

“That’s Understandable” Podcast - Season 1 - Episode 6
The Rise of Women in Leadership
Final Transcript

Brendan 00:04

- Hi there, welcome to "That's Understandable," the podcast that helps you establish a better sense of the world of healthcare. If this is your first time joining us, I'm your host, Brendan McEvoy, US Head of External Communications at AstraZeneca, and I really appreciate the thumb tap, finger click, basically whatever it took for you to join us on this episode. You won't regret it. Today, women make up only about 28% of the workforce in STEM occupations, which includes science, technology, engineering, and math. Even with the tremendous progress made for women educationally and professionally throughout the past seven decades, the sciences in particular, which includes the disciplines of medicine, pharmaceuticals, et cetera, have remained an area that is mostly male-dominated among STEM industries. In the US, women continue to be a staggering minority. And among those who do pursue those career focuses, rates of dissatisfaction and attrition are strikingly high due to factors including implicit bias and stereotypes about women's capabilities in STEM-related fields, lack of support from the organization such as mentorship and advancement, lack of fair and equal compensation, burnout and stress and family responsibilities. But despite these disappointing statistics, there are still women challenging them and succeeding in their professions focused on STEM. And I'm proud to say that at AstraZeneca we're committed to removing as many of those obstacles as possible. We were named the highest-ranking pharmaceutical company for representation of women in the Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 and retained our spot as one of the 418 companies on the Bloomberg Gender-Equality Index in 2023. Joining me today are two of my colleagues who hold executive leadership positions at AstraZeneca and who are making waves both within the company and also in the broader healthcare and pharmaceutical arenas. They're passionate about science, health, and people and bring a wealth of experience and insight to today's discussion on women in leadership. Mariam Koohdary is the Deputy General Counsel, BioPharmaceuticals. She joined AstraZeneca in 2005 and leads our company's global legal team responsible for advising on research and development, global commercial strategies related to the biopharmaceutical business, and all global legal matters. Mariam holds a Bachelor of Arts from Bryn Mawr College and a Juris Doctor from the Temple University School of Law. Liz Bodin is AstraZeneca's Vice President of US Respiratory and Immunology, leading the marketing, sales, and access strategy for the therapy area. Liz joined AstraZeneca after graduating from Penn State. We are! And has held a variety of leadership roles in the US and globally throughout her more than 20-year tenure. Thank you Mariam, Liz, for joining me today on "That's understandable."

Liz 02:46

- Great to be here. Thanks, Brendan.

Mariam 02:48

- Super excited to be here, Brendan.

Brendan 02:50

- Awesome, so let's jump right in. So both of your bios sound super impressive. Can you tell us a little bit about your roles? So what exactly you do on a day-to-day basis, and then maybe even more broadly how science fits into that. Maybe Liz, I'll start with you.

Liz 03:05

- Yeah, sure. So first of all, thanks for the Penn State shout-out, Brendan, from a fellow Penn Stater. You know, I feel really privileged to lead the Respiratory and Immunology team here in the US business at AstraZeneca. What that really means is I lead our commercial team, which

makes up our sales organization. So all our sales teams across the Respiratory and Immunology portfolio of medicines, our marketing teams who market these medicines as well as our market access strategy team. So really when it comes to translating the science, ultimately, to customers, whether physicians, payers, or patients to learn about our medicines, the teams that I lead are responsible for making that happen.

Brendan 03:44

- That's great. And what about you, Mariam?

Mariam 03:47

- So I have a much more kind of nuanced and specialized role at AstraZeneca, and my job and my team's job is in essence a couple of things. One is to defend the company. So defend the company's patents as it relates to our scientific inventions, defend the company to the extent that we have lawsuits or other government interventions, and also to get involved in the kind of commercial initiatives that the business has to drive success of our products and our portfolio. The way science fits in is actually in every part of it. So if you think about our patents, they're all about our science and translating that science to a group of people outside of the company. So lawyers and judges and jurors, in some cases, who may not be as familiar with the science and may not be as familiar with the inventions that we have. So it's really a crux of kind of everything we do in our representation of the company.

