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Season 4, Episode 3: "Organizing Work"

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The Big Idea

Mary Ellen Slayter: From Managing Editor Magazine, this is Margins, and if you've got content in your job description, we've made this podcast for you. I'm your host, Mary Ellen Slayter, and this season of Margins we're exploring what it means to be organized.

Elena Valentine: And I'm your co-host Elena Valentine. When you think about organizing work, how do you define that for yourself? What immediately comes to mind?

Mary Ellen Slayter: It's evolved over the years. If you'd asked me that question 20 years ago, when I was starting out, I would have a different answer than I do right now. And back then organizing meant when I was working on the Washington post copy desk, organizing my work, meant doing what Bill Walsh told me to do in a timely fashion. That's what organizing my work did. It's like, okay, you got six stories tonight, they're going to hit the desk and you're going to have to do this thing. So I had to organize my own tasks in order to complete them at a high level in a timely fashion.

Mary Ellen Slayter: And then I moved into roles where I became responsible for managing things over longer periods of time where it wasn't just do this thing it's due tonight. And then over time, my job became organizing other people's work. I wake up in the morning and I think about all the things that I could be doing practically, because there's an unlimited list when it comes to owning a business. And I think what are the things that I can do with my time today that will create the most value for me, for my employees and my contractors and for our clients and for the business long-term. What about you?

Elena Valentine: I distinctly remember having about six months of pretty intensive practice as a union organizer. It's probably some of the best training I ever received when it's come to navigating people and human relationships in the workplace. I really got to hand it to labor organizers. There truly is an art and a science. And I distinctly remember that the way they used to describe what coming together to form a union was. To organize was for workers to come together to make positive changes in their workplace. So within that, there was this idea of collective action. Collective action to help drive a positive change within the workplace.

Elena Valentine: That's really what I remember how I remember describing it to others. And if I really think about my foundations for how I navigate relationships, for how I navigate conversations, it has everything to do with knocking on doors and having pretty quick or long conversations that can either end up with doors being closed in your face, husbands or wives yelling at you or a meaningful hour and a half long conversation on someone's stoop envisioning some of the changes that they didn't want to see in the workplace that they felt that they couldn't do alone.

Elena Valentine: When I still think of organizing work, I do still see it as a collective action. And in some ways it's not organizing work. It's the organizing the workers behind the work. And even when I think about how you defined organizing work, it's organizing yourself to do work or working to help organize on behalf of others to do their work. And that to me is the perfect segue because talking to Harish and quite frankly, others, organizing work, organizing

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anything inevitably is around organizing power.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Who decides? We're really talking about who decides?

Interview 1: Henry Albrecht

Mary Ellen Slayter: As a founder, the decisions you make around how you structure your organization have a big impact on your culture. Henry Albrecht, CEO of Limeade has given more thought to this than just about any business leader I have ever met.

Henry Albrecht: When I think about organization, I think about things that are put in place towards a purpose. The first thing I like to start with is the why. The first principles of organization. What's the purpose? We've done a lot of work at our company and help other companies think about what mountain are we trying to climb? Is it Mount Everest? Or is it Kilimanjaro? And how are we going to get there? At our company, Limeade, we say transform work into a source of positivity, energy, humanity, and purpose.

Henry Albrecht: So then once you have that purpose, and maybe you define the values that support that purpose, then you actually know how to really organize around it. For example, if you have values around teamwork, those values have to infuse through every single element of what you're doing in that organization. So it means how you interview people, how you onboard people, how you have a team meeting when they first join and you share a virtual coffee, or hopefully someday a real coffee. So to me having a purpose and the values, those are the anchors of organization. And then of course, as you then design your supply chain, as you put your departments in place, at least you know where you're going,

Mary Ellen Slayter: This may mean throwing out the traditional org chart.

Henry Albrecht: We think of the org chart as upside down. The CEO serves his or her team. They serve the inward facing teams and ultimately they serve the customer facing team who served the customer. So for us, the org chart starts with the customer and the world at the very top. When someone gets promoted, you're not moving up. You're actually moving to bear more weight on your shoulders. To your question about where does structure come from and can it come from all angles, even let's say the market facing people or the janitor or a QA engineer instead of a CEO. I think absolutely the work structures should come that way. And that's about innovation. If anyone sees a process that can flow better or can work better, they just have to have the cultural norms that would accept them promoting and making that change. If you have the best idea and you happen to be a barista in a coffee chain, if that culture isn't open to ideas and change from that, then you can't reorganize around the best ideas.

Henry Albrecht: To me, that's why I always start with culture. I always start with the top down, because if you have a business that requires constant perfection or reinvention, then you have to have a voice of the employee be part of that. And you have to have your values reflective of that sort of innovation. And that's why some of these concepts that some people find a little nebulous, like inclusion and wellbeing and the trust and freedom to do your work with autonomy are actually one in the same with building better organizational structures. Because in the modern economy, there's very few businesses that just are making the same thing over and over and over again.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Which means you're going to have to rethink your own structure every few years.

