



EP275_Jana Merfen

Lisa Nichols 00:03

Chromosomes, little strands of nucleic acids and proteins are the fundamental genetic instructions that tell us who we are at birth. Most people are born with 46 chromosomes. But each year in the United States, about 6000 people are born with an extra chromosome, making them a person with Down syndrome. If you've ever encountered someone with Down syndrome, you know that they are some of the kindest, most joyful people you will ever meet. They truly have something extra. My name is Lisa Nichols and I have spent the last 24 years as both the CEO of technology partners in as the mother to Ally. Ally has something extra in every sense of the word. I have been blessed to be by her side as she impacts everyone she meets. Through these two important roles as CEO and mother to Ally, I have witnessed countless life lessons that have fundamentally changed the way I look at the world. While you may not have an extra chromosome, every leader has something extra that defines who you are. Join me as I explore this something extra in leaders from all walks of life and discover how that difference in each of them has made a difference in their companies, their families, their communities and in themselves. If you'd liked this episode today, please go to Apple podcasts or wherever you listen and leave us a five star rating.

Lisa Nichols 01:35

I am thrilled to have Jana Merfen. On the show today. Jana is the Chief Technology Officer at CrossFirst Bank. Well, Jana, welcome to the Something Extra podcast. I am delighted that you are making the time to be on the show today.

Jana Merfen 01:22

Well, thank you so much for having me. Lisa. It was so kind of you. Well, you and I met at the National ORBIES in Boston, and just had a really good time. So I always say I did what all good podcast hosts do. And I invite you on the podcast so I can spend more time with you. That's right, we connected at the Inspire CIO Converge 2023. And I think we made several connections over just technology leadership, careers, family, and it was great getting to know you and we've continued that conversation since then.

Lisa Nichols 02:27

We sure have, and that's wonderful. So I'm just going to say if there are any technology executives out there and you've not gotten involved in inspire and converge, converge 2024 I believe it's going to be in Dallas. I promise you it will be worth your while there will be a great return on your investment because you get to meet amazing people like Jana but Jana, you're the CTO for cross first bank in Leawood, Kansas. And I believe Weren't you a finalist for the Kansas City CIO? I think it was in 2022?

Jana Merfen 03:03

Yes, 2022

Lisa Nichols 03:05

2022. You've been named Ingram's 40, under 44 exhibiting the highest level of integrity, entrepreneurial thinking, leadership acumen, as well as industry and civic involvement. And I cannot wait Gina, to introduce you today to our listeners, because I know that your wisdom is going to help them on their own leadership journey. But tell me about the story about you growing up where I don't even know where you grew up. I want to know where you grew up. What do you like to do as a young girl?

Jana Merfen 03:38

Well, I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, my entire childhood in the same house, with my parents and two siblings. And, you know, I had I always had I say, a competitive drive from early on, and I started playing soccer at a young age. And that was really my passion and love was playing soccer. And then as I got into middle school in high school, I fell in love with running as well. And so just had a lot of fun growing up, but I learned a lot of life lessons playing sports, I learned how to, to win, and I learned how most importantly, to lose. And I also knew, you know, I remember vivid memories of you know, maybe I you know, someone got you know, the starting position over me and what did I need to do to earn it back? How did I you know, work hard to improve, not only individually for myself and what I could do for my team. So there was a lot of tough lessons growing up on that, that I've translated of, of how I've learned to handle that and in the real world as an adult so and after graduating high school, I went on to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and graduated from Miami with a degree in accounting and so started my career in accounting. I'm

working for KPMG. My recommendation still is always to anyone out there, get an accounting or finance degree because it is such an amazing foundation and really helps you in any area of your life or perhaps professional career, and started out my career and public accounting on the audit side. And I spent my first half of my career doing that, and then transitioned into various roles, where I just kind of followed my passion, and asking questions and turned out I really enjoyed technology and learning everything about it, and just follow that journey. And here I am today.

Lisa Nichols 05:37

Yes, as the CTO, there's so much here that I want to talk about so talking about that makes a lot of sense that you played sports. Because you, I cannot even tell you. It'd be an interesting study, seriously, Jaina to go back and look at the number of leaders that were athletes. A lot of technology leaders, a lot of technology leaders, Justin McFarland here, that was the CIO for McCarthy, he played college soccer at WashU. I mean, I just can't even tell you how many in and I know, too, that there's enterprise rent a car is a large client of ours here in St. Louis. And one of the things they look at when they're recruiting young people are athletes. And I think, to your point, there's so much that you learn from that competition, learning how to work as a team learning that every position on the team is important.

