Sarah Angel-Johnson 0:01

There we go. Perfect. Yep. All right.

Bill Murphy 0:05

All right, Sarah, want to welcome you to the show today.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 0:08

Thank you for having me, Bill.

Bill Murphy 0:10

So we originally got connected because of our talk to you a little bit about strategy and innovation and leadership through the CIO group. And then we talked about your nomination at the time for the orby Awards in Boston. And now you subsequently have won, which is great. And I know you put you have a track record of success that started a long time ago. Where do you Where did Where did you feel you started to, to where you're starting to achieve achieve success? And it could be both commercially or maybe back in school? Like Where did you Have you always been able to kind of rise to the top like this?

Sarah Angel-Johnson 0:56

Oh, that's such a great question. Well, there are so many points in time in my life where I can look backwards now and say, Oh, that was a real inflection point or an epiphany or pivot in my life. And there's so many of them. So I'll choose a couple of them, maybe three of them in IBM. So I was at IBM for almost 17 years, there was a point in time where I realized that I'm the one who's making the decision, that I'm not the person who is impacted by everybody else around me. I'm not just going to sit back. It's me who's making the decisions. And that first inflection point in my career led me into my first management position because I was trying to decide in my early 20s, do I stay on the tactical path, or the personnel management executive route, and I was really, really torn because I was a programmer at the time. I love coding. I loved my technical chops and I'm a female in tech. So that's kind of a place that I really wanted to stay. But yet there was a pole of, well, as a personnel manager, I could really impact and scale my ability to help other people in their lives, their careers, other women in tech. And I can make decisions that can help a business, give an IBM or even help other organizations. If, as you can see further on in my career, I see that would be the first inflection point. And I had a great mentor at the time. She She really cultivated my ability to understand that it was me who was in the driver's seat. That's it. That's the first inflection point. I would

Sarah Angel-Johnson 2:45

pause you for a moment.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 2:47

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Um,

Bill Murphy 2:48

you in the driver's seat. That's an interesting one, because I think a lot of people feel that they're the effect of things around them and that is the hundred percent driver but you have Your Language is very different than that. You You're you said that I'm the one who makes the decision. So you, you've said that I'm going to be this is the path I want to go down intentionally and okay. So because I guess it IBM so you can get caught into any company and get caught into, you know, what's going to happen by all these events around me But you made a singular decision to move forward in a certain way.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 3:22

I did. I did. informed by Yes, I'm the decision maker, but informed by my mentors by things that I've learned by my experiences. So making an educated decision around that is really important to me.

Unknown Speaker 3:38

I was your mentor, what was your mentor? Like? Like what how did you find this mentor and is it serendipitous? Or how did how do you how does she fit into that lens of mentor for you?

Sarah Angel-Johnson 3:50

It was serendipitous I so I have a story here that I will tell it's very true parents story kind of giving you insight into my personality. So I was a brand new house. at IBM, this is 1997 the.com bubble was growing and growing and growing hadn't burst yet, right. So I was the first wave of a lot of new hires and IBM after the massive layoffs in the 90s. And so, my perspective, IBM didn't really quite know what to do with us. And I was working at Poughkeepsie in New York. And it was far enough away from New York City that I felt like I wasn't in immediate contact with the ability to just expand as a young adult, right, I'm 21 years old at this time. So the the.com bubble is growing, growing. IBM is losing new hires to.com. And so their attrition rates are so high people are coming in starting at Poughkeepsie, and other places and IBM then leaving right to the dot coms. And I wanted to figure out a way to keep people because I wanted to stay at IBM. So then I started having parties sight, because I'm like, Come on guys. This is like we can be social, we can create our own fun here and the head of HR at Poughkeepsie at the time now in hindsight, she, she's, she's my mentor. And and now after the fact she told me that this had happened, I didn't know that at the time. She said, Sarah, we could have done one of one or two things in this situation. We could have counseled you in a very negative way of it's not appropriate to be having parties after hours on location. liability factor alone is too high, right? Or she could coach me in a very positive way. Bring me into the fold helped me understand how to do things in a way that would help both IBM myself and new hires. And that's exactly what she did. She brought me into the fold. She coached me I actually did a two year stint in HR focused on program managing new hire generational. So I started the first new hire networks at IBM that still exists today. The first pattern farms that still exists today at IBM, all in ways of how do you retain your new talent. And it was because of this incredible person that entered into my life, who could have pushed me out of IBM completely right. And she didn't she she coached me, she helped me understand that the different options that I have to make this a win win for everybody.

