AT THE EDGE PODCAST

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JENNIFER YI BOYER – Flexibility is the Name of the Game
Interviewed by Michael Lee

Jennifer Yi Boyer is Chief People Officer and SVP of DEIB at FiscalNote. She leads the FiscalNote People Team and their Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging and Accessibility initiatives. Building creative workforce solutions that are responsive and relevant to both individuals' career growth and enabling strategic business capabilities while operationalizing equity, creating community, and enhancing inclusive global leadership capabilities are cornerstones of her team's work. Prior to joining FiscalNote, Jen served as the Chief Talent Officer at ACT where she led the transformation of the HR function to a contemporary, agile-based center of excellence. Throughout her career she has fulfilled various senior-level leadership roles in human resources, customer service, and TQM/quality management for global organizations across financial services, hospitality, manufacturing, and non-profit education. Jen focuses on creating agile, pragmatic practices within organizations to drive complex enterprise-wide change, talent integration, and strategic workforce solutions at FiscalNote. Her goal is that these practices will nurture belonging, inclusive teams, a coaching culture and leadership practices that invite all our team members to contribute in ways that fulfill their passions and purpose while providing measurable results that differentiate FiscalNote from the competition. Jen holds a BS from Cornell University's Hotel School, a Masters in Leadership and Strategic Communication from Seton Hall University, and a Certificate in Executive Leadership from Harvard's JFK School of Government.

In this episode, Jennifer discusses:
- Her experience leaving one company and joining another in the middle of the pandemic;
- Using donuts and tacos to humanize employee experience;
- How to bring together leaders and employees as communication equals;
- Why "One and Done" is never enough;
- How video games can inform hybrid work;
- Why flexibility is the name of the game;
- And much more!

Michael Lee
Jen, thank you for being here on At the Edge. We're really pleased to have you.

Jennifer Yi Boyer
Thanks. I'm really happy to be here today,

Michael Lee
You have a very diverse history in your HR journey. You've worked in diversity and inclusion, you've worked with talent strategies, you've worked with development. How has seeing all these different aspects informed your ability to deal with the challenges you're facing in your job?

Jennifer Yi Boyer
Having so many different industries as part of my experience, from a work perspective, especially global industries, has really helped me to appreciate the different perspectives that people bring to the workforce, that thought leadership can show up in lots of different ways. It's not always the loudest voice in the room. And that looking for the opportunities to learn from each other really is where the magic happens. I think that's something that I've carried with me as I journeyed across these different types of organizations, different industries. And it also has helped me with my own learning agility, to really look at what are the key components to getting up to speed quickly, how to prioritize from an organizational perspective to really align with strategy. And then to help team members feel that they can be connected to those things that we're driving throughout the organization, so that they feel that they can contribute. Those are all portable skills. I took a little bit away from every organization that I worked with that's really helped me to where I am today with Fiscalnote, which is a very fast growing organization that absolutely wants to be on the cutting edge from a technology and innovation perspective.

Michael Lee
You left your previous organization in the middle of the pandemic. What was it like shifting to a remote or hybrid situation when you were at the previous organization? And then how did you walk into a new organization already in the middle of the pandemic - what was that like?

Jennifer Yi Boyer
My prior organization required a lot of thoughtfulness around how we were stepping into dealing with the pandemic. There were no rules to follow, per se. And so a lot of it was really looking and making the best decision given the data that we had at that point in time. And quite literally, like many organizations, it was about a twenty-four hour turnaround in which we transitioned from a being-in-the-office-all-the-time work environment to one where we were all working from home.

Some of the biggest challenges were the feeling of uncertainty that people had, at that point. Lots of organizations were downsizing. So how do you reassure team members who've lost their sense of connection, who sometimes were really struggling with very personal and significant health challenges, to feel that the work they were doing mattered. And at the same time, in that particular company, we had a strong downturn from a business perspective that was impacting our customers. And so it was a lot of morale boosting, a lot of connection, a lot of creating support opportunities. We were able to architect that on the front end.