Jana Merfen 06:39

right. And I think there's discipline that you have to really learn on, you put into it, like what you put into it, your level of effort, and your attitude kind of drives your results. And I look at it just as you know, for example, in the real world of if you're planning and putting the level of time and effort into preparing it, things are gonna go well, it's when you haven't put in the time and you haven't prepared. I enjoy public speaking. And sometimes people ask me, like, Oh, that was great. And I said, Well, it was great, because I practiced. And people don't realize that before I go up on, you know, and present for anything, I practice, I prepare.

Lisa Nichols 07:19

Absolutely.

Jana Merfen 07:20

And I make sure I have everything I know that I'm going to articulate and say and the key messages I want to get across. I don't just wing it. And so I think that that's something just that translates to, you can't just wing it, when it wing it in a game, you have to plan you have to prepare, you have to understand all the roles, how you're working together, what you need to do to contribute and play your part. And, and all of us have to play certain roles, right. And sometimes you might be more at the forefront. And some you might be a more supportive role. And it shifts and changes, you know, over time, significantly and all are extremely important roles. It's a lot of fun.

Lisa Nichols 08:01

Yes. Well, you are speaking my language. Jana, you are totally speaking my language I had in one of my roles that I had I started my career at McDonnell Douglas, that's something else you and I have in common. We talked about I have a BS in accounting. So I started while you went KPMG. I went to corporate accounting with McDonnell Douglas. But after I left Mac, I was at another fortune 500 company and I had my boss was an ex Marine. And his favorite motto was failing to prepare is preparing to fail. And I so believe what you just said someone sees the game, right? Or they see that presentation that you make, and they're like, Wow. But it's kind of like the iceberg. You saw this part, but you did not see what was under the water. And how much preparation you'll I have to give a shout out to our youngest daughter Ali, who is actually an inspiration for this something extra podcast. She was in a dance competition this weekend. Jana, go look at my LinkedIn page. Watch Ali dance. But the one of the lessons is she practices so hard. I mean, you see her like dance, but there's a lot of preparation that went into that. So you're totally speaking my language. But talking about KPMG I have said that so many times I went into corporate I loved my time at McDonnell Douglas McDonnell Douglas was so good for me such a good preparation for what I'm even doing today. Being a business owner, having an understanding of the financials and understanding your numbers is really important. But I always say, I believe like the KPMG GES of the world, the deploy to the world. I think that's a wonderful place to start.

Jana Merfen 08:37

It is an exceptional place to start and I encourage anyone that I mentor, or anyone that is going through that phase in life. I'm a proud KPMG alumni. And I love that we have events each year to bring us together because they really invested so much in each of us, and training and knowledge and just career. I call it Career Mentorship and advice. Because very few places you can be a 22 or 23 year old, and be sitting and having conversations with a CFO, or sitting in attending a new type of advisory board meeting or anything like that. And you really get to view end to end the entire company, their processes, their controls, their financial statements, what's working, well, what's not. And I really enjoyed my time there, you worked really hard. And we had a lot of fun. And you had the opportunity to work with a lot of people in your seed stage of life. But it really prepared me for so many other facets and opportunities I had later on in my career. And, you know, technology, were usually the highest and most complex budget for any

organization. And so I can manage that really well because of that background and foundation that I gained at KPMG. And I think the other key lesson that I really took away from KPMG was the investment in mentorship and training. So every year you know you if you are a second year, you are training the first year, if you're a third year, you're training the second years. And that philosophy I think is so important, in you know all of our careers is how are you offering that mentorship? How are you training, sharing the wealth of knowledge? I call it instead of being a hoarder, being that sharer of the knowledge and how do you have that cross training amongst your teams? That's something that we're really being focused on and intentional in my team right now is just how can we be intentional of cross training amongst our teams? How can we provide that knowledge share so that we don't just have a few people or one person that knows everything? How can we share that. So those were some great things that I learned from KPMG. And, you know, I'm very fortunate that I was given that opportunity.

