

Workforce Experience by Design

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Courtney Sherman, managing director, Workforce Experience by Design Leader and Co-Founder, Deloitte Consulting LLP

Ramondy Thermidor, senior director, Department of Neurology, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Burt Rea: Welcome to the Capital H podcast, where we explore the latest trends and developments to make work better for humans and humans better at work. I'm your host, Burt Rea, leader of Deloitte Consulting's US Culture Transformation offering and host of our Human Capital HR Executives Dbriefs series.

If you're among the 50+ percent of the workforce considering a career change, you know how much the experience you have at work matters every day.

If you are among the leaders of organizations across industries charged with navigating this massive workforce disruption, you know that many of the

issues driving workers to consider walking away from their employers predated the pandemic.

Today, nearly every organization, irrespective of industry, is grappling with how to transform the experiences their workers have every day.

Employers who are winning in today's hypercompetitive market deeply understand their workers, articulate who they are, declare what they stand for as employers, and then live up to those expectations.

In this episode, we'll be hearing from Deloitte's Colleen Bordeaux and Courtney Sherman, joined by Ramondy Thermidor from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center on using human-centered design thinking that places the worker at the center.

Colleen, over to you!

Colleen Bordeaux: Hi, everyone. Welcome to the Capital H Podcast. My name is Colleen Bordeaux. I am a Los Angeles-based senior manager in our Human Capital practice and do all of my work at the intersection of human capital and customer and marketing, where we are bringing what has worked for decades, transforming customer experiences to the workforce experience space. I am here with my colleague, Courtney Sherman, who co-founded and leads our Workforce Experience by Design practice with me, and Ramondy Thermidor, who is a leader at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, to talk about her experiences leading with empathy in a time of crisis, the challenges she's faced in navigating the shift to hybrid work models, and the lessons she's learned along the way that have helped to improve the experience of her staff, and that you all can learn from and apply to your teams. And I'd love for Courtney and Ramondy to introduce themselves. Courtney, do you want to go first?

Courtney Sherman: Fantastic, thanks, Colleen. Courtney Sherman, I am a New York-based managing director and lead Deloitte's Applied Design offering with our innovation practice, focusing on life sciences and healthcare. I have focused on human-centered design for my career, where I bring the user to the forefront of organizations' initiatives and develop solutions that are mutually beneficial to both the end user and the business. And my work encompasses developing

solutions that cross over physical, digital, innovation strategy, customer experiences, concepts and building capabilities. And I know we're really excited to have Ramondy with us here today. So, Ramondy, please take a moment to introduce yourself.

Ramondy Thermidor: Thank you so much, Courtney and Colleen. It is an absolute pleasure to be here with you. My name is Ramondy Thermidor. I am the head of operations for the Department of Neurology, where I lead a wonderful team of close to 300 people, clinical and nonclinical staff.

Colleen: Ramondy, one of the reasons Courtney and I wanted to invite you on the podcast today is because of the focus that we take in our Workforce Experience by Design practice, using empathy to solve human problems. And you are somebody who has modeled what empathetic leadership looks like, I'm using air quotes, before it was cool. So, our first question for you is, in your experience, what does leading with empathy really mean? And second part to that question is, when you think about leading with empathy, who modeled that leadership behavior for you, where'd you learn that from? And how has it helped you in your leadership journey?

Ramondy: I think leading with empathy means seeing the person on a human level, understanding someone else's need, being relatable, and appreciating that everyone's life experience is different. For me, I'm an orphan, I'm an immigrant. So, many people have been leaders, I guess, in my life, even if they didn't necessarily have a title. I can think of some key folks who really made me feel seen, valued, cared for, and loved. I try to model the same behavior and, I could go on, I have a list of folks who were instrumental but didn't have a leadership title, per se. And then, in my career, our current physician in chief was my partner in the Department of Neurology for a few years.

I don't think I was the perfect administrator candidate, but she saw that I had heart

and that I cared about people. And that meant a lot to me because there were more qualified, more experienced people. However, she always says to hire real people, people who actually care about their work but also about the folks, because without the people it's just work.

Colleen: How have you taken those examples into your own leadership journey?

Ramondy: I try to put myself in other people's shoes. It's a fine balance, because you have to also not get too caught up in the person's story that it doesn't meet your business goals and objectives. So, it's balancing both needs, making sure that you understand your employees' needs, your team's needs. I can think of several examples where I put myself out there for some of my team members to make sure they were okay, and as a result they ended up really producing and shining.

