

CareerMinded Episode 2 - Transcript

00:00 Martin Schneider: CareerMinded is sponsored by Career Minds, a leading provider of virtual outplacement and career transition services. You can learn more about Career Minds at careerminds.com.

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00:13 MS: Welcome to CareerMinded, the show that explores the human side of human resources. I'm your host, Martin Schneider. Each episode, we'll talk to HR professionals and thought leaders about the personal aspects of what they do and why they do it, all the while, discovering what drives people that drive the people that drive businesses today.

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00:41 MS: As you listen to today's episode, I want you to think of a time in your life when something extremely challenging happened unexpectedly. Maybe you were in a car accident, or you were abruptly let go from your job, or you had to deal with the sudden loss of a loved one. These scenarios happen to people every day, and usually, they come right when everything else seems to be going great. Now, think about where you are today, listening to this podcast, and try to picture the timeline between where you are now and where you were when that curve ball was thrown at you. How do you feel now? How have you recovered? What steps did you take to get there? Who supported you? All of these factors contribute to the path you took recovering from that punch in the gut. Or maybe your curve ball happened very recently and you're going through it right now. If that's the case, listen on, because you're gonna wanna hear what our guest today has to say.

01:39 MS: Today's episode is about resiliency, the measure of our ability to bounce back after challenges. We're talking about the different ways people can build resiliency in themselves and in other people, and we're talking about times when people have turned an unexpected hardship into the best opportunity of their lives. Finally, I want you to think about a time someone else you know has had an unexpected curve ball, maybe a friend, maybe a co-worker, maybe someone else who's close to someone that you are close to; think about ways that you supported them, even if you didn't know what else to do, even if you didn't know them. Now, if you're in HR or in any part of the employee experience sector, there are ways that you can show your support and build resiliency in your co-workers and your staff when you know that they're going through an unexpected hard time. This is not as far removed from normal business operations as you might think; after all, no one expects to get sick, but we offer sick days as a way to help employees deal with something that is unexpected. It's an unexpected setback. Same with bereavement pay or time off for jury duty.

02:45 MS: Now, beyond basic time off, there are other resiliency tools that HR teams can offer to support their staff. One popular tool is counseling services, including hotlines and employee assistance programs. Some companies are offering tuition assistance or student loan repayment programs for employees that may be financially struggling, or if you know that you're going to have to let people go, employing a top-tier outplacement service, like our sponsor Career Minds, goes a long way toward showing your employees that you care about their well-being, even after their

termination. The point is, as long as humans are doing business, then businesses will always have opportunity to show their humanity, and the resiliency of the employee is good for the durability of the company.

03:37 MS: Our guest today is Marisa Harris, who really embodies that connection between business and personal well-being. Marisa has an amazing story. 25 years ago, she was working with her friend, Bill Schiemann, who you may remember from our last episode, to improve the performance of a struggling company. But then, Marisa's life was thrown the ultimate curve ball, she was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer and told it was terminal. But during one of the darkest times of her life, Marisa had an unlikely moment of inspiration. She implemented the same business techniques that she used to improve the performance and well-being of her company and applied them to her recovery plan and her personal life, and it's made a world of difference. But I don't wanna get too far ahead of ourselves here. Let's let Marisa tell the story for herself.

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04:45 MS: Welcome back, and thank you for listening to CareerMinded. My guest today is Marisa Harris, she's formerly the VP of HR at CIT Group, but these days, she's a coach specialising in both executive issues and health issues. Those two topics may seem unrelated, but when you hear Marisa's story, you'll see exactly how they tie into each other. Alright Marisa, thank you so much for being on the show with us today.

05:08 Marisa Harris: Oh, you're so welcome, my pleasure.

05:11 MS: Before we get started, can you just lay down the two to four-minute version of your story?

