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. Welcome to The Breakthrough, I'm Alison Dean, VP of operations at TheoremOne, and today we are talking with Marina Cortazzo, currently the head of technology solutions delivery for AAG, where she is responsible for providing overall technology strategy for internal and external business operations. Previously, she has served in various IT leadership positions at DirecTV, JPMorgan Chase, Beautycounter, and Anastasia Beverly Hills, to name a few. Marina sent me her favorite quote from Jack Canfield. "Everything you want is on the other side of fear." Hello, Marina.

Marina Cortazzo (01:16):

Hi, Alison. Happy to be here.

Alison Dean (01:18):

Yay. Okay. So I want to know, why is that your favorite quote?

Marina Cortazzo (01:22):

I think it's been my quote to help me break through my own self-doubt and fear when it comes to either technology decisions or even just my own career path. Am I good enough? Do I have the skills enough to get to the next level career-wise? And also am I bold enough brave enough to take on innovation challenges for the company to make sure we move forward? It's a quote that really resonated with me and it's one I've even passed on to my kids. "Don't let fear hold you back. Everything you want is on the other side, you just have to be brave and try." And once you get that mentality, you become a little bit more fearless, a little bit bolder. It's been a contributor to my success.

Alison Dean (02:03):

I love it. I want you to walk us through what a typical day looks like for you at AAG right now.

Marina Cortazzo (02:10):

Usually, my meetings start around 8:30. I usually pop onto my team's daily standup for the various teams on our platforms, just to see how the team is going to encourage them when there's a release coming up, but also help them through any technical problems they have and also get some face time with the developers on their day-to-day. And usually, I have them stacked through the morning up until 10:00 AM, and then my meetings start—usually more strategy project-related meetings throughout the day. And then, depending on the day, I like to have one-on-ones with my directs, just to have an opportunity to discuss

any topic from the specific project problem to personnel, their own personal growth and development, mentoring opportunities for themselves or their teams, or just to give them advice.

Marina Cortazzo (02:58):

And then usually at the end of the day, I do a wrap-up personally, if I have no meetings, I actually get work done, whether it's building a strategy, putting together a presentation for an object, or a business proposal. And then I just look at my calendar ahead and try to figure out how to prioritize the next few days of what I'm going to try to tackle. That's a typical day, not very exciting, but fulfilling.

Alison Dean (03:21):

Action-packed. Given all the things that you've done. What does digital transformation mean to you?

Marina Cortazzo (03:29):

That's a great question because digital transformation, some people just focus on really just the innovation that is consumer-facing. And I do think that's a huge part of it, but I think when you think about digital transformation, it could be also from an operational perspective of how do we work, how much of it is a manual process, how much of that process could be streamlined? Whether it's implementing new tools, processes and putting new people in different roles. So when I look at digital transformation, I try to look at it holistically in the sense of what is the end goal of that transformation? You don't want to do a transformation for the sake of it, especially when it comes to a digital aspect where we're taking something that used to be manual, or maybe not as modern from a technology perspective and really applying a new way of looking at it.

Marina Cortazzo (04:17):

It's going to give us more advantageous efficiencies, maybe cost savings, maybe revenue generation, or maybe advancements in our ability to penetrate a market or provide a new line of business. When I look at digital transformation, that's how I approach it. And that's what it means to me. What are we trying to achieve? What is that transformation, what is that end goal? And make sure we align our work and our processes and the right people in place to help us do that.

Alison Dean (04:45):

Is there a project that comes to mind for you that is most representative of a digital transformation that you are part of?

Marina Cortazzo (04:55):

Yes. one of the things that we had to do during the pandemic and it was when I was consulting for a medical scrub company in retail, as well as B2B and with the pandemic, you were not going to retail, especially in the thick of the pandemic for nurses and doctors and practitioners in the health industry. You

weren't going to walk into any of those medical supply stores and just buy a pair of scrubs. And so the company that I was consulting for never had a consumer-facing e-commerce site, it was going to be a completely new business all the way through, from the consumer-facing website to the supply chain and inventory management and how we record the book. So it was really transforming this business to take on e-commerce and they've never done it before. So the way had to think from a marketing perspective, no more flyers, it's all digital, it's all leveraging social media and ad campaigns.

Marina Cortazzo (05:49):

It's all leveraging SEO capability, which is completely new to them. And then also looking at their supply chain, it's a little bit different when you can do it from your warehouse to a B2B, versus individually shipping. And what does that look like, what's that experience? And then all the people that worked for that company that have never done this before, and also coming up with new collateral, coming up with new assets, including new designs for garment, to be able to compete with big players. It was a complete digital transformation of how they sell and it was creating a whole new omnichannel. And it was something that this company hadn't done. Everything from creating that online brand presentation that did not exist to their e-commerce site to digital assets, as well as packaging. Now you're sending to individuals, not a big partner,  and you're sending up scrubs and plastic bags, it has to be a presence there.