Coming into Fiscalnote, where they had already been working in that environment for almost a year, was a little bit different, because the rhythms were not quite the same. Communication vehicles were a little bit different. And a lot of the organization was focused on written communication. Whereas in the previous organization, we focused a lot on how much can we push to live communication and creating a frequency of touchpoints. But there were some things that Fiscalnote was doing that I think really helped folks onboard like myself, when they didn't have an opportunity to be in person. Things like matching algorithms that would connect us randomly every week to someone else in the company, and an opportunity to meet and just talk about life.

Those things tended to help humanize the experience in a way that really helped embody the culture and get to know individuals. At that point in the pandemic it was focused much more on social connections and mental health. A lot of the things early on that I was able to do in FiscalNote really were focused on normalizing the fact that there were a lot of mental health issues and challenges as part of navigating this pandemic. And it's okay to talk about them. And providing a lot of services and access to things that perhaps under normal circumstances would not have been considered.

Michael Lee
When you talk about the hybrid situation you're in now, what are the specific challenges you foresee coming in the next period of time?

Jennifer Yi Boyer
Probably the biggest challenge that is starting now and will continue is going to be retention. The remote work environment creates a sense of disconnection. And one of the things that really drives engagement for people is feeling that they're making a difference and contributing. There are fewer organic touch points for those kinds of conversations - coaching, positive reinforcement - that you might get a little bit more naturally within an in-person environment. I think we have to work very hard as an organization, and not just our organization. You've heard about the Great Resignation. This sort of experience that we're going through is really creating a very unique labor market, and people are wanting to know that they're valued. I think that is probably the top priority for us as an organization right now.

Michael Lee
I guess that begs the question of what are the ways that we can actually solve that?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

Although I would say this particular challenge probably has no silver bullet, there's going to be a number of things that are important here. One is creating systems within the organization to operationalize coaching as a practice with a an expected frequency to it. For example, one of the things we've done this year is we've moved completely away from traditional performance reviews. It's not really sufficient to know how you're doing once, maybe twice a year. It tended to be seen as a very inhumane administrative task.

And so one of the ways we really focus systematically to help our team members and managers connect more frequently is moving to an agile-based coaching model, where we're expecting them to talk to their team members at least once a week about priorities and goals that are really relevant for that ninety day time frame. And at the end of that ninety day time frame, we're asking our team members to give their leaders feedback on how well they were coaching them.

So we're creating some of those requirements in a manner that really drives dialogue, frequency of touchpoints. And then at the same time, we really double down on training our leaders. We've introduced a number of inclusive leadership programs as well as some coaching culture programming. Those things are intended to help drive more empathetic behaviors, get more engaged leadership examples in place, and then really help them cultivate the voice and choice component for team members so that team members have forums and opportunities where they can contribute ideas and also feel like they're included as we make decisions across the company.

Michael Lee
How can we use technology to solve some of these challenges?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

Well, it's interesting. We've used two things. One is called Donuts, where we have a Slack plugin that connects people to other people to drive some of that interaction. Another one that we just implemented was, Hey Taco. You'll notice the food theme. Don't ask me why. Hey Taco is focused on appreciation and recognition that can be peer-to-peer. Creating those easy-to-access things within the technology environment people are already working in every day has really helped them in a really interesting and very quick way get picked up and mainstreamed. We literally only implemented Hey Taco a couple of weeks ago, and there are hundreds of people acknowledging and recognizing people on a daily basis.

Some of those simple things are technology enabled. We work in a very collaborative Google Suite. Many companies have lots of different versions. That also has allowed people the flexibility in this environment to work whenever it makes sense for them. Because they can go in and contribute. There's a source of truth there. And that level of transparency has also been very helpful. From a communication perspective, the pandemic creates a lot of opportunities for miscommunication. Because those day-to-day interactions aren't there to reinforce if you're on the right track or not, There's the proverbial water cooler conversation.

Some of those things have driven us to create that frequency of dialogue, not just in those other forums. I've found that frankly, a lot of folks who are a little more introverted, who would not necessarily do those things in an in-person environment, are engaging in those kinds of discussions and dialogues in an online forum.