There are some failures there as well, where I saw the potential in a couple of people, but only I saw it, and it was hard to try to hold the mirror and show them what I saw. We still want to make sure people can show up for our patients, and if they are not okay, then they really can't show up for our patients in a meaningful way. Whether it's someone who is answering the phone, patient facing in clinic, or an actual clinician, it matters that they feel valued and they appreciate what they do, so that our patients get the best experience.

Courtney: That's really some great examples. Thank you for sharing those. Over the past two years, we are certainly seeing empathy, authenticity, vulnerability becoming not only accepted, but even expected. And many leaders are now talking about the importance of these factors and these characteristics. But they're struggling to model it in their day-to-day behaviors, norms, ways of working. What advice would you have for these leaders who are trying to show up with greater authenticity and with greater empathy in today's work environment?

Ramondy: I think now more than ever we have to be intentional as leaders, and we have to be present. And by that I mean that, whether it's virtual or in person, you are really present and you are mindful of your impact. I always think about intent versus impact. We may have the best intentions, but how someone experiences us is very, very different. So, how do we make sure we show up as our best selves.

It's really being intentional and finding my best self and doing a lot of self-reflection. My team and I do this mirror exercise. We would pass the mirror around when we were in person and really reflect about a missed opportunity, a failure, something we could have improved upon. It's really a self or ongoing journey, I would say, seeking coaching. I have two (laughs), right now, three different coaches, actually, to help me identify my own blind spots, to challenge my thinking. And to help me improve. I would also say, check your agenda, check your own bias.

I'm part of a panel, and I was interviewing for candidates recently, and one candidate showed up on Zoom and, I don't know, automatically there was something uneasy. And I was like "Why am I feeling like this?" And toward the end of the interview, I'm like, "Oh my god, we need this candidate." But I had to stop and ask myself, why is it that I had this reaction to this person? And funny enough, others had a similar reaction to him.

But how you check your own biases is really coming together as a group and having the discussion and pushing back on, well, why? Why did you feel like that? What did this person say to trigger that emotion or that feeling? And when we ask the questions, we're able to get to the answers. And sometimes it's not what we want, but at least we are able to do the deep dive and do the work.

I think being a leader, you have to practice what you preach, check your own biases, because we all have them, and also have

people around you to help you identify those blind spots.

Courtney: Love that response, Ramondy. Authenticity is often misconstrued as, "This is just the way I am, so deal with it." I think there's this perception that that's what it is. When in reality, I think this idea, a lot of what you were talking about was pointing to, you know, we all have things that we have to work on.

There's this element of, how do you show up with your best character, those people strengths, and also the self-awareness of the scratchy parts of you that you have to work on in order to be a good colleague, a good leader, a good human being in any of the communities where you operate, which I think is a really important frame for people to keep in mind.

Ramondy: Colleen, to add to that, I think it's so critical to pour into yourself as a leader. Because we've all heard about burn-out, especially in a clinical space. As a leader, we all struggle with this, especially over the past couple of years. What are we doing to make sure we are able to show up as our best selves and put your own mask on first before you can help others. It is critical that you take time off, that you set some boundaries as well, and you recharge.

At work, I was telling my team to do this, to take time off to take care of themselves. And I was not practicing what I was preaching to them and encouraging them to do. And recently, I actually took time off and disconnected, and I got feedback from them that, "Oh my god, you didn't answer any emails. You really took off." It created this space and gave them permission to also do the same thing. And now, we have recently implemented an email policy where you cannot send emails past a certain time.

It's great that you think about this (laughs) late at night. However, delay sending, or send it to yourself, and there's a fee. We have this system in place where you're

going to have to buy the team coffee or lunch, or do something to then make up for the fact that you sent this late email. And it is working.

Courtney: I also like the small, tactical things as well as some of it can be really big. Being authentic, people bringing that side of them, and feeling comfortable. But then sometimes, it's small, little things and tweaks. I quite like that I'm hearing a balance there.

Colleen: Something that you were saying too on that topic of taking care of yourself, and everyone's talking about well-being and burn-out, and how that is translating to the experience that managers and leaders are having, especially. There's this tension between individual agency and the system that you work in. So you may desire or see things that you need to do to take care of yourself but work in a system that isn't modeling that.

