Alison Dean (00:09):

TheoremOne is the leading innovation and engineering firm for the Fortune 1000. We design, build and deliver enterprise-scale technology solutions and are very excited to present The Breakthrough Podcast — an ongoing series where we interview technology leaders to share their experiences and perspectives on what's next in tech.

Alison Dean (00:37):

Welcome to The Breakthrough. I'm Alison Dean VP of Operations at TheoremOne, and today we are talking with Melanie Hildebrandt who recently finished out a 15 year run at Sony Pictures Entertainment, most recently as the Senior Vice President of Corporate IT. She sent me this quote from Yogi Berra that resonated for her, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." So, hello, Melanie.

Melanie Hildebrandt (01:03):

Hello, Alison. Good to be here.

Alison Dean (01:05):

What does that mean to you?

Melanie Hildebrandt (01:07):

Well, the most important thing is for people not to be paralyzed or get too comfortable, no matter what decision you make, keep moving forward and all things happen for a reason. That quote really resonated with me.

Alison Dean (01:22):

Amen to that. Can you walk us through what a typical day looked like for you at Sony?

Melanie Hildebrandt (01:27):

Most of the day was filled with lots of meetings, really long days with meetings and discussions about what our future state technology strategy would look like. We spent a lot of time on business cases, there's a very thoughtful process that goes into all of our IT investment spending. We actually prescribed to the Pyramid Principle, Minto memo it might be known as well, which is really logically putting together your business case based on pillars, problem statements, and in a memo format. We spent a lot of time doing that, cost-benefit, analysis work, and I would say other than those two pieces, I spent a lot of time with my team doing a lot of coaching, mentoring, and discussing whether it's proactive work that we want to do, strategy work. That would probably be the top three.

Alison Dean (02:23):

I like it. How did COVID affect project prioritization?

Melanie Hildebrandt (02:28):

Luckily, we had launched in the corporate groups telecommuting programs. So, the move to work from home full-time was actually fairly seamless, which was great because the IT team definitely needed to scramble around VPN capacity and things like that. But generally speaking, the change management for the organization was fairly minimal, so that was fantastic because I know other companies didn't have the same experience as we did. We hit the ground running in getting everybody operating and productive. From an IT-focused spending perspective, I would say nothing really changed, we were just very conscientious of not wasting any money. Again, back to the business case preparation, everything has to have an ROI, we have to prove value and there was just a really good discipline on staying within our budget.

Alison Dean (03:24):

That's always nice. Was there anything that surprised you during 2020?

Melanie Hildebrandt (03:29):

People worked so much more than they did before. I think the assumption is that you're going to be at home, you're going to get distracted, you're going to do laundry, all of those personal things and errands. And actually, we didn't see a lot of that, we actually saw the opposite, which is people were working way too much. We had to have a lot of conversations with the teams around boundaries. I was running brown-bag sessions with my global team every two weeks, so I would gather a cross-functional group at all levels of my organization. I have 150 people on my team and I have a large outsourcing group in India, I would spend evenings talking with them and trying to understand their struggles. Boundaries were the number one, people were just overworking, they weren't spending enough time on their health and their personal lives, and so I really try to encourage them to get back to the normal working hours and give themselves a break. That surprised a lot of people in the sense that, with the laptop just being so close to you, turning it off was very difficult for people.

Alison Dean (04:37):

I'm one of those people. What do you think the most crucial aspect of a company's IT strategy is?

Melanie Hildebrandt (04:42):

Well, first and foremost, definitely aligning with the business. There are things in IT that we need to do independently when it comes to upgrades and things like that: infrastructure changes, closing data centers, generally the business is an agreement but they're not driving those changes. That is something

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that we can do independently and we're always looking for cost-down situations. But generally speaking, when it comes to the application portfolio, meeting with the business leaders, really having them in the driver's seat in identifying what IT investments were important to them, making sure that their requirements are being met. If we can align that strategy with their vision, that's really powerful.

Melanie Hildebrandt (05:29):

We have been doing that at Sony, that was something that we've been maturing over the years and it's just getting stronger and stronger and we are an agile shop. We were also using the terminology for them as well, calling them product owners, this is your product, what do you want to do with your product? How are you envisioning this? That really empowered them to take more of a leadership role versus participating more as a passenger, but it's really their systems, so they should definitely be more educated on technology capabilities and also the cost because it is a big expense for the organization.