05:17 MH: Of course. Just the question alone makes me emotional. So, I was at the height of my business career, I was head of human resources for the business units of a corporation called the CIT Group. And over the last two and a half years, we had used... We were pioneers in using this performance improvement program, called the Balanced Scorecard. We were one of the first companies to use it, and we were... We had brought in a consultant, Bill Schiemann, to help us really transform a mediocre, stagnant company, and our vision was through this, using this process to take this underperforming company to number one worldwide. And it seemed impossible. This was one of six companies of CIT, the least likely company that would achieve these kinds of results. But through commitment and persistence and imagination, we stayed with it, the whole entire company. And I was part of the senior executive team, and why this was so important, it was, I think, the first time in a two-decade career with the company, or almost two decades, that representing human resources, that I was an equal and at times even more member of a business strategy initiative. And...

07:14 MS: So you were a big deal for this. This is... You were a big name at this company, kind of the height of your career, as you said.

07:20 MH: It was. I thought at this time it was the number one challenge and accomplishment of

my life. And at the height of the success, Bill and I were back speaking at the conference board to hundreds of executives about the process that had transformed a company and its culture. And I had just received... It seemed like out of the blue, although looking back, it was not, the most dreadful information that I had ever received in my life. I was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer.

08:07 MS: And for context, how long ago was this?

08:09 MH: This was 20 years ago, just 20 years ago.

08:13 MS: Alright.

08:14 MH: And I was told by leading oncologists at leading cancer centers that absolutely nothing could be done, that I was medically untreatable, medically incurable, and with absolute certainty, they told me that I would die probably within four to six months, maybe if I was really lucky, nine months.

08:42 MS: Well, obviously that didn't happen. It's been 20 years, and you're here. So tell me how your recovery plan went and what you did that was a little unorthodox?

08:54 MH: Well, there was this one part of me that absolutely believed that these experts knew what was going to happen to me, and I believed that I was going to die. In fact, I decided to make some plans because of my children and my husband. And then, it was like out of the blue, I don't even know where the blue is, but this thought came into my head, this reminder that I had just been part of this process that had taken an underperforming, stagnant company with so many problems from sort of the bottom to number one, and I decided that I was going to apply that same framework, that Balanced Scorecard, except it was going to be a life balance scorecard, to getting well again. And the moment that I decided to do that, it was like, "Okay, I have a vision, I wanna get well again, I have a plan and a structure." And it was as if I came out of this dark prison in the basement, and suddenly it was like the doors opened and I was in the light, because I saw hope and possibility. And I felt so empowered to... That there was... That I just knew that there were so many things that I could do that would help me get well again.

10:34 MS: So, how did that work specifically? Can you give me just an example of how you used these tools, tools like the Balanced Scorecard, through your recovery, how you adapted them and applied them?

10:45 MH: Yeah. Well, similar to what we did with this business unit, it was like, "Okay, what is my vision?" And that was very easy. My vision was not only to get well again, which of course was very easy for me to come up with, but why? What was driving that, what was the purpose of my getting well again? And I have three children, and I wanted to see them grow up, and I wanted... And I set some milestones that I could [chuckle] really hope into and work towards and just see that happening, and... So I used my imagination, my imagination was that I saw myself dancing at each one of my daughter's weddings with my husband. And they didn't even have serious boyfriends at the time, so I knew that if I was at their wedding, that it meant that I had gotten well again.

11:53 MH: And then I thought, "Okay, if that's my vision, similar to what you do in the Scorecard, what are all the different areas that are going to contribute to my, quote, success?" It's similar to [12:08] ____ in terms of using it with the business, it was, who were the people I needed in my life? Who were the people that I had to employ and create an executive team that was going to help me get well again? And certainly, one element for me had to be a brilliant, well-trained oncologist. But there also had to be a quality and a characteristic about this person, and he absolutely... Or she absolutely had to believe in the possibility that I could get well again.

12:45 MS: You built a team with a similar philosophy to you, essentially, which is a very business-minded concept.

12:52 MH: Right. Yeah, no, I mean, it wasn't similar, that they were aligned as when I hired people, at all levels, to join the CIT. It wasn't so much similar, but they absolutely believed in the mission and the goals of CIT. So I hired people with all kinds of different capabilities that I thought would impact my getting well again, and they had to not only believe in my mission and in my vision, but they had to be excited about it as well, and very creative.

