

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

Episode 105

HUMANIZING LEADERSHIP IN HEALTHCARE

November 15, 2023

Shawn Nason
Host

Faith Zaslavsky
Guest

Shawn [00:00:01] Welcome to the ninth season of The Combustion Chronicles podcast, where bold leaders combine with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason CEO and founder of MOFI. This season is all about amplifying the voices of badass women leaders in the healthcare industry who are influencing change by thinking big, putting people first, and not being okay with the status quo. Experience matters. Culture matters, and revenue matters. That's why it's time to unite, to ignite a people-first business revolution, especially in industries that affect all of us like health care. My guest today, Faith Zaslavsky, put the life in life sciences because she's as passionate about people as she is about science that can improve their lives. Now the president and chief executive officer of Theralink, she has a long track record of leading and transforming teams, designing solutions for physicians to support care, and advocating for patients facing a cancer journey. Before joining Theralink, Faith spent nearly 23 years at Myriad Genetics and in her tenure there as president of oncology. She also served on the board of Directors of the American Society of Breast Surgeons Foundation. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Faith.

Faith [00:01:36] Thanks, Shawn. It's great to be here.

Shawn [00:01:38] Well, it is so awesome to have you here. And I don't know how you could have spent 23 years at Myriad when you're only 21.

Faith [00:01:48] Well, you know, they're in genomics and so they do.

Shawn [00:01:50] All of that. There you go.

Faith [00:01:52] Right.

Shawn [00:01:53] Well, you know, Faith, I met you a few years ago when you were at and we did some work together. But when most people think about life sciences, they might just picture a bunch of scientists wearing lab coats. But you oversee all sorts of functions, including medical services, medical affairs. You've done cells, you're done marketing. But now, as the CEO of Theralink, where does your time and energy typically go?

Faith [00:02:24] So that's a great, great question. So really, my time and energy is spent on people first. The priority has always been in my previous role, but more so here as well. The priority is to create a healthy environment for all of our internal and external customers to really thrive. And so, you know, when you think about that, you really have to spend a lot of time demonstrating your ability to tailor your interactions and meeting people where they're at so you can bring them along, especially when you're a leader. It's really, really important that the folks that you're leading feel like they're a part of the process of the innovation, the change, the team, the mission and all of that. So that's where the bulk majority of my time and energy is really spent.

Shawn [00:03:15] Well, and I know you're when you joined Theralink, you went in as chief operating officer and not very many months afterwards you became CEO. So give us your biggest insight as CEO that you've learned in the last 6 to 8 months since you've been in that role.

Faith [00:03:34] So what I will tell you is that transparency is key. Transparency about what we're doing, where the organization is going, and ensuring that everybody has a seat at the table. One of the things that is very, very important for us is to cross-pollinate across the different functions. So everybody has an understanding of what all the different teams are working on. So that's that's been really, really important. We find that a lot of our team members in different groups have very transferable skills and so they can really relate to each other. But prior to having that transparency, they didn't know that they had those things and didn't know that they had similar sorts of challenges, etc.. So we've really spent a lot of time in the last 6 to 8 months teaching and exposing the groups to their cross-functional partners, learning and really understanding each of their priorities and what their bandwidth is, especially because we're a smaller company and then bringing the leaders of those cross-functional teams to the table on a weekly basis to communicate what are the lessons, what do you need? How can we help each other coach our team? So it's really been center in that transparency of communication.

Shawn [00:04:53] I love it and I hope our listeners are listening to that because what I've always loved about you, Faith and our friendship is that we think so much alike. And

I think that's key. And I hope any leader that's out there listening hears that transparency is so vital. And as you know, you know, I'm a firm believer that organizations who improve their experience ecosystems end up having better results, which includes everything from the employee experience to the vendor experience. So there can often be a disconnect between clinical and non-clinical teams. So you're here, you are talking about this transparency. How do you experience this disconnect and what do you as a leader do to help navigate it?