Lisa Nichols 12:10

I did not know that about KPMG. But absolutely love that because one of the tenants is of good leader, Jana is to build other great leaders. And so I did not know that the second year of teaching the first year, I did not know that about KPMG. But I love that it's kind of there's a phrase out there, lift while you rise. So while you're rising, you're lifting other people. And I think especially and if we get time, we'll talk about this a little bit. But I especially think women should be doing that for other women, we should be pulling each other along. And because as we know, there's I think less than 28% of women are actually in technology. And then when you go down to the leadership roles, it goes even lower than that. So, but um, can you, can you really share because you started at KPMG? Can you share like a pivotal moment in your career that really influenced your path toward technology leadership?

Jana Merfen 13:13

Yeah, I was working at a data center company at the time. And we were thinking about going public. And I just kind of raised my hand to say, Yeah, I'll help with like the Sarbanes-Oxley controls and everything because I had that experience and background. And then when I started doing that, I started uncovering all of the ITGC and all these other controls we needed for the data centers and really learning our business. And then learning about HIPAA compliance. Gramm-Leach-Bliley, PCI, DSS and so through that I was learning the business and learning the technology side. And I spent a lot of time with engineers and I and I was completely upfront. I'm like, I don't know what you do. Explain it to me. And so then I would ask questions, and ask them for clarification. And then I was learning and they were really welcoming and so nice to me. And then I realized that I had a skill, because then I was able to go back to our executive team. And I could summarize and share both from a financial perspective, a business perspective and a technology perspective, everything that we were working on, and I learned that, oh, I think that this, this is a unique skill that I think I can focus on and hone. And I realized I really liked it. And I, I got, I was energized by it. So I just kept raising my hand, I didn't have a goal for any title. I didn't have a goal to even set out that I was even exactly going to jump into the technology path. I just kept raising my hand of saying, I think I'll work on that special project. I think I could do this. And then sometimes and then also I had some individuals ask me to do some things. And I, at first, I was a little nervous, like, I'm, I don't know, I'll I don't have all those answers and they're like, well, you'll figure it out. And so through that, I found I really enjoyed the learning side from the technology perspective. And I also realized I didn't have to have all the answers, I could build the trust and build a team that had the expertise and, and really just that catapulted, you know, where I continued my journey. And then I just continued following that path. And, and then that gave me an opened up another door that I was able to take on, you know, kind of a director role in technology. And I learned a lot there. And I just focused on asking questions, learning. And I always just focused on walking into the room, making the assumption, I'm not the smartest person in the room. And then I needed to listen and learn from the others so that we could come to the best decision.

Lisa Nichols 16:02

Wow, that my brain is firing on all cylinders here. Because there's so much packed in so much wisdom and sage advice packed into what you just said, Jana, that whole journey, what you just said, because you said sometimes, I was asked to do certain things. Sometimes I raise my hand, very important lesson. Sometimes you just raise your hand, Dana Lorberg was, before she retired was an EVP for Mastercard. And I remember her telling me that she raised her hand a lot. In fact, she raised her hand sometimes for the projects nobody else wanted. But it was one of those things that she did. Just I love what you just said about learning to lead, I had another leader on the podcast, that global CIO for an organization and she said, really, she goes, I don't know, there's no way I can know everything. She said, No, she said, it's really 80/20. She said, 80% of what I do is focused on leadership, building my team leaning into my team, then the other 20% is technology. You don't have to know everything. But you definitely have to be able to build a team, you have to have the humility to lean in and say, teach me I don't know this particular area. And then obviously, you have to have the passion to want to learn. Because if you don't have the passion to want to learn, it's going to be hard to really move forward. But you've had several roles in technology. Now you've had a great career, Jana, now you're the CTO for this wonderful bank in Kansas City. But was there a mentor or two along the way that was really instrumental on your path?