Marina Cortazzo (06:41):

And then how do you get those reviews coming in and get loyalty and subscription programs and focus on sustainability and get the word out via social media? And that one comes to me because it's very recent because of the pandemic. And it honestly made me feel that I was contributing to the medical field that was really working hard at that time. So being able to provide the masks and daily scrubs to help them feel a little bit human in their own skin was not only fulfilling, but it was really great to watch a company that was around for 90 years and never had a digital footprint to really transform itself and do this. So I was very fortunate and lucky in being able to help the company do that.

Alison Dean (07:27):

Now to pivot a little bit, what is the most memorable project that you've worked on?

Marina Cortazzo (07:34):

Two projects come to mind for different things. From an innovation perspective, I've been very fortunate and very lucky to get opportunities to work in technology as well as consumer-facing and operations in multiple industries, which I'm so thankful for. But it's in the hospitality suite and a project that is memorable in the sense of that. It really pushed the envelope from an innovation perspective that I never had a chance to do. And when I was working for Dine Brands, which is the parent company for franchises of IHOP, the pancake house, as well as Applebee's. When I was working with them, they really wanted to look at the innovation of really being able to build brand loyalty, to see more modern, be able to track new users, and

also to cater more towards the business user. They were very family-oriented, IHOP, very familiar pancakes, and so forth, but they were also very family-oriented

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Marina Cortazzo (08:33):

And it's like, "How do we penetrate the market for our business folks, lunches, dinners." Everybody's got to eat. And one of the projects that I took that was extremely memorable was called quick serve. What we were thinking of is how do you do this? And the concept we came out with and we did create this and we won a CIO Magazine, 100 award for innovation and me and my team did it. We came up with a QR code that would be in the center of each table and a mobile app. And therefore you can actually be on the mobile app, order your food, your drinks for not only yourself, your team, but you could also even pay upfront with the check, however you want to include a tip and tell us what time you wanted to show up and reserve what table you wanted in whatever restaurants that were part of the pilot.

Marina Cortazzo (09:21):

And basically let's say if your lunch was at noon, you and your team could go in at noon, sit down, and do geolocation. We would know you sat down and the service would bring you your drinks. Our food would be higher. The minute that we knew you were in close proximity to the restaurants. And when you would come in, not only were your drinks served to you, your food was provided to you. However you liked it and you don't even have to pay. You could just get up and leave, which was really attractive for people who wanted to have lunch as a team, or even just a couple of folks at a high hop. But would've been like, we don't have time to sit there for 20 minutes or 10 minutes, figure out what we want, order. Then the food comes. It's going to eat up more than the hour we have allotted for lunch.

Marina Cortazzo (10:05):

And if it's a bigger group, then being able to find seating at a very busy lunch hour. And so not only was it innovative to accomplish that, but for areas that were more isolated, like Ihop, where they serve breakfast and might be open at midnight or during the week where business wasn't as busy as Saturday and Sunday mornings when folks would come in for breakfast. The franchise owners use this same app to be able to keep their servers at off-hours at a minimum. So they saved on labor costs because you don't have to have a whole bunch of people sitting around waiting to be served, especially at off hours, because you need somebody to take orders. You need somebody to fire. You need somebody to bring it out. So you could reduce the staff because it was a little bit more self-serve for people to come in and get their order.

Marina Cortazzo (10:52):

And all you really needed was a runner and a cook to fire because everything was handled. So franchising owners also appreciated that model as well when things were lean or they had a big dip and flow of when customers would come in, instead of trying to keep their labor full-stack, that's kind of how we handled it

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via technology. And it really works. It gave them the building new track and trend when is their busiest time and be able to staff appropriately. So that to me was one of the most memorable projects because we did something cool, innovative, and something that we really haven't seen in a restaurant-

Alison Dean (11:25):

No.

Marina Cortazzo (11:26):

... in a while. That was really great and innovative. And then the other project I took, which was for Anastasia Beverly Hills, was something that as an IT professional, I never really got to do because I've worked for many Fortune 500 companies and it was really doing a full out build of infrastructure. What worked in application development, and when I needed an environment, infrastructure was really there to provide me the service I needed, or if I needed something I'd just open up a ticket to the help desk just like everybody else. But I never owned that side of the house and Anastasia gave me the opportunity to own both sides. And it was the first time that I actually ran full-on infrastructure, not just specific projects where I did a build-out because we just took over a building. But we really build in everything from a help desk to an ERP, to getting wiring, redundancy, telephony put in, build out conference rooms, security cameras, time cards for hourly employees, just building that whole infrastructure from a technical perspective was something I never really got a chance to do this come completely challenging.

