

How the Pandemic is Redefining the Future of Your Organizati...

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SPEAKERS

Renee McGowan, Ginny Bianco-Mathis, Mitch Simon

M Mitch Simon 00:10
Welcome to another episode of team anywhere where CEOs, leaders and experts at building teams, companies, organizations, and amazing cultures share how to lead from anywhere in the world.

G Ginny Bianco-Mathis 00:25
I'm your co host on the East Coast chicken Bianca Mathis,

M Mitch Simon 00:28
and I'm your co host on the West Coast. Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us team anywhere. Hello, and welcome to another episode of team anywhere. I'm Mitch Simon, your co host on the West Coast of the United States and on the East Coast of the United States. We have Dr. Virginia, Bianco maphis, my amazing co hosts and on the I don't know what coast is today's podcast guest, Renee McGowan. We'll find out where she is later. Let me just tell you a little bit about Rene. Rene magallon is the president of Asia, Middle East and Africa. I'll give you a little bit of hint about where she might be at Mercer Mercer is a human resources consulting firm that helps organizations use the power of their people to enhance business success a little bit about Rene.

R

Renee McGowan 02:47

That's also what she does she, like I feel so tiny compared to this woman. I know, I know. Not at all. It's a pleasure to be here. And thank you for having me. And I love that we're able to do this, you know, really spanning a large part of the world. So to answer your question, I am based in Hong Kong. I'm not really sure what coast either but certainly the South China Sea. That's, that's there. And it's a pleasure to be here. And, you know, to be able to share a little bit about what Mercer does, how we're working and you know, my own experience across teams. So you gave a little bit of the background, I grew up in suburban Melbourne, in Australia. And nothing remarkable there. But just a family that valued hard work, and they they valued education as well. So that was a focus all the way through. I didn't work in a gas station of 14, I'll clarify that that was certainly a little bit later to pay my way through college. But that was how we get through college. After there I, you know, while being in suburban melt wouldn't they're still very multicultural. So I was fascinated with the world from an early age, I think. And so, in high school, I took part in an international exchange program and couldn't afford to go to the lovely places in Europe or any of those types of things, but could afford to go to our nearest neighbor, which was Indonesia. So I went to live in Indonesia for a year to go to high school there. which is how I learned Indonesian because it was a necessity. It was literally landing on one day going to school the next day and having to start to learn to count 123 or Saturday will teager as a teenager, yes, as a teenage, as a as a teenager. But you know, a life changing experience, one that fueled a love of Asia. So I spent a lot of years working then in Indonesia and in Singapore. And then with mersa I've been really privileged to have opportunities to work across London, Sydney, Melbourne. Most recently, I've been in New York for a few years doing a global role. And then I've just moved here to Hong Kong. Two years ago, and, you know, as we know, the last couple of years have been a bit of a roller coaster from for everybody. And that's been the same for me here in Hong Kong.

M

Mitch Simon 05:09

Well, thank you. Okay, so she's in Hong Kong. She's been she's livid every place on the planet. Except That's correct. He's avoided the west coast of California. I don't know why. Not yet. Okay. Not Yeah, not Yeah, just I'm not taking it personally. Okay, so, obviously, you were in Asia, you were navigating your company through the pandemic before any of us were. So what was your personal experience, being in Asia when the pandemic hit? Yeah,

R

Renee McGowan 05:41

it was, I mean, fascinating, obviously, and, and such an interesting experience to look through personally as a leader. So the pandemic hit here in early January. So I sort of got