Henry Albrecht: It's not like building a bridge that's meant to last 80 years. It's like taking a tinker toys set and rebuilding a bridge, maybe every quarter, every year, every couple of years to fit the needs of the market in the business. I actually try to focus less on how to build structures than how to think about how structures need to evolve. When you start a business in your basement, and it's just you, you get to structure everything. You get to structure the name

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of your company, how you want to research it, who the first two, three hires are, how you raise money, what your capital structure is, et cetera. And I would say what's been fun for me thinking about that is about every year and a half, just like Moore's law, about every year and a half, you need a totally different approach and structure.

Henry Albrecht: And that's made my job really interesting because I've been doing this for 15 years and that means I've had 10 different jobs. There was a time early on where our structure was for software developers. One head of sales, myself, one customer success person, and one handy person who does product management and everything else. And that structure works great when you're a handful of people, but then you get to a point, maybe it's around 30 to 40 people where you don't know everybody's names of all their kids anymore. You have to have professional management. Yes, I still interact with 30 people, but really I have to focus on the managers because you need to get some scale and then you have to kind of change the way you think about trust. And I think it's very hard for entrepreneurs to trust others other than themselves.

Henry Albrecht: So obviously, you take your life savings, you bet it on yourself. And that actually is the opposite of what suits you as you're a bigger company. Now we have close to 300 people and I find that I'm actually restructuring my process and my goal to do less work myself, to spend more time thinking, communicating, working with, and leading and coaching people on my team and outward facing roles. So, whereas once I was very operational in what I did now, I really can't do that and still do a good job as a CEO.

Mary Ellen Slayter: I asked Henry what that looks like in his life.

Henry Albrecht: I use the metaphor at the start of climbing a mountain. Sometimes you're at base camp one going to base camp two and you make it and you try to go to base camp three and all your ladders fall into the ice crevasses. And you have to go back to base camp two and regroup and try again. That brings with it, at times, a tremendous amount of stress, but it's never boring. And I geek out on learning. So I think having that new experience every now and then.

Henry Albrecht: I think you'd laugh if you saw my to-do list. I'm a pretty structured person in what I have to do. And I prioritize them with high, medium, low, and I circle things I have to do today. I have a whole system there, but on the left side of the page, I basically have my preferred time allocation. So how much time is spent coaching my team, how much time is spent communicating and leading the company, thinking time and evangelizing or working in a more market facing role with percentages. And then I'd go back and analyze my time over the year and every month and see, am I doing the job as I think it should be designed? I'll redesign it probably every 18 months with the support of the board and my team. For me, the constant evolution of how you do things, keeps it fresh, keeps it interesting.

Mary Ellen Slayter: As we wrapped up our conversation, I asked Henry about his process for building more human centered organizations.

Henry Albrecht: First step is make sure your compass is clear. Your purpose and your values are clear. The second step is show care for employees. We did some research in the Limeade Institute that shows when an employee perceives that their company cares about them, they're 10 times more likely to recommend that company as a great place to work. They're seven times more likely to want to stay three or more years. They're four times less likely to burn out. So this concept of human care is actually not only is it important, but it's easy to structure something around. So we've adapted science from our Institute, largely based in organizational psychology to say, okay, what are the levers that you can pull as a company to show care? So I would say there's three or four at the organization wide level. Things like how do your leaders show up to your company?

Henry Albrecht: Maybe they show up in the mobile phone with a 32nd video once a week to align people on strategy and show that they care about you. How does your culture reinforce care through values? How do you provide people resources and tools to manifest that? It might be just a more efficient process for checking people out of the grocery

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store. It might be something like a wellbeing program or a pulse survey so you can hear the voice of the employee. And then how do you show the employee that what their work every day is connects to the value that the company is? So that's a company wide stuff. And those are levers we can pull. And we have very specific advice on how to pull those levers in a way that increases the connection and trust. And then there's the local ones. And I would say the local ones are even more important because the most important lever of all is the manager.

Henry Albrecht: How do you empower the manager to show care for an individual? How do you ask questions about how you can clear hurdles for employees? How do you make sure the flow of information is good through the manager up to the leadership? So managers are the number one lever, but there's some other really important ones, like your teams and peers, the people you work with every day. The social networks, maybe it's an employee resource group or a champion network, or some sort of affinity group that builds a social bond or community. And the last is the physical environment. I think COVID has kind of shaken up all of these eight levers, but probably the most of all has been the physical environment. You don't get to read people's smiles anymore. You don't get to see faces anymore. And you end up hunched over staring at computers all day. So those are eight levers you can pull to increase care, and it's not that hard. You just have to be intentional about it.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Want to learn even more about Limeade's framework for creating human centered organizations? Check out our show notes for a link to their white paper.

