a whole host of events. As your year comes to a close, I would love to hear your reflections on how the year was for you. Let's start with what was your biggest surprise.

Sharon: My biggest surprise is that I feel like kind of the movement of women in leadership positions in corporations has really stalled. I ran into less and less women than I ever have and more and more frustration among women in those companies and it really was upsetting and I've spoken to lots of other people, other WOTYs about this and everyone feels like wow, I've been killing myself here for 30, 40 years and things just at this moment are not better.

Taren: Why do you think that is?

Sharon: I think it's a few things. Women tend to get to a certain point in their career where their experience is superb, but they don't really understand the importance of their network and of their relationships and also kind of somewhat the personal traits that they need to bring forth to be at the top of a company and we tend to put our heads down and do our work and do an amazing job, but that's not always how you get recognized and get the top spot and I think we have a ton of work to do there.

Taren: I couldn't agree with you more and I know through the HBA they're really trying to put at stake in the ground and figure out what those challenges are and really move the needle. So I think it takes everybody to put their shoulder against this initiative to start to move the needle. So we encourage everybody to raise their hand and understand what it is to be a leader and to be an influential leader and to step up if we wanted change what it looks like for women across the industry. So thank you again for doing your part in carrying the load. In your year, what was the thing you'll remember the most?

Sharon: The story that I'm going to remember the most is speaking with a small group of women executives at a pharma company and they were probably 15 of the most senior women leaders in the company and I was speaking to the larger group at this company and they asked me if I would have lunch and they sort of opened it up and they very quickly got to their frustration about not being able to break into the highest level of the C-suite and that they're not being considered in those roles and one thing that became really obvious to me is that this group of women were not supporting each other and were not together. There was no we in that room. They weren't a united front at all.

And in fact, one woman who was probably the most senior woman there it was very obvious that she was not a part of the group at all, that there was some pretty outward disdain for her and she was just as very well put together, very senior, very knowledgeable person, but there

was not a lot of depth of empathy or it didn't feel like she really cared about the issue. So as I was sort of facilitating this conversation and it got to be pretty raw and some tears and a lot of emotion, but I can tell there was a lot of negative emotion going her way and I asked her how she felt about the situation. And she was incredibly brave and she said, "You know a lot of people don't know what's happening in my life, which is what I'm living with and what I'm bringing to work everyday and the truth is that my son is addicted to opioids. He's 18 years old. I've had him in and out of rehab. Some nights I'm driving around Newark looking for him for hours and hours and I don't have time or any bandwidth to do anything but come to work, do my job and deal with the situation I'm dealing with."

She's also an Indian woman. She had a lot of pride, a lot of feelings about not being a good mother and what I saw in that room was a complete change. When she was able to be her authentic self with her colleagues everybody was like how can we help you, why didn't you tell us. I mean women want to help each other. It's innate. It's who we are, but you can't if you don't know what's happening with somebody and you can't if you assume that somebody has got it all and they don't need your help. So I think for me that was the most profound experience I've had in this last year.

I felt so happy and proud that I could at least touch that group of people and turn them into a force for togetherness that can create change even if just for each other as the support system which we all need. So that was the most important story that I had.

Taren: That's an amazing story, and hopefully the listeners of our podcast will take it to heart because you never know what's happening behind closed doors of other people until you walk in their shoes as you said and so it's so important not to come with preconceived notions as well and so what an amazing contribution you made to their lives. That's unbelievable.

Sharon: And what I'll tell you is women don't tell those stories at work especially on the corporate side of pharma. I think things are maybe a little looser in my agency business, but people are very, very reticent to be who they are. I also spoke at a J&J group about – I don't know, right before this happened maybe six or eight weeks ago and the meeting started at 8:30 in the morning and the room was about half full and everyone was apologizing to me because people were coming in late and I just said, "Let's wait 15 minutes. Let's start in 15 minutes." I waited 15 minutes and people then started to come in the room. It was like standing room only and I just pointed out. I said, "How many people had to drop their kids off at school which is why you were 15 minutes late." I mean so many hands raised.

I mean let's just acknowledge that and the next time – and I turned to the meeting organizer who was a very senior woman. I go "Would it be okay to start this meeting at 9 o'clock so that people could get here on time and not feel like they have to apologize for having a family?" So I think people are just – like there's too much fear and apologizing and being afraid of being yourself.