13:32 MS: When you run into people who are already struggling with some of life's sudden unexpected obstacles, how do you talk to them about resilience? How do you talk to them about their lives and what may be ahead of them?

13:45 MH: Well, first of all, I ask them, "How important is it that you overcome this challenge?" Because massive motivation, whether it's in the business world, or whether it's finding the love of your life, or getting pregnant, or starting a business, it doesn't matter, but a key, key driver is that we're massively motivated to accomplish what we want. And then, the next thing is to really work on increasing their positivity. Because it's... Everything is energy, and if all we're focused on is the problem and what's going... What could go wrong and what is wrong, that's [14:34] ____, that we'll see more of.

14:37 MH: So to really increase their positivity, and often, and this is what I really also learned, go back in your life, look back. We've all faced what looked like insurmountable challenges in our lives, or at least very difficult challenges, and what did we do, and what did people that we know, that we've seen in our lives who have accomplished unexpected things? And what did they do and what have you done? And how can you use that to motivate you and to bring more positivity into it? And also to remember to get in touch with those resources that you have, those abilities that you have, the skills, and that... And to apply them. It really doesn't matter what the obstacle or the challenge is, the technology, the steps that you have to... That you take are very much the same. And the importance of being able to reach out to others.

15:54 MH: I think that, for me and for many other people, can be very difficult, to admit that you don't know something, or to admit that you really need help, and ask for help. And I saw this so much in the business world, in that people were reluctant to ask each other, even with a team, "Hey, can you help me out on this?" That sort of Lone Ranger effect.

16:23 MS: Is that something you struggle with in your current position? Now, you came back and

now you work as a life coach, and you work with hundreds of cancer patients in situations similar to yours. So, is that something that you find that you struggle with when you're starting to coach these people on their recovery, that some people are reluctant to ask for help, maybe some of them have given up, accepted that they're going to die like you had?

16:49 MH: I think that's part of it, but I think more of it is... And I not only work with cancer patients, but as you know, Martin, I also work on building resilience and fulfillment with organizations and with teams. Yeah, I think it's part of the way we... So many of us were brought up to do it on your own, be self-sufficient.

17:15 MS: It's a very American ideology.

17:18 MH: Yeah, it is. And when it comes to people who are ill, there's an added issue, and that's, "I don't wanna be a burden to people," and, "If I tell them how needy I am or unhappy, I'm afraid I'll drive them away," or "I wanna protect them," there's all kinds of things. And so, that's the important... Whether it's an organization or an individual, to create a team, so that it's not... It all doesn't fall on one person. And also, you're getting input from other people, from more than one person.

18:02 MS: You said the word "resilience" a couple of minutes ago. How exactly do you define resilience, and what are some of the techniques you use to help both people and organizations build that trait?

18:16 MH: Yeah, resilience is like one of those words like vision, and fulfillment, and whatever...

18:23 MS: It gets tossed around a lot, that's why I'm asking.

18:26 MH: It's not I think it's tossed around a lot, but we tend to think of it as one entity, as one quality.

18:35 MS: Okay.

18:35 MH: But in fact, it's made up of many different characteristics. So, I name [18:43] ____ like positivity... So people or teams or organizations that are resilient see opportunities and hope in the midst of challenging situations. It doesn't mean that they're... We're not looking for the Pollyannas, but that they don't focus on the problem and all the things that go wrong. And resilient people and resilient teams not only see opportunities, but actually go out and search for and create opportunities. And they also draw on... Whether it's as an organization, or as an individual, or a team, they draw on their own capability and resources. They're not, you know... Even in the midst of this... So for me, even in the midst of this diagnosis, I knew that I am very good at identifying resources and people who have had successes and really being... I'm a great interviewer, so I'm great at drawing out that information of what people do.