Michael Lee
So the answer you're saying is basically donuts and tacos.

Jennifer Yi Boyer
Not it's not only donuts and tacos. A lot of it has to do with leader behavior. One of the models I'll share that we use in our inclusive leadership program we call the Four As. Ask, assist, acknowledge, and appreciate. We encourage leaders to use that in their one-on-one engagements so that they're balancing conversation. So that they're not doing all the talking. So that they're making sure to recognize people's contributions. But also to make sure that if there are opportunities where folks need a little bit of assistance or support or development, that we're attending to those things as well.

It's not all about the food or the plugins, it does come back to leaders supporting their team members in a way that shows compassion and also encourages them to speak up when they see opportunities for improvement.

Michael Lee
How do you manage to put together the people who are working in the office and people who are working remote, in the hybrid situation where people are having to connect that way?

Jennifer Yi Boyer
Our real premise is flexibility. In this current labor market, that's been an advantage for us, because a lot of employers are creating hard-and-fast rules about who has to return. Well, that has tended not to be a great retention tactic for them.

There's going to be a period of experimentation for us, and for many companies, to see what works. I expect it'll be a little messy, a little bit iterative. And we'll figure out which roles it's really most important that we might need them in the office, or at least at a certain frequency.

No hard-and-fast rules. Flexibility is going to be the name of the game. And a little bit of experimentation.

Michael Lee
How do you keep your employees excited, having a good experience?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

For us, I think one of the most important shifts is to accommodate team members having that need to have a little bit more autonomy, if we want to use that word. To really focus on helping leaders understand what their role is in that process. Their role is no longer to just direct and put the guardrails on, but also to be responsive and flexible to some of those individual needs people have.

That does connect to the inclusive leadership program that I mentioned earlier, where we use a very simple model around voice and choice and level-setting in a way that we ask leaders to create both the opportunity and the space for team members to give feedback to contribute their ideas and thoughts, and to be a part of the decision making.

But then we also have to be really transparent in that decision making so that they can see where we've used the ideas and suggestions. And if we haven't, that we also are sharing why. The locus of control around decision making is shifting a little bit. And that is creating, frankly, a much more collaborative work environment. But it is challenging a lot of traditional managers in terms of how they see their role, and really going into a space. They're more of a facilitator sometimes for that discussion and outcomes than simply just one that's giving instructions and directions.

Michael Lee

Have you experienced that in HR in terms of finding ways to keep the employees engaged, excited, have you found that difficult as the leader of HR?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

it's always a challenge. Morale right now is one where there are so many factors influencing how people are feeling about their work. And a lot of my time is spent having those kinds of coaching conversations with leaders or working with team members on how to approach discussions with their leaders on particular things that they're struggling with. And that has really been part and parcel of the mental health conversation.

But also when we talk about operationalizing equity, and creating a space of community within the organization, if we're going to live our values, we need to be showing up very differently in these discussions. That's not necessarily something that we've had a lot of role models around, when it comes to that kind of approach to leadership.

Leadership is often misunderstood. You think that you have to be the one who makes all the decisions, because there's that sense of vulnerability you might have if you're not the one who is making the call. Finding some power in engaging others in a very proactive way to contribute to those decisions is kind of be liberating, if you're doing it right.

A lot of what's been particularly successful for us with our leaders is talking through different scenarios and bringing examples to the forefront where we put them in a position they're not normally in. We'll put them into a scenario where they are the team member having a struggle and having a tough experience and having to then plan how they're going to have a

conversation with someone else. There's a lot of role reversal here in our approach to facilitate what we call an open outcomes model. There's no one right answer that's going to work for anybody, not in the pandemic and not in regular life, either.

Our hope here is how many ways can we create a safe environment for people to experiment with different perspectives and approaches, to give them some tools that they can use that help drive a discussion of discovery, instead of feeling like they're just there to dole out the answers. And that is really an approach that I've found to be particularly useful.