Taren: Agreed. That's another great example of being your authentic self which you are everyday and you bring that to work everyday and that is the culture that you have embodied in every agency that you've been part of so that's a great lesson and I'm glad you're sharing that with the world outside of the agency space because I think these are important lessons to be learned in corporate America if we're going to change what it means to be all women executives.

Sharon: Right.

Taren: And then tell me what will you bring with you from your WOTY year into the future?

Sharon: I've been thinking a lot about that question and you know what I think the WOTY year really energized me to be much more of an evangelist about bringing your whole self to work and it seems really simple and then understanding how it works beyond your experience, what you need to bring to get to the C-suite and I'm just really surprised how little I hear about that and how frustrated people are. I took this job. I moved to this country. I did all these things and how come I'm not getting the CEO role. It's because you don't really know how the game is played and I think there is a real need for just that honesty. So I'm going to continue talking about this.

Taren: That's excellent. So let's talk about some of those lessons that you've learned along the way to get to the C-suite. What advice do you have for other women who are looking to climb the corporate ladder?

Sharon: I think the experience is important, but everyone checks that box and I think women over index on the experience. One thing I would say is people always think they have to do something before they can be something. So I've heard so many women maybe at the mid-level manager "Well, when I get my MBA then I'm going to go for this job. When I get this global experience then I can be qualified for that job." Men don't think that way. They do before they are and they take it until they make it and we have to do a lot more of that. I certainly did. And then building your network and your support system is very, very important and there's a big difference between mentorship and sponsorship and I tell senior women you don't need to be mentored anymore.

You're mentoring, but what you need is to be sponsored so that when a big job becomes available and everyone sitting around the table and someone goes "Well, what about Taren?" Then everybody nods their head yes, she's the one because I know her. I have a relationship with her. I know the people she surrounds herself with. I know of things that she'd done and you want people sponsoring you and talking about you and that you have to have that. There is no other way to get those jobs.

Taren: I think those are two great key pieces of advice. We often hear about women you don't need to check off all the boxes before they take the job just as you said and men just go ahead and go for it and the sponsorship piece as well. Women need to learn how to ask for sponsorship as well as what's expected of them and what's expected from their sponsor because it's not a relationship to be entered into lightly.

Sharon: No. No. And it's very personal and you have to invest just like any relationship and I think people don't – a lot of people I see have a work self and a home self or a personal. You know you're going to be one person and/or this one drives me crazy my people say they have work friends. No. They're your friends or they're not your friends. You don't work friends and life friends. Everyone should be your friend. Your work friends are your friends, but if you keep everything compartmentalized you're going to be seen as that kind of compartmentalized person that no one really knows and when people don't know you, they don't trust you for some reason.

Taren: That's again I thought about that, but you're right. If you have your life that is siloed across and then you want to – and then sometimes it's hard to mesh your different worlds together, but it so necessary.

Sharon: You do a great job of it.

Taren: I try. And you know you can get a lot of joy out of it too.

Sharon: Absolutely.

Taren: I often say I love when my worlds collide because it means that it's bringing different people from different parts of your life together and there's great joy in that.

Sharon: And you have a fuller life.

Taren: Agreed. Agreed. You touched on a little bit earlier about some of the big things that are happening at the agency. I'd like to know, too, in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic what else are you tracking in terms of major trends that you think are going to impact your advertising world?

Sharon: I think I am seeing on the client side people bringing in talent from really non-traditional places. So we're seeing clients that are coming from the entertainment industry into direct to consumer marketing, seeing people coming from other industries. Healthcare is very attractive right now. We're not seeing a slowdown in business. It's only getting to be more and bigger. So lots of people are interested in our industry. We're going to have to match that as well.

So I think that's a really big, relevant area is we've got to really understand the world, not just the way we've always done things. It's not going to work anymore. This Covid thing, everything has changed, so we might as well take advantage. The future is here well before we thought it would be, and we're not going to go backward just because we're working in an office in a few months.

Taren: Agreed. And I think if there's any silver lining to come out of this chaos and this heartbreak that it is that, that we're seeing technology accelerate. We're seeing reimagining of business processes. But I also think what you just touched on goes back to the earlier point about worlds colliding, and so if you're looking for talent from outside of that traditional healthcare space it's because as patients we're also people. So we're not just a patient and we're not just a person; we are all and the same. So maybe that's the time to now address patients as people, and not as somebody who's just sick.