Bill Murphy 6:34

What a fascinating story. It's powerful that our mentors and how they enter into our lives of different different points. And you know, that instead, this was an HR mentor, and you came in on an on a on a tech Avenue, and an IBM was probably this still probably the white collar kind of suit, you know, standard issue. Organization. I don't think they'd probably I shifted much in 1997.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 7:02

Yeah, they were just in the starting stages of diversity at that point in time as well. So my role that I moved into an HR evolved, I became a diversity program manager. So included new hire generational diversity, as well as we stood up IBM first diversity councils, diversity network groups, which are now more commonly referred to as employee resource groups or business resource groups. We did this back in 1997 through 1999, at IBM, and so I feel very fortunate to have been a part of that movement for IBM and technology business in general. But then I moved out back into technical

Bill Murphy 7:47

stuff. What was that? Like? What was your next step like?

Sarah Angel-Johnson 7:49

That brings me to that next inflection point in my career of realizing that I was a change agent in my personal branding around being a change agent. It didn't come overnight. It is something where I sat down and said, Oh, I'm a change agent. It happened over a series of career moves and IDM, where I was placed into my first technical personnel management role. Another great mentor put me there and believed in me, he was the site executive for Poughkeepsie, all of Poughkeepsie at that time, which was over 6000 employees. He saw something in me that and said, I think she would be a great technical personnel manager along with my prior mentor. And together, they helped me move into this technical management role. I was managing Masters and PhD in Mechanical Engineers and finite element analysis, acoustics and vibration.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 8:49

I was a coder

Sarah Angel-Johnson 8:52

and so that was the first time where it was put into a role to bring together disparate of the company. So they had me bring different brands of products together to do, they were all doing the same thing, but in different product lines. So they brought me in to bring them together to optimize what they were doing. And I had no idea what the content was right? I didn't understand. I'm not a PhD in mechanical engineer and finite element analysis. So that was a first I didn't realize that that I was a change agent. My next job was into global product introduction. So like beta programs, and again, an area that I'd really not been in before and it was the intent was bringing together disparate groups again, to help them create something become more than the sum of their parts. And every move after that and think it was the next hop after that. It was Oh, wait a minute. IBM keeps asking me to jump into situations where I don't really need to understand at a deep subject matter expertise level, what they’re doing, they want me to transform the team and what they can accomplish together. And it was three hops in that I finally realized, “Oh, I am a change agent.” I can come in and take different people different processes different content and meld them together in a way that, like I mentioned, becomes more than the sum of their parts all with buy in. So not a bulldozer coming in and saying, all right, you're gonna do it my way it is my way or the highway. It is through co-creation and buy in and influence in having everybody have a shared vision of what you're trying to accomplish together. That was an incredible point in my career when I finally realized that and could own it, and that's exactly what I do now is I own it in every single role that I move into, and that's where I thrive. So I know that when I make my career moves, I need to look for that. Because if it is a status quo kind of environment? I will wither. It's not for me.

Bill Murphy 11:07

So the change agent, just even knowing that in stating that was there… Did that mentor suggest, hey, Sarah, you're a change agent or did you read it? Like or how did you develop that? How did you develop the self-awareness and the languaging around- “I'm a change agent”? Because that that's, there's a difference there. You seem to like you said, own it, and understand it. And it becomes almost like a personal vision and mission for you. So, was there a time when that happened to you and they kind of coalesced? Or is it just, it was knitting many different experiences together that you came to that?