Alison Dean (06:03):

Since you were at Sony for quite some time, 15 years, you've certainly seen a variety of changes within the company. Can you tell us about some digital transformation projects that you found especially compelling, especially difficult?

Melanie Hildebrandt (06:18):

Because I manage the corporate applications, the two big ones that we've done recently is really around our HR transformation. Really looking at all of the systems and processes that affect people, whether it's onboarding and offboarding, whether it's interacting with the HR department, questions about benefits, things like that. Whether it's navigating the lot — because the lot is huge — understanding facilities, maps, and things like that. Looking at this holistic studio experience and trying to automate that experience as much as possible, creating self-service, and really just modernizing all of those services was definitely one of the highlights for me that I've worked on in the last few years, for sure.

Melanie Hildebrandt (07:02):

We're also looking at digital transformation in the business as well. They used to have LA screenings, people would fly in from all over the world and see trailers and there was events and executives would speak and they actually created all of it on video and gathered all the trailers, library them, had all of the executives speak, recorded it, packaged it absolutely beautifully and it was an unbelievable success story. We could still get our content out to all of the different potential customers to take a look at and it was very successful and a lot cheaper and it was good for the environment because obviously, people weren't traveling.

Melanie Hildebrandt (07:41):

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That's something that's going to continue in the future, even if they do bring back in-person events, this is always such an amazing option and was probably more successful than anyone thought it would be or could be.

Alison Dean (07:54):

Actually, it probably opens the door to more people being able to opt-in just because obviously with travel schedules and conflict.

Melanie Hildebrandt (08:02):

Absolutely Alison, very good points. There's no way we could have had such a vast and broad audience if LA Screenings continued to be in person. It's just physically impossible to be able to host that many people, obviously with budgets and things like that. Being able to cast a much wider net with the content was a huge win as well.

Alison Dean (08:27):

I wanted to pivot to when you moved from Calgary and you worked for IBM as an SAP consultant to when you then moved to London to work for Sony, any interesting discoveries that you can recall?

Melanie Hildebrandt (08:40):

Yeah. I always wanted to live in Paris and London, that was my goal, but it sounds so hard to make true, right? Then I thought, how am I going to do this? I vividly remember when I was consulting for a very large oil and gas company, I asked my consulting partner for an overseas assignment. I put it out there, hoping that something would stick. It was tough times back then, early 2000, and there wasn't a lot of work because we had finished the Y2K work, which was heavy. After that, there was a bit of a lull and she said, "I know you really want to go to Europe, but are you okay going to Los Angeles? The Disney SAP project needs some help." It was January, freezing, and they're asking me if I want to go to Los Angeles, absolutely sign me up.

Melanie Hildebrandt (09:34):

Jumped on a plane, started working for Disney, spent almost a year there helping them build up their SAP support center because they were halfway through their global implementation and they needed to have their own support group. They weren't running the queries and the ticketing through their regular help desk, it was just such a huge piece of work and it was hitting so many users. We basically built that up and then after I finished that piece of work, I asked the partner on the project if there was something else I could do.

Melanie Hildebrandt (10:07):

The project hadn't finished and I really wanted to stay, I was really enjoying myself and he said, "Okay, leave it to me, let me think about it." Calls me back and he said, "Do you want to go to Paris?" It was unbelievable, the luck, "Absolutely, I will go," and I basically had to be there to work on a project that was Buena Vista Home Entertainment, it was a European supply chain implementation in collaboration with Technicolor. We were doing a joint project with them and the idea was that we were going to build a global template with Technicolor and they were going to try to sell that to other studios. They were looking to try to build some service capabilities with Disney as their pilot group, and then try to shop it around, that was the goal.

Melanie Hildebrandt (10:52):

Anyway, get to Paris, finish that project, it was a year and a half, it was absolutely fantastic. Then there was a project with Sony, my partner was working on the Sony project and said, "After you roll off the Disney project in Paris, I want you to come and help us at Sony. We need someone to run the European rollout." Hooray, get to live in London. I'm working in London, the project was only nine months, it wasn't that long to complete. Finish that and then talking to the regional CIO for Sony Pictures in London, Steve Delavan, he essentially said, "The role that you're doing, we need to hire that role as a full-time employee. Are you interested in taking the position?" It took me about three seconds to jump up and down and say, "Absolutely."