Sharon: Right, yeah. We're all human beings.

Taren: Right. So in terms of where you're tapping into, where are you looking to get that next round of talent to come in for your agency?

Sharon: I'm looking at like the big consumer agencies, the big consumer digital agencies. Healthcare is not as hard to figure out as we make it out to be sometimes and there's lots of talent out there. People who can get really excited about having this kind of purpose versus selling cookies or Clorox or something, this is really interesting, especially to millennials who want their work to have a lot more higher purpose.

Taren: Speaking of millennials, how do you manage that new talent base with let's just call people my age seasoned professionals – how do you balance that because the needs are different and the wants are different for each of those groups.

Sharon: I think so, but I also think that some of it is about the needs and wants are different and that's good, and maybe working 14 hours a day isn't necessary. Maybe even working in an office every single day isn't necessary. Maybe living in New York City isn't going to be necessary anymore. I can tell you there's a lot of great talent out there in the world and they can – if we can all work like this for 4, 8, 12, however many weeks this is going to last, then we can reimagine the way people are going to work for us.

I had this really interesting experience. I had a client call the other day, and the client had a little daughter at home who is driving her crazy, and she was trying to conduct this really important meeting. I was like 'you know what, I think your daughter needs your attention and we can totally do this meeting after she goes to bed at 8 o'clock tonight.' Because it's impossible to do these things, and it was like a light bulb went off for everybody, including me,

which is you know what, maybe a continuous eight hours between 9 and 5 isn't the way everyone's got to work.

So again, the future is here faster than we thought. I know for myself I would really like to go out and take a walk and exercise between 12:00 and 2 p.m. and I won't mind working a little later or a little earlier to be able to accommodate my life that way. So I think we're going to learn a ton of lessons through this.

Taren: Yes, I agree. You're hearing it from all aspects within the industry exactly to this point, how do we manage this, how do I manage that? Before we jumped on the call we were talking about having to be a schoolteacher and a cafeteria worker and all these other things your new role as we live through this next couple of months and how that redefines you and how it redefines your role. Continuing on that vein, what are some of the things that really jazz you about your day? What really revs your engine about what you do?

Sharon: It's really dealing with people and creating all this new stuff just by talking about it. I mean there is a ton to be done. We have to reinvent our whole industry. Things aren't going to go back to the way that they were. What's that going to be like? I think it's a lot of fun. And also making sure – I'm at a point in my life and in my career where I'm not really looking for the next thing, (although I got the next thing I guess) but it's more about how am I going to get people ready to take over for me and what can I teach them and what can they teach me and that's really, really fun and exciting.

Taren: That's great. And conversely, then what keeps you up at night? The same things?

Sharon: What keeps me up at night is I don't want things to go back to the way they were before this happened. So how do you make sure that doesn't happen. I feel like even though we're all on computers – like we're talking face to face – there's some kind of intimacy that's happened and that's developed and that we're all in this together and we're all just people. I mean just like the fact that you're seeing inside each other's homes; it's a different world. There's a different kind of thing, and I don't want to lose that, and that keeps me up at night. I'm a worrier, and I just worry about people and if they're taking care of themselves.

Taren: That's empathetic. That's usually one of the – you're such an empathetic leader, you're such authentic leader and it comes through in every conversation I've ever had with you. So I can only imagine how that bleeds down through the culture that you are creating and the people who work for you, they have to feel it and they have to know it. So again, congratulations to you and from that that breeds great success as you had with the agency. So you just said a second ago that you didn't ask for the next big thing, but here it is. So how do you define success for yourself?

Sharon: It could be a different thing everyday. Sometimes it's like that day that I talked to that group of women that I felt like wow that was great, that made me feel really good and successful. And sometimes it's just like if you contribute an idea to something that really sparks another even better idea. And sometimes it's just being able to take good care of the people that you love. And I think lately for me is really about being able to find some balance. I can sit behind this computer for 12 or 14 hours a day and I'm really forcing myself not to do it and only because I'm setting a bad example for everyone around me if I do do that.

Taren: Yes, I understand that. I got it. We were joking the other day internally that we're seeing all these things pop up on Facebook about people who are developing new crafts and they're finding new hobbies and they're cleaning out their closet, and I thought I have no time to do any of that, so I've been constantly living in a state of emergency, which is not a good thing because my day to day has not changed at all.