20:04 MH: And so, resilience is also made up with a willingness to experiment, to take some risks, to try out things before they're proven and everybody is doing it. Because when you're facing a

major challenge, doing the same things, or even drawing on what others have done may not be enough, it may need that, you really need to experiment and take some risks and see those risks that, even if they don't work out, that you can learn from them. That it'll help you move on to the next step, that may be more successful.

20:52 MH: I think the other thing about resilience is also that we're able to deal with very uncomfortable feelings around fear and anxiety and disappointment and doubt, and not allow those emotions to take us from our vision and our priorities. To recognise that's part of life, but to know that there's... That in the midst of the disappointment, the midst of the setback and the doubt and whatever, that there's still room to try out new things, and to be positive, and to really work on not only our own, dealing with our own negative or dark emotions, but also to be able... And this is more, I think, with our families, with our children and organizations. To be able to handle and just allow people who have disappointments, they didn't get that promotion, they're... I just was with somebody who just... She got a demotion, she's no longer gonna be managing the team that she's managed for 13 years.

22:27 MS: That's rough.

22:28 MH: Yeah. And for her to be able to deal with it, but not allow it, not allow herself to get buried in it.

22:37 MS: Let's talk about the new things that you're trying. So when your health began to turn around, you... What did you take from the recovery? What did you learn from that process that you went and brought back into the business world when you returned to work, when you had a new career?

22:54 MH: Right. So I'm sure you're familiar with the term work-life balance, but today it's taking on new meaning, and for me, it had special meaning because work-life... To balance things, and it doesn't mean equal, is to pay attention. Doesn't mean it's gonna be equal attention, but attention must be paid. And when I said that it seemed like that diagnosis just came out of the blue, that's really not so. There were a number of little warning signs that I was just too busy to pay attention to, and there was no question that my priority, in terms of action and behavior, was my business world, was my business career, and then my children and my family. But the majority of my mental and physical time was spent on, how can I be a major contributor at this organization? How can I be senior person and I... I never said no to anything. It was like there was six different businesses I was supporting, and I had a dual reporting to HR, as well as to the Vice Chairman.

24:25 MS: So prior to the diagnosis, would it be safe to say that you didn't prioritise yourself and your own health and your own well-being maybe as much as you should have?

24:36 MH: Yeah, and by the way, because of my business background, the majority of people who come to me who have cancer have very similar profiles to mine. They're very invested in their careers and building their businesses, or building their career in an organization, and that's where their energy has gone to. The work that I do now is so much on work-life, it's work-life balance, but it's really work-life attention, to paying attention to identifying what are your most important

priorities in your life. And because of my experience, I tell everybody... Very often, they'll say family, but very few people, until they get ill, say their health. And yet, every person I've worked with has said to me, who's had a diagnosis, serious physical diagnosis that, going forward, and they wish in the past that they had made that a priority. And there's two ways, one of it is to pay attention to those little warning signs, which is one of the things we need to do with work, too. Rather than avoiding them or burying them before they become major things, you wanna take care of them when they're just small. It's much easier to take care of a micro challenge than a macro challenge. So you wanna do that in all areas of your life.

26:18 MS: What's an example of a warning sign at work?

26:21 MH: Okay, well I can tell you one that happened, this was right after... I was in CIT when it was acquired by Manufacturers Hanover, and they had a very different philosophy about HR, but one of the senior executives got word that there may be, and this is 20 years ago, more than that, a problem in their Atlanta office around possible sexual misconduct on the part of their number one salesperson. And so this person who, up until then, didn't have much regard for HR, he came to me and he said, "Have you ever dealt with this before?" And I said, "Too many times." And he said, "Well, what do you recommend?" And I said, "I recommend that we deal with it right away." And he said, "Can you go to Atlanta?"

27:16 MH: And this was just, it had really just begun, but rather than ignoring the little signs that you're hearing, maybe yes, maybe no, you really want to... Again, it's a thing about approach or avoidance. You want to approach it, you wanna look into the issue, maybe it's nothing, whether it's in the health area, whether it's something to do with one of your children, that he or she doesn't seem to be the same child that, from six months ago, that it looks like there's something going on. Whether... Paying attention to those important relationships, we tend to take things for granted, not only at work, but sometimes even more in your personal life.