Faith [00:05:46] Yeah, so that's a great question and it kind of makes me chuckle because you're so spot on the clinical the non clinical teams, even if you're you're looking at kind of a commercial team versus, you know, your R&D and your bioinformatics and all of those and the transparency around what is pertinent. So every team kind of has their own things that they need to deliver on and say, you know, our R&D team, they've got to get certain validation done. And then you have our commercial team that's out here saying that we can do some things and turn it around quite quickly without checking with that team. It starts to clog up the system. So I'm going to go back to my last answer, which is that transparency and making sure that everybody at the table leaders understand and the entire group, the entire organization understands what the strategic priorities are. And so kind of what goes first. And then if we need a favor or if we need something to be kind of fast tracked or if we need additional time running another validation study, all of that gets communicated. So there's no surprises because, you know, initially when I came into the organization, it was kind of commercial versus lab. Right, because they weren't in sync with what was going on and putting a stop to that and say, look, we're all one team and the only way that we're going to get to where we need to be is if we're all in sync, we're all rowing in the same direction. So that's really where we've centered in. And we have we've had a few bouts where people didn't understand. That's how they got in the ring for a second, you know, let the steam go and back at focusing on our mission as an organization.

Shawn [00:07:32] Well, and we talk a lot about and I talk a lot about when I work with executives and leaders. And we have multiple when we work with companies, you know that getting everyone pointed to that North Star, right. And that we all are going there.

People have asked me several times, you know, what is this magic? If it's around getting to that, you know, what we call an experience promise just because of their common purpose. If everyone knows that that's the North Star and we can all row towards that, then it makes it a little bit easier for you. So I love it. I want to go a little bit more personal about your career journey, because, you know, I'm in my fifth or sixth career now, and who knows, I could probably do five or more. My wife probably won't let me. But some people really take a long time to figure out their calling. But you've been in life sciences either your whole career or close to your whole career, so you could have used your degree in any number of industries. Why? Life sciences? And then more importantly, this becomes personal to me after my journey last year. Fighting cancer. Why oncology?

Faith [00:08:43] Yeah, So, you know, I've always wanted to do something that was purpose and mission driven. So it's always been something that I've wanted to help others. I grew up my mom was a single mom. She always had a lot of health problems. So I grew up quite quickly, you know, really caring for her. And so I felt that if you have an opportunity to really elevate your voice and use your voice and your your influence and your energy to really impact others in a positive manner, then that's something that I wanted to do. I wanted to be a part of helping to improve lives and outcomes for other people. So why oncology? Why, why? And I think because you know this firsthand, I can't tell you. Cancer sucks, right? ALS sucks, diabetes, chronic immune disease. And I can go on and on. And there's so many terrible diseases out there that we can all for our efforts into improving the lives of other people. But for me, the oncology journey actually started when I was in college. A very, very close friend of mine was diagnosed with cancer at age 22, and so I happened to be there. I sat front row for their journey and not just once, not through just a year and a half, but then a year and a half. What I and then the cancer resurfaced in another primary location. And so, you know, I got exposed to seeing what does at a very, very young age. And so that really stuck with me. And I always kind of centered on, gosh, I really want to help people that are facing the story. What can I do? How can how can I use my skills, you know, my talents, etc. to do better for others that are facing that journey? So that's really what got me started on that ecology track.

Shawn [00:10:49] Well, I want to say thank you, because you have you're making a difference in this industry. And I even know for our listeners personally, you're going through this journey now with your mother. Yeah. And yeah, cancer sucks and, you know, and you never I tell people, you never get away from it.

Faith [00:11:12] And, you know, obviously, we're going to know more and more people.

Shawn [00:11:15] Yeah, but that's what I do love about what you're doing at EarthLink. And what you guys are trying to do is to help that free journey and that even through that journey of of cancer. So how do you take all these experiences then previously and I think I know your answer, but I really how do you take all these experiences and then put them into your role today and what you're doing at Theralink?

Faith [00:11:40] So my previous experiences, this myriad first of all experiences, I think it really kind of feels that that passion, it's that it's just become an intrinsic motivation for me to do the best work we can possibly do, make sure that every time we're meeting with whether it's an investor bank, an analyst, external customer opinion later that we keep the patient out front, it's always nice. We can talk about doing it and. Stock price and all of that. But it really is about keeping that patient central in this organization and in our mission, because what we do is so different and we have something very different to offer than what's being offered. And so it's really helping people get around that. So I think that's what's most exciting about the role right now and bringing everything together, because I like, I intuitively feel it.

