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In this episode, Taren Grom, co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE meets with Lea Carey, Founder, Women Who Innovate.

Taren: Lea, welcome to the WoW podcast program.

Lea: Thank you, Taren. It's great to be here.

Taren: Lea, you have your finger on the pulse of what it means to be innovative and how to innovate. Please share what are the keys to be a successful innovator?

Lea: I think that's a great question and I'm actually asked that a lot. And from my perspective, questioning orthodoxies ranks right up there, I think is number one. I say that because successful innovators understand that one individual point of view or view of the world, it's just not enough. I think flexibility is another as I look at where our world is today. I believe that the flexibility to manage this constant change has definitely moved up there, maybe as number two. And you and I probably can relate to this very well. I think managing ideas is extremely important. We've all sat in those meetings where everyone has a million ideas and yet nothing ever really happens.

So I quote Rowan Gibson, he is the author of *The Four Lenses of Innovation*. I worked very closely with him for years and he lists these four traits as being key. One is questioning orthodoxies. Number two harnessing trends and then leveraging resources and understanding needs. And time after time any work that I'm doing in the innovation space, I always go back to those as my base point.

Taren: That's excellent. Those are four really important concepts and I agree with you. We have all sat through some of those meetings where there's a thousand ideas thrown up. But it's one thing to be innovative and strategic, but it's another thing to understand how to implement those innovations of strategy based on your circumstances being resources, so, so key. So talk to me because you've worked with a lot of companies to help them figure out their innovation strategies. What makes for an innovative culture in a company or an organization?

Lea: I have the delightful job of often having to tell my clients that their baby really is ugly. Sometimes, but I have learned to be very tactful. So number one, I think is being not afraid to fail. And to have that mindset of test fail experiment, test fail, test fail, just in your DNA. I think organizations need to reward curiosity and just the traits that I like to see if I'm putting a team together, questioning, experimenting, observing. Me and a

team of fellow innovators actually wrote our eBook. What we found that the healthcare industry actually doesn't collaborate very well together. I think that's the industry that we're in.

I think the other thing for an innovative culture is to think back what Henry Ford said, as an innovator sometimes you don't have a consensus of what the best thing to do in an organization. When they send out a survey and they really don't know. Henry Ford said, "if I would have asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses," and that's true. So I believe diverse thinking, diversity, and not being afraid to unpack your own business model and that's always scary for organizations. And in fact, that's often what they have to do is manage that portfolio of business units that they have.

Taren: I think that's such an important part is thinking about that diversity issue, and we'll get into it a little bit deeper there too later on. But it's that diversity of perspectives as you said. It's that diversity of thought and bringing people together who don't all think alike. Because otherwise, you get to the same idea.

Lea: That's true. In fact, if we just think about for an idea or a project to actually launch, it's 3000 ideas to launch a hundred products and out of those hundred launches only one comes to market. That's a lot of management and really putting that visionary lens on to be successful.

Taren: And you mentioned just a minute ago about DNA. Do you believe innovation can be taught or is it truly part of one's DNA or both?

Lea: I think it can be both. I'm an example of that. But there are also some characteristics as you and I have worked on team that I would not want on an innovation team. I think that those that are hardwired for bean counting probably would take the creativity out – they do. I'm not saying probably – they suck the creativity right out. So you want to be careful who you put on your team.

When I joined, Innovation Excellence as Chief Digital Officer, I had a dual role of healthcare and innovation. But it was, you know, Taren, it was a step back from only focusing on healthcare. And I was so fortunate to work beside some of the Innovation grades, Brendan Kelly, Rowan Gibson. And to this day, I believe that Julie Anixter, our CEO, had one of the biggest impacts on my career. I cannot tell you how it changed my perspective, my thought processes. I became more agile in my thinking. I'm learning to cross-pollinate outside. My sector was just huge and then I realized what happened to me personally, as a leader, making this bold move into Innovation Excellence.

Leonardo da Vinci brought up this concept to see, there are people that see without seeing and hear without hearing. And I think we all can be guilty of that, but to have that right team and really explore not outside your comfort zone, but thoughts that haven't been spewed out there yet is really a great experience.

So I definitely have innovation in my DNA, that I believe working with those leaders in Innovation Excellence, seriously took me not to levels but it just took me into a space that I had never been before. I really think that opportunity and I look back on that decision and think, “oh, my goodness, I’m glad I made it. And what was I thinking?”

Taren: That’s awesome. I love those examples that you just put forward and that idea of getting out of one’s comfort zone is so important and even maybe out of one sector to learn. As you said, the healthcare industry isn’t known for being highly collaborative, but there needs to be more collaboration in order to move forward, I think. So taking oneself out and exploring other areas is key. That’s what I’m hearing from you.

Lea: Yes, absolutely.