Marina Cortazzo (12:34):

Because I was learning as we went and very thankful for a lot of great advice with peers and friends that were always able to help and point me in the right direction. But I was really proud of doing that. Not only for Anastasia's main corporate, but their salon, their warehouse, their movie studio, and their other side the lighter offices. So give me a really good chance to build breadth and depth and building that infrastructure, which I never really got to do from scratch.

Alison Dean (13:01):

So do you think that was the most difficult project for you?

Marina Cortazzo (13:03):

Absolutely, because with technology as an old developer, pushing the envelope innovation wise. There's a little fear, but it's a little bit comforting because I do know how to program. I do know how to do application. When it came to infrastructure, I don't know anything about Phishing software. I know it was on my outlook, but I don't know which Phishing software I needed or how to whitelist or what APs went well, what firewalls I should use, should I use Meraki or Palo Alto? All of that. It was just a new world that I'm so much more appreciative now than I ever was. Because it was there. Somebody always did it and did it well. And I never really thought twice about it. That magic does not come easy. You got to probably

put a lot of effort into it. So it was a great learning experience and it was probably one of the most difficult and the most fearful projects I ever did because it's like if I screw up the company can't do email, they can't get on the network, we can't do Wi-Fi. It was fun. It was a whole new world.

Alison Dean (14:03):

Yeah. For the Dine project and for the Anastasia project. Did you leverage any outside consultants for either of those or was it all internal team?

Marina Cortazzo (14:14):

No, I definitely did leverage a lot of outside help, when it came to infrastructure. When they had a movie studio, I had to really engage a firm that knew how to set up a post-production space as well as know what to do with retina cameras and how to create an edit bay. I mean, I had a hire firm that would tell me what hardware I needed to buy based on what we're doing because they're like we bought a three-stage studio. We need to connect everything and do all of it. And I'm like, I don't have any experience. So bringing in managed service partners that are a specialty in that area to guide you to help you come up with a plan was so critical. And I used more than one because I needed so many different pieces to put in.

Marina Cortazzo (14:59):

And when it came to Dine Brands, we absolutely did because of hospitality, technology that connects with the kitchen firing software. That the cooks look at the short order, cooks look at the system and also connect it to your POS, you need to really bring in a firm that could help you navigate that, manage that project and bring in the right partners because if you're doing something so completely innovative, having a good partner that technically thrives in that space and is somebody that consulting partners can recommend that have done, maybe not the same project, but has the chops to handle something that hasn't been done before really helpful.

Alison Dean (15:40):

For Dine Brands one, specifically, that was a huge transformation for just how the business was being run. So was there an ongoing reliance on an external vendor partner for all that support? Or was there a period where you were relying externally, but also you knew you had to bring on an internal team to sustain all that infrastructure?

Marina Cortazzo (16:06):

It was a little bit of both. It was a buy-and-build model. We had to buy some of the technology from a firm in England that partnered in building some of the scalability of being able to connect a QR code via geocaching location, because we needed to be able to track you when you were in a specific proximity of the restaurant in order to fire. And what does that look like? The whole point is that you sit down and your food is presented to you. Like you're a king or queen of your castle. Not that you sit down and you're

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waiting for 10 minutes. That completely repeats the whole concept. So somebody that was really good with that was somebody that built and maintained it and owned that tech, that's their bread and butter and they're very good.

Marina Cortazzo (16:49):

So they kept on that ongoing engagement, but in order to of minor tweaks and do all the connectivities via API to support it to all of our infrastructure, to be able to get that whole process to work for the customer, I did have to augment our internal team in order to be able to support it. So it was a little bit of both. I think it would've been way bigger if we did it all on our own. It would have taken us twice as long. It would have been twice as costly. So leveraging good partners takes a little bit of the fear and lets you be a little bit more bold and brave and really rely on their experience. And the breadth and depth of their network and the people that they have to be able to help you do that. You don't have to ramp up and try to put those pieces together on your own, they come already packaged and it makes it so much easier to work with and really build that synergy to get the project going fast.

Alison Dean (17:43):

Totally agree with you. What's the most crucial aspect of a company's IT strategy?

Marina Cortazzo (17:48):

Honestly, having a clear vision. In order for any company to have a really strong strategy, it is really for them to have crystallized their identity of who they are as a company, and where they want to go. Because when we build a strategy, we will be able to figure out what do we need to carve out room for future growth to accommodate the next thing? And it also keeps us mindful of pushing that envelope further, of not just getting from point A to B and then somebody tells us from point A to the next point, what we do. But if we know who we are as an identity, that strategy should align with what we're trying to become. It's critical.

