

[00:03:03] De Vries: We moved about 10 years ago. I worked for a company four years in the Netherlands and they restructured their management and they asked me to take a corporate role in the US. We ended up being in Maine, which was gorgeous for the family. We really enjoyed Maine for four years and then moved to Kentucky and moved to Missouri. We've seen a lot.

[00:03:21] Nichols: Was that when you were at IDEXX laboratories?

[00:03:25] De Vries: Correct. I worked for IDEXX laboratories, which is a global company. They do veterinary diagnostics. When you take your dog or your cat to the vet, they'll run it on IDEXX analyzers or send it to IDEXX laboratories. I spent eight years with them, which was a-- It's a great company, they're doing really well.

[00:03:39] Nichols: Health care for animals instead of people, right?

[00:03:42] De Vries: Correct. There's a more direct connection to the pet owner, to the client. You get to spend more time in the field, understanding where the value creation is, which I think is something which helps in human healthcare as well.

[00:03:54] Nichols: I know that you were at McKinsey for a while. Talk about that because I just think anybody that has been at McKinsey, you have to be really smart to work for McKinsey, right?

[00:04:04] De Vries: I was very lucky to end up there. They have incredibly smart people, but what they mostly have is they have a large network. When you're trying to figure out a business problem, you can talk to other people who solve the same problem in other industries. That together with our models really drives value. I met them while I worked for a client and we ended up having a relationship and they said, "Please come and help us and help us implement things, help us make things happen, and drive the culture change that we need." How do we drive to value from IT? How do we drive product management at a large scale? Which is a really interesting challenge. I learned a lot of good things there, which I can use right now with SSM.

[00:04:38] Nichols: Sure. What are you doing today for SSM?

[00:04:41] De Vries: Within the SSM, we've organized IT in a way that we basically run infrastructure. We have regional IT, and then we have the rest. We have two groups, they're

clinical and business. I run the business side. We have a consultancy approach. Instead of solving problems just by doing a project, we actually sit down with our friends on the business side and say, "What are you trying to solve? What is the patient impact? How do we quantify when we solve it?"

We spend a lot of time on problem definition and alignment and then actually solving the problem is relatively easy. I have the delivery teams reporting to me for corporate function. That's all of SAP, the revenue cycles, everything from scheduling appointments, pricing appointments to claims handling, and then also the analytics group report to me. Together, our goal is to drive a better healthcare delivery, which is in line with our mission. Also, at the end of the day, do it in a cost effectively. We are really focused on taking care of the poor and vulnerable in society. That means we need to have a realistic cost profile as a company.

[00:05:36] Nichols: Well, I know that you and I have talked about this and you call it, I believe the term is rounding, but you have said that sometimes you will finish work at 3:00 or 4:00 on a Friday and you go to an emergency room and just watch, right?

[00:05:51] De Vries: Absolutely. We all sometimes have long weeks with a lot of meetings. At the end of the week, you want to reconnect, "Why am I doing what I'm doing?" For me, that is, and many of my team members, we will actually go to one of our hospitals. I love going to the DePaul Hospital here and go to the behavioral health part of it and see, "How are we helping these patients?" What the impact of my work really has on a patient. That's beautiful to see. That connection motivates a lot of us in the healthcare. That's what makes a difference at the end of the day.

[00:06:17] Nichols: It certainly is. I think that sometimes companies, they do have a difficult time aligning their people to the mission. "What I'm doing today, how does that affect the mission?" First of all, tell us the mission of SSM.

[00:06:31] De Vries: Our mission is that we reveal the healing presence of God through delivery of exceptional healthcare services. For us, that's specifically focused on the poor and vulnerable in the communities we are in. It really makes a difference. There is a lot of disparity today and we need to help people to get there. That's not just delivering healthcare services, that also means we run food banks in certain of our hospitals. When patients go home, we can actually help them have a healthier lifestyle. Those things are what really drives us.