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Interview 2: Amy Dufrane

Mary Ellen Slayter: A lot of tech CEOs like to brag about how they don't need HR, but what they're really objecting to is an outdated idea of HR. And that really bugs Amy Dufrane, the CEO of HRCI.

Amy Dufrane: Technology companies have historically said, oh, we don't need HR. HR is a bunch of people that push papers and sign you up for benefits and do all of those things that we don't want to do because we're too cool for that. But it turns out companies do need HR. You need HR for compliance, but you also need HR to make sure that what you're doing for your employees makes sense. It makes sense for the culture of your organization, for the values of your organization. And it makes sense because you need to make sure that your organizations are working in a safe environment, that they're paid competitively and that you can justify all of those things.

Amy Dufrane: I started in HR almost 30 years ago. And all the things that I did in HR 30 years ago are 100% automated and done in five seconds, except for the conversations and the listening. That hasn't changed because as people are coming to work, they have issues. They have challenges. They may be work challenges, but they could be personal challenges. And those impact people and the role that they play within your organization. You've got to have somebody there to facilitate them through that situation, be it personal or be it on the job, but those are things you can't automate.

Amy Dufrane: And I think we've seen in the pandemic that we're in right now, the criticality of HR and all of the elements that this has impacted for our organization. So over the past 15, 18 months, business continuity, remote work, employee health and wellness balance more so now than ever. And then you combine that with what's going

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on in our environment with the racial situations that have happened across, particularly the United States, HR really thought we had diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging figured out, turns out we don't. So we've got all these things organizationally that HR is dealing with, and these are hard issues. And these are not issues that you solve overnight, or you solve with one conversation or one training program. It requires a global thinker who can apply their thinking and research to best practices within their organization. You got to have great HR.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Amy knows firsthand that these tech founders really do need help with HR. How? Because they ask her.

Amy Dufrane: I participated in an Inc. 5000 event within the past couple of years and talk to a lot of entrepreneurs who are dealing with HR issues. And they, after I did a talk and I had several CEOs coming over to me and saying, I have this problem, what do I do? Really, how do I solve it? And they're all HR challenges. And many of these entrepreneurs said my time is being sucked into some of these HR things that are important. These are very important challenges, but I got to be looking at the business and I got to try to grow our business. And so I need help.

Amy Dufrane: So it's almost like these entrepreneurs know that they need it, but it's overhead in their mind. And so it's another body who isn't revenue generating, but then you think about how can they make me more efficient effective in what I do as a business leader. If you have an HR person who really understands what great HR looks like, they can help you to be more efficient and effective in hiring talent and retaining talent and re-imagining positions. Great HR knows how to assess the team, how to upscale the team, how to get them ready. You want to protect your business, right? And HR can help you to do that and can help you to grow your business.

Mary Ellen Slayter: So given how rapidly the role of HR is changing, what does Amy think it will look like in five years?

Amy Dufrane: They are the CEO's right hand person. Period. And the CEO will rely on HR in a very different capacity because as we see artificial intelligence come into the workplace in a rapid format, and we see individuals that are remotely working. The pandemic that we're in, this very easily could happen again. And so you think about business continuity and how do we prepare for the inevitable? That HR person has thought of all of those elements. So they're very strategic in their mindset. They have had the boots on the ground experience of digging in to what are the elements of the business that are going to make it be successful? They speak as a business owner because they are. They speak in terms of being nimble and agile. The change that is happening in everything that we do right now, that pace is only going to be amplified.

Amy Dufrane: And so a great HR leader needs to be quick on his or her feet, very forward looking. And those soft skills come into play. The listening, the communication, that nimbleness, all those soft skills are critical as these business leaders that are leading the people function, the human capital function, the HR function, the talent acquisition function are all focused in those areas.

Amy Dufrane: And I think we've seen HR reporting up through finance. It actually, in my opinion, should be the exact opposite. And you think about HR being more like and acting like a chief operating officer of the business. That's kind of that title, but that's really where I see HR moving. And the leaders that I talk to that are progressive are more than just the sort of traditional HR. They've got other business units that are part of their responsibility.

Interview 3: Harish Patel

Elena Valentine: Our stimulus checks were first-hand introduction to a novel concept. The government giving money directly to its citizens. How can programs like the stimulus transform work and more importantly society? To better understand these issues, I spoke with Harish Patel, Director of Economic Security for Illinois.