Alison Dean (18:28):

Looking back in all the places you've been. Do you think that most of the companies that you've worked for have had a very clear IT strategy?

Marina Cortazzo (18:38):

No. I would say the only company I would say had an extremely clear vision of where they wanted to be, who they were, and what they wanted their IT to look like. Honestly is DirecTV. When I work with DirecTV, and I will tell you, this goes back down to 2011, we were talking about leveraging social media to not only understand and advertise content but also looking at it from a place of being able to build that relationship and brand loyalty and continue to win the JD Edwards Awards in customer service. So we were looking at that strategy, we were looking at cloud, what does that mean? What does it look like? We were looking at

SaaS buy versus build back then. We were having conversations if there's a streaming thing that might happen. Should DirecTV invest in creating their own content, in a few years later what did we launch? The audience channel.

Marina Cortazzo (19:41):

DirecTV had an audience channel where we were creating and putting our own content on. So I think understanding who they are and where they wanted to go was so crystalized and not IT strategy was completely in line as a group because you weren't going to do all those things in one year or two years or three years or five years. I mean, back in 2011, I knew where we were going to end up and everything they've done has led them to where they are today. They're streaming, you can watch TV anywhere, anytime. I mean, they were able to do it from a set-top box to DVR to your mobile device.

Marina Cortazzo (20:16):

Being able to now put out their own content, be able to have a social media presence, and continue to be our number one customer service and loyalty. So to me, I felt like they were the most together company where they did not deviate, where their strategy for IT didn't change or wasn't very rudderless meaning it was just very vanilla in the sense of, "We're going to go cloud, we're going to get more efficient, we're going to downsize on cost." It wasn't just the regular tactical strategies. They really had a vision of where they wanted to go with IT and be very innovative.

Alison Dean (20:50):

Fascinating, love that. I want to know when you opt for off-the-shelf software versus building custom?

Marina Cortazzo (20:58):

That's a great question because I'm going through that process right now. So it's extremely timely. I think what you have to look at is, where strategy plays a key is what kind of company are you? And that's one of the conversations I always have with my CEO or president is, "What kind of company do you want to be?" And I hear them say all those things. And I always ask them to clarify. When you talk about being innovative, are you talking about innovation from a technological perspective or leveraging technology to be innovative from a customer relationship perspective? Which has been more consumer-facing, but not necessarily might be in your face technology. It might be subtle, it might be behind the scene. And when it comes to buy versus build technologically, what are we looking to do? What is the level of demand that we have for our product for services coming in?

Marina Cortazzo (21:48):

I look at what are the offerings out there. What are the gaps from a business perspective and what are the gaps from a technological aspect? Depending on where we are with those. I usually like to look at it from a total cost of ownership, not only from an implementation perspective, from operating and maintenance,

because depending on how we go, there's a resource component, there's technology hardware, software, possibly cloud service, financial implications to it. And also what your capability is, how closely are you tethered to that platform if you buy versus fill? You have to have a wishlist of technically, what do you want to do? What kind of freedoms do you want? Do you want to be able to control your release? Do you want to be able to control your own integrations and be able to manage your own middleware? Are you able to customize it?

Marina Cortazzo (22:36):

Meaning are you able to put an obstruction layer over it to build down pieces that might not be out of the box? And based on those decisions, I really like to line them up and walk a CEO the route because I always tell them if you buy versus build the runways a little bit shorter, depending on how much of it you can adopt out of the box. If you build, I always tell them that I know as CEOs and presidents, it's not a one-time cost because the business wants it and IT wants it. They will write you a check, a big check, and want you to get it done. But what happens is a few years later, there's no more money coming into the investment of the platform. And so what happens is you do the first big, big investment, and most of it is technology. Some of it is a requirement, enhancements from the user.

Marina Cortazzo (23:24):

But after a while, what happens is there's no money for the technical place. All they'll be doing is feeding the business machine some of the enhancements requirements to help augment the system to be able to continue supporting the business and the new path that it takes. But what happens is you end up with technical debt. Nobody wants to have that uncomfortable conversation a few years later where you're like, "I'm going to need a big check. My hardware is obsolete. If I have to have anything off the front, just from a performance perspective, I need to get rid of the technical debt. I need to update our stack. I need to update more staff logs. I need to buy better tools to monitor or deploy this or for my team to be able to work in it."

