

# EEP Rhonda George QM

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Maria Ross, Rhonda George-Denniston

00:04

Does your organization actually bet on its people, like truly invest in and grow your people, even if you know they may not stay more than a few years? Well, today you'll learn that doing so is a smart business strategy, and one that has helped TBWA worldwide dominate the advertising industry across the globe. Today we talk with the delightful Rhonda George Dennison, Chief Learning Officer at TBWA worldwide. We discuss why her company has elevated learning to the C suite. What today's leaders need to succeed her answer may surprise you how to lead multi generational workforces and help each other collaborate well together, and why so called soft skills of communication, empathy and authenticity can make or break your company's success and how industry leaders like TBWA devote resources and time to build those skills for all their people at every level, not just a select group. A little bit about Rhonda before she shares her own story, she and I had the pleasure of working together several times over the last few years for me to deliver empathy workshops to her different training cohorts, and I can't wait to do more. Having spent her initial career in the.com Boom, Rhonda brings an entrepreneurial spirit to her role. In 2001. She joined TBWA and landed on her mission, helping others to be their best selves. Rhonda is responsible for TBWA talent development strategy, ensuring key talent is retained engaged and thriving throughout their careers. Focusing on a systemic and interactive learning approach, she advocates individual growth plans while bolstering TBWA top talent. She's a nurturer and avid gardener and rescuer of discarded furniture, giving them a whole new life and purpose. And speaking of purpose, you will love what she has to say about helping your employees find theirs. Take a listen.

02:18

Welcome Rhonda to the empathy edge, we have finally made this interview happen. And I could not be more delighted to have you as a guest to share your work and your story with our audience. Welcome.

**Rhonda George-Denniston** 02:30

Thank you for having me here. Maria. Yes, it's good to be here. I'm excited that we made this happen.

**Maria Ross** 02:35

I know. And you know, as of this recording, you have recently been promoted to Chief Learning Officer at TBWA. Worldwide, which as I was telling you just thrills me that they've made learning and development a sea level position. So tell us a little bit about your story first, before we get into the good stuff of the the meat of the interview. How did you come to this work of learning and development?

**Rhonda George-Denniston** 02:59

Oh, my gosh, Maria, how much time do you have? We got a little bit. I have humble beginnings at TBWA. I actually started as E HR global chief financial officer. So yeah, from an EA to now sitting in the C suite. Boy, there's a lot that happened in between there. I'd say the thing that's really I find just so amazing about TBWA as an organization is the they bet on talent. Yeah. And so I'm an example of that, but but through the work that we do, it's exemplified where the organization is really about people. And yes, we do work for brands and clients. But there's a huge investment placed in people. And so I was able to always raise my hand for different roles and different things, and be able to have the opportunity they've always bet on me and invested in my growth. And so through different roles just fortunate enough to be now sitting in this C suite.

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Well, I'm very hard earned as well. But what what drew you to learning and development?

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Again, at TBWA, we always gather so yes, I started as an executive assistant, and then went on to become a project manager in the role of a project manager. I was working with the marketing team and the marketing team, the global marketing team sits in service to the entire collective Yeah. We always gathered like specialists and different discipline heads and different groups, always gathering to let's learn to lead us about whatever it is. And so seeing that that was our pattern. I thought you know what, maybe this is something that I can do so I can maybe get into this where I am solely for focusing on gathering our leaders and gathering discipline heads to come together to learn. So yeah, I went in with a spiffy spreadsheet and a deck to my boss, and, hey, at the time said, You know what, I think I'd love to be a program manager. Right? Because we didn't have that pathway in terms of leadership development or I&d. We didn't have it on the global level. So yeah, we were always meeting and gathering to learn and get better at our craft. And as a result, I was able to harbor a role for myself, and which eventually led to me being here.

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Well, and you know, as someone who has spoken at many of your training sessions, you definitely bring a passion to helping other people learn and reach their potential. And I think probably that spark in your heart is what folks recognized and why, you know, it's amazing that it is a C level role that that's how committed the organization is to developing talent. And like you said, betting on talent, and I wish more companies would really elevate that as a separate function from HR. I think everyone lumps it under HR, everything, people under HR, and yet they're very different. They're very different functions.