But I would say that a lot of the follow-up conversation, whether it's peer coaching or executive level coaching, to really start to hold that mirror up for accountability. Accountability is incredibly important when you start to talk about empathetic behaviors and whether or not we're actually being transparent as we're making decisions. And that is where we really give leaders an opportunity to reflect and learn. It's okay, because we don't need perfection, we do need you to practice and be moving forward in a way that's constructive. But that's not one size fits all.

Michael Lee
What I'm hearing from you is there's a particular model you work with. You put a lot of focus on guiding leaders how to work with the employees, as opposed to maybe in some cases, people I have spoken to who do a lot of work directly with the employees and less with the leaders. It sounds like your model is very much focused on helping the leaders lead better.

Jennifer Yi Boyer
We definitely have put a huge focus on that. Previously in the organization, there was no leadership training. There's a bit of a capability gap that we've been closing over the course of the year. That said, concurrently through our DEIB initiatives, we focus on creating community. And while we're training all of our managers on how to be better coaches, we also are sharing with all of our team members what to expect from their managers, and then asking them to evaluate their managers. Those team members are taking their job very seriously when we ask them for feedback. That cycle, hopefully, becomes reaffirming for team members that their voice matters, that their feedback matters. That's where we really drive engagement, that sense of this is a place where I matter. And where I want to stay. That helps us with our retention.

Michael Lee
As a company, you're dealing with engagement in a broad sense, in the sense that you're dealing with communication, with connecting people, with communities, as the work that you do. Have you learned how to incorporate some of the lessons of the actual work you do into how you run the company?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

Definitely. There are ways that we learn also from lots of our clients, through Fireside Chat environments around topics that are relevant, especially with regard to the different kinds of inclusion that we try and drive. We work with data and packaging that data into useful formats for companies and for the government and for advocacy organizations. That information helps us stay focused and ahead of the curve.

I would say one particular example is ESG. When we start to think about the environmental, social, and governance issues that we're doing research on for different organizations who are our customers, we have to also be role models for that. So we are in the process of being self-reflective, to make sure that we are representing all of those same things that we're sharing and that our customers are looking for in our data sets as well.

Michael Lee

What are some of the lessons you've learned from the Fireside Chats for your work? What are some of the ways you can apply, other people can apply, those lessons into their company?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

More than anything, it's humanizing it. And making sure that however we're packaging things that there's a clear relevance and responsiveness that meets the window where there's need.

Oftentimes, organizations, ours included, have been focused on perfectionism. And that has caused us to miss the window of opportunity to really support and help people meeting them where they are and when they need it the most. That would be perhaps my guidance. Worry less about being perfect, in terms of how you're packaging it, and more about being relevant and timely.

Michael Lee

How can you improve communication inside of the company, especially in the hybrid or remote situation? What are some of the best ways to help people communicate better?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

You have to set aside the belief that "One and Done" is good enough for communication, and think through what are all the different ways you can reinforce a particular message. One example that I've always been frustrated by is when somebody says, Well, I don't understand why they didn't do XY and Z, I sent a memo on that, or I sent an email on that. The research will tell you, on average, people need to hear things at least three different times in different ways from different sources before it finally anchors. What we want to be able to do is really acknowledge that.

And it's not a single forum. It's repetition. But it's also - I'll go back to the point around relevance - it's making sure that the context around the message is clear. And that we really help individuals understand why it matters for them. I would also say a lot of organizations

today probably have an over-reliance on broad-based communications from the top. Research will tell you that the team members trust their direct manager more than anyone else.

Even this morning, at part of our leadership team meeting, we talked about the fact that we need to do a better job equipping our managers, our direct managers, to talk about the strategy, to talk about the things that are going to be important for us over the course of our growth in the next year. That is where I think many organizations struggle is that they don't find ways to include leaders in distilling the message at that point where they're talking to team members, and helping team members understand where they plug in.

Michael Lee
We also know that the number one reason people stay in a company or leave a company is their direct manager. What are some other ways that we can make sure that people are getting communication?