The ability to think about setting some of those boundaries, establishing some of those rule sets and permission space for the team I think is hard to do but kind of necessary. And I love that tactic that you recommended, which frankly, I think every organization could (laughs) benefit from.

So I think that's a good segue to one of the greatest challenges that so many leaders are struggling with right now is navigating this shift to hybrid work. And figuring out how to empathize with and support their workers who are juggling new demands at work and at home. And I'm hoping that you can share some of the roadblocks that you've encountered navigating that shift, and how you overcame them.

Ramondy: One way I could look at it is that, my team went through the Great Resignation also (laughs) before it was a thing, a few years back. And we did a lot of work to listen to the pain points.

It was a multidisciplinary team, very collaborative effort. And it basically created

the framework for the administrative support staff, not for the clinical team, for us to be able to send our teams home working safely. It identified the on-site need, as opposed to things that could be done remotely. And it was an opportune time, because I'd say 65% of the team was new at the time of the pandemic. Not to say that it wasn't without its challenges. Although we had a framework, we had to make it work.

Again, giving the team permission to be themselves. I remember, in the height of the pandemic, being on a Zoom call. My dog jumped on my lap, and I'm like, "Hey, this is Scott everyone." Meet my husband, my son. He plays so many roles in my life. And then I started seeing people getting on camera. And I said, "I'd love to see where you are. It's okay. This is where we are and we're working. If you want to be on camera, it's okay." Because you know, people would put in the chat, "I have my child," or "I have my pet." And here I was, having a meeting with the team with frontline staff with my dog on the couch. And it was yet another opportunity, this is new to all of us, and the work is still going. Think we all got to see other peoples' homes, their children, meet their family members. And it was what was needed at the time. We needed that bonding. We needed that community. We needed to make sure people felt connected. I think we were able to be successful because we were still engaged.

And we were learning, and iterating, and making sure that the team understood that. Tomorrow, what we knew today may evolve and change tomorrow. And I think by being transparent with them that we don't have the answers, which is really, really tough for us as leaders, because we want to be the ones with all of the answers, however, that's not always the case.

Courtney: That's some really great examples around empathy and authenticity. I'd love you to share even a

little more perhaps about when you've needed to be vulnerable as a leader. How did you show up?

Ramondy: That's a great question. You don't lead with emotion, but to recognize that it's okay to have feelings and emotions, and the role that they play.

I guess, after the George Floyd murder, we had a series of meetings. Again, lots of changes in the institution and my department. I did get some feedback from frontline staff that they were disappointed that as a woman of color, as a Black woman, I had not acknowledged what had transpired. And that I had not checked in to see how everyone was doing. And that it was business as usual.

I had to take the feedback and reflect on it and ask myself, did I even have permission to do that? I am a big advocate of EDI. Even before it was a thing, I co-started a few employee resource groups at MSK, very involved in all of those efforts. I thought I was known for that and that's what I stood for and represented to my team. However, because I am a Black woman, the expectation was that I would at least acknowledge it, in an open forum, and speak to them about it. I was very much distraught at what occurred. I think the entire nation was.

However, corporate and social responsibility was not yet a thing, where it's okay for you during a meeting to acknowledge. I think on one-on-ones with some of my staff, you always say, "Hey, how are you? How is this impacting you?" Because this was not the first. This was just the first that was publicized. But this is one of many, and that was also some of the feedback that we received that people would come in with all of these feelings, emotions, and fears and still didn't feel like they could be their authentic selves or they could even bring these types of things into the workplace. And as a leader, I didn't

think we could, given where I work and where many people don't look like me in leadership. We've made a lot of strides and there's still a little room for growth in this area. But it was very challenging for me to accept that feedback at first.

And then I had to subsequently meet with the team and address it and talk to them about my career journey, my own challenges in this space as a Black woman, ongoing challenges as well.

There are lot of efforts around EDI, but it feels like an academic exercise at times, and it's disconnected from the realities of what's happening. We have to really make sure as leaders our goals, our D&I goals really reflect what we're doing and that we're keeping the pulse and it's not just the movement of the moment.

Colleen: Ramondy, I love that whole overview. And I remember you telling me that in that moment, you were going through kind of three things at once. On a very deeply personal note experiencing the pain and the fear yourself. That experience of your team looking to you to show up in a different way, a way that you had not necessarily felt the permission space to do before. And you shared the third, which was having to take the personal and professional risk of challenging your own leadership in that moment. I'd love for you to expand on that piece of the story because I think it was really powerful.