There's a direct connection to 150 years ago when we were founded when five very courageous sisters came to St. Louis and said, "How can we make a difference here and show that we care?" It's beautiful to see that link. If you translate that to our IT teams, they know what they're working for. They're not just sitting in an office building, they are actually trying to spend time on the floor. When they do projects, the most often asked question is, "What does that mean for our patient? How does that help our patient?" If we have that compass, that true north, that makes sure we drive the impact we want to and it makes also work a lot more fun, because at the end, you want to have satisfaction as a team that you've made a difference.

[00:07:34] Nichols: I so believe that. I did not realize that it was five sisters that actually started SSM.

[00:07:40] De Vries: Can you imagine, five sisters-

[00:07:42] Nichols: 150 years ago.

[00:07:43] De Vries: 150 years ago, who came to St. Louis, having never been to the US not knowing anybody here. There's \$5 in their pocket and they built this up. That's the beauty. That's really courageous and we're trying to make courageous moves as well to make a difference in our communities. It's inspiring.

[00:07:58] Nichols: What a beautiful story. Digital transformation is a term that is used a lot today. You've already touched on that a little bit, but what does that really mean for SSM? What does it mean to you? What does it mean for SSM?

[00:08:12] De Vries: For our teams, I would say it means two things. It means, number one, that we need to run an efficient organization. We need to make sure that we do things with the best cost profile we can and then focus on taking care of our patients, and taking care of our patients is about the outcomes. We're doing a number of partnerships in the markets. For example, we just partnered with Strive to focus on kidney disease patients. We're working with **[unintelligible 00:08:32]** to come up as a population health model so we can really take care of our more vulnerable patients.

For us, digital transformation is, get our basic process and our basic organization running the best it can and then do external partnerships to help us drive the innovation so we can make a difference for our patients and in our markets.

[00:08:50] Nichols: Is there anything that you're doing right now that is really exciting to you, that's noble?

[00:08:56] De Vries: I think for my area, what is exciting is, we have a focus also on the patient experience from a financial perspective. At times, healthcare can be confusing from a financial perspective. How can we make this easier for our patients, make it easier to be accessible? Also, can you eventually move to a model where you can be in Amazon or others like that, where we try to remove, I would say, all the friction we can for our patients and make it easier for them? These are people who are in a hard part of their life if they have to go to the hospital, we'd like to make it as easy for them as we can.

[00:09:24] Nichols: You and I have talked about that, when somebody is coming to the hospital, it's not a good part of their life, typically. Being able to make it easy for them is the good thing.

[00:09:32] De Vries: Absolutely. That's one of the things we also do, we focus on presence. We work with everybody, not just our caregivers, but also our IT team. How can we make sure that we're present when we're meeting, when we're talking to a patient? For example, when I go to a hospital and a patient ask me, "How can I get to this location?" We tend to walk with them because we want to take care of them. We take pride in being that healthcare organization together. Again, it aligns to, "What are we trying to do for the customer?" We can't forget that. It's sometimes very easy to forget that sitting in offices.

[00:09:59] Nichols: It is. Do you have any visuals or anything around the office that helps your team see the customer? You probably have tons of pictures of patients, probably, I would imagine.

[00:10:09] De Vries: We absolutely do. We have little things, like our conference rooms are named after our founding sisters. We actually try to open our important meetings with reflections. They can also mean like, "What is this project? What difference is it going to make in the life of a patient, or in the life of one of our communities, or of the partners we work with?" Because we always have to keep aligning back to our mission.

The one thing I would say is, if you ask anybody at SSM what's the mission, they will be able to answer it, but then secondly, if you say, "What does that mean for you?" They will, in their own

words, come up with examples, how it makes a difference. That, to me, is really exciting. I walked in here today and I talked to one of your colleagues and she talks about the experience she had and I'm proud of what our caregivers do for our people.

[00:10:49] Nichols: Our receptionist told you that she had just gone to SSM and it was a great experience. Isn't that music to your ears?

[00:10:56] De Vries: Absolutely, that's what we're here for. Within IT, we try to make that easier, to make that patient experience-- that there's no noise there, that really our caregivers can focus on the patient and that's what it's about.

