

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



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BEATRIZ CONINGHAM – HR on a Mission

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Beatriz Coningham is the Chief People Officer at the Pan American Development Foundation. She has lived, studied, traveled and worked in different countries in Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Her educational background includes English and Portuguese languages and literature, teaching English as a foreign language, psychology, and human resource development. Beatriz started her professional life as a teacher of English as a foreign language in Brazil, where she grew up. While living in the state of Mato Grosso, she co-founded and led a private language school, which offered her deep exposure to entrepreneurship and local capacity building. Her experiences in recruiting, training and developing teams led her to gradually transition into organizational development and human resources. In 2003, she moved to Washington, DC to pursue a doctorate degree in Human Resource Development at the George Washington University. Since then, she has worked in the non-profit sector in healthcare and international development. Beatriz is known for her dynamic and versatile leadership style, as well as her ability to work effectively in multicultural environments. Her passion is to create human resources functions that are vital to the organization through leveraging technology, great customer service, simplification and continuous improvement.

In this episode, Beatriz discusses:

- The different HR challenges of working in a not-for-profit “mission-driven” company’
- Why traditional Performance Management has run its course;
- How she sees HR as similar to customer service’
- The special challenges of remote and hybrid work in an international organization;
- What a fully virtual office should contain;
- The importance of researching what actually works;
- And much more!

Michael Lee

So Beatrice, welcome to At the Edge. And thank you so much for taking the time to be with us.

Beatriz Coningham

Thank you. I'm excited for the opportunity to talk with you. And looking forward to our conversation.

Michael Lee

You've got a really interesting history spanning really different industries. Could you talk just a little bit about the different experiences you've had as an HR leader in these different industries?

Beatriz Coningham

Well, I started in education, both in the private sector and as an entrepreneur. And also in public education as a teacher and teacher trainer. Then, gradually, I transitioned to non-profit and I worked for non-profit organizations that covered a very large range of topics. So I've seen a lot of different organizational cultures and subcultures at play. In all of these different experiences that I had, they were also in many different countries.

Michael Lee

The challenges or the purposes of working in HR are different. How are they different in this kind of space than they would be in a corporate?

Beatriz Coningham

So I think it's very different in many ways, working in the not-for-profit space. First of all, there is usually a limitation of resources that I have not found in other environments, and at the same time, a very intense drive towards action. People in the not-for-profit space are extremely passionate about their work. And they are so committed to doing what they think is important to do that they find it particularly difficult or challenging to have to comply with processes in whatever will come between what they want to do for their purpose or the purpose of their work in their day to day. They really don't want to be distracted from it. And there are HR processes that are interpreted as distractions. Whatever kind of process that I'm working with, I want to make sure that it is not burdensome, it's not seen as a burden.

Michael Lee

What are some of the processes you're talking about? And how do you avoid them?

Beatriz Coningham

Performance Management is an example. In the way performance management is designed, it can be quite complex. It can be quite time consuming. One of the things that I've developed as part of my toolkit for HR and even my philosophy in working is to simplify, really to simplify processes as much as possible. Bring them down to the essentials. To their most essential purposes. Really kind of radical simplification.

Michael Lee

We talk a lot on this show about engagement and experience with employees. How does engagement work in the non-profit space, as it would compare to a corporate or a big company?

Beatriz Coningham

I think engagement at the individual level actually works the same. People are more engaged when they are doing what they're good at. This is based on research by Gallup. People want to be doing what they're good at. And they want to feel that whatever strengths they bring, experience, knowledge, skills, they want to have opportunities to apply those. They want to feel good about what they're doing. They want to see progress. That makes a big difference, that they're making progress towards the work that they think is really important. Sitting in meetings that they don't feel are moving them towards their goals and towards their responsibilities and what they think is important can be a major source of annoyance. When there are aspects of the work experience that are on a day-to-day basis making it difficult for people to do the work that they think is important, that can be something that is discouraging to the point that people may disregard things that the organization is trying to do that are more sophisticated, such as, for example, rolling out new programs, new trainings, or different rewards.

Michael Lee

In a way, you're saying two opposite things. On the one hand, that people in the non-profit space want less disruption, they don't want to be bothered by HR and the different things that you might deal with. At the same time, you're saying it's more or less the same in terms of engaging them.

Beatriz Coningham

in the non-profit sector, or sometimes people describe these kinds of organizations as mission-driven organizations, there is a sense of urgency for doing the things that are going to improve the quality of life of whoever are the beneficiaries of that work. It's a question of intensity, not so much a difference. It's similar motivations but it becomes much more intense and is experienced as more urgent.