back from, you know, Christmas vacation holidays. And we landed back in Hong Kong with a family and we started to notice, you know, signs everywhere about protecting against the pneumonia type virus, that it was called, then in Hong Kong. And, you know, literally, within a couple of weeks, schools have closed or, in fact, they never opened after the Christmas holidays. So you know, we got a taste of it very early there in January. And so our immediate reaction was, obviously to look at colleague safety. You know, we've got a large contingent of our workforce who was based in mainland China, which was heavily affected at the time we stood, we had Hong Kong heavily affected, and then we started to see pockets of Asia, also start to get exposed to the virus. Asia is in a unique position, I think, in that they've battled these types of viruses, albeit not on this scale before. So they've got experience with SARS, and with h1 in one and these various types of things that are really caused havoc in society. So I think that was an advantage in that people did respond, and they did take it very seriously. From day one, there was no this will wait and see or anything, you know, we've worn masks since January 2020. In without exception, every time you move outside of your home, you you wear a mask. So all of those things came into play very quickly. But what we had to do from a business perspective was really look at safety first, you know, how are we protecting our colleagues? What was our practices around working? Where did what did we want them to do, we then had to move really quickly to a client needs because of course, we work in a business where we provide advice to organisations about their employees, we provide benefit plans, we provide a lot of the health care plans that are in place. So of course, our clients needed advice immediately there as well. We then move that to the community as well, in that we didn't want to start with our clients. So as we're implementing telemedicine and everything in 2020, January 2020, in China, we were making that available for local communities as well, just to try and make a community contribution to, you know, the challenge that was there. And then we had to put in place the business controls. So, you know, really starting to make that assessment of is this going to be short lived? We don't know, what do we do? Well, you know, we don't know we've got no visibility or whatsoever. So we put in place very strict business controls all the normal ones, if you like, around reducing expenses, and all of these types of things when in place in in January. So that was how we responded when it was just Asia. And of course, the rest of the world kind of knew about it a little bit. And they checked in to say how's everything going and everything was going okay, but then of course, by March, a couple of months later, it became the global pandemic. And then the rest of the world suddenly turned to Asia as well to say, Hey, what do we do here? So we kind of had to go through it all over again to try and and, you know, help colleagues and clients in other parts of the world navigate the uncertainty also.



Mitch Simon 08:59

Well, thank you, you know, it's interesting, a different because you guys had been through it before. Sounds like you took it very seriously. And yeah, a little bit different on this side of the pond. Okay, great. Now, as a result of the pandemic, many organizations are saying that the shift to hybrid or remote work will be permanent, in helping 10s of 1000s of companies make this transition globally. What do you see? Are some of the top challenges they're facing? And then how are they overcoming these challenges? And I just want to get your, your, your viewpoint is is this a permanent thing?

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Renee McGowan 09:39

Should we treat it as a permanent thing? what's what's your opinion on that? Yeah, um, I mean, it's been fascinating to experience early on from early on as well. So, you know, as I said, it was a pet. It was at that point, an epidemic in Asia became a global pandemic. You know, in March, everybody switched. To working from home, etc, it was the hugest, the most significant shift we've ever seen, of, you know, changing our work behavior literally overnight. And, you know, quite clear that even if we'd spent five or 10 years planning it, most organizations would say that would have been impossible to do what we actually did, but but everybody did it. Then sort of watched by about June, you know, many organizations started to make the call of this is the future, you know, offices won't exist, we won't need office footprints, everybody will be work from home and sort of sitting here. And of course, you know, in Asia, we're six months into working from home at this stage, and just hold that hold that a little bit longer that thought, because there's actually ramifications of doing it, and you start to see some cracks in there. And, of course, now we're a long way into the pandemic, and we're seeing organizations start to change their approach of, you know, what is hybrid to them, what is remote working, and so on. So, you know, that's been very interesting to watch, I think the reality is that we will not ever go back to working the way that we did in the past, have everybody moved one location to work at the same time, and to do it in a supervised, you know, time observation, type manner. But I think it's unlikely that we will have a world where people don't come together, either, where people only see it via zoom. So I think it's about the hybrid bit and enabling flexibility. And for me, it's what we're talking with companies and what we're spending, it's less about putting in place rules for how you work, you know, do you work two days a week in the office, or three days a week? How do you monitor that? How do you, you need that guidance, and that will vary by business. But you also need to think about, you know, how you want your colleagues to work and interact? You know, do we want them to be all working at the same time? What types of you know, communications will be used? How do we remove things that are time wasting and spend time on things that are valuable? And how do we make sure that we're getting all of the richness that comes with people coming together? So that what we're working with clients on is, you know, what level of flexibility is possible in your business? And you have to think about

that on a business level, you know, product engineering roles, for example, could be done remotely, can be done remotely, many of them have been doing it. But, you know, is it optimal for collaboration, for creativity, for sitting down and reviewing blueprints, prototypes, etc. So after you know what flexibility is possible, then you look at what flexibility is actually desirable? You know, what is your business? And how much do you actually think people do need to come together versus working on their own? And then the third is what flexibility is sustainable? And they that's what you need to think about is, what's the role of the office? What technology have you got that's enabling it? Do you ride through 2g, you have the right job descriptions of the right performance management descriptions, etc, so that people are going to be successful in work and their roles?

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Mitch Simon 13:16

Do you have any examples? You know, because we're so far away from from Asia? Do you have some examples of how companies are providing this flexibility and how they're, let's say, answering the myriad of questions that their employees have about what what does the future hold?

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Renee McGowan 13:37

Yeah, I mean, I do think that what we're seeing in Asia is probably similar to many other parts of the world. I guess the caveat that I would say is that a lot of the markets here in Asia, you know, if I say, even Japan, China, a large market, they're working from home and flexible working has not been the norm historically. So they've done an even larger cultural shift, if you like, from an organization perspective, because it just wasn't the norm. And then suddenly, it became, you know, mandatory. So I think the impact there on organizations in those cultures is going to be even more profound. Because, you know, if you take Japan, for example, completely hierarchical organizational structure as well premise very much on FaceTime. And, you know, being in the office, all of that needs to change. Wow. So the work that we're doing with companies at the moment sort of spanned three areas. One is around the organizational design. How does your organization need to be structured for the business that you're in? We then moving to actually what are the skills that organizations need? So historically, in organizational design, you'd probably focus more on the job roles, and then the job evaluations, whereas now it's a lot more to what skills are needed in the organized And how do I assess the skills that my employees have? And then build the skills that are required? And we see a lot of folks doing that nature.

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Mitch Simon 15:10

Can I stop you for there? That one because there was a really good article in the Wall Street Journal, I'm sure you read the Wall Street Journal every day. Ongoing,

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Renee McGowan 15:19

I usually do. And I read the New York Times, because New York is still in me. Okay, I'm

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Mitch Simon 15:24

just I'm just imagining that, you know, by the time the Wall Street Journal comes to Hong Kong, it was like, three days ago, you know, Mondays Mondays article was really about skills, right. And it was it was talking about it was funny, the article basically said, you know, now that you're going to be virtual, then if you really want to move up in the organization, you need to get those first you need to make sure you're there when your boss is there. And and then, and then the article just kind of fell apart and said, Well, maybe not maybe actually was a really interesting article, because I don't agree with this. Maybe actually, the skill sets of the future is, you know, you're really going to succeed, if you are really great at both leading and being on a team that is hybrid. And I just thought, yeah, you know, and can you imagine, you know, as we would never have had that in the manual. If you talk about some specific skills like that, one that that we might not be thinking about?

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Renee McGowan 16:29

Yeah, it's a great one. And it's coming up with regards to, you know, assessments of performance and things already at the moment that there's a few pieces of it, you know, to be a good people manager, managing distributed or remote workforces was not really the requirement, it was, you know, happened on occasion, but it wasn't the norm, if you like, whereas now it is. But what we're really focused on now and thinking about is, you know, what will happen as we assess performance and roles there, and what skills are going to make, make an individual successful or appear to be highly successful or key performance talents. So one example there is, if we have large proportions of the workforce that are remote, do digital skills, just jump to the top of the list, and we might be assessing people because their digital skills and their ability to navigate in a remote world are very high. And it may be invisible to us that they're perhaps they're not collaborating with people, or that people skills are not that strong as well. But to that, that point, I didn't read the article, it's going to be a real challenge, I think, for everybody to, you know, up their skills in these key areas of you are going to need to be digital, but you are also going to have to manage a remote workforce. And in many of us that are in global companies, it's not just a remote workforce in your country, as well. It's a remote workforce spread

across the world that you can't interact with, with the frequency that you used to, to be able to jump on a plane, etc. and that changes the dynamics of not just, you know, individual organizational cultures, but business in general and the way you do it.

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Mitch Simon 18:16

Now, you know, what I I'm intrigued by your comment, because, you know, in my experience, what I'm finding is a lot of managers are not creative enough to think that way. What they're doing is they're saying, you know, what, this is the way it used to be. So, this is how this is, as far as I think. So we need to, we need people to be back in the office, as opposed to Well, I don't know about that. Because, you know, there's plenty companies out there that were actually global. They did pretty well. We know that because they're global. And, and, and they, you know, found ways to incorporate different nationalities and different personalities in different cultures, and be remote and get stuff done. And I think of, I think of Nokia, in the heyday, when Nokia had the heyday, when I worked there. I barely worked with with people who spoke English as a first language. And yet we were found out how to make fun of phones, you know, and sold them all over the world. So I'm just wondering, what would be your words of caution or coaching to those managers who are really having trouble being flexible enough to to accept the new landscape and then say, gee, let me start to look at what skill sets I need to think about, as well as you're you're talking about the dichotomy between digital and collaboration. Yeah, and you and the answer is, yeah, you have to have both.

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Ginny Bianco-Mathis 19:51

That's right.

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Renee McGowan 19:52

Yeah. Yeah, you You do have to have both and the other bit and I guess, my, my advice instead What I've learned through my experiences, you have to take stock of all of the ways that work has changed, you know, we spend a lot of time focused on, is it hybrid, or is it remote, what's the office for etc. But leadership styles have changed and won't revert, employee expectations have changed and won't revert. And so you know, what I think about, if you're the type of leader who says we need to get back to the way things were, you simply won't be able to, because there's been too many moving factors there. And probably, if you try to, I would say, the biggest risk factor is that your employee expectations will have moved, and you just won't be able to, you know, create the employee experience, create the energized workforce that you need for your business to have sustainable success.



Ginny Bianco-Mathis 20:54

And so, I haven't worked with a lot of some of your employees at Mercer over the years and hire you hired them, I would suspect that you're doing a lot of work in the measurement, and performance evaluation, all of the leaders and managers now, because of just this discussion we had, it has to be different. And I can see some of them. After about three months of thinking that's going to come back to normal, being scared to death. Look, they're gonna fail until they take on some very new behaviors and skills.



Renee McGowan 21:43

Yeah, and it's it's the suddenness of the change. So yes, you're right, we are, you know, I SVO. I cells looking at what are what are leadership capabilities that are required? And what's the mindset, and we're also advising our clients on that. I think one of the biggest challenges is probably not around the definition of the leadership mindset, it's about the speed of the change. That's there, you know, you've got a large proportion of the workforce that has always worked in this one way. And, you know, we talk about the necessity of agility in business. And we talk about that more with you how you need to flex your your business, your product, set, your customer experience, etc. But actually, we, we, it's required, that leaders will have that level of agility as well, that they're going to be able to, to change to learn to absorb to be uncomfortable as leaders, and to be far more vulnerable as leaders in a world where they just haven't had to do that before.



Ginny Bianco-Mathis 22:45

Exactly. Yeah.



Mitch Simon 22:47

Let me let me as we're, as we're on this topic, you're, you know, you're pointing to all these different competencies. And one of them that we, I think it was our first second third podcast was on empathy. So what we know is that empathy is along with flexibility and agility and vulnerability,



Ginny Bianco-Mathis 23:05

vulnerability, and all the delivery, they already said, Yeah,



Mitch Simon 23:08

empathy is not an ability. But empathy is emerged as a critical leadership skill amid the pandemic. And not surprisingly, women have fared better in navigating their companies through the pandemic. And that's the question I have a white Why is that's what it says women have fared better. I'm just that's what it says. on that. I mean, I know, I know, look, I know that. I know, it's true, just because women have had the biggest Brunt. Because we're not just talking about, we're not talking about work. Women have been, you know, taking care of the kids have taken over the food of taking care of, you know, you know, you just name it, and they've had to work as well. I want to, I would love to get your your opinion, as why have women fared better. And do you see women faring better in this pandemic, due to due to higher levels of empathy? And then ask you finally, why is empathy so important? And how can leaders win with empathy in this shift to flexible working? Yeah.