[00:11:06] Nichols: What's been the most rewarding thing that you've done in your career?

[00:11:10] De Vries: It's definitely connected to actually being on the floor, being with the customer, being with the patients. When we were at IDEXX, one project where our analyzers in the clinics had different set of results than the one in the laboratory. We ran a fairly large organizational project to align the reference ranges so you can trend it. Once you can trend it, you can look at it and say, "What happens to my pet over time," and you can make better medical decisions.

That might sound like a small project, but for us it was really game-changing. The best thing is, when I then talked to our clients over the next year, two years, they talked about it. I had friends come up to me like, "I just had my dog tested and look at the results." I'm like, "My team was a part of this." At the end, that's a satisfaction. We had the impact we wanted to have.

[00:11:50] Nichols: We know dogs are part of the family, right?

[00:11:53] De Vries: Absolutely.

[00:11:53] Nichols: They're just another family member. Today, there are so many things, like machine learning, and artificial intelligence, and so many different technologies out there. What is exciting for you with the intersection between technology and healthcare? I see a lot of this, a lot of innovation around healthcare these days.

[00:12:14] De Vries: There is a lot of innovation. Partly, what we do is, we use external partners to accelerate that. It makes things move a lot quicker. At the same time, internally, we're

continuously trying to learn, "What do we need to know to be able to take the next step?" It's interesting when we work with the teams, often the people on the floor have the best ideas how we can improve things. We spend a lot of time talking to our physicians on the floor, talking to our revenue cycle people, "Where's the opportunity?" Sometimes the opportunity is to make care better. Sometimes it is, "Can we quantify a patient earlier for charity care so they don't have to worry about a bill?"

It's interesting, we had somebody come by our house yesterday to give us a quote to paint the house, and I was talking like, "Hey I work for SSM," and he's like, "Oh, it's great. We have 10 children. At some point, we had a tough part in our life and I'll never forget that SSM was able to say early on, we'll take care of you, don't worry about it." What happens in the background, if you think back, that's because we run the algorithms over our data so we can qualify people early and we can remove stress for our patients. At the end, how can we use this technology to have an impact in our patients. A lot of that today is data-driven and algorithm-driven. There'll be a lot more coming there over the coming years. It's exciting.

[00:13:20] Nichols: For technologists out there, you're in such a good space because technology really does improve lives, as you've just said, and the cost of effectiveness. Running a very cost-effective organization allows you to be able to do that for people that are in need, right?

[00:13:36] De Vries: Absolutely. Cost is becoming one of the quality parts of healthcare. If you think about it, 20 years ago, we never thought about the cost today with high deductible plans. For a lot of our patients, it has a significant impact. If we can reduce the cost by looking better at our supplies we use, if we look at how much care we provide, we can really make a difference, and at the same time measure, are we having the right outcome health-wise, and then also financial impact. It's key today.

[00:14:01] Nichols: I'm so excited about continuing our conversation. We're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Eduard.

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[00:14:41] Nichols: Eduard, SSM, 42,000 employees, \$7.5 billion organization, that is a lot of people to get rowing in the same boat. As a leader, how do you empower your team? How do you get everyone rowing in the same direction?

[00:14:57] De Vries: That's a great question. We spend quite a bit of time on that. I think part number one, which is relatively easy at SSM, we are aligned to the mission. We can always go back to that true North, what difference does it make for our patients? Then what we do, we create an environment where we say, "Okay, this is the business problem we want to solve together. How do we solve it? We create a cross-functional team, where we have either finance, or supply chain, or revenue cycle people together with our IT people, and we say, "Look, there are opportunities for improvement, if things go wrong, it's on the leaders. Let's find ways to make things better and to measure that. Are we capturing the benefits we expect to win? Do we secure them so they're part of a new process?"

We spent quite a bit of time figuring that out with whiteboard sessions, and then we link two, three months later, "Do we see a difference in the field? Are we getting a different feedback from our customers?" For example, I'll spend time listening to our customer service reps, like, "Are you getting a different feedback? Especially, what doesn't go well?" because that's where we can learn. If we create a safe environment where we can say, "These two or three things are not good, let's go and figure them out and make life better instead of saying, "Why is that wrong?" because they're so different. That also creates a fun atmosphere, where we can work as a group and enjoy ourselves because we're driving to the right direction.