Quote #1 Section

Sarah Angel-Johnson 11:49

It was knitting different experiences that I came together. But I will say Bill, I love to learn based on methodologies and principles that others have created because they see that it works based on their learnings. So, the word “change agent” for me came from reading books, came from going through courses, like my MBA right and thinking through like digital transformation or just business transformation in general and change agent was used throughout my MBA curriculum. And going backwards though before I forget, one of the things I adore is “disc,” so driving director interacting socializer study relator conscientious thinker and how we interact with each other. It was one of the first times that I learned something and intentionally applied it in a job immediately. So it was my first management assignment. I had attended an Asian Leadership Summit, where they had taught us experientially “disc” and I had in my first month had my first call with my team as a new manager. So just imagine I'm this mid 20s kind of person I'm, you see already kind of my personality. I'm sort of here it is, this is who I am. And I will talk it out loud and ask lots of questions. And this was a globally distributed team. So we're all on the phone, no video conference like now. It's all on the phone, and I’m my bubbly self, so asking lots of questions kind of in their face. And it was like silence in response. And I'm thinking of course, because again, my first management assignment, I'm young, I'm female, you name it, right? All those insecurity points that many people in their career go through. And I attended this leadership summit where they taught me “disc” and I realized, I'm a driving director and interacting socializer- meaning I am about getting it done. And I'm about let's talk it out. Right. It's about the people and the people that a managing. They were conscientious thinkers, they didn't They wanted to be right before they said anything. So when I would ask a question live, they wouldn't want to respond because they were nervous that I wouldn't say nervous. And so I don't want to say that they were not professional that way. But they want it to be right. And I get it. I mean, given their background, PhD and Master's in Mechanical Engineers, they're based in evidence and proof, and data. So when I started doing immediately was applying that knowledge. I would create agendas with the questions that I would ask ahead of time. Know, before the meeting what I was going to ask, and it was like night and day, we would have the most vibrant conversations. And just being able to take that learning and realize it wasn't my insecurities. It was different ways that people work together. And if you can apply that, you can just again, that's this mantra of becoming More than your sum of the sum of your parts, it's just puzzle piecing together how different people work together.

Bill Murphy 15:06

Yeah, and that's self awareness is that you've developed is huge, because instead of leaning into your style and be like, okay, it's my style, or the height or myself or no style, you thought that you had that 360 degree awareness that you're willing to experiment with your method. And that little agenda gave gave people who want to be right, or they're trained to be right through their engineering, a chance to win in a public setting because they have a chance to prepare and, and, and give you great feedback. So that's a that's that is that's huge. And that that became with disk. I love that. I love desk.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 15:44

Yes, it did. And I can't take credit for that. Right. That is not what people have put that together from tons of research and I have benefited from it. So I want to make sure I told that story because it is another one of those sort of inflection points in my career. Going back to your question about the change agent piece that to me crystallized so clear when I made a decision to leave for profit and IBM and go into nonprofit. It really did. I had this goal and IBM I so wanted to be a the CEO of IBM. I wanted to be Ginni rometty, right. A female CEO of a big tech company, I thought I was going to be a lifer at IBM had no intention of leaving, and was going to take my brand and my strings as a change agent all the way home, right. But then Girl Scouts approached me and I was sitting on the board of Girl Scouts of Connecticut at the time, and the CIO from Girl Scouts headquarters nationally approached the CEO of Girl Scouts of Connecticut. It's a federated system. And so there are 100 and 1300 and 12 councils and one headquarters so 113 different fiber ones each And they had asked the CEO Girl Scouts of Connecticut, and we've been trying to put the 800 and $60 million Girl Scout cookie program online for years, and we can't seem to do it. How do we do this? Do you know somebody who can help us accomplish this? And the Girl Scouts of Connecticut CEO, kay said, I know exactly who to talk to tapped me. And we then you know, the rest is history. I eventually made the decision to leave IBM and move into nonprofit land and take the Girl Scout cookie program online and I need to make a very clear statement because people misunderstand the cookie program. When I say take it online, it is not like it's not a credit card. I want to purchase cookies and get it shipped to my door. It's not just ecommerce. Wow, that's a big component of it. It's not Just that the bigger component is behind the scenes and what 1.8 million girls learn, they become business women. Commerce, they learn digital marketing, they learn supply chain, they learn predictive analytics through their through their dashboards, they learn how to talk to customers on a different kind of platform. They learn how to take orders that happen one week and apply knowledge to the next week. That's the bigger learning behind this. And yes, there is a whole ecommerce part of it. That is the 800 and $16 million. But it is the creation of a movement of female business leaders 1.8 million girls being able to do that. That change me realizing that I am a change agent, realizing that I can make a difference for millions of girls, and not just millions of girls, but the business world because then they go into the business and business world. That was such a poll for me though, like, that was what made my final decision to leave IBM