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Renee McGowan 24:14

Great questions, bit of a minefield, I think. To answer it, honestly, I mean, women faring better that assessment comes more from a societal perspective. And if you look at, you know, on a macro level, and countries where women have been in charge, their response to the pandemic and the impact of the pandemic at a national level, has been determined to get to fared better. The same sort of assessment is happening in organizations, but of course, you know, we're still in the thick of it, if you like, it's not as if we've, we've got years to look at their, um, I think the the issue I mean, empathy has become such an important topic. My view is personally that the pandemic Really just accelerated trends that were in place. topics around such as an empathy of vulnerability purpose in organizations, they were all there before the pandemic, it's just we've put it all on steroids if you like, and the expectations around it has all increased. I mean, very simply, and it's a generalization. But you know, for me, empathy is really about creating an environment where people can thrive, where they feel comfortable, where they feel understood, and where they listened to. And so if you can create that environment, in your workplace, you know, it gives everybody a really great position to be successful from, arguably, women may have been able to do that easier, because as you said earlier, they're juggling a whole variety of different things, you know, it's not that hard to make a leap to to empathy or understanding somebody else's position, because odds are, you're probably in it yourself.

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Mitch Simon 26:00

Yeah, yeah, you're right.

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Renee McGowan 26:04

But I do think that there's, you know, empathy has got a lot of a lot of attention at the moment. And it's absolutely right. Empathy, you know, for me is about listening. And which is really, really important. And I think it's a critical element from a leadership perspective, because getting back to what we were talking about before, unless you can listen to your employees, you're not really understanding how much their experience and their expectations have changed. Probably the next step is, you know, compassion, it's what you do about that, and what environment you you provide to make sure that, you know, you're providing as much equality in the workplace and opportunity in the workplace for everybody, and recognizing some of the challenges that that people are bringing every day.

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Mitch Simon 26:55

Yeah, I just think this, this, I just keep writing down expectations have changed. And when you when you pair that with listening, you know, I think I think expectations have changed. And I think that, because this has happened relatively fast, that I think a lot of employees don't even know what their expectations are now, I don't think they've really, we've really had not had a chance to voice it. I know it on this podcast, we've really promoted these these really transparent, vulnerable, authentic conversations between leaders and owners and employees. For those who are, you know, brave enough to enter into this space, which is, yeah, things have changed. I don't even know what, what my expectations are. But what is interesting, as you know, is to say that, you know, creating an environment where people are understood. And you hear so many leaders saying we're just going back to work, it's it's just, it doesn't make sense. Cuz you're not asking

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Ginny Bianco-Mathis 28:12

that. And on the another layer to put on top of that is big. To your point about some people don't even know what their expectations are. Because things are moving so fast, as Renee said, so they have to answer that question in the moment as they're experienced that Yeah, like it here at home? like do I really want is two days gonna work is three days going to work? I do believe in the organization, and Mercer's consultants are helpful in providing a certain amount of guidance on under what circumstances do you do your best work? Are you a morning person? Are you an afternoon person? What are your family? You know? It's almost like life planning. Yeah. A live planning and, and then I also think, organizations, and I'm sure this is what you all need to grapple with. have to look at what we do need to give you a certain number of guidelines. Right? Or we'll be out of business. So within these guidelines, the empathy and the compassion, but at some point, I'm sorry, this may not work for you. However, here's what we can do. Right? To help you

discover what might so Yeah, wow, it's just

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Renee McGowan 29:45

it's so I mean, then we talk about employee expectations as if, you know, it's a homogenous group as well. But then actually, everybody's got a different employee groups. You know, I've got a few 1000 people Across the part of the world that I'm responsible for, but we have an average age of 36. And then you go to some markets that I'm responsible with China, you got an average age of 27. Now, employee expectations are very different, you know, according to those types of things. So, you know, organizations have to look at their own workforce needs and do their own listening. And then they do have to get their own framework and guidelines, just as you said, Jenny, in that, you know, you've got to be clear on what your business is, not every business can be remote. Not every business can offer all sorts of unlimited flexibility. So you've got to be clear on what your business is, provide those guidelines. And then importantly, you've got to make sure that you've got people that feel empowered and trusted to work within those guidelines, and that you empower and trust them to work in those guidelines as well. Because if you come in, you put those guidelines in place that will have more openness to them, than guidelines might have historically. If you don't trust and then you start micromanaging, then you're trying to apply leadership and management styles of the past to a new environment and