Jana Merfen 17:55

Yeah, that's something that I've, I've shared several times with others. You know, I had, I call it a I was in my, my late, late 20s. And I had had two of my children, two of my three children. And I remember I was just kind of that it was stressful in my in my life at that point. And a gentleman who I worked with, he was actually I was the client, he was my, my, my partner, he was working on an engagement for us. And he's like, Who's mentoring you, who's providing you guidance. And I looked at him and I was like, no one. You really need to talk with someone. Well, it turns out, he was my met my first mentor. And he really provided me so much feedback of just how to approach things in my career, how to also, he was very helpful in that navigating how I was managing things from both a personal and professional perspective. And it was really helpful. I felt like to have his perspective. And then he talked to me about he's like, You need more than just me. He's like, you need your own kind of personal board of directors. And so that was just kind of that phrase that I was like that it just clicked with me.

And it took time, like when I share this with people, they're like, how do you suddenly have multiple mentors that you meet with on a regular basis and like, well, you just don't, it doesn't just snap and happen over time. These relationships you build, and you build that trust, and then you recognize, okay, this is for someone I can really trust and learn from. And I always encourage, I have mentors on my personal board of directors, some that are in the later stage in their career. Sometimes they might be even in a similar stage in my career, men and women, both inside and outside of my current industry. I really look for that diverse diversity and in, you know, who I'm asking feedback on. And they're ones that they really give me some candid advice. And they don't ever tell me what to do. But they asked me really tough questions. And sometimes too, they challenge me. And sometimes they gave me feedback that I might not necessarily even want to hear, I'll be honest. But I've learned that I need to process it. And I've gotten, I've significantly improved, I call it I've significantly improved in 10 years previously, you know, 10 years ago, and I look at, I need to continue to work to improve and I'll be, I'll be better 10 years from now. And five years from now, I think if you aren't just looking to continue to evolve and learn from everything. That's when you're stagnant. And that's just, that's been, I think, the biggest blessing in my life, and they're able to help me both personally and professionally. Because there's been moments that are, I'll be honest, they're tough. And sometimes you don't know how to handle certain situations. And those are the main mentors that I call him, like, how do I handle this? How do I handle this conversation? What have I, you know, what things should I think about and they give me different viewpoints, I can look at it in a better lens. Because I think sometimes we can only see this, but when you talk with your mentors, that you can see a broader perspective.

Lisa Nichols 21:19

It is so good. There's a proverb that says, There is wisdom in many advisors. And sometimes we get in trouble when we don't have those advisors. Are there other voices and perspectives around us, right, Jana. So I love that you are described them as a forward thinking leader who blends classic business training with leadership and technology and innovation. I know that you're an early adopter, you've been said of you. You're an early adopter of emerging technologies. What technologies? Jana, have you seen in the businesses that you've been a part of that have really made a major difference on those businesses? And what are you specifically excited about in the banking world?

Jana Merfen 22:10

Yeah, I think, you know, over time, over the last I look at it the past 15-20 years, right, technology has evolved significantly. You know, I remember being one of the first, you know, working with a company, when we were one of the first, you know, cloud environments that we were offering to clients. That was, you know, FedRAMP certified. And, you know, back then that was that was really exciting for us that we were using physical on prem, and we were building out this technology, and it just is continuing to evolve. You know, I think that one of the things that is really exciting and prevalent right now in discussions is how can we leverage generative AI. And I what I see it as it's not being used necessarily to eliminate any role, it's how can you augment it, to support your teams, and help them be more efficient, help them get answers faster, you know, I've talked with, you know, another organization that they've launched that, you know, with their client care center, so they can help get their employees the faster answers to help the clients faster. You know, working through how we can leverage that from development and in writing code and making sure that we can have our team members leverage this expertise and knowledge source in a positive way, but also balancing the challenges and understanding that there's bad actors out there also using that same technology to also infiltrate your environment. So it's this balance right now, that I think is a really critical point for not just the banking industry, but all industries. And there's obviously, Biden had an executive order on Gen AI, here over the last couple months of that is going to be coming out over the next 150 days. So I think that we'll see a lot more compliance and regulatory requirements coming out over the next several months. But I think all the companies are, I would say, majority of the companies I'm talking with, everyone's trying to figure out what's the opportunity there that balances your risks with their value, the value add, and how can you provide that value add to your business, and to your clients that it moves, it moves the needle? And it makes sense. So I don't think all of us have the answers yet on it. But I think for trying to figure it out, and I think we're getting closer and I would say it is definitely moving at an exceptional rate of

speed. And I think a lot of individuals have compared it to when the internet came out or when, you know, iPhones came out and it's just that much magnified.

Lisa Nichols 24:52

Yeah, I've I've I've quoted this a lot. JNM but I feel like it's really appropriate here. I had Phil Johnson on the PA cast this is probably several months ago. He's an emotional intelligence giver out of Canada. And I will never forget this statement that he made. He said that in this century alone, the city alone, we're going to have 20,000 years worth of change. Wow. Because of the way technology is moving at that rapid pace, but it's exciting. I know, for a lot of people, it's a little scary, but I'm with you, I do believe because I see how there's, there is a situation right now, where we're working with a nonprofit, a lot of data for an individual to sit there, Jaina and parse this information and try to categorize it, it would take hours, where if you've got the right prompt, and you've got the right program to run things through, in a matter of seconds, you can have that same analysis done. So you know, let's use it that way. And then allow the individuals to go and do something else that is strategic for that organization. So I could not agree with you more. Well, Gina, I've got a lot more to talk about with you. But we do need to take a quick break, and then we'll be right back with Jana Marfin. On this something extra podcast.

AD 26:23

In business, the tendency is to seek out partners who are bigger, faster, stronger. When it comes to it. You should be looking for smarter, faster, better. That's just a you'll find with a talented technologist at technology partners, our experts develop custom solutions to tackle your most complex challenges all to simplify your processes in the smartest most efficient way possible. It's time to be swift and nimble starts now go to technologypartners.net/solutions and see what's possible.

Lisa Nichols 26:53

So welcome back everyone to the Something Extra podcast with Jana Merfen. Jana is the CTO for CrossFirst Bank. Jana, some of our listeners may not know about CrossFirst Bank, can you tell us a little bit about the bank?

Jana Merfen 27:08

Yes, I'd be happy to Lisa. So CrossFirst Bank is a publicly traded bank. We are headquartered in Kansas City. We have locations across the country. We have locations in Denver, Colorado Springs, Phoenix, Tucson, Fort Worth, Dallas, Preston center, Frisco up through Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Wichita. So we are a regional community bank, really focused on serving middle market, you know, businesses and serving their lending needs and also supporting and providing private banking services as well to business professionals. We are, I think, a really unique bank and that we started 16 years ago, so we are in the banking industry. We are young, but we have been a fast growth entrepreneurial company. And we've just really embody that entrepreneurial spirit in providing extraordinary service to our clients. And that's where I think we've been able to provide I call it that, you know, competitive advantage and difference compared to our competitors in that we really go that extra mile and serving our clients and supporting their needs. And I think that that just all goes back to our culture. You know, when we started, you know, we had a business strategy of being branch light, technology focused, and really focused on a culture of trust. And we really lead and live by our four C's of character, competence, commitment, and connection. And we really focus on that. And we have discussions on that as an organization. And we make sure that we are living by those values. And it's a tremendous culture that we have to work with, here with all the great people that I'm privileged to have as teammates, in everyone. And it gets really aligned on our common goals and common strategy. And I would say, we know how to treat each other nicely and professionally, and really supporting those four C's and making sure that we, if we have that commitment to each other, commit to our clients, we're working together, making sure that we have that connection and communication, making sure that we're all following the character of that integrity and honesty. And it's just been a tremendous organization to be a part of.

Lisa Nichols 29:35

Jana, I love that. The four C's, I just did a post about commitment this morning. So that was funny to hear you say because commitment. It's the commitment or the lack there of will change your life is the quote but that is remarkable. I had no idea that the bank was that young

Jana Merfen 29:59

Yeah, we're a little over, right, right around 7 billion in assets. So it's been a tremendous journey and story of how much growth that we have had in such a short amount of period of time. And I think that that is a testament to the leadership that we have had. And really building a strong foundation, how we serve our clients, how we manage our business, and really proud to be part of this organization.

Lisa Nichols 30:28

I can see, well, if you come to CrossFirst Bank, just strap in there, but strapping in a good way and still keeping that grounded in your in your values in that that's amazing. You know, how do you think about leadership? Jana, let's move into this. I would love to know, first of all, what your leadership style is? And then how do you think about leadership? How, what do you think it takes mindset wise skill set wise to be a really good leader?

Jana Merfen 31:05

Well, there's a lot to unpack there.

Lisa Nichols 31:07

I know, well, let's just start it, what's your leadership style?