Bill Murphy 19:10

and what a powerful experience in view to be able to see and link your personal vision right to the big transformation for that with a huge organization and there's nothing easy about working with Federation's that that most events, I mean, that must have been a PhD and working with people.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 19:32

Oh my goodness,

Sarah Angel-Johnson 19:34

I will not say live just how difficult it is to work in a federated system. What I will say is I learned a lot, just the so taking to the nth level, when I was an IBM the ability to influence people who were directly reporting to me either directly or indirectly meaning levels of teams down but all all through my chain I knew how to do that and then also influencing my peers and then influence up like that came so naturally to me from IBM. But then to go into an environment where you're talking to 113 different c suites, 113 different boards, and nobody can mandate anybody to do anything.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 20:23

Oh my goodness,

Sarah Angel-Johnson 20:24

me growing away in terms of how to influence people, and it really drives into where my philosophy now is and Human Centered Design. That was the beginning inception of that because I realized that if we could take the conversation away from I want to the girl needs, then you can more quickly align with each other and work together. So it was a point in time for me where then I started saying, what is the human need, and then designing technology around the human because I found that gets such a better You more quickly accelerate the buy in, in terms of transformation.

Bill Murphy 21:04

And that's, that's where I want to come back to Human Centered Design. And I just want one comment though. There's a woman on my board. She was the former CIO of Johnson and Johnson, which was which she was the CIO of the CIO. So she was the main CEO. But then each, they had 100 businesses under that umbrella. And each business is a multi billion-dollar business so that the, in each business had a CIO, she was the CIO of the CIO. And she minds me a lot of you from from your, your enthusiasm, the ability to work with people, and she has a very clear like, expectation of getting things done. But recently I learned from her, she threw in the word patience. She said, and, and that was really interesting because she was a hard driver. Getting Things Done was great working with people, but then people often don't work at the pace of the leaders, the top leaders, so like, how do you achieve big thing for her was patience and I’d love to get your comment on either patience or what your unique spin would be on how do you meld people in your energy and how do you bring the people together to take action?

Quote #2 Section

Sarah Angel-Johnson 22:17

Yeah, I think it starts with fundamentally leading with inquiry. Come in with a point of view, it can immediately off point off put people that you are talking to. So, I've honed over, I would say the last 10 years or so, my ability to lead with inquiry. And it's open ended questions. So not questions that are answered with a yes or no. But questions that start to open up what the other person is motivated by, what the other person is wanting to accomplish. And then once you get into that, and the guts of what motivates them, that gets back to “DISC”, right, because are they motivated by getting it done? Are they motivated by the people, are they motivated by evidence and proof? You can start to understand through that inquiry of how you can bring them along the journey with you. So, and then you start to talk about the human once you understand what motivates them, because then with the human, you put a lens on it of, yes, let's get it done. But get it done how for the human, right? Let's get the benefits of the people but to impact the human how? So it all kind of ties together. I would say I so much agree with that word patience. And for me, patience is that leading with inquiry in starting with the questions and really getting into underneath the surface, right? It just really getting into knowing people and what motivates them.