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Yeah, for sure. You know, TBWA, I believe we, we've been on the vanguard of leadership development. As an industry. We have our parent company, right as the model. So at the at the parent company level, Omnicom has Omnicom University where the investment is an Harvard Business School professors, we have business cases that are developed specific to our network, the Omnicom network and people and leaders within the Omnicom network. So just having that as a model, they've definitely set the bar for who we can be as TBWA, and how we can invest in talent. So definitely, we've always once we got into the area of Okay, so now this is going to be such specialized, we're going to be very intentional about how we gather, where we gather, who we gather, once we got into that area, that it became, okay, we want the best of the best as far as bringing in subject matter experts to help grow our people, because we want to give our people an unfair advantage.

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I love that an unfair advantage and, and the fact that you even call it gathering, I noticing that terminology. And that's wonderful, rather than, you know, setting up training or getting people to attend or this idea of this mutual invitation to, to helping them thrive, and really understanding that, especially in a service based industry, your people are your product, you know, I hate to put you know, I'm using air quotes, but that that is where the innovation comes from. That's where the creativity comes from, that can't come from a machine or, you know, I mean, as much as people are doing with AI right now. But it's being able to develop those people. But what I love even more about this mindset is understanding that it's a different skill set to lead and manage people. You know, so often and as you've probably seen two people get promoted into leadership roles, because they're good at doing the work. Right, good at the job of leading at the skill of leading and gaining consensus and creating energy and boosting innovation and collaboration. Yeah, so I love that there's that commitment.

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Yeah, and especially Maria, just the way the world is today. That's that's exactly what is needed. As a leader, you're not going to know everything, there's no way you can keep pace with the change, right? Technology is just growing at a clip. So therefore, if technology is moving at a clip, you have to be able to one, be collaborative, be able to influence and bring the best out of others because now the spotlight moves from okay, you having all the answers to Hey, you bring it the best and bring you the answers out of others. So that's how you really demonstrate your value as a leader. And that's what we recognize. And I think more so because we're a global collective. It's we spotted I think that that need or that trend ahead of the others because we're global, and we have to work with others from different parts of the world to get the solution. So it's always been one of those markers of success for us in terms of how we value leadership

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Absolutely. And that's a great dovetail into, you know, what you're seeing in terms of what leaders need to be successful. Yes, they need to understand the job and the business acumen and understand the market, and all of those things. But you've mentioned a few of the skill sets that they need to succeed. What what do you focus on as you're developing leaders, whether it's new leaders, or seasoned leaders who need a little brush up? What are more of those skills that are needed in the 21st century to be an effective leader?

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Oh, gosh, self awareness. So I put self awareness as one of the most important things because you, before you can lead others, you have to have a great awareness of your values. Right? You really have to know how you're showing up for others. So that you can either dial it up or dial it back, you have to know how you received and perceived by others. So self awareness would be number one of the Yeah.

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And that's so so interesting, because that's so true. And I've often talked about the fact that when, when it comes to empathy, ego kills empathy, because when you're when you're stuck in your own, your own stuff, you have no, you have no room to take on another person's point of view, or even to accept another person's idea without defensiveness. Yeah, so I love this idea that self awareness is the key. How do you work with leaders to help them build self awareness? Let's say let's say, you know, worst case, you're dealing with someone who has no idea how they're coming across. And I'm sure you, you've had to deal with leaders that are like that. I mean, there's, there's the difference between leaders that are brand new, and don't really understand they don't really know how they lead yet, because they haven't had the opportunity. And then there's leaders and we've all had them, who were like, do you even know someone else is in the room? You know, how, how do you go about do you have any? I mean, there's, there's not going to be quick tips to this. But what's a strategy to help someone in the organization develop that self awareness?