Melanie Hildebrandt (11:43):

That's how I ended up working in London with Sony and I went home, packed up my stuff, the rest was history. I ended up supporting SAP across Europe for five years.

Alison Dean (11:54):

You were flying back and forth?

Melanie Hildebrandt (11:55):

No, I moved. I was fully moved over there.

Alison Dean (11:59):

You really got your London experience?

Melanie Hildebrandt (12:01):

I did.

Alison Dean (12:03):

What years were you there?

Melanie Hildebrandt (12:05):

I was there 2005 to 2010.

Alison Dean (12:09):

I was in London when you were in London.

Melanie Hildebrandt (12:11):

Oh, wow.

Alison Dean (12:14):

I was my senior year of college, I worked at a pub off of High Street, Kensington called The Greyhound. I loved London. Was there anything that surprised you the most about Sony's journey during your tenure there? Any significant turning points or lessons that you can reflect back on?

Melanie Hildebrandt (12:32):

The whole journey with the entire media and the entertainment industry is, "Buckle your seatbelt." You just got to buckle in and you've got to go with the rollercoaster. The hay day was when everybody was buying DVDs and Blu-rays and rentals, that was a cash cow, that whole section of the business. When that started to dry up, everybody was really concerned, how are we going to supplement all of this revenue? People were just not wanting to own anymore. Streaming services started coming onto the docket and the competition is fierce. I don't know that it was anything that surprised me, but it was just constant change all the time. We were always looking for cost-cutting opportunities, how can we really maximize our profit? If revenue is at a certain point, the only lever you have is to cut your expenses.

Melanie Hildebrandt (13:26):

We really had to focus on that and become very disciplined in our spending. I just love to see the evolution and the re-imagining of the business. You went from these very siloed vertical organizations TV motion pictures home entertainment, to being much more collaborative, much more enterprise-focused, and it's almost like the vertical flipped over into these horizontal process-focused groups. It was fascinating to watch, it's all best practice. A lot of really great decisions were made, a lot of great leadership either was there or came in. We had a lot of great people directing the vision and keeping the company afloat because the company has actually continued to do well and it's doing very well right now.

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Alison Dean (14:16):

In that space of time, when you were seeing these big changes happen, how are you going to carry on in your next role leveraging some of what you experienced in those changes at Sony that made you go, "Wow, that was done really well, or that was done really efficiently or that was done really smart," and bring it into your next role?

Melanie Hildebrandt (14:35):

Great question. Number one, I'm really excited to bring the discipline around IT investment spending, I think we do a great job of it. The business case preparation, the focus on the problem statement, the focus on really solid cost-benefit analysis, I just feel like a lot of people don't do that well because we have such a robust process. I'm hoping to take that learning with me for sure, because I think the business also feels a lot more comfortable when they can be walked through a rationale of something, they can understand it, it's in business language, they're going to appreciate that.

Melanie Hildebrandt (15:14):

Secondly, I just think all companies are doing digital transformation, So that's another thing that can be transitioned over as well, which is all the learnings from the transitions that I've been a part of, the organizational change, the lessons learned. It's hard, but it's so fascinating to be part of.

Alison Dean (15:36):

What does digital transformation mean to you?

Melanie Hildebrandt (15:39):

Well, essentially it can be as basic as automating something, that's digital transformation. Let's take it out of Excel and move it into a system, let's automate any process, let's bring in robotics, things like that, to basically completely removing manual effort, full robotics. Basically, processes are completely automated to the point where there's almost zero-touch. So I think there are various levels of maturity in digital transformation and I know everybody just uses the term now because that's the cool term, but that's essentially what it means to me.

Alison Dean (16:17):

I sometimes ask the question and I sometimes don't, it's interesting to gauge what the response is when I say, digital transformation, because some people it's like, "Yeah, that's a buzzword, it's a thing, I know it," and then other people are like, "Why are we calling it that since it's been exactly what I've been doing all this time?" Just interesting. Anyway, I digress. Shifting gears a bit, do you feel like there are benefits to being a woman in technology?