Bill Murphy 23:47

I love that. I love that. Thank you for that. That insight. That's really cool. With the Human Centered Design, so there's this big movement now. It's prizeman big, it's probably big for years, but it's certainly Before as probably with the speeding up of innovation, but this human centered design or design thinking, lean, I'd love to get your perspective on why you use the words and the and the approach Human Centered Design and how you differentiate them? Or how you make choices to do one versus another? Or do you look at them as kind of being the same?

**Quote #3 Section**

Sarah Angel-Johnson 24:23

And when you say them, I'm sorry, did you mean Human Centered Design and design thinking? Okay, the difference? Three of them. I would say Human Centered Design is more of a mindset than anything else. And design, thinking and lean are methodologies that support a mindset. So I am careful not to use the words to start off with with design thinking and lean, or even agile, because they're all methodologies that have practices industry standard, best practices behind them, and different belief systems around how you implement them. Human Centered Design for me is it's that mindset. I'm going to think about the human first I'm going to put the human in the center of anything that I'm designing, and the way that I'm thinking. So I'm approaching it that way. First, you're to understand what's needed. I don't know that any kind of methodology is right for every situation. So I might employ design thinking, I might employ agile, I might employ lean. And there's another one that isn't as popular because it's the predecessor to design thinking I might employ act, accelerated change together, which I used often at IBM came from GE then adopted by IBM and then turned into design thinking, but I love act because it focuses on inhibitors. So I still use it. I'm actually about to use it on September 28, with a group of operational focus staff and leaders at your up because if you didn't have your inhibitors, then you would be in your future state. So you think you talk about current state and talk about future state is a typical consultant kind of gap analysis act. So attacks the inhibitors, and I love that kind of approach for specific situations. So it really depends, right? What methodology will work or situation. But if you have the mindset of we're going to think about the human first, then it often leads you into different kinds of discussion versus let's talk about the tool. Let's talk about the feature. Let's talk about the function. I don't want to talk about any of that until they understand the human first and then the business outcome second, so that's the approach and my philosophy.

Bill Murphy 26:43

I love that I love it is that is the when you the the mindset that you have, do you does the organization have to buy in beyond the CIO into that approach? Or are you just a you because you see something As a change agent, what how are you interacting with departments? They may have their own approaches? Like, are you trying to? You're trying to unseat other approaches? Are you just starting with you in working in your impact areas versus trying to get the whole organization on one train going in one direction?

Quote #4 Section

Sarah Angel-Johnson 27:21

I would say it depends, okay, answer to these questions, right? It depends. My goal where I'm at now is to change the hearts and minds of all of Year Up and an organization which I believe I've accomplished or rather and far along that journey, because we need to be able to work as one entity, one business, we call it a one year up technology, strategy and roadmap. So, there's no word of it or any specific function in there. It's a bit year of technology, strategy and roadmap. Now, this could be different in other organizations, right? I'm not so sure if you would need to implement it across an entire business in every single situation in Year Up, that that is the case. And so that the approach there is is a little different in terms of I work with a very fundamental, rudimentary rather is the word strategic planning pyramid, right? If you can create a shared vision together, then you create your shared mission, then that drives into your goals. And then once you know your goals, then you talk strategy, approach and operating model and tactics. It's one on one kind of stuff, but I find it to route people into a methodology that is so easy to understand, because you've got so much complicated things like I would love to get to a place where I get to with balanced scorecard. I love balanced scorecard. I implemented that at IBM. But it's complicated. And so it's tough if you're coming from a place of you don't have the foundation to even get to a balanced scorecard. So just really talking through a shared vision, shared mission shared goals, is what I found to be successful. As you wrap up,

Bill Murphy 29:19

I love what you and I talked beforehand about. I love offense and decent defense of thinking and being able to communicate in that way as a as a leader as a transformation as an IT leader and as a CIO. So I'd love it. If you and I were, if you had to prioritize your your top offensive defense approaches for the coming year. How would you lay that out? Like what how would you lay that that out if I if I asked you on in a meeting at work?