28:12 MS: So, since you had kind of a renewed sense of attention and you've refocused the priorities, how did that affect your personal life, your personal relationships? It sounds like some of the things you said, your personal relationships with your husband and your family actually got better during your recovery and your diagnosis.

28:30 MH: Well, first of all, one of the things that I had learned in business is to see where you are in something. What's the level of success or fulfillment, or just like, where are you? And so then you can see where you're going. So one of the things that I did is, I did an assessment with my husband, and I asked him, "What is your level of satisfaction in being married to me, and our relationship, on a scale of one to 10?" And he sort of hemmed and hawed and he said two and a half.

29:07 MS: Wow.

[laughter]

29:10 MS: Wow.

29:12 MH: Yeah. And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because you're always too busy. You're so busy with everything else." And I said, "Well, what would it take, what can we do so that you feel that you are getting attention?" And he said, "I wanna feel valued," and this is so true. Whether we're talking about our employees or whatever that think about being valued. And so we came up together with a plan of how he would feel that I was giving him more attention, what that would look like. So we had a date night once a week, but also that dinner... We would have dinner together at least three times a week, just a whole number of things. And then did an assessment again, and I went from two and a half to a little over a nine.

30:18 MS: Wow! Look at those results.

30:21 MH: And I did it with my children, the same thing. I also... I realized the whole thing, I think, so many of us, sometimes I think it's all of us, about so much to do, so many competing demands, and so the importance of prioritizing, because you can't do everything. You can do anything, but you cannot do everything. And so, I cut back on certain things and certain people that I was seeing, I decided I would see less often. And during the time that I was sick, not only did I cut back, but I was very, very clear, going back to alignment, that people could only be in my life during that recovery period that absolutely believed with me in the possibility that I could get well. That people who were either negative or against the kind of treatments that I was doing, I would tell them, right up front, that while I'm going through this, you can no longer be in my life. And I think that's something that's so important.

31:50 MH: Sometimes it's difficult with family. You may have that uncle who's really so negative, whatever, but you can decide how much you're going to see that person and also to not get emotionally involved. It's sort of like the weather that we had yesterday. Sleet and snow and [32:13] ____ and there's some things that you can't change. And that's the other thing, to really ask yourself, what are those things that I can change? And to put your attention on those things that you can either directly change, or, which is most often, those things that you may not be able to directly control, but you can influence. That's a big part of how we operate in the business world. Even if you're the CEO, you really can't force people to do things over a period of time, but how can you influence them through both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards?

33:00 MS: Yeah, I think that it happens a lot of time in the business world especially. Well, business and personal. We're afraid of what it might mean to cut toxicity out of our lives. And sometimes, in the business world, you hear about toxic employees that poison, essentially, an environment and they're not removed in time, the attention isn't paid. The warning signs, as you put it, aren't there. But what I like about what you just said is, it makes absolute perfect sense. While you're trying to get the toxicity out of your body, why would you have toxic energy from outside of your body coming back into you? It seems to make perfect sense from my point of view.

33:39 MH: Yes, of course, because there really isn't any boundary.

33:43 MS: Right, right. Marisa, thank you so much for coming on and sharing your story with you, sharing some insights, it's been a pleasure having you.

33:53 MH: Oh, you're so welcome. It's been a pleasure, really fun, an honour to do this.

34:00 MS: Thank you very much.

[music]

34:02 MS: Alright Marisa, well, thank you for being on the show, and thank you to all of you for listening. That's about it for this episode of CareerMinded. Be sure to tune into our next episode, where I'll be talking with the VP of Human Resources at the Philadelphia Zoo. I'm really excited for that episode, it's gonna be a wild one.

[vocalization]

34:21 MS: CareerMinded is hosted by me, Martin Schneider, and is brought to you by Career Minds. Thanks for listening, we'll talk to you next time.

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