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Melanie Hildebrandt (16:44):

I don't know but I wouldn't necessarily say there are many benefits. I think that there's challenges and it's not even industry-specific because as you know, the number of CIOs that are female is around 10 to 11%, also statistically girls and then college students interested in STEM careers and going in technology, the numbers are dropping. I always thought 20 years ago that the numbers would continue to rise, but it's fascinating to me that they aren't, even though this is such a fabulous and really rewarding career path.

Melanie Hildebrandt (17:23):

Number one, we're not good at branding the career. When people think of technology and even when I tell people I work in technology, they want me to fix their printer. Such a small part of being in technology and that's just where their thought process goes, all of the opportunities that are there, especially around business relationship management and the strategy side of technology, the project management side of technology, so many different roles that you can go into, you don't all have to be a developer as an example.

Melanie Hildebrandt (17:56):

That's something that we need to work on when we're looking at the gender parody is having people interested in STEM, getting into technology and then sticking with it because that's the other thing that we're seeing with women in technology careers is that, the middle management level they're dropping out and they're dropping out for different reasons. A lot of people say, "Well, they're dropping out because of family." That's only 20%, the other 80% are dropping out because they're changing career paths, they're going into finance or marketing or something else. They're opening up their own companies, doing something entrepreneurial, et cetera.

Melanie Hildebrandt (18:32):

That's something that I've been really interested in digging into a little bit more, is that why is that drop-off happening? Because you're clearly interested in the subject matter, you're interested in the career, and then let's say five to 10 years in you decide, "Okay, this isn't for me." That's something as a collective, we should all be trying to understand a little bit more deeply and also trying to create more opportunities for women to get into those senior leadership positions.

Melanie Hildebrandt (18:59):

I'm digressing a little bit, but these are three things that I've been thinking about a lot lately to solve that problem. one is, in many cases women are not on the radar. They're up and coming top executive material, they have amazing skills, both hard skills, soft skills, but they're just not on the radar of that promotion or trajectory path, so we need to make sure that they get on the radar. My branding coach says, "Decisions about you are made in rooms you're not in." You need to make sure that you're planting the seeds that, "Hey, if that position comes up, I would like to be promoted. I'd like to be an executive

leader," et cetera, et cetera, that that is being communicated and that the right people, AKA hopefully your sponsors, know that, know your story, know your brand, and then can bring your name up when decisions are being made, because otherwise, it's not malicious. You're just not on the radar and you're not visible. You need to be visible, you need to have the opportunity to get your name on the list of candidates, we need to give women opportunities to speak.

Melanie Hildebrandt (20:07):

A lot of women shy away from public speaking, but that's a way of really getting visibility and being able to practice executive presence and speaking, and then also letting them showcase their skills, whether it's stretch opportunities or some innovation incubator lab, whatever the company is looking to do, where women can also get involved and create a bit of an experience for themselves that is above and beyond their day job, which shows leadership, shows initiative and all of those things that people are looking for in executive leaders.

Melanie Hildebrandt (20:39):

If we can really be a little more intentional about that versus just thinking, "Oh, organically people just rise to the top and it all works out," because I think time and time again, we're seeing that it doesn't and the women need that little extra support, that little extra help in moving forward and moving upward so they don't feel disenfranchised and potentially thinking, "Well, this is a dead-end job, I should just drop out. I'm being ignored. I'm invisible," all of those negative things which we don't want to happen.

Alison Dean (21:13):

So, it sounds like one of the benefits of being a woman in tech is helping to uplift other women in tech?

Melanie Hildebrandt (21:18):

Hopefully, yes. The other thing is, I don't know that every woman feels the same way as I do. I'm incredibly passionate about lifting others, everyone, lifting my team, whether they're female or male, it's very neutral. But yes, I do have an extra sensitivity to watching for when women get dismissed because it's just something that I notice and maybe other people might not be noticing. Do spend that extra time and effort to highlight them, that's in all the books, it always says, "Women will give all the credit to the team and they don't run for the spotlight," and things like that because they're trying to be humble and more of that nurturing style, hence not self-promoting or maybe not as good at managing up. Unfortunately, that holds them back, we need to make sure that we encourage them to do those things and then also do it for them as well.