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Ginny Bianco-Mathis 31:10

orderly. Totally, we need a partnership towards constant creating. Now, while it won't be three months from now, and then now we'll be Yeah,

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Mitch Simon 31:22

yeah, I have one. One competency that we haven't mentioned yet, but I bet it's on the tip of your tongue, which is experimentation. Because with with everything changing, and we having no idea what tomorrow will bring, I was talking to Justine, my assistant today, and she said that she dropped her kids off at school today. And she can see that the school is quickly getting ready for sending the kids back home. They're just ready. How do you encourage or build the competency of experimentation? Again, in a in a world where we haven't really had to experiment, before we everything was pretty much a straight, straight path in it, you know, again, recognizing all this great entrepreneurship we've got here and all of our countries. How can you encourage encourage leaders and teams to build that competency of experimentation?

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Renee McGowan 32:19

Yeah. It's a great question. If I had the answers, it would be helping many, many organizations. My perspective, though, is actually comes down to trust. That trusting in your workforce, trusting your leaders, your employees, everybody is the critical component there to letting people find the way in a world of ambiguity and uncertainty. And so you know, that's really challenging to get back to the you know, the earlier conversation, they were asking leaders to be more vulnerable to be more empathetic, etc. But people also need people to lead, you have to make decisions. And yes, out there. So I think, you know, the new leadership style is to make the best decisions that you can based on the knowledge that you have, and recognize that you may actually get it wrong. And you'll call that, or others will call that as well. And so I think you've got to apply that kind of approach to your employees and trust them to do things that work. And if you've got some of those guidelines there, you know, if, depending on what your business is, you know, for Mercer, our businesses, our clients, our clients will come first. And our people are the critical people that deliver to our clients. So we have these guidelines there that you know, will be driven by clients will be focused on working with clients in a way that suits them and asked, like, you have those guidelines there, but you have to trust people to flex. And I think we've proven that we can, like, the way that the world has worked over the last 18 months. I suspect the US may have to, in part to pull back from schooling. You know, I'm in Hong Kong, my kids have been back in and out of school over the last two years, five times. So, you know, they go back for a couple of months, they get pulled out again. But people adapt and you make it work, but you have to trust, you know, the bright people that that you've hired to do some of the things that are right, and to experiment and to sort out what works for them and for your business.

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Mitch Simon 34:36

Great. Yeah, you know, I'm walking away from this podcast with I there's a slide that I show when I do fresh biz, which are all the leadership traits required in it was there was a 2015 and then there was a 2020. And it just seems it just seems that that what COVID is saying is like nope, we're serious. But now so because you know, leaders need to make decisions. Well with you know, without The pandemic you could kind of get away with, you know, being a little bit slow to decisions. Now, today, you've got to go. And so I really do think it's separating, you know, the men from the boys and the women from the girls, as leaders to, to respond to experiment and say, I don't know, but this is the best. But if we have to make a decision and move on, it's been so enlightening. I really, I just love this whole conversation. I know, when we mean sees that, that we might not have, you know, been thinking about the new expectations that we might not even know. And definitely empathy, and vulnerability, and building trust, between all of us who are going to aim is at the same time. So our final question is, gosh, you're so your, your, your story is so exciting,

your your your, your the work you do the knowledge you have, how can people find you?

R

Renee McGowan 35:55

It's very simple. I'm on LinkedIn, you can look for rename a gown on LinkedIn there, there isn't many of me, in your family, they're very happy to connect with everybody. And in fact, you know, I love connecting with people all around the world. I think it's one of the great privileges of you know, being a global citizen is, if you like is connecting and getting different perspectives. So please reach out.

M

Mitch Simon 36:18

Right. Well, thank you, Renee. And for those of you who are like going on your phone right now, let me find this woman. It's Renee MC, geow a n. That's her name a gallon. That's our podcast. That was sensational. Wonderful. Thanks for me, and he gets to go start her day we get to go into our day. Thank you, Jenny. This has been awesome. And to our listeners. Thank you so much for subscribing and listening or listening to Tim anywhere. We look forward to seeing you next week. If you've loved this, this episode, which we have, please share this. Please give us a review. Please tell all your friends. And until next time, we'll see you on the next episode of team anywhere