

Inspiring Women

Episode 65: Abby Sears

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 or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening and I hope you will be inspired.

Welcome to this episode of Inspiring Women. And today, we're speaking with Abby Sears. Now, Abby is the president and chief executive officer of OCHIN. OCHIN is a nonprofit healthcare innovation center designed to provide knowledge solutions that promote quality, affordable healthcare for all people. Now, Abby has been an executive leader in this space of healthcare and promoting health equity and data and innovation solutions for about over 15 years. She's a national figure. She is on stages all over the United States, prominently speaking about HIT and advising how with through her expertise, how healthcare can be equitably delivered for all. She has been with OCHIN since its inception as the CEO. She's again, a national speaker previously recognized at... Awarded CEO of the year for nonprofit organizations. Most recently appointed to the Federal Health Information Technology Advisory Committee. And Abby, I'm so pleased to be speaking with you today.

Abby Sears:

Pleased to be asked. So thank you for inviting me.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, great. Well, I was connected to you, Abby, through some of your vast fan club of just people who really appreciate your leadership and your support. Why don't I just dive in? I always start on Inspiring Women trying to understand, what is your work life look like right now. As the CEO and president of OCHIN, what is your day to day?

Abby Sears:

What a fascinating question. I'm standing in my home office and I do that from the minute I wake up to the time I decide to eat dinner. And that's what it looks like every single day in this new world that we all find ourself in. And it feels a little bit like Groundhog's Day.

Laurie McGraw:

So in terms of getting through this pandemic, in terms of work-life balance, is there none, has that ever been true for you?

Abby Sears:

Well, that's a great question. I try to. I have two kids and I was a single mom for the majority of my time as CEO here at OCHIN. And so, I've always had to juggle getting them to where they needed to go. One of my kids was a competitive basketball player and played on the AAU circuit, so. And the other one was in robotics. I'm not going to say player, but was pretty active in the robotics club. So I think that my life probably mimics many women's lives a lot more than they might actually think. Making dinner for the robotics club and trying to get to the basketball games in Chicago and Arizona, and still try to run the company at the same time and to grow and develop people, as well as you're raising, hopefully, two well-adjusted children in today's world.

So I think I have the same challenges. Making dinner, what are we going to have for dinner? And am I going to get off of Zoom soon enough to actually make dinner? Or am I going to have to do DoorDash or Grubhub just like everybody else? So I think it looks... It would be shockingly similar to what everyone else is doing. And what happens if my daycare couldn't make it? And so, I had all of those same challenges. And at the time that I was raising my kids, I didn't... I probably made less than the traditional female did. So I was trying to figure out how to pay for taking care of them and managing the life that I had on the business side. So I think now if you fast forward to today, my kids are in college. So my life is a little easier in that regard. But I'm also a little older and wiser and probably a little more tired. So [inaudible 00:04:40] stamina that I did.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. I think that should be one of our [inaudible 00:04:45] a great objective sort of as our kids get older, is just getting more sleep. I don't know if I'm any better at it, but I think that's a great objective. There's a lot in that, Abby, that you're talking about. I want to actually go back a little bit. So, as you've become accomplished as the consistent leader of OCHIN, long time ago, you started off as a chemist. So maybe, could you just walk us back and sort of give us a little bit of the history journey of how did you go into leading this important nonprofit? And then, I want to talk a little bit about OCHIN and what you actually do.

Abby Sears:

Okay. What's fascinating is I feel like the job that I have now is an amalgamation and a compilation of all of the things that I'm probably have a passion and interest in, and didn't realize it when I was 22 and 26. I went to school, undergraduate. I was a chemistry degree. I thought about being a doctor and that was... I really, really thought about being a pediatrician. And really thought that was the path I was going to take. But then when I got out of school, I took a couple years off and worked as a chemist in environmental labs. And I really realized that what my true passion is really on the administrative and business side. So instead of going to med school, I took a different route. I went to... And got two master's degrees. A master's in healthcare administration and an MBA.

And so, being in the tech field was not something I ever thought that I would actually do. But growing a company and being committed and passionate about people having access to care was why I wanted to be a pediatrician. So I think what I ended up doing, I didn't even realize I was consciously doing it. But I was following my instincts was the science part of it was something I wasn't afraid of. The leadership part of it was something that I knew that was something I was striving for. I always thought even if I was a physician, I would end up on the administrative side. So the smartest thing for me to do was just go back and get training for that.

And I got my residency after school, when I got out of graduate school at the VA here in Portland, Oregon. And I met this most amazing woman doing an informational interview, while I was at the VA who ran the largest Medicaid payer in Oregon. And that's just history. She invited me to be the project director for this grant project. And it was about women and children and access to care and technology and management. And it was everything I was interested in. And that's what grew into OCHIN.

Laurie McGraw:

So that's sort of an amazing recognition. One, of just what you determined where you were actually passionate about. Getting more training to just build your expertise and skills in the area of business administration. Those kinds of things, while still pursuing a passion to help others and make sure that all people can receive equitable healthcare. So as you just met that woman at the VA and began OCHIN, tell us a bit about the organization. What did it start out as? What is it today 15 years later?

Abby Sears:

Yeah. It started out as a grant project to actually implement... There were five or six organizations in Oregon that... At that moment in time, the health IT world wasn't very interested in those organizations that served the Medicaid and uninsured population. And the reason they weren't is there wasn't any money in it. So the products that they were using were getting bought and sold, and service was inconsistent. So they wanted to come together and buy something together. And that was the grant project that I came into run.

Within three years, we decided... We ended up buying Epic Systems, which is the system that everybody uses in the commercial population. The large delivery systems all use that particular IT system. And at that moment in time, it was unheard of and unthought of that the safety net would actually be able to afford Epic and/or have the right, frankly, to have a product of that magnitude. And I probably fought that stigma for the first 10 to 12 years of my career, where I had to justify why we did that. And we kept saying that they deserve the same high-quality product and the same high-quality service that everybody else did.

And so, what we ended up doing was it had to be an economy of scale business. We couldn't afford to use that high-quality product that was not inexpensive. It was expensive. So we had to actually grow the business and we had to get to a place where it was sustainable, frankly. So the first, I would say, 12 years of my career was really making the company sustainable. And then, the last, I would say, eight years was really, I think, building the organization into what it can be, if that makes sense. Getting past, knowing whether we're going to make payroll, getting past, making sure we had a business that would be here for the long run. And then, really slowly and intentionally adding more services that would round out what we were doing. And slowly and intentionally providing a service that was a very high quality and providing an environment.

And I'm still working on this, where we are building out a workforce and a work environment that really shows that you can take care of your staff and your members and provide a business and run a business in this same way. So that's what it looks like today, is that we're really trying to get to this place where we're taking as good a care of our employees. And we're thinking about them as holistic people and recognizing they don't come to work every day and leave their kids and all of the other things that they have going on. That they're just leaving that at the door. Frankly, they're probably sitting at their feet, so.

Laurie McGraw:

Abby, as you talk about that. I mean, you talked about being a mom, a single mom, and how you orient your work life around the support of your kids. And you also said that that was just the same as sort of like probably every other woman. And then, when you talk about how you built OCHIN and how you did it, you're explaining it in this matter of fact way, like anybody could do it.

What I'm hearing sounds a bit different. What I'm hearing is that you, from the get go, had to learn the skills, follow the problems of a sustainable business solution, a stigma issue. And my question to you is, how did you do it? I mean, you started off as the leader of the organization. Yes, you have an MBA. Yes, you have multiple degrees. But did you have mentors? How did you accomplish this? Because I find that remarkable. I find that as somebody who did it single-handedly. I'm sure you did it with a team.

Abby Sears:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laurie McGraw:

But it's not like you came from three or four having done that before to do what you've done here. How do you think about that?

Abby Sears:

Well, I think about a couple things. First of all, somebody opened the door and allowed me to actually be a leader. And I think it starts with that, and the amount of responsibility I feel for the fact that they took a chance on me when I may or may not have been the most qualified for the role. I might have been the only one interested in the role. I really don't know because I wasn't in those conversations. But I feel a sense of responsibility for that. I have always worked with a board of directors at the company that I would say were really good teachers. They guided me and guided the organization and gently prodded me in the right way. So I think being open to hearing that...