Alison Dean (22:14):

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I'm with you a hundred percent. You mentioned your team that you had in India, in your experience, what has made for the most effective cross-functional teams?

Melanie Hildebrandt (22:24):

Great question. We have a fairly large outsource partnership and it was very difficult in the beginning. Change is hard and the time zone and all of that and the learning curve for the new joiners, but over time it's become incredibly successful. We definitely have fantastic teams, everybody's flexed to each other to try to find those hours of the day where they can communicate because you still do need to have the meetings, especially with agile, daily stand-ups. The teams have really flexed to each other, it's been really lovely to watch actually, how the squads, because we call the teams squads and we self-empowered teams, so they can decide how they communicate when they communicate. There's not a ton of management oversight because we really want them to self-organize and it's been working really, really well, and I think that my team is incredibly diverse, the LA-based team and then obviously our India partners. We also had some folks from different countries as well coming together.

Melanie Hildebrandt (23:28):

To me, the most diverse teams are the most innovative and creative. Because you have so many different thought patterns happening, everybody's coming from a different lens and it's unbelievable. I've always been the type of person to run towards diversity because when I was working in Paris, our teams were so diverse, one night we were having dinner and everybody said their country of origin, we covered 25 countries, It was fantastic and the stories and then people talk about the food and the culture, it makes us feel so much more global and international and we learn so much from people. I feel like my tour of duty overseas is just matured me beyond a level that I could have ever dreamed of by just opening my eyes to what else is out there in the world. I run towards having a very diverse and inclusive team.

Alison Dean (24:22):

I want to talk more about all the different squads self-organizing, who's giving them directives of what they're trying to achieve, and in what timeframe are they working? Because obviously, you guys are working Agile, what does that look like?

Melanie Hildebrandt (24:35):

Historically, we used to have the business relationship management team separate from the dev team. We had this shared services dev team and they reported into different groups. It was a little bit more difficult to get that collaboration just because with different leaders, there is that silo effect. We broke that out, everyone on the squad reports to one DCIO. Immediately that makes things a lot easier because they all have the same boss, there's not these trying to serve two masters situation, all the conflict was gone. Then those squads are formed and then within the squad, there's still the scrum master. The scrum master's coordinating things, setting up the meetings, whether they're having daily stand-ups and then all the

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ceremonies and then the product owners, which typically is a business, is setting the backlog, for the most part, we use JIRA, we use ServiceNow for some stuff as well.

Melanie Hildebrandt (25:34):

The team is basically chipping away at the backlog in those systems based on the prioritization of the business. What we generally were tracking as the sprints and the sprints can be two weeks, four weeks, we try not to have long sprints, we try to keep them tight. Then the business can basically reprioritize after every sprint if they want, we always do the retrospective so we can talk about what went well, what changed, and it just gives the team a lot more autonomy and a lot more space to say, "We're not going to make it."

Melanie Hildebrandt (26:07):

Because the other thing that we are really trying to monitor is workload hotspots. Historically, the team always felt so passionate about making their dates, that they got overworked and they wouldn't put their hand up to say, "Oh my gosh, I actually need another day." They would just work the hours, work the weekends, and we really didn't want to encourage that behavior. If you've estimated it was going to be 40 hours, but really once you dug into whatever you were working on is 60 hours, then just be honest and say it's 60 hours instead of trying to hide the fact that it's 60 hours and then working till midnight. We're trying to reinvent the communication and give the teams that space to be a little bit more agile.

Alison Dean (26:53):

But I think it's also giving them the space to breathe a little bit, or at least remove some of the fear that they have if they can't make a deadline that was set in place. As long as you have clear lines of communication, here's what we're hoping for but please let us know if that's something that you know is not achievable when you know it, so that we can re-address it.

Melanie Hildebrandt (27:15):

You bring up a fantastic point because the foundation of Agile is servant leadership and psychological safety. You can't have a high-performing Agile team, self-monitored, without that group feeling safe together, feeling safe with whatever the management chain looks like. We've also spent a lot of time with managers and there's a book called multipliers, looking at how do you multiply the knowledge which is a very much coaching mentoring style, versus the diminisher, the boss that's more of the diminisher and there are all these diminishing traits that we all do. If you read the list you think, "Oh my gosh, I do so many of these things," but it's all for the greater good. Trying to reeducate managers on how to empower their teams, how to be more of a coach and a mentor verses that command and control traditional management style.