[00:16:05] Nichols: It is fun to accomplish things as a team, isn't it?

[00:16:07] De Vries: Oh, yes.

[00:16:07] Nichols: Greg and I always talk about that. He always says, "I so enjoy collaborating and accomplishing something as a team so we can high five."

[00:16:16] De Vries: As a leader, honestly, the best compliments you can get when you talk to somebody and said, "The last year, I've achieved things I didn't know I could do." When you can

bring that talent out, not only is it good for the organization, it's also good for the employee. If you have that double win, that's what it's all about.

[00:16:30] Nichols: I couldn't agree more. We've talked about this a little bit. I know that SSM, you do measure your Net Promoter Score. Can you tell us a little bit about that? For maybe our listeners that don't really understand, what is a Net Promoter Score?

[00:16:46] De Vries: Absolutely. We've all had these surveys after we rented a car, "How was your experience on a scale from 1 to 10?" The way it works, 9 and 10 are promoters. Everything up to six is a detractor, and seven and eight are neutral. You simply say, "How many promoters do I have?" I take off the detractors. If you look at it, Apple, for example, has about a Net Promoter Score of 50, which is a gold standard. How do we get there? That's step one. You have to measure it and see, "Am I increasing it?" Step two is, you look too, "What are the root causes for this?" You look at the individual comments.

One of our strategic projects we're considering for next year, one of the ways we got there was going to the comments, "What feedback do our patients give us? What feedback do our physicians give us?" Those are things we can improve by removing distractions, and thus allowing them to focus on the good things.

To give you a specific example, when I worked for the pharmaceutical services company, we were trying to figure out, how can we give our customer service reps, we had about 1100 of them, direct feedback, which is actionable for them? What we did, we implemented NPS at a more granular level. We were able to say, "This is the NPS score for the patients and physicians you talk to." Guess what? They responded. In two, three months, our NPS score started to go up, but also our customer service reps are really happy because they're like, "Now, I know where I can improve."

[00:18:01] Nichols: Right. Specific feedback.

[00:18:03] De Vries: Everybody wants to be successful, you just have to create an environment where you give people the right tools to get there. If you have that mentality, NPS can really help you move forward.

[00:18:11] Nichols: You've also created an environment where if you don't get great feedback, it's going to be okay. It's all about continuous improvement, it's not like you're going to lose your job.

[00:18:21] De Vries: When things don't go well, as a leader, we have to take accountability for that. With that, we create an environment where our teams are willing to say, "I'm willing to take a risk here." Obviously, you always look at the downside, what's the impact, but then you'll be surprised, when you give people trust, they return trust and you get such a higher performance. As a leader, you're able to say, "I'm going to focus less time internally and more time into my company and into my customers or patients to find the next opportunity."

The counter-wise is also true, if you don't trust people, guess what? They will not be trusted. As a leader, you have to make that choice every day, because sometimes it feels safe to micromanage because you're in control, but realistically, you're not. That's, I think, something we've all learned over our career.

[00:18:59] Nichols: I totally agree with that. I'm going to read something here. This was a tweet of yours on February the eighth. I want to read this and then I want to talk about a little bit. You said, "Sometimes you need small wins. This morning, being able to mutate a column in R--" We love R here by the way, "On a large data set is the wind before the family wakes up. Learning is fun." One of your hashtags which I want you to go into is chop wood carry water. Talk about that a little bit Eduard.

[00:19:29] De Vries: Back to basics. Even if you think about digital transformation, you have to have your internal processes run well before you expose them to your customers. If I translate that to myself, we are looking at all these advanced things we can do with analytics, what we can do with algorithms, but at some point you say, "The technology has moved on, then I'm not sure if I have all the right knowledge." I decided for myself to start a Master of Science at SLU University, a great University here in town. I'm right in the middle of R, so that was probably a victory moment on a Saturday morning.