Shawn [00:12:43] You don't hear that very often from leaders of companies.

Faith [00:12:47] So that's sad to me.

Shawn [00:12:49] It's sad to me too. But to hear that and to hear your passion around it just makes such a different and, you know, faith, you know, that I, I lean into being a little bit of a disruptor and as we call it, a maverick minded people first human obsessed. And I really think that the rest of the world should be honestly and I kind of pisses me off that they're not. So I just wrote a post about this this week around a you know, what's

one question you could ask your CEO and it really talked about this, but it closed out with this whole concept of you got to love people and you got to you've got to put people first. And if you don't like, get the hell out of it. Right.

Faith [00:13:32] Right.

Shawn [00:13:33] Your work, again, we're talking about oncology in a very high stakes industry where we're actually making the wrong decision could have dire consequences on people's lives. And I even. Talk about this with my oncologist. Like, how do you take that pressure of knowing? I just went through a scare again in the past few weeks where I was starting to have some issues and I thought, Oh my God, is this cancer again showing up? And thankfully it wasn't. So is there really room in this industry for mavericks and disruptors to really change the industry?

Faith [00:14:15] Absolutely. And frankly, what my experience has been in the role and working there is like right now, I think oncologists specifically are looking for mavericks and they're looking for mavericks in R&D and innovation. I think we're coming away from a period of time where everyone's been so focused on kind of like, you know, big data and electronic medical records and all this sort of stuff. But I really do think that they're hungry for some disruption. And, you know, when I think about mavericks, which I love the term, by the way, not only do I love the term because it's it's very descriptive of the types of folks that we want on our team. But my daughter also just got a seven month, seven month old puppy. His name is Maverick. So, you know, that's like disrupting everything. But I think they can be very powerful. And I am incredibly blessed to work on a team of mavericks in R&D, in bioinformatics. And we have an amazing partnership with George Mason University and Dr. Manual. Patrick Coyne. He is a maverick in this space as far as proteomics is concerned. Proteomics hasn't really been on the map. We've been stuck in ceramics and in talking about inferencing, what types of therapies will be helpful? Whereas he said another goal. Now if we get to the protein, we can tell you exactly how active that protein is and how it's going to respond to different treatments. So I do think mavericks are necessary. Now, listen, we don't want mavericks running our lab, right, because we have processes place in science, so you

can't really plug them in there. But there's also I think Covance really taught us that from a commercial perspective is you need to have mavericks trailblazing for your commercial teams in the way that you communicate and how you're connecting. You know, this isn't Pharma 1985 where everybody's out golfing and doing that sort of thing because information is coming at everyone so fast. So I really do think that it's important to have a diverse group of mavericks, but then you also need to have goose sitting at the back and Ice Man to keep you on track. And it's really getting that team to know each other's strengths and respect each other's strengths and to keep each other.

Shawn [00:16:51] So I'm so good. I love all of the analogies there as well that even I hadn't put all those together to so that I might ship. That's right.

Faith [00:17:01] A nice smile can be pleasing if you can get the dental care to help create one. Medicaid kids don't always have a lot to smile about. It's challenging for them to see a dentist offer. Health was started to increase access to health care for people who don't have it. Offer, smile and business partners with dental practices to get these kids seen faster smile and these three person care team that brings hospital grade anesthesia to the dental offices so those kids can be on their way to getting the smiles most of us may take for granted. Offer help, creating connections, improving lives, care you deserve. Learn more and offer health.com. That's. O. F. F. O. R.

Shawn [00:17:46] And, you know, again, it goes back to people and our love for people. What causes some organizations then to lose the people connection?

Faith [00:17:57] So this is a great, great question. And it's when they stop listening and stop really hearing what it is that their frontlines are telling. I think organizations so often bring in leaders that feel that they have a pulse or that they can read a survey or get external consultants to say, No, this is your North Stars change, then you should make a correct or a correction, right? And there's many organizations and they go through the exercise of surveys and they seek feedback. And it really is a loss of trust and confidence when they don't actually use the information and make the changes that people are saying need to be changed. Right. It really is actually it's I think it's the words when you ask for the feedback and then you don't do anything about it.

Shawn [00:18:53] You don't.