Brendan 04:39

- Thanks, Mariam. And you know, obviously reading in your biography, so neither of you come from sort of traditional STEM backgrounds, right? But in your roles now you've had to learn the science, you know, obviously you're in the pharmaceutical sector, but definitely requires or I imagine requires a level of interest and understanding to get there. I wanted to talk a little bit more about your careers here at AstraZeneca. So Liz, your entire career has been here. And Mariam, more than half of yours has been here as well. So the question is, what's been the most pivotal thing for your career growth at a company like this? Is it really, you know, time and patience the key factors in advancing your career? Or what's the secret recipe to making it happen? Mariam, how about I start with you this time?

Mariam 05:22

- Sure. So I guess I would say it's two things. One has been curiosity, so just a general interest in learning and learning new things and challenging myself to be uncomfortable, if you will. So I kind of bucket all those things under curiosity. So I've never been afraid to try something new or to learn something new. I'm often the person in the room who doesn't understand something and has to learn it to be able to explain it so I would definitely say curiosity. And I would also say resilience. It's never an easy path. It's not an easy path now, nor has it been for the 18 years I've been here and the many decades I've been a lawyer. But the key to a career, but actually life is what you do when the failures come or when the challenges happen. It's what you do that next day, right? How you get up and keep moving. Those are the two things that I would pick.

Brendan 06:13

- And if I could actually stay with you for one minute, obviously you alluded to it there. So you were in private practice before joining AstraZeneca and the biopharmaceutical industry. So what sort of was your experience like in transitioning from the private practice to the sort of the corporate side? Anything sort of unique there in that transition, lessons learned that has helped you along your career to get to the role you are now?

Mariam 06:36

- Yeah, I guess what I would say is, so I've always in some way worked in science. So even in private practice I was an IP litigator and so there was a fair amount of science that I was involved in. So the science was never something when I was transitioning from private practice to a kind of company wasn't really the challenge. I always say I had a blessing when I transitioned, although I didn't realize it or appreciate it at the time. And the blessing was that I was, you know, an expert. I was an expert in being a patent litigator, but the job that was offered to me was as a deal lawyer, which I knew nothing about. I'd never done a deal. I'd never sat at the deal table. I had no clue what anything should be. And I always say for reasons that are unclear to me to this day, the company offered me the job and for reasons that are unclear to me, I took it. I don't know why. It wasn't like some thought process, right? That clearly there was no thought process. But I think it was the best decision I made because from day one I had to be humble and I had to ask questions. I had to admit that I didn't know things. And it really kind of set the course for the rest of my career because even now, and you know Liz and I work together, in order for me to do my job, I have to actually understand things, right? And so I have to admit all the time like, "Gosh, can we stop for a second? What are you guys talking about? Can you help me explain it?" I'm never gonna ask the same question twice, but I'm going to ask a lot of questions. And so it was a huge gift, actually, that I didn't even know I was getting and didn't plan at all. But boy, am I grateful for it.

Brendan 08:05

- Yeah, it sounds like that theme of curiosity has continued to stick with you in helping you be successful. So Liz, how about for you? What would you say is sort of the most pivotal thing in your career growth here?

Liz 08:17

- Yeah, and Mariam, I have to say I love your questions 'cause generally you're asking the question that's going through my mind too, so you're an expert at asking the right question. And I actually think I'll build a bit off of some of the comments that came from Mariam. Similar themes about what I felt like been an enabling part of my career success has, you know, you mentioned, Mariam, curiosity and I think for me that's a piece of it with sort of like a drive and a hunger to try new things and stretch myself. So I found throughout my career that I was constantly seeking the next opportunity that would help me grow and learn and that I really thrive in an environment where I am learning in a new space, stretching myself in a new way. And you know, we all hear that idea of, you know, get comfortable being uncomfortable. Well, I think over the course of my career as it's progressed, I've actually come to love that moment of being a bit uncomfortable because I know that's the moment that I am learning and I'm gonna be better for it in the end. And I think over time I've come to appreciate that that very moment, that's the moment that you're getting stronger from and learning. And I feel really fortunate that at AstraZeneca we're surrounded by a culture and an environment that that's embraced and that people want to help you learn and grow along the way. And that's been my experience throughout the course of my two-plus decades of my career here at AZ. And then that, which ties, really, I think, to the second theme of something that's helped me succeed is a lot of great mentorship and support and advice along the way. So I am always one who is willing to ask for help, to ask for guidance, and I also am very willing to help others with that as well if I'm called upon for that. But I think, again, it speaks to culture here and being surrounded by a lot of individuals who have helped me learn and grow, a lot of great women leaders who were there cheering me on and fostering my development along the way. But I also do find that you have to be willing to ask for it and you have to be willing to go out of your comfort zone and then allow others to help you learn. And that's been a big driving force of how I've been able to progress throughout my career, I think, is that hunger and drive for it. (bright electronic music)