It's great to see and understand how do the basics work, so we can have a discussion, and we can talk about, what are the opportunities we have for as a leader, I understand it. It's great to continue learning. SSM has a good program where when I do a master and it's aligned with what drives value for SSM, we get reimbursement as well and that goes for all our teams.

[00:20:17] Nichols: That's wonderful.

[00:20:18] De Vries: It's promoted internally.

[00:20:19] Nichols: That's a perfect segue. Learning is important.

[00:20:22] De Vries: Absolutely. I think we have to continuously learn.

[00:20:24] Nichols: I agree. You are a voracious reader. I know that you did a post and you talked about, I think it was nine of the books that were the most impactful for you for 2019. Do you want to highlight a few of those?

[00:20:39] De Vries: I will highlight two of them. There's one, which is my absolute favorite. It's called *American Icon*. It's about how Ford transformed during the recession. There are so many learnings to learn there about transformation. How do you say, I'm going to run a tight business, but at the same time, keep innovating's firm successful in five years?

If I go to the books of last year, specifically to technology, there's *A Seat at the Table*, which is an amazing book. It really talks about, how do you change a new paradigm, because agile is easy to say at a team level, but how do you organizationally, do that? How do you fit that in a bigger budget cycle? At the end, when I'm sitting with a CFO, we have to commit to certain benefits, but because of agile, you don't know exactly how you're going to get there. You just know you're going to get there. That's a book which I probably bought for all the leaders reporting to me and I think I also bought it for my own CIO.

The other book I would say is *The Unicorn Project*. It's really about empowering a team and then making incremental change. It's written in a storyline format. It's a great it book, slightly modified to the modern technologies. I would highly recommend both of them.

[00:21:40] Nichols: What's the old adage, leaders are readers?

[00:21:43] De Vries: Absolutely. If we're not curious, then how can we help solve things? I think if you look at technology and business, there's a lot of similarities between different industries. Once you get fast and good at learning, you can quickly pivot to a new industry or to a new part of an industry, which we have to do as leaders. Our portfolio is too large to know everything. We've got to be able to pick up the key points quickly.

[00:22:05] Nichols: What are you reading right now?

[00:22:07] De Vries: I'm reading a book called *Applied Artificial Intelligence*. It's from a business perspective. How can you create business benefits? It's not about technology, and then how can you build a governance? Some of that, we're still learning, but it's interesting to see how other people have done it so we can take slivers from that and then grow on that. I would highly recommend it. I don't know the author on top of my head, but I'll get it to you.

[00:22:26] Nichols: Very good. Eduard, you've learned, and you've grown as a person by reading, but you've also said that traveling and living in different places and working in different places has also grown you as a person. How was that?

[00:22:40] De Vries: It's about adaptability. There is an excitement too. If you're one week in Japan, having a group of middle managers and getting them to change, and then the next week being with a group of pathologist in Germany, because you have to adjust to different cultures. If you translate this to what we do on work, one hour, we might be with a group of physicians trying to drive a certain message, the next hour we might be working with patients or with a financial group.

I would, especially to young people say, "Go out there, travel. When you travel, go and learn how things are the same in different countries and how things are different," because there's something to learn everywhere. That broadness of focus, we need that because otherwise we're so constrained to the lens we see everything to, which we've grown up, we need to be broader in today's economy.

I would say, in addition to the traveling, it's also about different industries. We always try to recruit the right mix of people. For us, we are looking for healthcare talent, but also for people not coming from healthcare, because we want fresh ideas. If you run a finance organization for technology partners, or SSM, or Nestle, the core process is the same. How can we learn from different industries? Keeping our core business, continue to become better at healthcare, but at the same time, bringing an outside perspective, we will challenge the norms and make us better. That's what you need for innovation. If we all stay in the same industry always, you're not going to get that mention innovation, I would say.

[00:23:56] Nichols: I agree with that too. We obviously staff for a lot of industries and sometimes we will see clients that say, "We want somebody from this particular industry," and we always challenge that. We say, "It's okay, you might want to look at somebody from a completely different industry because they're going to bring a new perspective to the team."