Ramondy: It was really difficult for me to accept that I wasn't doing enough for my team. But also, personally to, one, admit my mistake to them, that I was really sorry. I had to reflect and I was very honest with them that I took offense to it at first because I wonder if I wasn't a woman of color would there be the same expectation of the leader of that area. And also that I always felt like I tried to diversify my area. I think we look like the UN. And that is intentional.

And not just diversity as far as race, but of experiences, thoughts, backgrounds, gender, everything. I hope we get to the point where it's not about race but that I'm just a good person, a decent human being and that shows up or how I show up reflects that. However, what was needed in that space in time was for me to be the Black leader, and it's representation that matters. You can't be what you don't see.

And my team had to see me take a stand, acknowledge a lot of the things that could be improved upon and were clear opportunities for us as an institution, but also what could I do at the local level. And I did meet with people one-on-one just to make sure I allowed for the space, for the discussion, "How are you feeling today? What are your fears?" And at that point, it was very personal and people were grieving and mourning and I had to be there. The institution did have a lot of listening sessions. I'd say we still have a lot of ongoing efforts to date. However, I want to make sure that it is at the forefront of everything that we do and not just again something of the moment, but then we forget about it and we lose momentum.

Colleen: That's great, perspective. And I think you were saying EDI is the term you use at MSK.

Ramondy: It's interchangeable. So, equity, diversity, and inclusion or it's diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Courtney: Ramondy, hearing you talk about that, unfortunately, at times, the EDI or DEI exercises become academic. Obviously, we want to see a shift away from it being academic to really living it. And oftentimes that comes through with the empathy, the vulnerability, the authenticity we've been talking about. Is there an example that you can give that could bring that to life for us?

Ramondy: I can think of a couple of examples. One in particular is someone I

care so much about, she's one of my White moms. I have several adopted moms. And she really cares about diversity and inclusion. She's intentional about knowing the minority leaders in the institution, to build relationships with them or to help create opportunities. Very involved in areas that are mostly populated by underserved communities. Always makes sure that she is seen in certain meetings when it comes to that population to show her commitment.

It's not a check the box exercise, it's real. I believe she understands that she can't be everything to everyone but tries to connect folks to make sure that you don't feel like you are the only one. Throughout my career, I think her leadership really stands out in this space as someone who saw the disparities and tried to make a difference.

And I'm telling you about sort of the visible impact, but there are so many things that she has influenced behind the scenes that she has created so many opportunities for minority leaders that would not have existed without her presence, without her leadership, and without her orchestration. And that, I think, is when it's not about an academic exercise or to say that, "We stand with you. We appreciate," but they are real efforts.

Colleen: I love that. And I think that kind of model that every leader can learn from and something that you've shared in the past, Ramondy, that I also think kind of ties into that example you gave is really becoming more aware.

You talked about it in both the personal and professional sense, in the communities where I hang out, does everybody look like me, talk like me, act like me, reflect my background socioeconomic status and holding yourself accountable to stepping outside of your own box and narrow view of the world to intentionally go out and build relationships with the people that are surrounding you day-in day-out that are nothing like you.

I think you've obviously modeled that in your career to date. I love how you said (laughs) your teams look like the UN. Any other takeaways when you think about somebody taking the time to listen in and really thinking about how they're showing up as a leader, and wanting to be more empathetic, authentic, vulnerable. Any other takeaways or advice you would want to give before we close out today?

Ramondy: I would say to really push yourself out of your comfort zone. If you are really comfortable, there's a problem. And for me, it's putting myself outside of just a healthcare setting. Getting involved with people in different industries, understanding where there are some synergies where I can learn from.

And to your point, Colleen, making sure I have done a lot of EDI work and focusing on promoting and creating equity for people who look like me. And in addition to that, I am pushing myself so that my friends actually are diverse, and understanding their journeys as well. I'm actually taking a flight to Paris to meet with a women's group from a certificate program that I did at Yale a couple of years ago. And I had to reflect on my own biases and my own insecurities.

When I entered that group, oh my God, the women are powerhouses. And I felt like, "Oh God, how did I get here? And why am I here in this space with these powerful, wonderful, brilliant women?" And I became insecure and I did not interact. I didn't show up as my best self. So automatically I felt like I wasn't good enough, I didn't have the accolades or the pedigree.