Brendan 10:19

- You have to be willing to go out of your comfort zone and allow others to help you learn. what an important tip for all of us looking to take the extra step into a position of leadership. And at AstraZeneca, we're committed to ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunity for leadership at all levels. As of 2022, women comprise almost 53% of our company's global workforce, hold more than 49% of senior middle management roles and almost 39% of our board of director positions. All of this to say that in AstraZeneca's book of culture, we want to foster a diverse community of smart, like-minded people who desire to grow collectively. That's great, and I definitely want to come back to the topic of mentorship and development and sponsorship in a little bit, but we all hear the term "climbing the corporate ladder," you know, advancing to leadership positions, you know, the challenging journey that it takes for really anyone. But we know, and you know, studies have showed, statistics are out there that it's that much more difficult for women to advance than their male counterpart. So from your perspective, as you have now achieved senior leadership roles, what were sort of the critical decision points in your journeys where you sort of had to really consider, you know, multiple factors to determine whether or not it was, you should go after something or you wanted to go after something considering sort of everything else that maybe was on your plate?

Liz 11:45

- I can take that to start, Brendan. You know, I think for everybody it's multifactorial when you're trying to decide, am I gonna pursue the next opportunity? Do I have the support I need around me? Am I driven to do it? I think for women, there are sometimes other layers that come into that decision-making process. And I can speak for myself personally and what I see from other women around me, I think a big part of my considerations, that was always my family as well. And so at points in my career when I was starting a family and having my first and eventually my second son and you know, let's just call, it is like, that balancing act of wanting to ensure that I was making good decisions as a mom and also being really passionate about what I wanted to do for my career and to achieve the things that I was hoping to accomplish professionally. But it's, I mean, quite seriously, it's a real balancing act in trying to just say, can I take on this responsibility at work and still also be the mom or the parent that I wanna be? Am I gonna be able to be able to deliver what I want to in the workplace and fulfill my needs there and be a great, you know, great partner to my colleagues and be a great leader to my team and also be able to still show up in the evening and be a good mom to my kids. And so the struggle's real, right? It's something that I think throughout parts of my career, it's always on my mind as I think about, whether it's a new job, a new assignment I'm taking on is how I can accomplish both. And I think like any women you talk to, I don't know that it's ever a perfect balance of doing both perfectly, but it's certainly a key part of the consideration I've had throughout my career. What about you, Mariam?

Mariam 13:23

- Yeah, I don't know that you're gonna hear anything different from me 'cause this is something Liz and I talk about, actually, quite often. So I also have children. I have three and they are my number one priority, right? No question. I mean, I love my job, but these are little people who I've brought into the world and who I have a responsibility for. They're not so little in my case anymore, but I guess what I would say is, one of the things that I did kind of early in my career was I had women, right, who I went to who I admired, and they may not have had senior-level jobs, but they may have just been working moms. And I kind of asked them a lot of questions about how they did it. They were often people whose kids I had seen and who I was like, "Gosh, I hope my kid turns out that way." And I did research, right? Like, well, what were they doing? How are they doing it? And I kind of, you know, like all good research projects, I took all that information and decided what I was gonna partake in and what I wasn't. And I guess the thing I would say is, and I don't know if this is true or not, but it certainly is true with

me. I had this image of what perfect was, like what a perfect mother would be like, what a perfect lawyer was like. In my case, you know, I also have parents who I'm quite involved in their lives. What's a perfect daughter like? I do think I had this unreasonable expectation that I put on myself. Nobody else did. Like, nobody was asking me to be the perfect mother. My kids certainly have no clue what a perfect mother is or isn't. But I was putting it on myself and kind of when I gave myself that moment in time when I was like, I'm not gonna be perfect. I'm gonna be me, and there's gonna be moments where I'm a great mom and there's other moments where I'm gonna be a great lawyer and if at the end of the year everyone's alive and standing and we're all like, still surviving, great, right? And when I kind of gave... And by the way, it took like years. Like, it wasn't like a six-month period. It took many years before I got to that place where I was like, "I'm not gonna be perfect." I'm gonna have weeks where, you know, the job is sacrificed for the kids and vice versa. When I finally got to that point is where I feel like actually the windows opened to my career because I wasn't trying to be perfect. I was just trying to do the very best that I could with all of it, but it took other people, and not always, it's not always a senior leader, by the way. It's a mom in your community, in my case or somebody down the street, or maybe it was somebody here at the company or whatever. Just, I went to people whose children I admired. (bright electronic music)