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Harish Patel: Poverty and inequality is a human choice. We created the system that allows for that. So therefore we can redesign that system to not allow for that. It's actually not good either economically or for us as a civilization. And so Economic Security for Illinois, at least in Illinois, is trying to build that income floor where we can call cash policies, guaranteed income, universal, basic income. There's so many different names to it, but ultimately saying nobody needs to be poor because America is so wealthy. We just need to figure out how to redesign this system. The question that we could ask is how much wealth is too much for an individual to have before we start calling them an emperor? If we don't want an monarchy, or an aristocracy, we got to ask, how do you want to redefine and how do we going to reorganize ourselves?

Elena Valentine: Many of us are familiar with the concept of universal basic income, but Economic Security for Illinois is advocating for something slightly different. Guaranteed income.

Harish Patel: The way we define universal basic income is universally targeted basic income, because we do think there's a certain kind of folks who definitely need a basic income, but we may not go up the income or the wealth scale that a general universal basic income may want to. We call guaranteed income because we think that we need to define who is the universal target audience that gets it, and how do we pay for it? When you define how to pay for and who gets it, that gets a little bit more targeted to focus on the inequality and poverty aspect of the problem. And it's not just an infusion of cash for everyone, because if it ends up being that we give everybody equal amount of money, then it may not actually shift inequality if everybody is getting the same amount. What we also know is that if everybody gets the same amount, some people will invest in the stock market and savings accounts and stuff.

Harish Patel: That then produces more wealth for them. But for a lay person, it may not give them an opportunity because they're just trying to get by. They may never build wealth off that basic income. So we would want to target the people who really need it to survive because it's good for the economy. When they have cash, they spend it. When they have cash, they're paying their tickets back. When they have cash, they buy a car. Great. That's what we want. What we don't really want is investment in savings account of stock market, because that actually doesn't infuse and have a multiplier effect for the economy. So that's where we think about guaranteed income as a universally targeted basic income.

Elena Valentine: The concept of guaranteed income has been around for a while, but why is the idea of resonating so much in this moment? To Harish, the answer is simple. It's because more Americans are experiencing inequality and poverty during the pandemic.

Harish Patel: Everybody knows somebody who is closing a business. Everybody knows somebody who has no money for rent or can't pay food and the same people lose their job while they saw millionaires becoming billionaires. And so people are trying to figure out, okay, I don't understand how that's possible. How do the people I know can't even afford food while the stock market is doing so well. So maybe the stock market actually doesn't define my life. Well, maybe there's some detachment in this economic system for us.

Harish Patel: So I think that has allowed space for us to think about new ideas and bolder ideas. And I think cash is one of those ideas that took hold in this moment. Most Americans just got a check from their federal government. So they just got an experience of what it feels like to get cash into their bank account, or a check that they can make into cash and buy stuff. We got three of those in a very short period. Once you've experienced that, it's really hard to unexperience it.

Elena Valentine: And finally I asked Harish what does he think the future of work will look like?

Harish Patel: The pandemic reminded us that work requires human infrastructure, but it also reminded us that you can automatize a lot of work. So future of work really should be about future of workers and let the workers define how it should happen. But what future of work looks right now is it's actually mostly leaving workers behind. And the

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human infrastructure is in some ways being discarded because we don't need them. Well, if the human beings are mostly creating a civilization so we can kind of all cohabitate this earth, then leaving most workers behind is not going to work. You can't organize society without the human infrastructure. So it's actually a very dangerous path if the governments don't really create policies to center workers in the future of work. And so we're working with legislators and philanthropy to kind of come together on a table to really think through that for Illinois economy.

Harish Patel: Because if not, we're going to leave a lot of workers behind, like I was saying. And so I am worried about that as we come out of the pandemic and don't think about a lot of folks who are not going to have a job to go back to because it was automatized or a lot of folks who are not going to have all the infrastructure that you need to survive because your job doesn't give it to you anymore. And the tax code has also not evolved to keep up with the changing dynamics of work. Is a gig economy worker an actual worker? Do they have rights under the law? There is a lot of conversations happening around that. Depending on what our government or state governments decide, if they think these human beings who work 40 hours or more, but just are not defined as workers, are they actual workers? Because if they are, then they would have protection.

Harish Patel: If they're not, then we have to redesign our policymaking because we would all agree if you work 40 hours, that you may be considered a worker and you should have full equal rights. We agree on the concept, but the law doesn't. So we have to evolve. The law needs to evolve. We've got to think about changing that text code to represent what we want it to and make some policies to curb the economic system so it doesn't just leave majority of us behind and possibly this earth may not survive if we let a few people control it all.

Outro

Mary Ellen Slayter: So that's it for this episode of Margins from Managing Editor. You can find us on Apple music, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Make sure you get organized and subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

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Elena Valentine: And a special thanks to the universally basic badasses who made this episode possible. Producer Rex New, audio editor Marty McPadden, and assistant producer Michael Thibodeaux.

Mary Ellen Slayter: We'll see y'all next time.