Faith [00:18:53] Yeah, that's actually detrimental to the group. And so I think when organizations and especially in the life sciences industry, I think when they do a good job of is when they're able to connect the human resource to the science. Right. That's when they do. Well, in addition to responding to the human resource that they're saying, hey, look, everything we're doing, the strategy is working and the organization responds. Okay, let's talk about it. Let's figure out a new path forward together. So I think it's really that the failure comes from not really scary, what's being said.

Shawn [00:19:33] The failure comes from not really hearing what's being said. I love that. I actually just read an article recently around is surveying dead, but yet we have some major organizations that I can name off that many people wouldn't know or that you receive a survey from. And their whole the whole premise of the article is quit survey. And if you're not going to do anything with it.

Faith [00:20:02] Right.

Shawn [00:20:04] Right, Right. Like a consumer would rather not get surveyed or asked a question, then get asked a question and give you something and then nothing happens with it. So. And that ties back to everything you just said. So I think this is a pretty simple answer, but I'm going to ask the question so we can get it on tape. So what can these organizations do to connect the humans with the science then?

Faith [00:20:28] So connecting them, I think, is really rooted in focusing on the mission that's at hand for the people. Right. So what is it? Why do we do what we do? And ensuring that everyone stays connected in our industries, the patient, the patient that's facing a cancer journey. So and I'll say this is this has been really a learning experience for me because we see younger generations that are truly motivated more so by a mission or a calling to improve lives or outcomes. And, you know, they want to be a part of something significant. It's not what was driving people in the eighties where it was big dollars and, you know, the brick of a cell phone that you can have in your car. Those are those are the key drivers for our younger generations. And so the days of companies that were leveraging just their stock price or the number of units that they can produce

to motivate, I think is really behind. So I think that really putting that connection of what you do, drive out the front kids. All of your human resources connected and what part they play in and freezing them and having that that broad recognition is something that's very powerful.

Shawn [00:21:52] Yeah, I mean, yeah. And I think Generation X is really struggling right now with it.

Faith [00:22:00] Yeah, I agree.

Shawn [00:22:01] You know, because yeah, baby boomers already think Generation X is weird and they don't even try to understand and broad statements when I say this, but they don't try to understand Gen Z, Gen Y, next Gen because they just, you know, but I see the people caught in the middle are those of us that are Gen Xers are going to have this job to make this money. But everyone wants to be about purpose and. Yeah, and it's hard for us to understand how a 23 year old or 24 year old would rather live in a one bedroom apartment.

Faith [00:22:36] It's true.

Shawn [00:22:37] And make \$35,000 a year and be happy.

Faith [00:22:41] Yeah, it's true. And I think the other thing is for us is learning how you how do you connect with that group and how do you motivate them? Because our our knee jerk motivation to war has been money, promotion, title all of these things. When that is that is an it. And so that brings me back to getting to what drives each individual, tailoring to each individual. That's what's important. And I've learned that a lot over, I would say the last ten years is really learning from some of those younger team members what actually doesn't for them, why do they want to get up and come to work and what is it that they have to contribute and what do they see for themselves as being important? It doesn't always connect with money. Title Write it Down. Is workplace satisfaction feeling a part of the team, you know, being able to express themselves creatively. We have a gal that I think she's she's just adorable and she wanted to to

make the plants that sits next to her desk appear better. So she went out and got all these sticky eyeballs. And so now that has all these sticky eyeballs and she's like, This is the best thing ever. I'm like, That's fantastic too. That that's great. You know, it's like, I just love the fact that I feel free, that I can do that. I'm like, Yeah, you should do that. It's like, That's great.

Shawn [00:24:14] But that's true. Gen Z is just sitting there going, What? Yeah, right.

Faith [00:24:22] Yeah.

Shawn [00:24:23] That's right. Yeah. What did that just cost us? But I think that's it. Right. And that's what so I think specially I mean we joke about that putting eyeballs on a plant but in the industry that you work in. It's such a life or death industry that.

Faith [00:24:42] Is.

Shawn [00:24:43] That you can almost live in doom and gloom the whole time. So how do you make it to where you can get tied to that?

Faith [00:24:50] Right? Say.