Brendan 15:47

- It's refreshing and at the same time eye-opening to hear that both Liz and Mariam's rise to leadership in their respective fields isn't an exact science. Now, I'd like to think they're both being modest when they say something like luck is involved, but it really does stem from relentless determination, prioritization, and removing your self-expectations of perfection. (bright electronic music)

Liz 16:13

- Yeah, Mariam, you're striking for me a similar situation where like, seeking out that, again, that mentorship, that guidance of people that you trust. And I can remember at one point in my career considering a new opportunity, and my boys were still pretty little and I was worried about the amount of travel that it would require of me. And my sister, who is my lifelong mentor in both what she does professionally as well as being a mom of children who I very much admire. So to your example of looking to a mom and saying, "Hey, you got this right. Look at this beautiful family and these kids you've raised." And I was talking to her about, you know, "Can I do this with the travel?" And she was reflecting to me how she used to have to travel a great deal for her job. And she's like, "And when I ask the kids who are now a little bit older, whether they have any reflection of all the time spent traveling, it doesn't even come to mind. They remember the things that matter." It was not that, you know, Mom was gone for two days here and there on business trips and things of that nature, and it's about the quality of the time you spend with them at that time when you're there, or of course the quality of the work you're doing when you're committed to your professional pursuits. But I think it just builds off of your point that sometimes you just need to talk that through with other individuals who you respect and admire to have a bit of a reality check of the things that sometimes in our mind we really think may prove a real challenge. One, if we can get past this idea that perfection is the goal, and two, if we can learn how other individuals have managed through that, we can all get better together.

Brendan 17:40

- I think that that point is sticking with me around, Mariam, you sort of talked about sort of research, or kind of looking at Liz, you did too. Looking at others who are handling a variety of things and roles and it's kind of collating all that information and figuring out what makes the most sense for you as an individual. And Mariam, that mention of sort of when you found what was authentic to you, that's when your career really flourished. I think to me, that's a key point. It's not necessarily mirroring someone else, but sort of taking the variety of experiences that

you're seeing from others around you, finding what works best for you and then tackling it in your own authentic way. So I feel like I have to ask the question around work-life balance. We hear that this is a topic that has been debated forever, right? Can you achieve work-life balance? So you both have families. You talked about kids. I guess I'll ask generally, can you achieve work-life balance? Or really, what's your perspective on the term work-life balance?

Mariam 18:39

- Yeah, so I'm happy to start. And let me just say, I definitely do not have caretaking responsibilities for my parents, I do not, but I'd like to be in their lives, right? I wanna enjoy their company and I wanna see them, and the older they get, the more I want to, right? And maybe I'm gonna say something controversial here, and I don't mean to, but I think one of the worst things that we've ever created for people in general is this concept of work-life balance or this term or I don't even know where it really comes from because it implies by its nature that something is achievable. That there's this thing and it's called work-life balance. And if you just, it's on you. It's your problem that you're not getting it, right? And the reality is, it's just life, right? And some days in life, like if, you know, maybe you've got a week where it's like, super busy at work and you're not making it. In my case, I've got a lot of, you know, athletic games and chorus concerts and whatever. I'm not making it to those things, right? It doesn't mean that my life is unbalanced. It just means that in that week other things take priorities and then vice versa. You know, my son just graduated from high school. And for those who know, it's like, you know, there's an event almost every other hour for a week, right? During that week, believe me, I didn't get a heck of a lot of work done, right? So to me, it's not that it's not achievable or is achievable. This concept just shouldn't really exist. It's life. Within life is the opportunity to do great work if that's what you wanna do and what you enjoy. And there's also an opportunity to have a family and raise it and enjoy them too. If such a thing existed, I certainly don't know how to achieve it and nor am I trying to. I'm trying to enjoy the day and the week as it comes and constantly prioritize which one is most important to me at that moment and how can I manage it? And sometimes somebody gets disappointed, right? And that's life, too. Life is not mom showing up to every... I mean, I've said this story to a couple people, you know, when my kids were little, they could pick a field trip that they felt really strongly about and I would carve my entire schedule around that field trip, but that's it. If I made it to other things, wonderful news. And by the way, to Liz's point, you know, my son's 18. He has no recollection of any of those events. Not one. He doesn't have a memory of any, like the time when I ran to, you know, take him to the zoo. No recollection, right? And so I think at the end of the day you should do those things that are important to you to appreciate with your family not because you're doing it so that your child remembers it because they won't, they will not remember it.