Melanie Hildebrandt (28:08):

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Psychological safety, servant leadership, studying all of that and making sure that the organization is focused on that as well as the Agile transformation. Then that's putting you in a really good position to win. Otherwise, it can be incredibly challenging because you have one without the other, you definitely need to have strong collaboration for sure.

Alison Dean (28:32):

Absolutely. Scott Olechowski, who's the co-founder and chief product officer at Plex, was recently on and he has this question for you. "If you could offload one area of responsibility, what would it be and why?"

Melanie Hildebrandt (28:47):

That's so hard. I don't really love doing administrative work. If I could offload that on someone else, and honestly I do, at some points in my day, in my career, I've gotten so overloaded with busy work, had to really take a step back and say, "Okay, I need to carve out more time for strategy, that has to be a priority." Also learning new technologies and reading trends and things like that, and all of that really important stuff was falling to the bottom of my list because I was so focused on email and busy work and sending statuses and things like that. We've really tried to A, eliminate a lot of that, and B, it's not helping the team. I don't think it's a good use of my skills and that's why I don't gravitate to it and I try to not have that be a priority.

Alison Dean (29:40):

Is there any admin stuff that you always want to do though? Are there those things where you feel like you must still be attached to them?

Melanie Hildebrandt (29:48):

I do like to do my financials. I think because I grew up implementing financial systems, so I love accounting, I love budgets. Even if I delegate some of it, I still review it myself, I like to understand it. Also, a lot of presentations I'd like to review as well before they go out, that's something that I haven't completely relinquished control on. I also am very passionate about PowerPoint templates, I love colors and I like it to look professional. That's something that my team always laughs at like, "Melanie is going to want to change this." I like to have something that is a little bit jazzier, maybe that comes from my consulting background, I don't know.

Alison Dean (30:32):

A little bit jazzier. Okay. I want to talk about lessons that you've learned from being a leader in tech for as long as you have and doing the things that you've done, what are those lessons?

Melanie Hildebrandt (30:43):

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The most important thing is taking care of your team and never losing sight of that. Sometimes we get really focused on our own stress and our own busyness and we have to lift our heads up and know that it's not about us, it's about them. I try to very intentionally redirect my energy to them, if I'm stressed, they're stressed, so I need to focus on their stress, that's the most important thing and make sure as well that I'm focusing on their growth and their learning. I'm really passionate about my team and not seeing them as people who are just working for me, but really my job is working for them.

Melanie Hildebrandt (31:25):

That's been a lesson because as you mature in your leadership style and you take on larger teams, you just get better at it, I hope people get better at it. Some people maybe don't, but that is my goal and I'm always trying to better my management style and skills and have that relationship with my team. Also from the lessons learned is, nothing is perfect. We started doing IT projects in the late '90s, and honestly not a lot has changed fundamentally, you're still trying to estimate, you're still trying to read the minds of the business, you're still implementing tools that are never going to be perfect, there's always going to be shortcomings, so the lesson is really not getting too worked up about perfection and focusing more on how do we clear obstacles. Obstacles are going to come up, there's no way around it, and just making sure that you get better and better at identifying them as soon as possible, and then always knowing how to quickly pivot quickly mitigate.

Melanie Hildebrandt (32:27):

I'm getting better at that because I think before if something went awry, often took it very personally, I should have seen this coming and really over analyzed things and now I'm trying to be a lot more pragmatic, "Okay, this happened, how do we move forward?" Not focusing so much on the past or what went wrong. Retrospectives are good, but for the purpose of being better in the future state versus being too hard on yourself for the past, and that has made a huge difference.

Melanie Hildebrandt (33:01):

Then the other thing that I'm finding and you probably are too, we worked Agile in the '90s, we just didn't use the terminology. All of the things that are old become new again, which makes me happy because I always feel like this is just the same thing with another name, but we're always iterating. I'm not saying that things aren't getting better, I think they are, but I don't think that things are so radically different than they were 20 years ago, that's what I'm seeing. I just feel like I worked this way before, I just didn't have the smart naming. We didn't call it sprints, we called it something else. That's fascinating to me as well when people think that they've come up with these revolutionary ideas and they're really just old ideas with a new name.