Marina Cortazzo (24:05):

And in some cases, that investment is not business-facing. So it's really hard to quantify towards cost reduction or revenue-generating from a business mind perspective. And they don't have the appetite to invest in it. And what happens is you hobble along for another five to seven years until that system hits obsolescence. And you're going to have to have that uncomfortable conversation where they're like, "What happened? I invested in it five, seven years ago." And you're like, "That's the whole point." You invested in it five to seven years ago. I told my CEO I'm like, "Razor, do you have the appetite to give me two to 3 million every couple of years just to keep the platform healthy?" You got to do the help for the application and the staff of, that's not a one-time cost as part of the implementation.

Marina Cortazzo (24:53):

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That's part of the operation and maintenance costs that we could kind of amortize over a couple of years, but I'm going to need that check regularly. And I don't really want to be coming to you. Like it's a surprise every few years. If we don't have an appetite, if we're not looking to lead with technology first, if we're looking to be a business company with a strong stable technology that has some proprietary aspects, the organization I build and maintain and run, looks a lot different buy versus build. So those are the questions that I ask. And that's how I pick who are we as a company? Do we want to lead technology? Do you have the wallet and the appetite to continually invest? If the answer is no, then let's pick something that is going to work for the business, meet our IT needs to be able to support you and any changes so we can pivot quickly to adjust any business needs. And that's the approach I take. And that's honestly the approach we're going through right now.

Alison Dean (25:53):

All right. What are some of the greatest lessons that you've learned from working in IT?

Marina Cortazzo (25:58):

I learned that process is incredibly important. And I'm not a process person where it's a heavy process like Six Sigma. I want a green belt, heavy process. But I think the repetitive process that is easy for anybody to understand, that is easy to look up and easy to remember, that allows us to be able to do something over and over and be able to onboard new people on how to do it, is critical. So I always have a test for my team and I think they find it funny, but it actually works. It's when it comes down to processes. How quickly can I read it and repeat back to you what you have written? If I could do that and explain to you very confidently, what that process is, who owns it? When do I perform it? When do I escalate? How do I do things through it? What happens when I make an exception?

Marina Cortazzo (26:49):

If I could quickly read it and it sticks with me, it resonates and I could echo it back then you've done a great job of simplifying a process that I can now remember, which means everybody else can remember too. And that to me is critical because I've worked in companies and I am guilty of it, where you build these incredible standard operating procedures, put them in a library, the new hire sports to read them their first two weeks because we're trying to figure out what to do with them. And then nobody remembers or does what is in that process. Everybody goes with, "But that's not how we do it today." So I'm like, if we keep it brief, if we keep it simple, if we keep it to something that we can easily all remember, we'll make sure it's always up to date and we'll make sure everybody knows how to do it. And that to me is one of the biggest lessons I learned is that process helps people and really helps set expectations too, because I can't hold anybody accountable if I'm not out like this is what it should look like.

Alison Dean (27:45):

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I'm going to keep nodding, because I agree. So given the velocity that technology changes, what recent projects have you learned the most new things, and what are those new learnings?

Marina Cortazzo (27:57):

I think there's been a ton of things that I've learned. I think what happens is that technology just changes so fast and I will tell you, I spent a good chunk of my time where people mention something and God bless Google because I'm like, let me learn about it, let me look about it. Things that I learned that I did not know, which I found unique is FinTech because I started my background in FinTech. It was really very heavy, it was very processory. They were really behind in certain areas when it came to innovation, when it came to transactional data, you could have beat a bank. You deposited a check, boom, it is. And it's there, you see it, you get the text, it's on your statement it's instantaneous. When it comes to transactional data, it's really quick. But when it came to the tech stack that they used, the speed of how fast they were behind retail or other consumer-facing technology was so slow.

Marina Cortazzo (28:56):

And I would say over the recent projects that I've learned, the gap has gotten much smaller and the players of more financial startups are really picking up. And that was something I didn't really realize, is normally there were a lot of big major players and the smaller FinTechs would kind of pop up and then just disappear. And now some of them are really small, but so powerful. They're giving a run for the money for some of the more established, bigger companies doubt there. I was surprised. And through this whole vetting of five versus build project that I'm working on, I really learned that these FinTech companies are really picking up and are more modern and are using modern architecture and have the capability to do so much more consumer-facing. And it could be just personal learning because I've skipped around so many industries, but I was pretty impressed because I was like, "Wow, you guys have come such a long way. I'm glad I'm back in FinTech because you guys are exciting again."

Alison Dean (29:56):

You're like, "Let's hope you've changed in all this time I've been away."

Marina Cortazzo (30:00):

Really, yeah.

Alison Dean (30:01):

Okay. So Rachel Francine, who's the CEO and co-founder of Musical Health Technologies. She was recently on the podcast and she has this question for you. "Many companies will install ahead of innovation, but it often is for show. And many times the departments are not funded or staffed, or given the power to actually commercialize the innovations they create. As someone who has headed up innovation

at many companies, how do you ensure that those departments are not for show and have actual power and influence in the organization?"