Brendan 21:12

- Mm-hmm.

Liz 21:13

- Yeah, I don't think it's controversial, Mariam. I think it's true. It's life. A lot of it comes down to the pressures, again, we put on ourselves about what this balance is supposed to be, this magic formula of how to do both. I think that what it really is for me is it's about prioritization, and it's about knowing what my priorities are. And I think it's similar to what Mariam just flags. It's like, when there are things that are pressing and demanding at work that are gonna demand my attention and my team needs me and the business needs me, like, that's the priority because that's what I'm committed to through, you know, my professional responsibilities. But I'm also gonna know what the priorities are in my family life, and if there are things that are critically important. Yesterday was fifth grade graduation, and so you know, that's an important one and I'm gonna be there for it. And for me, it's never been about being at every single thing. It's about, what's the important stuff? What are the things that are

important to me? Because to your point, Mariam, sometimes it's about what you wanna make sure you were a part of for your kids less than what your kids actually care what you're a part of in some situations so it's about knowing what the ones, the things that are really important to me that will make me feel fulfilled and are important to me. And then also making sure I'm really aware of the stuff that's important to my family whether it's parents, whether it's a spouse, whether it's children to say, hey, this is the important stuff and I need to make sure that their important stuff is my important stuff. And then when you run into the rub is when their important stuff and the work important stuff are at odds with one another. Fortunately, and maybe just as fate would have it, like, usually you can work around it. And in the rare instance where the clash happens, you know, sometimes people do get disappointed, and high communication, high explanation. I've always tried to make sure my kids understand what I do professionally, that they understand that I'm proud of the work that I do, that I feel like I make a positive impact on patients' lives, that we are bringing great science to physicians and patients so that when I do have something at work that takes my priority, they also can feel proud of it because I'm doing important work in the world versus me apologizing for it. That habit we can get into of being apologetic and then suddenly you're apologizing to everybody 'cause it's very difficult in life to make everybody happy. But I think that, not that I get it right every time, but if I involve my family, whether, like I said a spouse, children, others, that they understand what I'm involved in at work and why it's important, then I think that's a better formula to garner support for what you're doing versus a sense of, why isn't Mom there for it? That's one of the strategies I try to employ.

Brendan 23:47

- Yeah, I thought maybe to stay on this point, I'll share some statistics. And these are from the Association for Women in Science. They say that women now earn more than half of all STEM degrees yet remain in those occupations at half the rate of men due to organizations' inadequate addressing of the barriers faced by women pursuing leadership roles. And I think, you know, obviously the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated a lot of things, right? Every sector, things were, anywhere there was a problem, it seemed like the COVID 19-pandemic exacerbated it. And actually as it relates to this, it actually resulted in 1.1 million women leaving the labor force during that time, and most were citing caregiver responsibilities as the main reason. I recognize that women are much more frequently asked than men how to balance work life and family life. And we talked a little bit about, you know, that work-life balance and also sort of the additional responsibilities that tend to fall on women versus men. Can you recount sort of during your career experiences, let's say, maybe some lesser-known barriers that you had to face and overcome?

Mariam 24:53

- So it's not in the work-life balance category, Brendan, but I've told a couple of people this story. But this was, you know, I was maybe at the midway point of my kind of baby career, as I call it here. I had a person who ended up becoming a mentor and a sponsor of mine, but who I was working with on a project. And he said to me, you know, "Hey, I'd like you to go and meet with, you know, so-and-so who's the head of HR." And I was like, "Well, why would I do that?" And he's like, "Well, what do you mean?" I'm like, "Well, I didn't do anything wrong. Like, I don't have a question about a policy. Like, why would I need to go speak to the head of HR?" And he just kind of like sat back and he, you know, I think he might have even laughed at me, I'm not sure. And he said, "You do know, like, the head of HR is kind of responsible for keeping track of like, talent, what they're interested in doing, what they wanna do with their careers and if they don't know you, whatever it is you wanna do probably won't get recorded anywhere." And I mean, you would have thought like, I was learning some, you know, genius information. I mean, I'd been at the company for years at that point, right? Like, it's not like I just walked in through the doors. And it was such a big moment for me. I mean, it was probably... He probably doesn't even remember the conversation, although I've referenced it a couple times