Jennifer Yi Boyer
One of the most common things that we use, and I'm sure many companies do, is that we survey our team members. We have check-in surveys on a regular basis to get a sense for whether or not they understand where we're going, if they're aligned with that messaging. We also do frequent all-hands sessions and then have follow-ups within department meetings. When you couple that with the coaching culture requirement that team members should meet with their managers once a week, there's a lot of dialogue happening at different levels that creates the opportunity for those different checkpoints. It's one of the reasons that we implemented that Four As model I mentioned earlier, where you've got Ask, Assist, Acknowledge, Appreciate. Because if a manager is doing all four things in those interactions, then they are actively soliciting the feedback that lets them know whether or not they've been understood and heard.

Michael Lee
How can a small company like a start-up or a very small team apply some of the lessons that you've been talking about throughout our conversation?

Jennifer Yi Boyer
Even in a smaller company, the practices and the behaviors look exactly the same. It's just that you might not have created a policy or a program around it. It really is about the kind of tone that you set with the level of communication.

But I also think that probably one of the most important things in that smaller work environment, that is true for FiscalNote as well, is that they focus a lot on engaging team members in everyday decision making and creating transparency around customer problems. That everyone has an opportunity to be thoughtful around how do we address them. There is a real feeling of ownership there that I think is a little bit easier in a smaller organization.

Our company this year has grown 72% in terms of headcount, year to date. That kind of growth does create some challenges for maintaining the culture in the organization, because you can't have that same level of intimacy where everybody's involved in every decision. Not everybody will have visibility into every customer problem. What it really does is put the focus on the leaders to have to make that still feel local and very close to their team members in their teams. But we also then have to make sure that we're clear on where can you improvise and where do we have to standardize so that we can continue to deliver regardless of where people sit in the organization.

Michael Lee

If you had to create a technology where everybody could meet and work together, a hybrid virtual space, where, wherever your people are, they could do whatever they have to do - what would that space look like, ideally, to you? What would you want to have in it? How would people interact there?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

Well, I'm not a video game player. But I'm somewhat tempted to think that perhaps in some case, that simulated work environment where there's a little bit more engagement and movement and choice around how people work together could be really interesting. Today what I find is that there's a lot of fatigue, given how long we've been in this pandemic remote work environment, that more and more people are turning off their video cameras or calling it on their phones. And as much as I know that Internet can be a little wonky, I don't believe that it's 95% of the time for certain people who are really just not feeling that that level of engagement is working. There is an intensity about being on screen live that I think is tough. Even something as simple as turning off your own video. Maybe opportunities to have an avatar might be something that we would explore in the future of work. There's lots of possibility there.

Michael Lee

And what else would you want in there, besides a video game avatar?

Jennifer Yi Boyer

Different spaces for different kinds of collaboration and different kinds of interaction. I've found that we've become very business-centric, and a lot of the pleasantries and small talk that create the fabric of the social network and the culture of an organization are gone. I'd love to see some of that replicated. If there were an app like that, I think just that ability to find people with non-work-related common thoughts, interests, communities, and practice around certain things that you could pop in and out of a little bit more fluidly. I think today, the other challenge we have is just being over-scheduled. It's not uncommon. We work on a thirty minute meeting schedule in FiscalNote generally. You might have fourteen meetings, fifteen meetings a day, back to back, no breaks in-between. And they're all focused on business delivery. Sometimes it dehumanizes it. To the extent we can leverage technology to

bring back a little bit more of the personalized human component, I think that would be very welcome.

Michael Lee
Jennifer, if I asked you to summarize for people what core message you represent, what it is that you think people should really know, how would you summarize that?

Jennifer Yi Boyer
I think my message for the world would be don't underestimate folks. Give them the space and the opportunity to contribute. And allow that to really guide your decision making. And don't feel like you have to have all the answers. The burnout issues are very real in many organizations today. And that is driving a lot of the under-appreciation and challenges companies are having with retention. The degree to which you can help your leaders feel equipped to really coach and support and meet people where they are is, in my opinion, the ticket to retaining your best staff.

Michael Lee
Thanks very much, Jen. It's really been a pleasure to hear your perspectives.

Jennifer Yi Boyer
Great. It's been so great to be here. Thank you