Marina Cortazzo (30:38):

That's a great question. And she's so spot on. It is true. It's usually for show, they slap a department name technology innovations and they move a couple of people into that department. And those people just try to figure out what to do, because they are underfunded. They're not really given a clear strategy. There's no direction. And then there's just this group of guys that are in this department that are radarless. And then they end up just working and being actually absorbed when you need extra bodies on other things because they are technically savvy. You start using them as architects. And so I really am turned off by companies that say they have an innovation department. What I like to do as head of technology is always make it that innovation is everybody's business. I don't care where it comes from.

Marina Cortazzo (31:27):

And innovation could be from a process and efficiency to consumer-facing a completely brand new tech, a new way of using tech that we've never used in that way. And I'm very fortunate that I worked in so many different industries that I could take tech that is pretty standard and let's say hospitality or beauty and bring it into FinTech where you would never even think about using stuff like that for your business because there are such complete industries apart. And so to me, innovation is something that should be part of your company's DNA, not something that is kind of done in a lab because I think after a while that ecosystem becomes very stale. And disconnected from the rest of the company. What is that IT strategy?

Marina Cortazzo (32:09):

And to me, I'm like, what do you do with this innovation group compared to the rest of the company? And how does that all fit into your overarching strategy? I don't have an innovation department. I probably never will, but I make it that it's everybody's job to do it. And I reward and I recognize it regardless of where that idea comes from, whether it's on the business side, whether it's from a temp, an intern or whether it's from a developer, that's working on something that is old school, but has great ideas and we should leverage those.

Alison Dean (32:40):

Mh-mm-hmm. Agree. Are there things that technology should not solve for?

Marina Cortazzo (32:46):

Yes.

Alison Dean (32:48):

That's it. Okay.

Marina Cortazzo (32:48):

I do think there are certain things technology should not solve for, and I don't know how popular it will be, but everybody talks about machine learning and AI and how brilliant it is. And I do think when it comes to repetitive tasks where we can gain efficiencies, speed and eliminate redundancy and free up resources to work on something else, love it. What I'm not for and where technology shouldn't be used is to create the lines where you want somebody to walk through. Building the system for the happy path and using AI, machine learning to take care of the happy path is great. Can AI and machine learning deviate from the exception path? We could, but it depends on how big your wallet is. Because it could be very costly. Take a lot of time. What I see is people want to eliminate management decisions, how they manage the work. Or decisions that you should make that a real person can because based on their experience, based on taking the breadth and depth of a situation. They should be able to evaluate.

Marina Cortazzo (33:51):

And there are certain areas in finance, in medical, even in entertainment that you want that human person to interact. And a great example of an area that you're not going to see IT really touch is HR. Because you can never replace a human person in the HR space. So to me, there are certain things like HR can connect up machine learning to get you onboarded and get all your paperwork done and validate all your papers. But if you're having a personality conflict with your manager or you want a promotion, I can't build that. So that's that space where you want that person to think and be able to lean on experience and be able to ask questions that you can't program. Because it's situational. And to me, that's that one area that I don't think will ever be able to touch.

Alison Dean (34:40):

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

Marina Cortazzo (34:44):

I hope they think of me as a change agent for the better, because most of my roles are to come in and change or move a department or a company in a new direction. I want them to think of me as being very transparent with them as well as the business to make sure that they see that I lead by example. But also as somebody that is a good mentor, my biggest reward honestly, is mentoring the people that work for me or even people that don't work for me that might work with other people that come to me for advice.

Marina Cortazzo (35:15):

I really hope that I am remembered as a servant leader that really helped them on their career path. As kids, we all have that one teacher that we remember, it could be all the way up to college, a professor and in your job, I would love to be one of those bosses that left a really good, positive impression that when

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they're sitting in that CEO or president or SVP chair, they remember that maybe something I did help them get to where they are. So that's kind of how I would love for them to remember me as somebody that helped them on their journey.

Alison Dean (35:50):

That's a beautiful answer. How has your leadership style evolved through the years?

Marina Cortazzo (35:56):

Ooh, as a woman in technology and I'm older than some and most, there wasn't very much of us in there. And all the women that you saw that were in leadership positions were very direct, very harsh, very assertive, and tough. And you thought you needed to emulate those same care characteristics in order to be taken seriously, in order to be promoted and given the additional responsibility or be seen as a leader. And I would try to emulate that, and that strong personality only served me so well for so long. Honestly, it burned a lot of calories because it takes a lot out of you to put on a persona that is bigger than you, that is sterner and not emotional and very business-like and serious. And I learned over the course to change my management style based on the group of people I have.