There's always a lot of criticism. There's always a lot of you didn't do it well enough sort of a thing. And I don't spend a lot of time on that. I've really thought about this a lot. I think what matters to me the most is there's truth in everything, is I try to pull out the truth and what's being said, or what is going on around me. And I try to learn as fast as I can and pivot as quickly as I can because nobody is perfect and nobody's going to do it perfectly. It's just how do I create a situation where I'm learning as fast as I can and making sure I'm taking care of things as much as I can.

So first of all, it comes to I've had a fantastic board of directors from the very beginning who were looking out for me. I have fantastic friends and support system who's always there for me. And then, I just feel like I have this innate sense of responsibility. Like I'm responsible for the employees at the organization. I'm responsible to the members who had the courage to step off the curb and work with us when they didn't have to.

I mean, think about what courage they had to actually create this little company and be willing to risk their business systems by working with us. So that sense of responsibility is probably my largest driver and not wanting to let anyone down, not wanting to let my kids down,

not wanting to let the employees that work at OCHIN down, and not wanting to let the members that we provide a service to. So I think that's what my drivers are. And then, just trying to learn as fast as I can.

Laurie McGraw:

I mean, that's incredible and it is inspiring to hear that. What I'm also hearing, and I don't want to read too much into it, but many women struggle with the taking criticism, learning moments, those types of things that are inevitably obstacles along the way. And many women tend to take those items very personally and dwell on them, and they become sort of outsize to the learning moment.

What I'm hearing you say sound like you have an ability to separate the emotion of it from the responsibility and like how to learn from those moments. And again, I'm just trying to hear what you're saying, is how do you deal with just things that can become sort of like that in your head voice, emotional and dwelling on the negative thing, which is a tendency that many women have.

Abby Sears:

Yeah. I think that's a really good point. And I've thought a lot about this because when I'm mentoring women, I see this a lot. Whether it's my own daughters or some of the women that I work with. It's not letting things define you and not letting somebody else define you, and not giving your power away. Just because I'm sitting in a room of men where I will say something and then they'll ignore me, until a man says this exact same thing. I can get mad about that, and I can get frustrated about that, or I can prove them wrong. And I think I just don't... My energy and my time are more valuable than that. I'm just not going to give them away to people. And I'm not going to give it away to anyone unless I consciously choose to do that. And I'm not going to be defined by what they think I should be, or by what they want me to be in any given point.

And I also, what I learned quickly, it didn't spend time in situations if they weren't going to lift up the organization or lift up me. So those were my priorities. If they weren't going to help me get the organization to where it needed to go so that I could be responsible and I could get it to where it needed to be, so that I didn't fail somebody, I didn't spend any time on that. I didn't give them any additional time. And I didn't waste my time on that, I guess, is what I would say, because it wasn't going to add any value.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think what's incredible about that actually is I think that most people objectively understand that that's what you should do, that that's actually what you do do is great. And how you think about it again, it's very authentic in terms of what you're saying. And I hope for [inaudible 00:17:10] listeners relatable to put themselves in that kind of mindset, because I think that advice that people can actually take it and do it the way that you are able to is exceptional.

Abby, I've listened to a number of your discussions and podcasts and other interviews that you've done. And I've just heard you talk about how you purposefully have built OCHIN for the employees, so that they can do their best work addressing things like health inequities. And so, just the workforce is two-thirds female, that you have a very open environment, kid-friendly. Can you just talk about why is that important to you? Socially competent is advice that you give to people to be socially competent. Maybe you could just like hit on some of those points.

Abby Sears:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I believe why it matters to me is because I don't think you can separate a person from their personal life and their professional life. I think they are a whole person. I think they bring all of that to work every day. And I think as a female, I don't believe that you should ask a female to come into the office and act like a male. I think they are innately good at juggling many things, but you have to give them permission. You have to give them the permission to prioritize all of it and to handle it the way that works for them. So I don't believe in an 8:00 to 5:00. I don't believe in... I mean, people can come and go. I just believe in here's the work, help me get the work done in whatever way it works for you as a person.

And I think maybe because I know that I wouldn't have been successful in my role, if I hadn't given myself that permission. I can't tell you how many phone calls I made from parking lots. And people didn't know that this was what I was doing. Sitting outside, waiting for basketball practice to get over because I couldn't find anybody to pick up my daughter.