Jana Merfen 31:11

I've just always looked at first and foremost, I, if everyone that I work with knows that I care about them, I feel like I'm doing a good job. First and foremost, that's just something is really important to me, that they know that I care about them professionally, I care about them personally, I really do. And that's just always been really important to me. And, and that they know that I'm their advocate, and I'm going to be open and honest with them and help help get them where they want to go and support their, their goals and their dreams. And you know, have those that open dialogue. And, you know, I'm really proud to say that, you know, one of my individuals I previously worked for, you know, she became the CIO after me and, you know, and I'm, I'm so happy for her. And I'm proud of that, because I look at that those. Those are opportunities of how can you help and develop and support individuals. I really look at it again, as a learning opportunity. I'm learning from my teammates as much as they're learning from me and how can I show them that, you know, advocacy and support in their journey?

Lisa Nichols 32:27

Well, that builds trust, too, doesn't it when they know that you care, and they then they know that they can really trust you. And we I'm thinking as you're talking, Jana, I'm thinking about Steve Covey, Stephen M. R. Covey, not Stephen, not Covey, Sr, but Covey, Jr. That wrote the book, *The Speed of Trust*, I don't know, if you've read that book.

Jana Merfen 32:54

I have read it.

Lisa Nichols 32:56

That's an amazing book. But his whole premise is you can only go as quickly as there's trust in the organization. So I think your team knowing that you care about them, that you're investing in them that you want to help them reach their aspirations, whatever that may be, I believe just builds trust, and I believe that as an organization, then you're gonna go faster. So I love everything that you just said. Well, what advice would you give and you've already given a lot of advice, but from a financial and understanding your numbers, and you've already given a lot of advice, but what would you say to younger professionals, and especially women who are aspiring to that level that you've reached in your own journey, Jana?

Jana Merfen 33:48

You know, I would recommend if you're, you know, starting out in your journey, the focus of relationships, and really focus on even if it's an area that might not interest you, or really making sure you're broadening your relationships inside and outside of technology, because you need to understand finance you need to understand human resources you need to understand marketing, you need to understand all facets of a business. And so the more you can get exposed to individuals in those areas and build relationships, so you can gain their insights and build that trust, I think that you can continue to learn and grow. And I think that will accelerate your opportunities, because you'll be in a unique position. That's where I say, don't just sit in the technology team and think that you're just going to learn in the technology world, I think you have to look broader. And I think that that really expands the opportunity and frankly, that you know, the expertise of an individual. And I think then, as you focus on those relationships, and then making sure that you're raising your hand, and you are asking for those opportunities, and you're accepting those opportunities that also come your way, even if sometimes they might not seem like a good opportunity, every opportunity is good opportunity to learn, even if you don't think so at the beginning. And I'll tell you, I was part of initiatives and projects, I probably dragged my feet on a little bit that I wasn't too thrilled about. But at the end of the day, you learn a lot.

Lisa Nichols 35:24

And you're glad you had those experiences. Well, I love what you just said Jana, because technology, really, and I've heard other leaders say this, that it's really important to, to not just go within the technology, but really to go broader and build those relationships, because technology touches and integrates with so many of those functional areas. And

there may be a time where technology is working with finance. And if you've got relationships within that finance function, I guarantee you're going to be able to get things done much quicker than if you did not have the relationship. And the other thing that I've heard leaders say is build a relationship when it's not necessary. Don't wait until that happens to build the relationship. So wow, so much good wisdom there. Well, where do you see technology and leadership in particular technology going in the next decade? You know, what competencies do you think are going to be necessary for the future leader?

Jana Merfen 36:35

I don't know if necessarily it will change from what you need today. I think first and foremost, I think, you know, a strong leader has to have strong communication skills. And I think that, you know, like we talked about earlier on how to build teams and build trust. And obviously have, you know, the appropriate technology acumen. But I think it just really goes down to just continuing to have that passion to learn, continue to build those relationships, and communicate well, you know, you have to be able to just share that those that shared vision and goals and be able to explain I call it always explaining the why behind it. Because you need everyone bought in and rowing in the same boat and in the same direction. And if you can do that, you'll accomplish many things.