Marina Cortazzo (36:49):

I know it sounds weird, but I push forward my strengths based on the audience I'm dealing with. I am who I am naturally and I am very transparent and I am a servant leader. My job is to eliminate the obstacles and help set the strategy and support my team. But I also try to make sure that if my team is more timid, if they're quieter, I'm not going to go in screaming and swinging off the chandelier and cracking jokes. I'm going to bring in the quiet Marina. That is gonna be more common. Because that is how they appear and really focus on what the communication style I see resonates with them. And that becomes over time, just my natural state when I'm with them.

Marina Cortazzo (37:35):

And when it comes to my leadership style with managing up, if my management is very focused on results-oriented, come in, give me the quick direct text, then I'm not going to lead with a story about my weekend. I'm going to come in with my metrics, my slides of what I need and get it done. And that's the side they see. So I try to make sure that I push forward or present the part of my personality. So I am authentic that really will help that team feel most comfortable in building that trust and being able to depend on me and being able for me to help guide them to where we need to go as a department.

Alison Dean (38:13):

I love it. What are the most important lessons that you've learned from your mentors?

Marina Cortazzo (38:18):

Well, it ties to that quote, and this is something that resonates with a lot of women I would say that I've come across over my years is when they see a position that they know they could do, they really read through that job requirement, look at those qualifications. And if it says three to five, I'm not like I could maybe say I have 3. I'm like, oh they need five. And so therefore I would always just not put myself out there. I would let the fear of not being qualified hold me back. And I would always try to work on myself because that's something my mentors have always told me, "personal development, you are a project." And that's how I look at myself. I'm a project until the day I die, I need to improve. I need to enhance. I need to learn and evolve.

Marina Cortazzo (39:01):

And so I was always holding myself back and focusing on enhancing my capability. And that's why my career path I've covered every industry because I wanted to say, not only am I technologically well versed, but I could bring to the table technology use in a bunch of other industries that we can leverage, that maybe we might not be thinking. It's that out of box thinking that I was trying to build. And I was going to honestly probably build for another five years until my mentor. And I'm going to give a shout-out to Ron Camp who told me, "You're already there, you are ahead of technology. You already got it. I don't know what you're waiting for. Apply. You are there. I know you could do the job." And that's really what got me out of that ceiling of director to the next level. Because I was literally hovering and going horizontally in that director track.

Marina Cortazzo (39:51):

And how do I break my own personal ceiling? What do I need to do to get ready for that? What do I need to do? What do I need to do to get to that level? And Ron's like, "You're there. What are you waiting on? You got it. You're the only person holding you back. I know you could do the job." He's like, "I'm willing to put my need on the line, go and do it." And Ron just opened my eye.

Marina Cortazzo (40:11):

And the other mentor I have to give a shout-out to is Eric Ivacy. And when I was at a crossroads of do I want to stick with Fortune 500s or go into private equity and do a startup? Again, it needs to be fear and he is like, "What do you got to lose? You want to get a little bit bruised. You want to put boots on the ground? Do you really want to build something from the ground up versus take something that's already been built and establish and transform it or take it to the next level? If you want to build something from scratch, go do it. Don't be afraid. You have nothing to lose. You can always come back." It helped me go from IT to makeup companies, to restaurants and hospitality, to medical scrubs, back to finance because you really gave me that boost. My mentors have been so important to me.

Alison Dean (41:00):

I dig it. What projects are especially interesting to you as you continue in your career?

Marina Cortazzo (41:07):

The customer journey is incredibly important to me. And I love to look at technology and projects that focus on not just the upper funnel to the lower funnel of how do we do the attribution from when we get you from marketing all the way down to conversion, right?

Alison Dean (41:22):

Mh-mm-hmm.

Marina Cortazzo (41:23):

I really love the technology and the ability that we have. The business has always talked about omnichannel, but I try to look at it. I'm like, what if we look at the consumer as an omnichannel? I can get to you from social. I can get to you in-store. I can get to you through partners and other products that you already use that are complimentary and find out what is the most important things to you and how do I make sure that we take those into account and build that loyalty. So looking at a human being as an omnichannel funnel is a kind of taking it and flipping it, it's inverting it. And that's how I look at it. It's like, how do I get to know you so obsessively and sell you? Not just my products, but how do I sell you other people's products too. Not me as my own company, but how do I also then leverage that to compliment? Because that's an extension too.

Alison Dean (42:14):

Powerful.