[00:24:14] De Vries: The way how, I would say, you get quickly grounded in a new industry is go to the frontlines, and especially go talk to your clients. When I was in the veterinary industry, I've been to many rural veterinary clinics, it was fascinating to learn. That was not an environment I grew up in, I grew up in an urban environment. The same goes for SSM now. When I go to our emergency department and see what are some of the urban challenges we have in certain areas, that's a great learning experience. If we take that back, we are richer with our knowledge and we can help that to apply to solve business problems.

[00:24:45] Nichols: Very good. Eduard, what do you believe is the something extra that every leader needs?

[00:24:50] De Vries: I would say it's about aligning your team to the mission and then creating the space for them to be successful. I call that aligning incentives. Incentives are not about money, incentives is about role modeling the right behavior and then celebrating the right behavior. If we do that as leaders, it's actually energizing for our teams, and often, we're surprised of the outcome in a good way, how much our teams can get done and drive an impact.

I'll walk through the hallway in our office and people say, "Well, thank you for doing that," and I actually have to figure out what happened because people just took the right opportunity and just got it done. I love that part. It's about aligning incentives.

[00:25:25] Nichols: We talked about that a little bit. I said, "Which is more effective, Eduard, carrots or sticks?" You said, "Definitely, the carrots."

[00:25:33] De Vries: We all want to do the right thing. If we reward the right thing, with attention, if we reward it by calling it out that it's a great thing, that works. Nobody wants to work out of here. If you do that, people get defensive. Then instead of seeing an opportunity for improvement, they're going to explain why somebody else's fault. That doesn't help anybody, and especially, it doesn't help my patients. At the end, we're there to help our patients, to help our communities. The only way to do that is to drive forward and get better.

[00:25:58] Nichols: Very good. This has just been so much fun. Tell me, is there something that's coming up that you're really excited about?

[00:26:04] De Vries: For me personally, it's finishing the first module of my master of science. I'm excited about art, but I'm also ready to take a break from that. It's exciting to every time go to a new topic and learn something new. Thankfully, I have a lot of very smart people at SSM. When I get in trouble, I can always say, "Can you just take 10 minutes and help me a little bit and I'll buy your lunch."

[00:26:23] Nichols: It's a team approach.

[00:26:25] De Vries: It's a team approach, but it's also about, if we say as leaders, we want to continue to learn, then we have to share that with our teams. Hopefully, they take some of that behavior as well. Another thing we just did, we started a book club internally, which is exciting because there's so much we can learn, and if we can promote reading more in our organizations, I believe every good leader reads. I get to pick a few books, which is hard, because there are so many good books, but it's exciting to do it, and then talk about what I think we can take away from them for our organization.

[00:26:54] Nichols: Yes. I always say, it's not just turning the pages of the book, it is really about taking those learnings. I'm a big person about practicing. You have to practice what you've read, right, to really get it into your DNA.

[00:27:08] De Vries: Absolutely. If you probably ask my direct reports, they probably know when I read, because then these flurry of emails goes out, where I tell people, "Don't react in the evening or in the weekend," but I'm not the kind of person, I'm the person who sits with a paper book on the deck, hopefully, soon, and then makes notes on it, reads it, and sometimes stops for five minutes to think, "How does that fit within my context? How can we use this?" Then I'll make pictures and send it out and like, "Hey, can we talk about this on Monday or Tuesday, how we can use this to make a difference?"

[00:27:35] Nichols: I read something recently, it's not about the quantity of what you read, it's about the quality of what you're taking away. Usually, that's not speed reading.

[00:27:44] De Vries: Absolutely. It's saying, how do I take some of the key points and share them with people I work with? That's what the opportunity is. They will come back and challenge it. Your ideas become better when you start to, I would say, shoot holes in each other.

[00:27:56] Nichols: Have some discourse yes, absolutely. Well, Eduard, this has been so much fun. Thank you so much for taking the time. I know how busy you are. I appreciate you being on the show today.

[00:28:06] De Vries: Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure.