AT THE EDGE PODCAST

SEASON 2, EPISODE 8
SEBASTIEN GIRARD – Never Waste a Good Crisis
Interviewed by Michael Lee

Sebastien Girard is Senior Vice President and Chief People Officer at Centura Health. A native of Montreal, Canada, Seb joined Centura from Atrium Health, where he served as the Senior Vice President responsible for workforce engagement and workforce operations. He previously served as the Chief Workforce Officer at Parkland Health and Hospital System in Dallas, Texas. He spent nearly fifteen years with Randstad, a Dutch-based global human resources consulting firm, in executive and operations roles in both the United States and Canada. Seb has a Masters of Business Administration from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Sloan School of Management. He completed Randstad's international Senior Executive Program and the Human Capital Institute's strategic workforce planning development program. He also serves as an advisory board member with three independent HR companies, innovating in nurse staffing, professional nurse development, and health care workforce-managed solutions. In addition to his professional experience, Seb is passionate in giving back to the community and has engaged in international humanitarian projects to recruit and attract some of the world's best engineers to support those living in India with mobility obstacles.

In this episode, Sebastien shares about:
- How employee experience is different from engagement, and why experience trumps engagement every time;
- How the health care industry adapted quickly to hybrid;
- How the pandemic has accelerated a talent crisis;
- The need for intentionality in maximizing the hybrid employee experience;
- What types of technology he believes are most important now and into the future;
- Why you should never waste a good crisis;
- And more.

Michael Lee

Sebastian, thank you for being on At the Edge. And welcome.

Sebastien Girard

Thank you for having me. It's an honor to be here today.

Michael Lee

Let's jump right in and talk about hybrid work. How has hybrid work changed the situation for your company?

Sebastien Girard

It changed tremendously. The healthcare industry was a little bit alien to working remotely. Hybrid work, working remote, has been embraced by other industries quite some time ago. But it was not really coming in in healthcare. So we had to adapt extremely quickly due to the pandemic. And we had to shift on a dime. It went extremely fast. And the impact is significant.

So it was for the right reasons, but it really brought a new layer to the healthcare industry. And it forced us to bridge the gap in skills like virtual leadership or virtual leadership development or even virtual engagement. How do you engage your people virtually without seeing them or being with them in person?

And then there's new layers, like, for example, virtual performance management. So how am I managing your productivity or even delivering a tough message while doing it on a Zoom call? Or even to go deeper, virtual mental health?

So having hybrid work, more people working from home, we're all getting pressure. COVID brought a lot of pressure to life. It also brought a lot of exhaustion and burnout in the workplace. How do I identify those signs virtually that I normally would pick up through your body language if I were in person? Those are skills that many leaders in healthcare didn't have, that we had to swiftly adapt to, so that we could adapt to the new reality of hybrid work.

Michael Lee

What are some of the ways that you did it?

Sebastien Girard

First of all, by bringing awareness to it. Acknowledging it's happening. And then coaching, training and development, and just providing the tools on how to do those things virtually. There's a true journey happening right now, moving from engagement to experience. And there's a big difference between both. I can be engaged and have an awful experience, and what I'll remember

is the experience. Or I can be disengaged and have an amazing experience, and what I'm going to remember is the amazing experience.

That journey in itself, that transformation, is absolutely happening. How the hybrid work model really impacts that transformation is, on one side, enhancing engagement, because for many, working from home can be a very positive factor that can be engaging in their work. On the other hand, you lose connectivity with people. So you also have to develop and train how you build relationship and connectivity. How do you stay engaged? Or have your leaders be engaging and creating experience while having to do it in a new way?

Michael Lee
When you talk about the difference between experience and engagement, it sounds like you're saying that experience trumps engagement. How are these two things different in how you interact with them, operate with them, create them? How do you do that differently in those two areas?

Sebastien Girard
The experience economy was a business case from *Harvard Business Review* in the late 90s. It became a book. It's really picking up and we see it right now. Organizations that maximize the emotions and the attention of their customers are the ones that are winning. You see it with Disney. You see it with Apple. You see it with Amazon. There's an emotion attached to those organizations, and it creates loyalty, and it creates the success that we see from those organizations. Or even Walmart. Whether you like Walmart or not, the people that like Walmart love Walmart. So that experience economy is number one.

Number two, Dr. Maya Angelou said it better than anybody, people are going to always forget what you tell them, but they will never forget how you make them feel. I can be engaged. But the emotion I'm going to go through, depending on the situation I'm in, is what I'm going to remember.

The focus we need to have as leaders is what type of emotion we want to create with our people. And then making sure that we spend our time to focus on that. So if for example I have a tough message to deliver, I know it's gonna be a disengaging message, but I really want the person to feel respected. How do I change my message, so that what the person is going to remember from the tough conversation is, they were transparent, they respected me, and I'm going to get better?

So there's a way to create emotion. And experience trumps the engagement card. Every single interaction is a way to create an experience, and very often it's just a matter of taking the time to reflect, What emotion do I want to come out from that interaction? If I want to feed somebody to feel recognized, it's not just a word I'm going to use, it's how am I going to have this conversation so that the person truly feels proud? And therefore, what they're going to remember is the proudness of that moment versus the words. Instead of "Good job."

Good job isn't a recognition. It might engage you, but you're going to forget about it. But if I say "Good job," but I do it in a public forum, and I do it with a handwritten card, and I do it to really increase your proudness - that's what you're going to remember.

So I think it's really just coaching leaders that every single interaction, every single one, even a tough message, is an occasion to create an experience. What emotion do you want to create?

Michael Lee
And I guess one of the big changes that we've seen is that every single employee is an individual.

Sebastien Girard
Absolutely. And none of them get an experience the same way. That's why I go back to the preparation for what emotion you want, because no two people are gonna have the same emotion from the same message. As a leader, you need to ask yourself the question, What's the best way for me to reach their heart and soul and not just use words? And it's really to be intentional.

There's a couple examples I can give. I felt that very often being virtual, I could learn more about people than if I was working with them in person. Let's say I was working from home and my background is my favorite sports team. So out of nowhere now you know I like sports, I like football, you know which team I like the most without us even having a conversation.

Because productivity was so high working remote, the one-on-ones were only to talk about life. Normally in the office, the one-on-one is to talk about work and make work move forward. Remotely, the one-on-one is to catch up - dedicated time where it's more about, How's everything going with you? How's your family? Tell me about your dog. What's your hobby? How do you stay sane in this crazy time? A one-on-one became the time to connect. Where when you're in the office, it's often reversed - you connect at the water cooler when you get your coffee in the morning, and then at your one-on-one, you do the work. So intentionality is the key word on this one.

That's one thing that COVID did to change the landscape, and I think it's going to be changing the landscape forever. Around mental health, there was a point in time where if somebody was going to struggle at home, they were going to go into a depression. And there was a point in time where if they were going to struggle at work, they were going to exhaustion and burnout. What we learned with the pandemic is both are extremely related. You show up at work showing burnout and exhaustion. But the source of your burnout and exhaustion is home, what you're going through in your life. You're either going through a relationship issue, a financial issue, sickness, etc. But it's really intertwined.

What the pandemic did is for us to really get the best out of all our people individually. We need to care for their whole selves. That's inclusive of even their mental health at home or caring for

their whole family, etc. We always knew that people are the highest asset and value of any organization. But now we know it's the responsibility of a company. Where in the past it was only to care about work, it's now to care about the whole person.

Michael Lee
How do you do that? To actually care for each and every one of your employees, the whole person in all these different aspects? How do you do it?

Sebastien Girard
Well, first of all is to acknowledge that transformation, going from only having to care for your employee as an employee to caring for the whole person. But the second one is culture. When you talk to people, do you talk about their family? When you do events, are you inviting their family? When you provide tools to recharge, are they only mental or are they also physical and spiritual? So are you really addressing all the components?

I think more and more organizations in any industry are picking up on the fact that COVID really changes how life and work are getting together. When you work remote, you work at home, but you also sleep at work. And I think companies pick up on that. Now do I think healthcare is doing it in spades? I do believe so. Because we're facing the pandemic. So we're more frontline than many other industries. And therefore we're seeing more the impact that COVID in life and COVID at work can have on people. There's a transformation happening.

Michael Lee
Let's talk about innovation a bit. Innovation in the hybrid space can be tricky, with less direct communication - collaboration and communication being critical to innovation, and yet being two of the hardest things to achieve remotely. How have you seen the impact on innovation?

Sebastien Girard
I want to make a distinction between disruption and innovation. I think both are necessary. Innovation is, I'm going to do things the way they were done before, but better. It's process improvement. Disruption is, I'm going to do things in a way that makes the old way obsolete. Toyota made Ford better in terms of quality and availability, if we go back fifty years ago. Netflix made Blockbuster obsolete. Toyota was an innovation to Ford. Netflix was a disruption to Blockbuster.

The good news in healthcare is innovation was always part of the culture. Innovation is something that we've always done extremely well, especially on the medical side. To be the best and the most current on the medical side is extremely important for a healthcare system. So it was part of where we were when the crisis happened, when we had to move remote. We took the lesson

from how we already knew how to do it on the medical side and applied it to how do you do it on, in this case, some non-clinical function.

The other thing, as Winston Churchill said: Never waste a good crisis. There's nothing like a crisis to bring people together. We didn't have the luxury of time. We didn't have the luxury of failure. We had patients to take care of. And we had to do it very fast.

So when you have smart people, working remote or not, that come together and find a way to work together without egos and without pulling the blanket on their side of the bed, you get to that level very fast. That explains some of the big innovations we had to do in the past twenty months. So in this case, the end justifies the means. We were forced to innovate, so we figured it out. But we knew how to do it because we had this huge experience on the clinical side.

Michael Lee
Which is more important? Does innovation drive engagement? Or do engaged people innovate better? Which comes first?

Sebastien Girard
I don't think that we are in a situation of a chicken or an egg here. I think there's a chicken and an egg both at the same time. Innovation is not always engaging, because not everybody reacts the same way to innovation or to the level of innovation. I also don't think that engagement drives innovation all the time, because not everybody knows how to do innovation the right way.

So to me, this is more about how do you bring the right people, with the right innovations, triggered with the right engagement? And then if you have that set up the right way, I would say both drive each other. If I have people at the table then I know it's going to be engaging for them, and I know that because if they're engaged, you're going to drive even more innovation. So it's fueling each other at the same time. That's why I'm saying it's an egg and a chicken at the same time instead of one versus the other.

Michael Lee
One of the things that the pandemic has done is cause a lot more dependence on technology. How do you see that technology is changing the employee experience?

Sebastien Girard
I'm all in favor of technology. I'm a technologist. I'm a futurist. So to me, I would say it tremendously impacted. And it did it in a very positive way. I think it's necessary, it's expediting how fast we need to go, where we needed to go before COVID.

If we look into the data, there's two boomers retiring for one Gen Z or one Gen Y entering the employment market. So we're losing two resources for one coming in. So we're losing resources. The second thing is, in the US, the unemployment rate was below 4%. As soon as we look into the clinical function, it's below 2%. When it's below 4%, it's considered a full-employment market. So virtually everybody's having a job, and two people retire against one coming into the market.

COVID didn't change retirement. It actually expedited retirement, because their 401Ks didn't go down. So there's even more people retiring. And the employment rate is as good as it was before. When you deal with something like that, your only ways to win are three things: process improvement, which is innovation; retention, don't lose your people; or technology.

So to answer your question, technology is helping tremendously in the case of engagement. It's providing a just-in-time feedback mechanism. You can react much faster than you did before. It's helping you lower the workload. Because there are two ways to increase productivity - add people, but right now, there's no people to add - or support mental health. It's providing tools that we didn't have before to be able to support people and make them more productive.

Michael Lee
And what are some of the specific tech technology tools that you have found to be successful?

Sebastien Girard
An engagement platform gives us the chance to have a survey mechanism at the frequency that we want to modify the way we want, so that we truly can have feedback on how people react to an initiative. We're looking into mental health technology we can provide on devices to support to our people. If I reach out to an EAP, to a resource group, I'm already deep in my issue. I'm reaching out, but my problem is pretty deep. If I want to provide prevention to the problem, very often, it's a matter to do with technology. And we all know mental health is a way to increase productivity. If I'm feeling better, and I'm feeling healthy, I'm more productive, I'm more engaged.

And there's a way to enhance innovation even virtually. If we look into some of the platforms like Teams, for example, where you can basically all work on the same document live in a very efficient way while seeing each other - there's a way to maximize that technology that increases productivity.

Michael Lee
What do you think is lacking in the technology? In other words, what would you like to see get developed over the next period that would help increase productivity and engagement in the hybrid situation?

Sebastien Girard

I think what we experience right now, the world is short-staffed. I was reading an article about the airline industry. They are just shutting down flights because they basically have nobody to fly the planes. If we go into healthcare, there's not enough clinical people to care for the level of patients that we're having due to the pandemic. I don't know how it looks, but we've got to find a way to lower workloads, or lower dependency on people to technology, and increase productivity.

The reason I'm linking it to engagement is because one engaging factor is workload. And one thing that can be very disengaging is if I feel that I'm short-staffed, I have to put the load of all the people that are missing on my own shoulders, and therefore I need to do way more.

Michael Lee

I'm going to ask you another imagination question. Imagine you have a hybrid workplace, in other words, a virtual space where people, especially those who are not in the office, open their computer up in the morning, and they spend the whole day with that thing open, because that's their office, they don't come to work at all. In your perfect dream, what would that space look like? What would it contain? How would it work?

Sebastien Girard

We know that working virtually is engaging. We know it's increasing productivity. We know that it's lowering connectivity, and that it is not the best medium to create innovation. That's what we know. So what I would want to see is anything that enhances connectivity, that makes it more personal. What I would want to see is any tools that can generate the level of ideation that I would get in person, so that I can feel that I'm in person with you.

One thing that we've been using for years is a Virtual Job Fair, or Virtual Conferences with virtual booths. And then you have your avatar that goes from one booth to another in the case of a Job Fair, or from one stage to another in the case of Conferences. And when you get to the booth, you're put in sync with whichever company is at that booth, and then you can have a quick conversation, and then you're virtually moved to another booth, and then you have another conversation with another company.

The reason why I'm using that as an example is, I would not be shocked if offices become true virtual offices. By virtual offices, I mean having an avatar where we can all be in a room seeing each other, where you can learn about us, like those family pictures, things like that. The beauty of technology or having it virtually is that everybody can impact the same document at the same time. Everybody would be able to play.

Michael Lee
Give me some more insight into connectivity. How do we make that work? We talked about it a bit in terms of leaders. But how do you make it work among teams, among people who aren't leaders?

Sebastien Girard
Create an expectation and an intention, a setup and a time to do it, and have building relationship as the purpose. I'll give two or three examples with my direct team. We had a fifteen-minute call every single day where it was a rule to not talk about work. Those were my direct reports. We had a one hour call with the whole HR team where we were not going to talk about work. And we ended up having conversations about Tiger King on Netflix, or the last football game, or people were showing their costumes before Halloween. But we were not able to talk about work. We had other time dedicated in the calendar to do that. And I was doing it with HR, but all my directs were doing the same thing with their teams.

At a certain point, it was recurrent, all at the same time. Some teams, it was one lunch a week where they were all going to show up. We forced people to do it. But I ended up knowing more about people virtually than I had in the office.

I'll use the Halloween costume example. When we had this one hour a week, before Halloween, just by seeing people showing up in their costume, or showing their kids' costumes on the call, that was telling you so much about them. Oh, you're Iron Man. Alright. So you like Marvel? Let's talk about that. Your kid is a unicorn. And you're a princess. Let's talk about your favorite Disney show. So it really triggered conversations I would have never ever have had in the office. And I felt more connected. But we were extremely intentional.

Michael Lee
As a futurist, as someone who thinks about the future - what's the future? Where are we headed? With hybrid work and with work? Where's it going?