Taren: Excellent. One of your areas of expertise is in developing digital strategies and you were way ahead of the curve in this area. Talk about how you’ve witnessed digital evolved and what are the key components of a good digital strategy? I know this is one of your passions.

Lea: So when I think of what we’ve always done, those leaders within organizations, and industry, starting with thinking in terms of what solves problems, is that something that we do. And then what generates values for the end-user and organizations, that’s something that we also do as well. But the way in which what media reaches our stakeholders is a bit new and I look around. I think the most important element is being aware of what’s going on around us right now. I mean, look at where we are right now. Where are people working? So what does that mean for the future of work? How are we communicating? What are we missing with those interpersonal relationships and nonverbal communication by being on Zoom 24/7? And that’s not going to change.

Research says that that digital communication and collaboration is going to continue to grow in the digital space. I look at the trends of cybersecurity, intelligence AI, and we’ve seen that coming. But I think one of the things that we haven’t looked in to or that hasn’t been a priority is probably mental health. And I believe that human experience, that patient experience is now going to be a priority. And you linked this to digital connectivity and take it from there and just see what new companies are going to grow. What current organizations, industry, are they going to add on top of that?

So I think the key is what is going on around us and start talking about that and not being afraid to, for instance, I don’t think mental health has ever been looked at the way we should have been looking at it in the healthcare sector. But now, who has started these great conversations, it’s been outside of the healthcare industry. They are the ones that are actually really taking this up to the next level. You look at tennis players, et cetera, et cetera. So I think cross-pollinating, talking about things that are going around us in a very edgy way is how things start. I mean, innovation changes everything.

Taren: Thank you for bringing up that mental health, I agree with you. I think it's an area that has been so stigmatized over the years, and it's such a difficult therapeutic area to tackle and companies for years have been trying to get their arms wrapped around it. But as you said, it's being brought to the forefront by few people outside of the healthcare industry and hence, it's getting maybe that celebrity that it needs to be part of the everyday conversation within the life sciences.

Lea: Yes.

Taren: You know, another thing that you're a very big proponent of is as an individual, having a social media presence or a digital presence on social media. Why do you believe this is so important and what are some ways that people can do this successfully?

Lea: Well, I think for me, digital brand is one of my all-time favorite subjects. And I think that's because I come from a design perspective. If we go back to how we want ourselves to be viewed, that how we really are viewed, that whole Johari window has taught me so much. So what is that gap between how we think we are and how we really think we are.

Well, what bridges that gap is actually brand design. And now, that lays with the digital component. Because when you think about it, our brand it doesn't reside with us no more than a brand – any brand resides in the marketing department. So digital presence, digital brand, digital innovation, it's actually a collection of perspectives for organization. It's a collection of perspectives from the consumer's viewpoint. And I believe that the most important thing, building your brand is understanding why does that gap between who a company thinks they are and how their stakeholders view them. If we trans that personally, how does Lea Carey want to be seen and how am I really seen – and bridging that gap, through digital strategy is absolutely the way to moving your presence up into that executive space and more successful space, I might say.

Taren: Excellent, that's such a great perspective. I love that you're taking it from the brand design point of view. I also know that you are a very strong proponent of supporting and elevating women in the workplace. Please share some of the lessons you learned being part of the Global Board of Directors of the Healthcare Business Women's Association.

Lea: Well, it was quite a jump to be honest. What was critical for me, as I went from more of the global stage was to see through the lens of those that I served and yet bring my skill set to the table. There are women-owned businesses out there that have put everything, everything into their businesses, and to keeping their doors open and to talk one-on-one, to socialize, and to network and to gain ideas, it's an emotional journey. And it's easy to forget if you are working for a top 10 company, that those frontline businesses, that's what it's all about, right there. And I have really gained a heart about

what it's like to decide, are they going to go out to dinner or are they going to keep the lights of their business open? And you really saw the grit and determination during COVID when there were shutdowns of how these organizations, they didn't know if they were going to have a business is from day-to-day.

So I would say that learning or having the opportunity to feel what these women-owned businesses went through during COVID, it's worthy of a book, an eBook. Because I can tell you, they put everything on the line.

Taren: That also stems from your experience as being president of the Palm Beach Women's Chamber of Commerce and you gained a lot of insights from those businesses as well.

Lea: Absolutely. You get a sense that tomorrow is not a promise for some businesses. You have to have a great deal of grit to be business-owned. And I have to tell you, one thing that we learned through HBA is you have to have those male advocates as well. And I think I saw that, I saw that in play in real life. Not just through principles. I actually saw women lived through that.

Taren: Interesting. And as you also work through the HBA and then through PB, Palm Beach, you have a real respect for the need for diversity. We touched on it earlier in our conversation, the diversity of experience, the diversity of perspective, and the diversity of culture. Tell me, how you brought that to bear, when you put your board together? When you were running the chamber?

Lea: So when I was president of the Women's Chamber, we had a dreamer on our board and she was one of the most amazing women and is, that I have ever had the pleasure of working with. We also had an African-American woman who I consider a dear friend. We had a Chinese-American woman and I have to tell you, I'm Native American, many people don't know that. We had a truly diverse board and we had someone first-generation Cuban on our board. So for me, learning the different perspectives, and we talked about diversity it was very different from a typical sitting on diversity and inclusion committee. These women were diverse and not only that, we had diversity in age. Fortunately, I was one of the oldest women. So I will say, it definitely narrowed my perspective on what it is that we need to do, be doing differently within the industry and organizations. And it broadened my perspective on what should be considered diverse.

Taren: Interesting. And so, what is that perspective? Now, how should we be thinking broader about diversity?

Lea: Broader about diversity is just not about color. It's about the way we think and bringing those experiences to the table. I think back to Kelsey, who is on my board, she was a dreamer and she has such a story about how suddenly her name was Burke and suddenly, everything was different for her. And then a senator changed so much for her

when she, he went to bat for her to go on law school. And those stories have to come to the table. It is just not that we were born a certain way. I'll give you an example of that, my daughter. My daughter has been told that she doesn't matter because she presents not ethnic enough, and that was at the highest levels. When I think back to that comment, I think these are the stories that need to be told, to really understand the depths of misinformation on how we carry out our diversity and inclusion committees. I would say, you've got to bring those stories with you.

Taren: You've worked with a lot of organizations and you've worked with a lot of women. What's some advice you can provide to other women who may want to reach the executive level, since you have achieved that in your successful career? What steps should they take to give themselves the best advantage of reaching, whatever that job is that they want to get to? Not everybody's born for the C-suite, understood, but there are women who really want to get to the C-suite. How can they achieve that?

Lea: Roll your sleeves up and I would say, make that a goal as much as you have a project in 2023, make that journey incredibly intentional. Find a mentor, find a sponsor, put the time into networking, working on projects that are outside your core responsibilities. Say yes to opportunity and opportunity of this type moving up is not going to find you in your cubicle. You have got to work on your visibility, your thought processes. You need to become more innovative and you need to be able to cast your ideas in a very positive way, but I would say nothing is going ever took place rolling up your sleeves. You know, Taren, I think back on my career and every time I've worked with you, you have never been afraid to take on any project and roll your sleeves up. It's always been a privilege to work beside you because I think we're both workers.

Taren: Well, Lea, thank you very much. That's very kind. I do agree. I think that I am a worker and I like to get my hands dirty. I like to get in there and I'm a fixer. I'm a doer, right? So that's part of my thing. You and I have worked on multiple committees together in full transparency to the audience and we came up with this term, stratactically. So there's a strategy but there's the tactics that have to be involved in that strategy to achieve it, right? It's like saying, "we should go to the moon but we have none of the resources to get there." So that's not a strategy if you're not able to implement it, and that kind of goes back to our earlier part of the conversation. But you have achieved and worked with some really successful folks and you've achieved a lot of success in your career. What has been one of the biggest, wow accomplishments for you, that is either changed the trajectory of your career or shaped your career?

Lea: That is such a great question because as I was going through like, I think my time at Innovation Excellence and we did not get the funding that we sought after. But the experience to me, as I was going through it, I had no idea that it would differentiate me and bring sustainable competitive experience to my plate. I had no idea. I look back on that now, and that was an inflection point. So I would say at that time, I also, from HBA, I received the Innovation Award and it meant everything.

Taren: Deservedly so.

Lea: You know, we just put ourselves out there with digital strategy and at that time, we didn't have our arms around how can you add revenue model around this, but we knew there was a way. And today, that has kept, I know the Women's Chamber and other organizations are the clients that I have had that has kept us going. I think being an early adopter of digital innovation, and as we began to implement our strategy from the corporate level, we started to see traction in our brand very slowly we were looking for. We were looking for signs of change, and it just grew year after year after year. So when I got that award, that was like a big moment and I've got that award in my office and I look at it and every time I look at it, I think, "okay, you did it." I pat myself on the back and I think I started by not knowing what I was getting into, but I had this sense that I was doing something right in the right way and with the right people and I took a chance. So that's where it was for me. I took a chance on doing something new.

Taren: Absolutely. And the success you had with that and for the audience that you need to know, it was really elevating, the HBAs digital presence. And you hit some astronomical numbers along the way in terms of trending through the annual conference or the Woman of the Year Event and throughout the year actually. So congratulations again to for that important award and it was so well-deserved.

Lea, thank you so much for spending some time with me. I appreciate it. I have learned quite a bit in terms of your innovative thought processes. Some really interesting areas to explore as I go forward and I hope our audience does as well. So thank you so much for being a part of our WoW podcast program.

Lea: Thank you. This has been a pleasure.

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