Alison Dean (33:46):

Right. What do you want your direct reports to remember you for?

Melanie Hildebrandt (33:49):

I really hope that they remember that I was always their advocate and that they were always top of mind for me.

Alison Dean (33:57):

From what I know of you, Melanie, I would think that they would feel that way of you, yes. What are the most important lessons that you've learned from your mentors?

Melanie Hildebrandt (34:06):

I would say just always looking at things maybe a little more objectively. I came to a mentor with a situation and then said, "This is the way I see it from my lens." What they've really brought to the table is being able to show me a different side of that situation and be able to look at things a little bit more objectively. I still do that now and call them and say, "This is how I'm seeing it, help me fill in the blanks." Whether it's the other person's perspective or a completely different perspective, because a lot of my mentors are CTOs or they're in software companies, they're coming at the situation from a completely different perspective, I really like that, I like to weigh all of the pros and cons, all of the different ways of seeing a situation before making a decision.

Alison Dean (34:55):

What are projects that are top of mind for you, where you are thinking to yourself, "I want to say that I've done this when I look back on my career."

Melanie Hildebrandt (35:03):

Because I've spent so much time in corporate and that's what I'm hoping with this new job is going to fill some of those gaps. I do want to get closer to the business, it doesn't matter what business, because all businesses to me are interesting in their own way. Any industry is fascinating and all of its challenges and strategies. That's my big focus now, is really getting closer to the business and working on implementing technology that's going to solve more of that front-of-house business problems. I love the back of house, don't get me wrong, I still love the finance, the HR, all of it, it's fantastic, but I want to broaden out a little bit.

Alison Dean (35:41):

I dig it. What future innovations are you most excited about? It could be anything that you're excited about.

Melanie Hildebrandt (35:48):

Well, I'm excited to see the continual evolution of robotics. Elimination of a lot of the manual basic tasks and being able to make our lives more and more efficient, which really fascinates me, is trying to get

people out of these more labor-oriented roles, move that to robotics, whatever it is, automation, whatever efficiencies we can implement and then have our workforce really focus more on creativity, innovation, ideas, human connection, all of those types of vocations. That's what I'm excited to see.

Alison Dean (36:30):

Okay. Can you talk to us about a breakthrough that you've had recently?

Melanie Hildebrandt (36:34):

Yeah. When you've been with a company for a really long time, it's very easy to stay and to get really comfortable and you have all these amazing relationships and you feel confident in your role and your knowledge of the organization. A big breakthrough that happened for me during COVID was really reassessing my life and my growth and my north star hopes and dreams professionally and personally.

Melanie Hildebrandt (37:06):

Professionally really impacted me in the sense of, I felt that I really needed to make a move, I really felt like the best thing for me was to move into a new industry, take on a new role and a new culture, just because I think there's no way that you can stay in an organization and stay up-to-date on what's going on in the world without emerging yourself into it. It's like watching TV of vacations but actually never going on vacation and never moving anywhere, it's a completely different experience. I really felt like I needed to immerse myself in a new environment to truly learn and grow.

Melanie Hildebrandt (37:46):

That breakthrough happened during COVID and it's been incredibly difficult. The decision to go when you're on a high note and everything's going really well, a lot of people think I'm crazy, "Why would you leave?" But the catalyst for that is really about taking some risks and focusing on learning and growth and a new adventure, that is the reason I decided to make a move.

Alison Dean (38:13):

Is there anything that you want to leave us with?

Melanie Hildebrandt (38:17):

The most important thing is, no matter whether it's in a project or initiative or on your personal professional development, don't create barriers for yourself. There are so many people who decide that they never want to move anywhere, they never want to rise the ranks, they're comfortable in their roles. Those are all self-inflicted ceilings and barriers that people create around them which limits them. I would just invite people to try not to do that, try to be more open, try to break the barriers versus creating barriers, and then see what happens because at the end of the day. What's the worst that could happen? Generally, it's not that bad. If you continually think more about breaking barriers, breaking obstacles, keeping moving, that is

where true learning, growth, and real development come from. I see so many people who box themselves in.

Alison Dean (39:19):

On that note, thank you to Melanie.

Melanie Hildebrandt (39:21):

Thank you.

Alison Dean (39:22):

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