Michael Lee

When people are aligned with the values and mission of an organization, they're a lot more engaged, they're a lot more excited to be at work. And I imagine, again, that in your space, more of the people are just naturally aligned with the mission.

Beatriz Coningham

Definitely the values and the mission are a much more important driver of engagement in the not-for-profit sector. This is beginning to change, but compensation in the not-for-profit sector still trends behind the private sector. And when people come to the not-for-profit sector, they still make that choice. And it's usually because they don't want to compromise on the kind of work that they do. And I speak for myself, when I make career choices, what the organization does is super important to me.

Michael Lee

It sounds like as an HR professional, you're actually ahead of the curve in the sense that you're already thinking about serving your employees and supporting your employees in ways that corporates are only figuring out now.

Beatriz Coningham

I see HR as a service to employees. I see the role of HR as the role of enabling people to do the work that they came to the organization to do. I also have a customer service orientation in that I believe that we need to understand employees as we would try to understand customers. What exactly do they need? How do we make their lives easier, so they can engage? I think that there are a lot of organizations nowadays that are thinking like that. And that's why the employee experience, this term, is coming through as customer service, a customer experience understanding, and even the idea that you want to design that experience. Even better, you want to co-design that experience. So you really have to learn what the needs are through various other interactions.

Michael Lee

How do you create a productive, valuable employee experience?

Beatriz Coningham

Observation. Questions. By trying to become invisible. People should not have to go out of their way to get whatever they need, if there is a program that somebody wants to participate in. I went through some customer service training through Gartner a few years ago where they shared some research where they found that customers became much more loyal when things were convenient for them. Convenience even trumped other things such as quality, and even the wow factor, the delight factor, could be sacrificed for convenience. In so many ways, employees are

customers for Human Resources services. So how do we make things convenient for them? And that means easy to find, easy to understand, easy to consume.

Michael Lee

Let's talk about hybrid work and remote work and how your organization has been impacted by that situation.

Beatriz Coningham

Remote work was not completely new to us because we have worked for over sixty years now in multiple countries. But what was new was the fact that we couldn't do it in any other way. We couldn't travel. We couldn't have in person interactions. So that was completely new. And we needed new technology, too. Because what we had was not completely appropriate. The adaptation was pretty quick. A lot of our employees were very comfortable with technology. So adoption of the new technologies happened relatively quickly. What I think was difficult was the isolation.

At this time, when we are gradually and tentatively coming back to some level of in-person interaction, the experience continues to evolve. At the end of August, we reopened our offices in Washington, DC. People can come in once a week, twice, or three times or every day. But they have the option to also continue to work from home. And it's interesting, we're trusting people to continue to do their work, which they have done very well. This has been a highly productive year for the organization. One of the most productive years in history. We know for a fact that at least for a year or two, we were able to function almost completely virtually. But it's not the preferred way of working for everybody. There are employees who really are missing the in-person experience. So we're trying to offer those experiences as well. And then we do have employees who would enjoy working from home more, but do not have the conditions at home. The experience is evolving. We know that we can function virtually and that's encouraging.

Michael Lee

You mentioned technology. Let's imagine a virtual office where people never come into the physical office and they're able to work either with other people who are remote or with people in the office. What would you want that virtual office to contain? What should be in it? How would it work?

Beatriz Coningham

I think that it would be very important to have structured and unstructured time. So one of the things we did initially that I think may have taken us too far into the structured was to turn every meeting into a Zoom meeting and require that everybody turns on their camera. That, after a while, is exhausting.

Flexibility for people to be more comfortable in whatever environment they are in, I think is important. I think that there needs to be some form of arrangement to give people time in which they're not in structured meetings, where they can get into their work and have that sense that they made progress and that they are not being interrupted by multiple group interactions. Some form of, of technology that allows you to communicate freely, to be resolving things via text or doing a quick group text or staying in touch with closer colleagues throughout the day.

And I would also like to have time where people are not necessarily working through tasks in work-related responsibilities. We have started to do a number of different parties via a digital platform. We've now had our second costume party with people participating from all across the different countries where we work. Our year-end party is going to be fully digital. Having those kinds of moments where people can connect and are not necessarily focused on accomplishing an immediate task.

Michael Lee

What about things like rewards and recognition, managing people online, coaching people in your report lines? How do you manage that and how would that fit into a virtual office like this?