Sebastien Girard
I think it's here to stay. And I think, like everything, you can disagree with the trends, but resisting is going to be a mistake. I think organizations need to embrace it, and really perceive the value of hybrid work, and really maximize the engagement of hybrid work and coach the leaders how to be extremely efficient with hybrid work.

What hybrid work is going to bring to the table is, you're going to have people able to do the work anywhere in the world. So it's going to remove frontiers, which is highly necessary in a world that is short-staffed. Done well, it will increase productivity. If it's done in an intentional way, it will increase connectivity.

You've got to embrace it. It's not going anywhere. I think the beauty is that more and more innovators or brilliant minds are going to focus on how to make it better for all of us. Again, I think it's just a matter of embracing the trend and not resisting it.

Michael Lee
So the future is bright.

Sebastien Girard
We'll make it bright. Never waste a good crisis. Humans are always nervous in the face of changes. Innovation is scary, seeing things differently, because we like to be comfortable in our old ways, in our own ways. But we always find a way to make it better. And in this case, we don't have a choice.

We have to work remote. It is safer. It is better access for staff, because we are short-staffed. And there is a way to be more productive. We already have the proof of that. And I think productivity is just going to keep increasing. And that's exactly what we need to compensate for the lack of human resources we're going to be facing. The future is bright if we embrace it. Let's put it like that.

Michael Lee
One of the original Futurists, Alvin Toffler, in his book Future Shock many years ago predicted that the future was going to be ever-accelerating. It's not like this pandemic's going to end and things are going to slow down again. The need to adapt, to always be looking for ways to be more productive, more flexible - this is, I would imagine, a Futurist's vision of paradise.

Sebastien Girard
I cannot agree more. So there's a couple of things. There's a lot of bad that is coming out of this pandemic, of course. It's touching with the health of people, death, etc. But the one thing this pandemic is going to generate that's going to be good, and hopefully long-lasting, is the ability to adapt to change very fast and make change happen fast.

I totally agree with you on the speed of change. In the 80s, organizations were going through one major change every decade. And by a major change, I mean either an economic crisis, a change of name, an acquisition, a strong change in strategy. In the 90s, it was twice a decade. In the early 2000s, it was three times a decade. Right now we're talking three times a year. And so just within the past forty years, we went from one major change a decade to three times a year. And it's only keeping expediting. Now, organizations are going through five, six, seven major changes a year.

So the capacity to adapt, the capacity to have change management and to embrace technology and innovation and disruption, honestly, not just innovation - to pay attention to disruption. Nobody wants to be Blockbuster. Nobody want to be Toys R Us. Because we know how to. That capacity is what's gonna make an organization win or lose.

Michael Lee

If you wanted people to remember you, the Chief People Officer of Centura, and there was one thing you want them to remember about this conversation, how would you summarize that? What would that be?

Sebastien Girard

I can give you two. One on innovation and one on experience. Because I think it's two different topics.

On experience: there's a difference between engagement and experience. Please do that change from engagement to experience. You're going to see the results with speed.

On the innovation side: I'm going to go back to say, It doesn't matter if you agree or disagree with the trend, it's going to happen no matter what. What matters is if you embrace it or not. The capacity to embrace it is what's going to make the difference. The landscape is driving us, not the other way around.

Michael Lee

Thank you. That's really well-put and succinct. Here's my last question. And I think it's the most important question of this entire discussion. What's your Halloween costume?

Sebastien Girard

I was Dr. Strange. I have two young boys. They were Black Panther and Spider Man. So yep, I was Dr. Strange. Now you see, you know a lot about me, and we've never met. So, point made. What was yours?

Michael Lee

The Headless Horseman. I would love to just go around with no head. Maybe I just spend too much time in my head. So it would be nice to go around without one.

Sebastien Girard

Which is also telling me something. Which is good!

Michael Lee

Thank you very much for this provocative conversation. It's always nice to talk to a thinker. So thank you very much for sharing your thoughts.

Sebastien Girard

It was a pleasure to have the conversation and an honor. Thanks for having me.