Lisa Nichols 37:27

I love that. I love the analogy of rowing in the same boat. And that if you've ever been in a canoe. Some people doing this and

Jana Merfen 37:41

I think my husband would say that we were not very good at good at kayaking or canoeing together. We haven't figured it out.

Lisa Nichols 37:48

I guarantee you, my husband would say the same thing. But it's a great metaphor, right? Isn't it, Jana, for teams and you need one rowing in the same direction? Or you're gonna go around in circles? So are you a triathlon competitor?

Jana Merfen 38:03

I have competed in several triathlons. I have.

Lisa Nichols 38:07

Okay, I had not asked you that. But I had read something. And it just made me wonder. I'm like, I wonder if she competes in triathlons. Wow, what has the training and that taught you about yourself?

Jana Merfen 38:22

Well, you can't just show up on triathlon morning day and show up. So you have to prepare. And so there's, you know, you have to plan it out well in advance several months. So you have to decide in advance that you're making this commitment. And then you have to really plan out when you're going to do your training. And then in triathlon words, it's called like a brick workout, what they call it, so where you have to you do to have that them together. So you either will go swim, and then run or swim and go bike. And that takes a longer, you know, span of time. And so planning that around with my family and, and everything, you have to really make that commitment and it means a lot of times you're waking up really early in the morning to get it done and get it in and especially. It's usually I'm doing a lot of that training in the summer before the heat. But then it gets you prepared so then on race day you feel prepared. You know what to expect. And, and then you can go out and give it your all. You know, I always share that it's taught me a lot. I'll share the story of my first triathlon I panicked in the water. I did. And no one really explained to me how many people would be surrounding me and kicking me while swimming. And I remember like one of the people supervising, like, kind of hollered at me and said, Are you okay? I'm like, I just need a minute. And then I continued forward. But sometimes, you know, right, you just need a minute to collect yourself. And then you can keep moving forward. And then I went on, and I've done several more triathlons since then. And then, I learned from that. And then I, I now know what to expect. I'm ready and prepared when I enter in that water, and I'm always happy when the water portions done.

Lisa Nichols 40:16

I am sure, I'm sure. Well, that is something I've never thought about before, Jana, until you just said that. Because really and truly, there's probably so many people in the water. Not everybody stays in their swim lane.

Jana Merfen 40:29

There are no lanes.

Lisa Nichols 40:30

There are no lanes, right? Oh, wow. I've never thought about that before, wow, that's great. Well, I'm shared share, we I've got two more questions for you. And then we'll go to something extra, share with our listeners how you grow. I mean, what are your go-tos? Are there any books that you would recommend podcasts that you listen to? And I know you're going to be a Something Extra podcast listener after this podcast, Jana. That's gonna be one of your go-tos. But are there organizations that you're involved in anything like that, that you could share with our listeners that might help them?

Jana Merfen 41:09

I think it's, it's a balance, right? I'm part of several organizations. You know, I was a founding member of the Inspire CIO chapter. And I learned so much from meeting with regularly with my peers, and all the other tremendous CIOs in Kansas City and then also nationally. I also worked with several other female CIOs across the country, we formed a female CIO group, that and we've been having events through Inspire CIO. And that has been tremendous and supporting other women. I also have been part of a next generation leadership program where I'm a mentor to several females, kind of early on in their technology career and journey. I also serve on boards here in Kansas City, in the nonprofit world, and get to meet numerous other individuals there, and you learn from processes and everything, going through that experience. You know, and then I also just look at ways that I can, I can learn to myself not only meeting with my mentors, but I know I've listened to your podcast, I also listened to like the CIO Tech Whisperer. I also read a lot. I really enjoy reading. And so I will study up and, you know, make sure that I'm looking at all different aspects. So trying to balance it all. I don't think it's one answer. I think it's a lot of different components that add up together.

Lisa Nichols 42:44

Agreed. Is there one book that you're reading now, or you read recently that really impacted you that you would want to share with the listeners? Can you think of one?

Jana Merfen 42:53

You know, I've think of *Good to Great* is a book that I've read, that is really good. It just, I feel like it's like a very simplified version of just how you can be a really impactful leader and really make an impact on your team. We also are a *Strengths* organization, *Gallup Strengths Finder* organization, we really focus on our strengths and do a tremendous job of that. So I've read a lot of books, over the years on our strengths and how we can capitalize on those and how we can foster that throughout our team. So I think it's just finding what you're passionate about. I think everyone's different in what they are focusing on. And I think it also depends on where you're at in your career journey, and personally and professionally, of what you want to focus on.