Sarah Angel-Johnson 29:51

Sure. Absolutely. So, my top three offenses would be, number one, heard me talk about it already, it's a one business technology strategy and roadmap. It has to be synergized together. Cannot be separate. Two would be that Human Centered Design combined with an appropriate methodology. For me, at Year Up, that is agile and design thinking. Three would be data driven decisions, actionable insights, and really getting down to data and how that can influence the decisions, the educated decisions and tradeoffs that we make going forward. So, offense, those are my three top offenses. Three top defenses. First and nonprofit specifically, is to focus on the mission. IT should not try to become a cutting edge technology company. If your mission- unless that's your mission, obviously, if you're if your nonprofit mission is to become a cutting-edge technology organization, then definitely do that. But if your mission is driven in other ways, then the IT function needs to remember that the organization needs to be experts in the mission, right? So, for Girl Scouts, it's the expert in the girl. In Year Up, it's the expert in the opportunity youth. So, and not try to be experts in technology and bring that expertise in from the outside. That’s the first one. The second one is balancing the need and desire to transform with the need to run the business, you can't break the business based on what you're trying to do to transform. So, I implement a run, grow, transform framework. That way in the run space, this is my defense, right? I know exactly what I need to do to operate the business. And then the cone of uncertainty kind of gets bigger as you go up that row. Grow is to do a bit more uncertainty, right, in terms of Growing capabilities and transform is the most uncertain in terms of capabilities. And you know you've got some, you've got some flexibility in those two categories, right? So, my defense is know what I need to run the business without breaking it. And then the third one is an innovation lens. Leveraging innovation lens, because so often companies are so fast in terms of what they need to do to innovate, that you got to take a step back. Desirability, does the user want it? Viability, should the business invest in it? And the third one, which is so important, and often where we trip up in terms of defense, feasibility. Is the organization ready for it? Can the organization implement it? Technology structure, or design, all of that. And I so often find that that's where we trip up in terms of defense.

Bill Murphy 32:55

I love this. Well, I I really enjoyed our conversation and You know, we have only a minute left. And I just wanted to just ask you, is there anything in particular that as we're talking that, you know, I wish you wish that I had asked you or you just wanted to make sure you got something in that you felt was important that I didn't ask you about.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 33:17

I'll touch on for a minute around work life integration. Okay. I, I would say that this applies to women, but it also applies to men. Because all of us are dealing with particularly now in COVID-19, this ability or rather, a challenge around how do you integrate this virtual world of work in a home before I'm an engineer at heart, so my formula is that originally where I had hit failures in my career was I thought work at home could equal to hundred percent 100% at home and 100% at work, and that's not the case. It has to equal 100% and it's a sliding scale, right? So if you're at 50% 50% you're going That's like

Sarah Angel-Johnson 34:00

the perfect integration and balance.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 34:03

But it's okay if you need to slide it and work has to be 80%. And home has to be 20% or the other direction home has to be 80% work has to be 20%. As long as you are continually analyzing and digesting for yourself, where am I in that, and you can exist in one imbalance for too long before you start to feel things start to fray around the edges. So my tip and recommendation is to look at work life integration in that way. It's been helpful for me,

Bill Murphy 34:34

that's great. And I've come up with a new my kids are 1917 and 14 now. And yeah, there's quite a bit as an entrepreneur is just in in the workforce early on, you know, you'll always wonder, you know about your choices. And finally, I got a I learned two years ago, this great approach, you know, there's, there's no, I don't believe in anything, I don't believe in work life balance. I think there's work life choices, and each choice has As a consequence, and it's just up to us to to choose what with those choices are going to be, and it takes the pressure at least it took the pressure off me feeling that there I was striving for that hundred hundred. I was like, you know, 100 and 100. And it's just that's very, it's not sustainable. And yeah, I love that. I love that. Thank you so much for spending some time this is going to be wonderful for the CIO community, the Year Up community, the the orby Awards, which you just won the whole community of CIOs there, so I really appreciate you for spending your time.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 35:34

Oh, it's been my pleasure, Bill.

Sarah Angel-Johnson 35:36

Thank you so much. Okay. Have a great rest of your day. Take care. Okay.