And one of them had to remind me that I was still in the same room. And I worked hard to be in that space. And I have to say that she kept reaching out to me because I did disconnect and I said, "Ah, this is not for me. How could I add value to this team?"

And during the pandemic, they would have these Zoom brunches. Lynn, shout-out to

Lynn. She would reach out and say, "Will you be joining? It would be nice if you could join." I had a candid conversation with them as well around the George murder, George Floyd murder, excuse me.

And I told them, I didn't feel like I belonged. I was one of the few and just my experiences were nothing like theirs. However, I also had a unique story and unique perspective and I added value. So, it's okay to be uncomfortable. It's okay. And not all of our journeys look alike. We don't have the same educational background, the same upbringing, you name it.

Colleen: I think that fear thing that Courtney and I spent a lot of time talking about this too, fear as a limitation on empathy. The example you gave of really feeling out of place like you don't belong. And that, I don't check the boxes of this particular mold. And I think there's this lens on fear that is limiting empathy in the workplace and limiting the experience of inclusion and belonging at work.

And I think it's coming to life through a skill lens. The World Economic Forum published this report a few years ago on the skills of the future and cultural and cultural fluency is one of those skills. And I think that a great marker of a need to develop that skill is a discomfort engaging with others who do not reflect your experience. And a discomfort of asking questions, opening the floor and learning about somebody else's experience and that challenge of cultivating curiosity and empathizing in the sense of, I want to better understand where you're coming from and learn about you.

Courtney: I've seen it in other places though, where someone is uncomfortable and then therefore isn't open and can't hear the other side. And team performance goes down because there's not an open dialogue. So I think it's, to your point, be uncomfortable, be open with your uncomfortableness and have that two-way dialogue.

Colleen: Courtney, one last thing that I think is so important and connected to everything we talk about around using empathy in the workforce experience space is this willingness to challenge our logic bias. We tend to show up at work in these very myopic ways and over-index on logic at the expense of the willingness to get a little bit messy and invite emotion and human feeling. And one of the things that Courtney taught me as we were working together is how much emotions matter, that it underpins almost everything about how we behave.

Courtney: First of all, thank you so much for your time, for your insights and for sharing your wisdom with others. Thank you even more so for being a wonderful leader for those around you.

And here are some of the things that I heard you say. Show up as your best self, but also be aware when you're not your best self and set your boundaries, take your time to make sure that you're in the place to be that leader, to be that colleague. I loved some of your stories about who you've surrounded yourself with, looking for leaders that are role models that can help you on your journey, as well as then you are playing that role for others.

And you spoke a bit about the importance of allyship and modeling that behavior, and opening doors for one another. And then lastly, on the individual side of putting yourself in people's shoes, we've used the word empathy a lot here. Balancing the heart and head. Considering the context of others. To Colleen's point, considering your biases, help raise your own awareness and pushing yourself to learn.

And then when you're putting your team together, that multidisciplinary approach that you mentioned. So once you have all of that grounding, the understanding of one another to solve the problems and often using a human-centered design approach, which, we talk about in the Workforce

Experience Design. So bringing all those things together to co-create and solve together. Thank you again so much for your time and for the wisdom you've shared.

Ramondy: Thank you, Courtney and Colleen. And I'll add that all leaders in our own right we do not the title to be a leader. It's how we lead versus whether you have a fancy title, accolades, we see leadership model in small ways and in big ways.

Courtney: And there's a stat on that as well, Ramondy, around just the rapid generational change, rapid push to hybrid work that we know that the ability to lead others and influence their behavior no longer follows the rules of hierarchy. Just because you have a title doesn't mean that people are going to do what you say. And so this capability that we've been talking about all along is the key to how you become a more effective and influential leader and is more important, I think, in this environment than ever. Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us. This was wonderful to have a chance to just get your perspectives.

Burt Rea: As organizations act to retain and attract talent today, it's clear that there's also an exciting opportunity to shift the way we think about the worker experience.

To elevate the human experience, we start with what we all have in common: being human. By placing the worker at the center and designing experiences that resonate with the workforce, organizations can win in the market for talent.


A big thanks to our guests, Colleen Bordeaux, Courtney Sherman, and Ramondy Thermidor.

Thanks for listening, and stayed tuned for our next episode!



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