Laurie McGraw:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Abby Sears:

So I'm sitting there in the parking lot on multiple conference calls for an hour and a half, in parking lots. Or I'm taking phone calls while I'm driving one kid to fencing and I'm taking one kid to basketball. And so, I wouldn't have made it if I hadn't given myself that permission. I can't not be a mom. That's ridiculous. And I would've quit if that would have been the choice, just like most females would do. I mean, that's just a rational response to that.

So I think I just need to show that you can be a successful organization, you can be a successful female, but you can define it any way you want. One of the things I've said to a few females and to myself is if I can't... As a female leader, I have a responsibility to show it can look and be different. And if I'm not going to do it, then who is?

Laurie McGraw:

Right. And you've said that... One of the quotes, I'll just read it, that I've heard from you, "It's vitally important for girls and young women to see successful women with different leadership styles, using their voices and doing important work in their community." So this is a consistent approach that you bring to your work and you bring to the many discussions and national leadership positions that you participate in.

And I do, I agree. It's important. And I think that your focus on women, as well as single mothers, recognizing those unique responsibilities and burdens. And knowing that we're seeing statistics of more women leaving the workforce due to the pandemic is problematic. So I think that those sort of putting it out there as not anything to be ashamed of, not have to walk away from, but to say, "Hey, this is life," and bringing that whole person a mentality, I just really appreciate that. That speaks loudly to me. And I hope to so many others.

Abby, I wanted to also ask you about, just because you are an expert in the intersection of data and innovation and systems, and how that can impact the health, the populations. What are you seeing out there? We've been through this, or we're not through, but in still this pandemic, as

you look at data and systems and the opportunity for population health, what are you optimistic about? In terms of the future, where do you see opportunities?

Abby Sears:

I am incredibly optimistic about the voice that we are caring around the patients that are not visible in this country, that are left out of the delivery system, that are not commercially covered, that are covered by Medicaid and/or uninsured, and are barely getting care. I'm incredibly optimistic about the focus on equity that we're hearing. But it has to be sustained and it can't just be something that we just talked about for six months or 12 months. There's an institutional challenge around how we've defined and designed our entire healthcare system.

But I would say around everything, even the things we're talking about today, around how we define what a workday looks like, about what we define how somebody is successful in the workplace. None of that has to be true. We can redefine that. And so, that's what I'm incredibly excited about, is that I feel like I'm finally doing some of the most important work that I was set in this world to actually do. And that's to show that we can be incredibly successful and define it in a different way.

The challenges with that are the institutional... You're changing people's points of view about that. We're able to use the data that we have to actually show what's truly happening in the pandemic. And the amount of lack of equity that we've experienced, I think for hundreds of years is now at our fingertips. We can tell a story. We can tell a story about our patient population, about what has happened to them during the pandemic. That they've gotten COVID at a two or three times the rate. That they were not given the vaccine as quickly because the vaccines were not distributed to trusted partners in the same way.

But we've been able to elevate that voice. And we've been able to make changes in ways we never were before. And that's been exciting, is that we've been able to communicate with the data that we have. What's really happening with this patient population and helping to influence some of the rules and the laws and the distribution and the approaches in ways that, I think, over time could really have a huge impact and will have a huge impact.

So I think on both sides, from a patient standpoint, I'm excited. But I also think from a workforce standpoint, I'm also excited about the opportunity to show that remote work can work, the opportunity to redefine what that looks like for an employee, and not have them on the road for two or three hours a day if they have traffic. Things like that. Those are the things I'm really excited about.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Abby, I have to say it's so encouraging to hear you talk about what you are so excited about. Whether it's workforce or the opportunities for addressing the needs of those patients that were previously or oftentimes invisible, which are, by the way, the same types of things that you were talking about 15 years ago when you started OCHIN. So that you're optimistic is just, again, encouraging. This has been such a great inspiring women conversation. I really appreciate, Abby, you sharing so much of this. As we close out today, any last words of wisdom or advice you might give to perhaps younger women who are looking to follow in similar footsteps as yourself?

Abby Sears:

I just think the biggest thing is to not be defined by what other people think. Find your path, find your passion, and don't give up. And write your own rules.

Laurie McGraw:

I think that is great advice. That is from learned experience. And I appreciate you sharing that. We have been speaking with Abby Sears on Inspiring Women. And Abby, thank you so much.

Abby Sears:

Okay. Thank you.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. Please subscribe, rate and review. We are produced by Kate Cruise at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.