Sharon: Right. I get that. It should change because you do have a little more time on your hands. I hear from people who work from home or who work virtually, things haven't changed that much for me, and now maybe they should.

Taren: Exactly because we've been a virtual company since we started. I've been working from a home office and working virtually, so nothing has changed for us in terms of our operations. But you're right, maybe they should change. If you could go back and fire up that way back machine, what one piece of advice would you give to your younger self?

Sharon: It would be to stop worrying and being afraid that you're going to do the wrong thing. I think it's to just be more human and realize that you're going to do the wrong thing and so is everybody else, and no one is perfect. I think was so worried about getting everything right and perfect that I didn't focus on the bigger, more important things. Yeah. I wouldn't work so hard or so much because some of that hard work didn't really pay off until I realized that that's not what it's all about.

Taren: That's great advice.

Sharon: And I'm not saying don't work hard, but don't give up those other things that are important to you.

Taren: Right. Limited resources, limited time, limited bandwidth. You have to appropriate it accordingly and appropriately. So that's great advice.

Sharon: Someone said something really important to me once, which was if you would like to know what your priorities are Sharon, then look at what you do. And then I started looking at how I was spending my time, and it was not aligned with what I was saying my priorities were.

Taren: Interesting.

Sharon: It's a pretty simple way to look at it.

Taren: It's a great piece of advice. Among all the other things that you're doing professionally, I know that you're involved in a number of charities and nonprofit organizations. How do you (A) balance it all, and then (B) how do you decide where you want to lend your talents and skills?

Sharon: Well, I mean balancing it all is you can't take on too much, and I've been there and done that and not said no to everything. So I've started saying no more to balance things. Or handing off some of these opportunities in nonprofit or things that you really care about. Those are great leadership training opportunities for others. So handing those over because you can't do it all.

And then I think for me where I do spend my time are things that really stir my soul. Right now politics is preoccupying me and the kind of leadership that I want to see in the world. I'm chair of the LGBTQ victory fund just because I believe that representation matters and we've seen more LGBTQ people running for office and winning office than ever before, which is important for people like me to be represented equally and fairly at all levels of government. So I would say that's a very, very important one for me right now.

Taren: That's amazing. Again, congratulations for doing really important work when really important work needs to be done. Finally, I'm going to ask you to really stretch yourself and think about one wow moment of your career. It could be something that changed the trajectory of your career. It could be a momentous occasion. It can be whatever you want it to be, but that one wow moment for you.

Sharon: A wow moment was a little over four years ago when Omnicon Health Group was being formed. Omnicon had a lot of healthcare specialist agencies not all reporting to one person, very distributed leadership and I was not chosen to be the leader of that group even though I thought I should be, and as I kind of went on that journey I got a lot of confidence in asking why. Why didn't I get the job? And if I hadn't ask they never would have known and when I do ask and I was told why it made a lot of sense. What I brought to the table was not what they were looking for in that job. And at that moment I really realized that you can be more powerful when you feel that you've been able to express yourself.

And I think a lot changed for me in that moment because I was like okay, now I'm going to be able to go forward and support the person who is leading this group because I understand why he's leading this group and why he is the right person to do it and that's Ed Wise who's my boss now and we've had an amazing partnership and I think it's because I didn't wonder, I didn't complain, I didn't undermine, I faced things head on and understood what it is and what I needed to do to raise my profile and to do better. And it really changed my career and I think

my life too to have a lot more kind of integrity and I find... like people make up stories. 'I didn't get the job and this person got the job' and they make up the story about it instead of really being brave enough to understand why, and in my case it was for a very good reason.

Taren: Well, that shows a lot of bravery and again authenticity and taking ownership of that self reflection which a lot of people don't do.

Sharon: No. It's hard to do, isn't it? It's really hard, but the only way to get results is to take action and you can't be effective in taking action if you don't know what's really happening beneath surface and it gets back to all those things about your network and your relationships and having honest conversations with people. You don't get good results without any of that.

Taren: Well, Sharon, I can't tell you how much I appreciate you being so open and honest and transparent with us with this WoW podcast program, truly a special episode, and I want to thank you again and congratulate you again for your Woman of the Year honor and for all your tremendous success. I know going forward is only going to be even better for you. So thank you so much.

Sharon: Thank you Taren.

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