Beatriz Coningham

For those who had to transition from managing a team that they could see every day or every other day at least, to managing a team with whom they are interacting completely virtually, there are skills that you need to deploy more frequently. Having support for those managers making that transition is important. Clarity. The ability to really delegate with clarity and really describe expectations, responsibilities, clarifying roles for different people in the same team. These become even more important in the virtual environment. Being able to make sure they understand what they need to do, how to focus their time, should not be taken for granted, because it doesn't come naturally to everyone. It's so easy for managers to assume that people already know because they read the job description, it's very common for people to actually interpret their job description in a very different way. So having conversations in and supporting managers in this transition, so they build on those skills.

Michael Lee

You've also got a lot of experience in the healthcare space. And I notice that you left the healthcare space, literally, at the exact same time as the COVID lockdown hit the world.

Beatriz Coningham

That was just how things happened. I became the new Chief People Officer without having met people in person. I know a lot of people had this experience where they transitioned jobs during the pandemic. Very challenging, because I feel like with any role, and human resources in particular, establishing relationships is a foundation to be able to understand how to add value.

And I had to do that via Zoom. And Zoom is so limited. It's so limited. It's when you get out of Zoom, that you actually meet people in person, that you realize how much it was cutting off the experience with that person. Just recently, I had the opportunity to finally come to visit our teams in Colombia and in Brazil, and just being there was such a relief in in such an enriching opportunity. So it's, you know, just seeing people and being with them in the same place.

Michael Lee

We don't know where things are going in the future. But it does seem like hybrid work, remote work is very much here to stay. And there's much uncertainty about things changing, Especially with an organization like yours, where you're working with people around the world, what do you see as the way forward to make sure you can actually have these touchpoints? You're talking about being able to connect to people and at the same time making sure you get the job done, making sure people can actually keep working.

Beatriz Coningham

We are anticipating that hybrid will continue and will solidify some of the things we began to do and want to maintain. One thing that was amazing about the experience of being fully virtual is that even though it's a very limited experience, everybody is in the same situation. I don't know if you've been in a meeting where some people are in person, and they're sitting around a table, and then some people are on the phone. Even if you have them on video, the folks that are joining virtually have a very different experience from that meeting compared to the ones that were sitting together in the same space. And it's very hard for them to participate.

So what happened to our meetings is this separation between those in the room and those in the digital space disappeared. Because everybody was digital, that allowed us to have also a whole lot more people join. It is so much more difficult to have people join from various different countries when there is a group in the office at headquarters.

So we learned that we want to continue to take advantage of some of these new ways of doing things that actually worked. So we'll continue to have meetings every week or every two weeks with all our directors from all the different countries where we operate. We want to continue to have some of the digital fun events that we developed, which again, allow people to join from everywhere. We want to continue to offer choice and offer different designs from which people can pick their experience. Do they want to be fully remote? Do they want to have a hybrid experience? Do they want to be in the office some days a week? How many days? And we want to continue to offer those choices.

However, we are also, in this situation, balancing the needs of the organization and the employee. Not all roles can be fully remote, because for some there are in-person meetings with clients, for example, that are based in in Washington, DC. So we have to balance various needs. But the idea is to give as much choice and flexibility.

Michael Lee

If you wanted to share with the audience the core wisdom you've acquired over the years of working in this mission-driven space - what would you share with people?

Beatriz Coningham

A couple of things. I'd say that I have, over the years, given more and more value. One is to really listen to the organization, instead of coming as the HR expert who knows how things should be done. Yes, there are parts of HR that are based on what legal requirements, there are labor laws we need and will follow those. But there's also a lot that is believed to be the right thing to do. And I think that's when we make mistakes in organizations. By trying to bring in solutions without a real, deep understanding of what the organization really needs. I don't like to bake solutions before I talk with multiple people to understand exactly what is the problem that we're trying to solve?

The other thing is I think our profession will benefit from is looking more into evidence in research on what works and what doesn't. I think we have some practices, and I'd say performance management is one of them, that over the years, over and over again tend to not deliver what they are supposed to deliver and we should be able to go to research and find alternatives. I think that best practices in whatever we learn from experience, it's very important to enrich that with also what science is out there in psychology and sociology, so that we can have a solid foundation for how we design our programs.

Michael Lee

Thank you, Beatrice. I really appreciate the time you've spent and the wisdom you shared. Thanks very much.

Beatriz Coningham

Pleasure talking with you. Thank you so much.