Shawn [00:24:51] Yes, I'm going to get up every morning. And I know that this is a hard industry and this is a hard nut to crack. So if I put eyeballs on my plant. Great. Go put eyeballs on your plant.

Faith [00:25:03] Right. Exactly. And she comes in and it feels like it's an extension of her creativity. But when she's in the lab, she's hyper focused on ensuring that those patients that we're working on have nothing but the best. Right. So.

Shawn [00:25:19] I love it. I'm never going to diverge. Then this is the last episode of season nine. So I get to do that because we have been closing this whole season out with this little two minute drill around. How might we statements? And I almost feel like we've been doing that just in our conversation and we've come up with some great things about connecting human connection to life sciences. So I'm going to ask this

question to you as we close out the season. This has been an amazing season of amazing women in health care, and particularly in leadership and health care. As we close this season out with with this question, I want faith to give the best piece of advice. To women coming into the industry or into any industry that you wish you would have had when you stepped into into this industry and into these roles.

Faith [00:26:16] That is. Wow. Okay. What is the best piece of advice that I would have? I would say that women typically don't want to appear to be vulnerable. Or we just because, you know, when you're in a new role, it's really tough. Do you have all the answers? And the answer is, no, you don't. And so the best piece of advice that I would give to other women is find people around you and ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to gather context for whatever it is that you're doing. I think oftentimes well, at least in my generation, without Wonder Woman, right. She was so cool and she's so powerful. And, you know, all of us wanted the bracelets that she had because those just were our. I think that so many women feel like they have to prove themselves in a way. That they are shy to ask their counterparts a lot of questions that are going to help them move faster in their career and get a better handle on what the job is that they're doing. So that would be my piece of advice.

Shawn [00:27:31] I love it. Well, before we close the episode out, we do do this on the end of every episode. And the thing called the combustion questions, which are three randomly selected questions.

Faith [00:27:44] Okay.

Shawn [00:27:45] By my amazing algorithm known as Michael. And so I have not seen those questions. They were just sent to me. And so I'm going to be reading them for the first time.

Faith [00:27:56] Okay.

Shawn [00:27:57] To you. And you just need to give us whatever response comes to the top of your head as we do this. So, Faith, are you ready for these combustion questions?

Faith [00:28:06] I hope so. I hope so.

Shawn [00:28:09] All right. Combustion question number one. What's the first thing you're going to do when you retire?

Faith [00:28:17] I haven't even thought of it. That's my answer. I have not even thought about retiring. I would have to give my time to something meaningful. So I'm not sure why that would be. But one area that we do give our time when we can is from a McDonald House.

Shawn [00:28:34] Love it. So give more time.

Faith [00:28:37] Give more time.

Shawn [00:28:38] Love it. All right. Would you rather go on a vacation alone or in a large group of various.

Faith [00:28:49] I would say alone.

Shawn [00:28:51] And I'll make sure your family does not listen to this episode.

Faith [00:28:54] I think they confirmed that. They would say absolutely. Yeah. I think it's important when you are constantly kind of being told that that you have. Time to recharge.

Shawn [00:29:08] Hmm. All right, Combustion question number three.

Faith [00:29:11] Okay.

Shawn [00:29:12] What do you think about toothbrushes?

Faith [00:29:15] They need to be changed. Often. They're amazing. And I wish my son would be more proactive with this.

Shawn [00:29:29] All right. Now, definitely make sure your children don't listen to this at all. So, Faith, thank you so much for doing this and for closing out season nine for us. And, you know, I look forward to seeing you in person. If you want to connect with faith, connect with her on LinkedIn. Are you that connect to me? We'll have all this available on the website. But again, thank you and I look forward to seeing you very soon. And until then, stay safe and be well.

Faith [00:29:59] You too. Thank you so much.

Shawn [00:30:01] Thanks so much for listening to this episode of The Combustion Chronicles. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few minutes to subscribe, rate, and review. Remember that I'm always looking to meet more big-thinking mavericks, so let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn. If you want to discover more about human-obsessed, maverick-minded leadership, go to Mofi.co. Or go to experience evangelist dot com. To learn more about my mission, to challenge leaders to blow up outdated, siloed systems and rebuild them with an aligned human-first approach. As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing shit up.