Lisa Nichols 43:43

Yeah, two great books, listeners. If you've not read those books. *Strength Finders*, fantastic book \$20 There is a free assessment in the back, it gives you a code, you can go take that assessment, I would highly, highly, highly recommend you. I read that when it first came out, Jana, but even a larger organization here which I'm sure you're familiar with Bayer. It was used to be Monsanto. Every one that works at Bayer goes through *Strength Finders* as well as DISC and I just I think it is a wonderful, wonderful tool. So yeah, one more question before we go something extra, how do you stay, because you're a mom, you're a mom, you're a technology executive, you've already said you mentor people, you're very involved in the community in a lot of organizations. How do you stay balanced? How do you stay grounded, Jana?

Jana Merfen 44:38

I always say you have to make sure you focus on what your top priorities are. And, and just make sure that you're communicating that and know what those are. And, you know, I don't have a perfect answer. And I've also learned throughout my career, everyone's different. And I think I, I remember, like observing some women in my career early on and, and I'm like, do I have to follow that example, because I don't necessarily want that example, I want to follow this path. This is what really matters to me. And so I had to learn early on that I needed to follow my path and hold true to that. You know, and I think just prioritizing what really matters to you, and like, I know that I'm going to make every effort to make my kids activities in the evening, and make those games and be the ones cheering on them. But I also know I might be doing some things, you know, from a professional standpoint, at other times, you know, throughout the week to make sure that I can be there for those moments. I just, I don't think I have a perfect answer in that you just continue to figure it out. And focus on what matters most to you. You know, one of the things that I decided on I have three kids, I don't ever miss a birthday, I don't miss a birthday. And I've been able to hold true to that. And that was just something that I really cared about. So those are just things again, what works for me might not work for someone else. And that was I think my biggest lesson.

Lisa Nichols 46:12

That's your biggest aha.

Jana Merfen 46:13

That's what I think really clicked for me. And then just being open and honest about it. And at the end of the day, everyone knows that I'm a professional, and I get my work done. And I know what needs to get done and when, and then they know that my family is important to me, and I'm going to make you know, they will be prioritized and be a priority for me as well. And so, and I think that goes back to the trust and working with great people. And when you have that, I think everything works well.

Lisa Nichols 46:42

Love it. Love it. Love it love. It could not agree more. Well tell me this, Jana, this is called something extra, what do you believe is this something extra that every leader needs?

Jana Merfen 46:53

You know, I just think number one, just being that support, being that supportive advocate for your team members and your teammates and your peers. And for the individuals you report to I think if you are supportive and an advocate and communicate with them, well, I think that that's the number one opportunity to just always focus on. If you are being supportive, advocating for them, helping them reach their goals, reach whatever, you know, strategies and focus opportunities that everyone is working on. I think that that's where you have a winning outcome.

Lisa Nichols 47:34.

Yeah, that's good. I've got another book to recommend to you, Jana, based on what you just said, you're gonna love it. If you haven't read the book by Jeff Henderson called *For F-O-R, For*. He was the CMO for the Atlanta Braves. He worked I believe the CMO or, or something similar at Chick fil A. He's with the John Maxwell group now but his name is Jeff Henderson, F-O-R. I'm gonna go order that. And it's really about being for your people, for your family for your team. But if you unpack that, and just what you just said being supportive. Okay, child number one, what does support look like for child number one? It might be different than what support looks like for child number two, right? Team member one it may be different, Jenny may need something different from me, than Supantha, our COO, right? So yeah, you're gonna love this book. You're gonna love it. Jana, thank you so much. I have absolutely loved this time with you and I can't wait to see you again face to face. You know, Kansas City is not that far away. We can do, we can do a lunch or something. We can do it.

Jana Merfen 49:02

Well, I look forward to seeing you soon. And hopefully, I'll see you at one of our CIO events here soon and I just really sincerely appreciate you asking me to meet today. Really enjoyed being a part of your podcast and love the message and the support that you're providing through it.

Lisa Nichols 49:20

Very good. Thanks so much.

Announcer 49:24

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