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Hmm, that's a good question. You know, we work with world class coaches, to kind of help our people to develop their leadership skills and identify whether or not they're sucking the air out of the room. Oh, my gosh. Yeah. So I think you really have to ask for feedback, really. So you have to be in great relations with your people to ask for feedback. And it could be it's difficult getting feedback from the people who reporting to you, right? Because depending on your relationship, that can be tricky,

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right? Especially if you, especially if you think that that's, that's negative for you that it's if you get that feedback, and it's negative, people are going to see you differently, or they're going to lose respect for you, when actually, it's the leaders that ask for feedback that are often more highly respected.

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Yeah. Yeah. So I think you should make that a part of your growth strategy to seek feedback from others.

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Right? And then action? Yes, and then take action on it. Right, right. And the action is not to figure out how to rebut every piece of feedback. But to really take it in and try to understand like, you know, maybe I don't I don't see that I'm doing that. But clearly somebody else is perceiving that I do that. So let, let me get curious as to why they have that perception. And maybe they will tell me Well, here's some specific examples of actions you've taken, that make me think you don't care or you don't understand our workload or whatever the the negative feedback might be. But I also think there's, it's, it's the self awareness is also like you alluded to, it's understanding your strengths as well. And we

recently did an episode about leaders understanding their strengths. I'll put a link to it with Brendan Miller. His organization helps people use the the Clifton Strengths Finder, finders, yeah, understand their strengths. And that's part of the part of the journey is not just self awareness of okay, you're gonna hear about everything you're doing that you're doing wrong, but to also understand where your strengths are, and you might actually be surprised at what some of your strengths are and figure out like you said, how to dial that up as a leader. Do you does does does your company or do you believe in those kinds of diagnostic tools to help leaders improve?

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Oh, definitely the psychometrics die and like we were definitely big on those and different tools for different cheaper because not everyone, you know, kind of buys into everything that you put out there. So we depending on the coach that we're working with, we would definitely make available to program participants, the various diagnostic and psychometric tools, the more the more insight and data that you can gather on who you are, it definitely helps you to create that, that plan that map for who you want to become,

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at any level, right? Even the most experienced leaders can benefit from, from understanding a little bit more or getting a little bit more insight into their leadership style, and maybe where they have blind spots.

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Definitely, we do this with our most seasoned vets. So we have programs. And that's the thing that's great about TBWA, too, as far as we have three pathways to access development opportunities, there's a nominated track, there's the application track, and there's the self directed path. There was a program that we have, there is a problem that we have our seasons that and we recently did Myers Briggs with them. Right? And these are people who have been Yes, you might have had it before. Right. Right. The the assessment before, but it's great to do it with a new cohort. And this is a trusted cohort, right? So you're actually giving when you reveal the assessment, you're giving each other feedback in terms of Yes, I experienced you this way. So yeah, I definitely agree with that, to be able to see it, when you're at a different stage, in a different setting with different people. It's definitely enlightening and helps to grow. You

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totally, totally, I remember doing a Myers Briggs exercise in one of my corporate gigs about, oh, gosh, it must be about 20 years ago now. And I had taken Myers Briggs when I was in high school, and taking it one other time between that, that corporate position. And I was always the same except I was ENFJ. Except the last time I took it, I was borderline J and whatever the last, I don't remember if it's p or not. P Yeah, I was borderline on that. But I it was, it was really interesting to see how I had been consistent from high school when I knew you know, nothing about leading. But what was interesting about the exercise we did as a as a, as a department was we got into groups where there were you know, we had very opposing, you know, I hate to use that word, but opposing letters. And everyone got to talk about what it was like, for them being in meetings, what it was, like, you know, and why, you know, this was frustrating to me. And that's frustrating to me. And I thought that was really powerful to have us actually

listen to each other and hear what our experiences are coming from those different personality types and different leadership types. And so it was really helpful to hear from someone you know, who we all thought was very cold and standoffish to say, I just can't think fast enough in a meeting. I'm an introvert, and I just need time to gather my thoughts. And, and it was just an amazing breakthrough of understanding to be able to do that exercise. And I can only imagine, especially if you're more senior, and you're willing to be humble, and going, you know, I can always improve. It doesn't matter if I've been at this for 30 years or 40 years. So I love hearing that. So let's talk a little bit about the different generations in the workplace, because there's been you know, we often cite the statistic that we now have five generations in the workforce right now. And that can cause a lot of friction. And I'm wondering if there's a different mindset or different curriculum, if you've got Gen Z leaders versus baby boomer leaders, or Gen X, or is there is there any difference that you're seeing around what those different cohorts need in terms of leadership development?

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You know, where rather than looking at the differences in terms of their different styles and ways of being I think we like to look at what are the common ground? Yeah, what is the common ground? Yeah, what what it is that? Each of those profiles, and really, we manage individuals, so let me back up for a second, right. And I'm gonna take advantage.

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Okay, hang on. Hang on, there's a plane flying overhead. That's why just so you know, that's why I keep muting every now and then because I'm reading flight path. And then I'll just tell my editor, we'll go back. I love this answer, by the way, thank you. Okay, all right. And

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Yeah, I think rather than looking at the differences between the generations, we look for the common ground. Alright. The other thing about TBWA is that we are really big on managing individuals versus managing an entire segment of the population. So with that, it's what do they have in common? What does everyone have in common? Everyone wants to be treated with dignity. Everyone wants to know that they're doing meaningful work. Everyone wants to know that they're compensated for what they're worth. And that they're bringing something of value to the organization. Alright, so it's not as much as Oh, yes, they do have

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oh, I text more than you do. Yeah, exactly. It's not those those little actions, right. Yeah.

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Okay. But it's, what's the message that needs to be communicated? And how can you communicate that message? Yes. So it's what's your signature style. And so that's why it's super important as, as a leader, regardless of which generation you fall within, to have an authentic signature style of communicating. And I think if your team sees you as having their best interests at heart, doesn't matter if it's text, or if it's in person, whatever the style is, if they know that my boss has my best interest, they're going to show up for you. So I think we are much more interested in what are the common areas that we have that we can reach everyone, because at this point, it's development, leadership

development is about developing the entire organization. So we're no longer cherry picking these five leaders to grow? We are really, it's about how do we bring out the leader in everyone? Yeah, because that's what's required to be collaborative to be able to influence across cultures and differences. That's what's required now, to be innovative, to be creative to solve for our clients to have a workplace, that's a place of belonging for everyone. So as much as the difference, the difference is the strength.

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I love that the difference is the strength. And it's really just about understanding those differences. And those contexts I've heard of. I've heard of other organizations that have done purposeful, purposeful, mentoring relationships, where they've actually paired up, you know, very senior baby boomer executives with, like a brand new Gen Z manager. And the goal of it is to help them learn from each other. And what often happens is that the younger people, don't they go in going, I don't know what I'm going to teach this person. But it's actually this wonderful collaboration and this wonderful, empathetic exercise of understanding the worlds of these folks and how they see the world of work. And, and like you said, then getting back to that, well, here's what we have in common. And you can avoid a lot of misunderstandings, I think, in that case.

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Yeah, I love the idea that that mentor eye because then feely as you said, it comes back to what do we have in common? And it comes back to relationships, why empathy is so important in the work that you're doing is so important.

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Yeah. So I want to talk to you a little bit about, we were talking before we started recording about a common lament, I'm hearing from quite a few leaders that are under a lot of stress right now, specifically in the tech industry, but I'm sure all over where they are leaders that have been working on the you know, making their signature style, one have empathy, and collaboration and understanding and lack of ego and all the things and yet they're being faced with a lack of empathy coming from their employees. So they feel like they're working really hard to show empathy. But then there's, there's sometimes there's employees that are, you know, not pulling their weight or not, you know, willing to do a little bit extra and tough times. And they're struggling because they know, you know, I want to respect boundaries, I want to be understanding of what's going on for this person. And we still have to get the work done. I'm still responsible for the performance of the organization. And so they're they're really struggling, they're having this existential crisis of what do I do? And you had some great advice when we were talking about this before we started recording. And I would love if you would share this with our audience of how can leaders work through those kinds of difficult relationships they might have maybe not with all of their employees, but maybe certain employees that that but they're not. They're not doing the job they need them to do.

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Yeah, in a hurry, I think, as if it's a team, whatever it is a team equip the people that you're managing one, I think you have to come in and agree on what your team's mission is. So establish a mission. Right? Which everyone together, you establish that mission. So it's not something that you as a team leader should come and be like, This is

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our mission. Yeah. Like, why did you think we're here? Why? Why are you here? Why did you join? Exactly?

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Why is that establish the why? Right? Alright. So once you've done that, and you've built, really the trust, as one person, it goes back to what we said earlier, right? It just can't be one person just putting things out there. So if I'm empathetic towards you, I'm gonna expect you to be empathetic towards me, because we are in this together. So creating that environment where it's a shared low, where you have set the bar, and I think that's something that you have to do together. And it goes back to what's our mission? What's our purpose? Why are we here? What do we believe in? Hmm.

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So love that. And I love doing that. Also, as a micro culture, I've talked to teams about that before where maybe they're frustrated, they're in a larger organization, and they don't feel like the C suite is an empathetic leadership body. And I always tell them, you don't have to wait. If you have your team, you can create a micro culture within your team, and come up with your values for your team and your mission and your standards of excellence. And then you actually end up becoming a model, because then when you You're killing it on your goals, people go, how are they doing that? Exactly. Right. And so you're able to, you know, this is the the, the complaint, I hear a lot with people in organizations that like, Well, I'm not in a leadership position, how can I get my leadership to understand that empathy is important, or culture is important. You can start with your own sphere of influence. And that's why I love what you're saying. It's making sure you as a leader are having having those you mentioned earlier, those tough conversations. Yeah.

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And I think that's why it's important to have your authentic voice, your authentic style of communication, like you, you really have to work on that. Right. So then you're able really to have those difficult conversations, and have them at times, it's

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I think we're in this place where, you know, we have to be very careful how we thread. And so at times when we're having difficult conversations, it's so it's it's cloudy, it's fluffy. Yes. Yeah.

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It's scary.

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Yeah, yeah. So it's, but it's not, at the end, the conversation ends, and the point that you're trying to make is not really delivered with the impact that you intended to have, right. So we really can't shy away from being clear and direct in terms of what the deliverables and the expectations are for being a member of this team. And then really, being willing to make the tough decisions, not only the tough

conversations, but then tough decisions, when you know, it's apparent that things aren't quite working out the way that you need them to.

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Right, right, and having that empathy, because I always say, you know, when you're having these difficult performance evaluations, for example, no one really wants to come to work and fail every day. So you know, they might be struggling too. And maybe then at that point, it's it's not the first course of action. But maybe at that point, the empathetic thing to do is, maybe we need to find you a different role. Or maybe we need to shore up your skills in this particular area. But you can't know that unless you have those conversations. And what you're saying to me is just getting me so excited, because again, it goes back to the fact that these are not soft skills at all, being able to communicate and collaborate and have honest conversations and be authentic. That's not fluff that actually impacts performance and the bottom line, because people can get work done and I'm getting all my up on my soapbox again. But you know, you've just proven again, how that how that those dots connect for people that we call these soft skills, we you know, people roll their eyes or say and empathy workshop is a waste of time or whatever, but it's those skills that can actually destroy a team or destroy an organization or, you know, maybe not destroy but hinder them from hitting their goals. holes.

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Yeah. And I think that's something. When I said TBWA has always been in Vanguard that as an organization, we realized and always infested it, right. Always invested in terms of growing and developing to softer side of business, which has a very huge impact on the bottom line

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has a very hard impact on the bottom. Totally, totally. I love it. So, as we wrap up here, what what do you think is changing? Or what do you think has changed from how long you've been doing learning and development work? Maybe not maybe TBWA had being on the Vanguard? It's a little bit of a biased view. But what do you see in terms of the conversations other companies and the market is having about the importance of leadership development? Are you seeing any changes from 10 years ago, 20 years ago, to deal with the realities of business in the 21st century? Yeah, um,

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I think it's good to have to bet on all. So it's not because one tenure isn't the same. Yeah. So now, the average tenure is what I think like four years. Yeah. Alright, so you have your talent for a little while. One of our coaches says, you know, you're now renting them, right? Yeah, yeah. So So you always have to present the most compelling reason for that person to stay. And so, gosh, if I know I can grow, I can flourish here, then maybe you've had me for a little while longer. So the thing of you have to do that on the individual level, and you have to do it for all. So it's not just a squeaky wheel anymore.

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Right? Right. Or it's not even just like, we only bet on our top, top perform high. What do they call it? high potential?

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Yeah. high potential. Yes. Everybody's high

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potential if we if we invest enough in them, right. Most of the time. Yeah. So I love that. And I, you know, that's the thing I'm hoping cuz you still see some companies clinging to the old ways of just know, when I have a, you know, when someone's performing badly, we caught them. When someone is, you know, a squeaky wheel, we, we love them, we're fine. Yeah, we let them go or, and then we only bet on the people that are, you know, showing their loyalty to US versus let's create an environment where we're not trying so hard to attract. People are magnetized. To us as an organization, I think that's what's going to be the key to success for companies in every market going forward. And the ones you know, I hear these horror stories all the time, people tell me these horror stories about management teams and executive teams, and I can't believe that things they're doing in 2023. And yet they are and I'm like, they're gonna wake up. And that's going to be a really awful hangover. When they when they finally realize what they've lost out on.

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Yeah, at Timmy web one and make your tenure the place where you've done your best work. So we are going to do everything possible to empower you to do your best work. So that means you have to have the best managers, that means that we have to have the best development programs. That means we are always betting on you. Because we want this to be the place where we understand you're only here for four years, whatever the tenure is, right? But when you look on your body of work, you identify, I did my best work when I was at TBWA. Like that's our mission. Oh my gosh, you took place. Flourishing. Yeah, thriving.

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Yeah. And if every company did that, imagine how amazing work would be for people. And imagine what imagine what they'd be able to do. You can't even imagine what they'd be able to do and what they'd be able to accomplish. So I hope this is a this is a an invitation to anyone listening, not only in the C suite, but in learning and development is to really create that culture, where you're betting on your people and and you have the self awareness to know that they're not going to be lifers. I mean, if you get lifers, great, good for you, that's a unicorn, but to really understand, okay, they might be here just, they might just be here for a few years. How can we help them thrive? And also, you know, get the most out of that while they're here? Yeah, as

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you said, people want to come to work and know that gosh, this is the place where I can do my best work and I you do come into it with a commitment of doing the best. Right so yeah, how can we help you keep that commitment?

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I love it. I love it. Well, we will leave it there. Rhonda, thank you so much for your time and your energy and your passion. Your work. Again, I'm so excited for your new role as chief learning officer. And we will have all of your links in the show notes. But for folks that are on a jog right now listening to us, where's the best place they can learn more about you or connect with you?

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Um, hey, I think it would be LinkedIn. I would say I'm on LinkedIn. I've ventured into Tik Tok, but I'm unfiltered and Tik Tok. So

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the real Ronda is in Tik Tok, they will find you. No, that's great. We will end you know, if anyone wants to connect with you. They can connect via LinkedIn. Make sure that if you do LinkedIn etiquette, customize your invite, and tell her that you heard her on the empathy edge podcast. Rhonda, thank you so much for your time today. I look forward to collaborating with you more in the future.

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Maria, this is my pleasure. Thank you so much. And thank you for the work that you've done and continue to do that at the end of the

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day. Thank you and thank you everyone for listening to another great episode of the empathy edge podcast. If you like what you heard you know what to do, rate and review and share it with a friend. And until next time, please remember that cashflow? Creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Take care and be kind