Marina Cortazzo (42:14):

I look at cross-branded as an opportunity from an omnichannel perspective, I'm the consumer, why couldn't I omnibrand if I cross-brand and then be able to build that brand loyalty. So that in your mind, when you're buying this product, you're also thinking about me and coming back to me, and buying from me.

Alison Dean (42:32):

Great idea. I like it. What future innovations are you excited about and where do you see things progressing?

Marina Cortazzo (42:40):

I mean this whole work from home.

Alison Dean (42:42):

Mh-mm-hmm.

Marina Cortazzo (42:43):

A lot of companies are going 100% work from home and it's great because people are getting their laptops, keyboard, printer, Wi-Fi. Everything's set up from home. We're living on Zoom as we did all through last year. What's next? What are the other levels of technology that we can collaborate? Whether it's a holographic 3D, where me and you are collaborating, and do we need to be on Zoom? Can we do it using a different utility? So I think exploring what are the capabilities and technology for working from home or remote offices, how do we continue to bridge those gaps? What are the technical innovations there? Because I feel like we just tapped into something that's very new on a global scale. So how do you take that global scale and make it completely different? What else can you push through a video meeting or conferencing? What is the next level? How do you use it for consumers? How do you do a consultation with a real estate broker or have them walk you through a house without you leaving your house without holding your iPad? What's the next level of that?

Alison Dean (43:47):

Things tapping into all the senses. So like, when you can smell the person you're talking to.

Marina Cortazzo (43:52):

Absolutely without like, hold on, I need Zoom or lagging and people freezing on it. What's that next level look like? I don't know, but I'm excited. Because I know there's a lot of smart people out there that are going to blow my mind.

Alison Dean (44:05):

And I think it's going to be really interesting when we look back in five years from now and go, "Remember when we were doing it that way?" I'm with you. Okay. I always punctuate with this in which is, can you speak about a breakthrough that you've had recently?

Marina Cortazzo (44:21):

I think my biggest breakthrough is really using my technology platform to make it more accessible for students that are coming from low-income families by really starting programming groups where we could help folks program, especially women. I really am very passionate about women in IT. I feel like the number of women getting into IT is definitely increased, but the ones that are getting through that funnel up the food chain is not as strong as I'd like it to be. I'd like to see more of my peers sitting around the table with me. Especially in technology, there are very few of us. And I've worked in many companies where I am the only woman in a room full of men, at the executive level or it's being the HR woman.

Marina Cortazzo (45:06):

And I'd love to see more women in the tech forum alongside me, especially in the infrastructure side I think that'd be so cool. The breakthrough for me is really working on helping people that are intimidated by technology that think it's very expensive out of their price range. That's something that they don't know how to do because I'm not a programmer. I'm not good at math and really make it accessible to them. Because to me, I think we're not going to get away from more smartphones. Technology's not going to slow down. It's going to become more and more part of our lives.

Marina Cortazzo (45:38):

I mean, we're spending more and more time on our phones than any other time in our history. I mean, people are actually using apps to monitor their screen time to make sure they're not over 10 hours a day, which to me is probably the norm for a lot of people, if not more. And some of the people that are in low-income houses or minorities, just assume that it's for social media or work or whatever and that they can't really use it to develop things, to help them do financial planning for their own futures. To help them with being able to educate their kids or be able to help their kids do homework online because they feel that technology is just on the phone, the TV it's, "Oh, computers are too much for me. Besides looking something up on Google or buying something on Amazon."

Marina Cortazzo (46:22):

I'm showing them that you can probably create a process, create a spreadsheet with macros. It's not that hard, organize your documents in there, or be able to learn how to do stuff. And it that you can actually go get employment and build a future and maybe consider it as an option if you weren't thinking of it in the past. Those are things that really has been a breakthrough for me.

Alison Dean (46:45):

I love that. Is there anything else you wanna leave us all with, Marina?

Marina Cortazzo (46:49):

Sure. I guess my parting thoughts I'd love to leave everybody with is: really trust your instincts, lean on your experience without really shutting out all input from other sources, which I think is the hardest thing we could do, but it's something that with practice, we can all get better, including myself. And so that's the advice I leave people is trust your gut, lean on your past experience when you're making decisions, but don't shut off input coming from all sides. I think learning how to trust your gut and really lean on your experience of well, what do you think has worked in the past or can be applied, but also take in the advice that is being provided to you at the in time versus just shutting it all down. When you're looking at technology moving forward, taking on a project, I think going in with that mindset of being open, but also being trusting of what your gut tells you and leaning on your experience really makes it easier for people to collaborate with, because you're more open.

Alison Dean (47:53):

Yes, indeed. Thank you, Marina. That was well said.

Marina Cortazzo (47:58):

Thank you, Alison. Happy to be here.

Alison Dean (48:00):

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