both publicly and personally. But it was, you know, I think I just didn't know how it worked, right? Like, I was a kind of, I'm gonna do a good job and I'm gonna work really hard and that's important. I always say to people who I mentor, it's really important to do a good job. It's really important to be good at what you do because that's what gets you to a place where you get lucky. But if you're not good at what you do, you're not gonna get lucky. But you also have to know how the process works. Like, you have to kind of know the system and how it works. You have to spend a little bit of time understanding, kind of wherever you work, there's some version of the HR story I just told, and you have to understand how it works in the place that you work. And boy, was I lucky that I was working on something with somebody who probably took an interest in me and told me, otherwise I think I'd still be like, you know, sitting at my desk doing whatever I was doing and not realizing why something wasn't happening. So I'm not saying it was an obstacle, but I think it could have been had somebody not taken an interest, and he probably knew I didn't know and kind of showed me the roadmap, if you will. (gentle electronic music)

Brendan 27:11

- It's really important to be good at what you do because that's what gets you to a place where you get lucky. I'm sure we'll unpack a little bit about what Mariam said here, but it's worthy to note that hard work and learning the ins and outs of your role beyond the surface level go a really long way. (gentle electronic music continues)

Liz 27:28

- Yeah, I think that this idea of sort of like, knowing how it works takes somebody around you, oftentimes, showing you the way. This is why I'm passionate about mentorship and support of other people is that oftentimes, like your situation, Mariam, somebody needs to provide you the right guidance to point your efforts in the right direction. And you know, as you pose that question, Brendan, I was thinking about, again, through the lens of women in leadership and leadership aspirations, and I think maybe one of those obstacles to think about for women today and certainly something I can recall throughout my career, too, is making sure you find your voice. And Mariam, as you were talking about being new to the organization, I can remember coming in new and sort of you've got this hat on of being the newbie and being, in my case, like very junior in my role, being surrounded by people who had far more experience than me and knew how everything worked. And yet even very early on I can remember thinking, "I have a thought on this," or, "I have an opinion on it." And I'm not one to be quiet, but there is a place for sort of being respectful and deferring to those who have greater experience or who know the process better. And I think that may be a bit accentuated for women sometimes, too, is to try and kind of create that space. And so I feel fortunate that people early in my career ensured that they wanted my voice to be heard. And I think that's really our responsibility as leaders is to allow everybody to bring their authentic voice to the table, and I think really in the whole spirit of inclusion and diversity, people need to feel as though they can show up to work, their voice can be heard, and it doesn't have to be just sort of saying what the corporate environment wants them to say. That it's truly their authentic perspective on it. So I think those obstacles, and it can happen whether it's early in somebody's career or at points maybe where they're transitioning to a new part of the business or maybe they're joining a new team, is having the confidence to have your voice heard, to be able to bring forward your ideas and suggestions. And I think that that's often because somebody else around the table gives the encouragement or creates the space or says, "Hey, Liz, what do you think? I really would like your perspective on it." And I think that's a big responsibility that we have as leaders and really throughout the entire organization is that we're helping create that environment where everybody gets to bring their authentic selves and bring their voice. So maybe it's our responsibility to kind of look for that individual in the room who isn't being heard or isn't saying as much and create a little bit of that space and create that moment for their involvement.

Brendan 29:54

- Mm-hmm.

Mariam 29:55

- Brendan, can I raise something that, because it's something that's troubled me a lot, actually, is the number of women both in STEM and otherwise that because of COVID really had to pull themselves out. And it just breaks my heart, actually, that many of them have not come back, right? To the extent any of them are listening, what I would say is, you know, really get tactical about the things that you're doing as a caretaker, for whether it's your children, your family, whatever, and whether that could be delegated to someone else. One of the best things we have now that I didn't have when I was raising my kids is, you know, the ability to have your groceries delivered, the ability to, you know, have your holiday gifts delivered, birthday gifts, you know, all those, all that technology that's available now. I do remember I had a work mother here at the time who I would go to and be like, "How do you like, get your grocery shopping done?" I mean like, really? I know it sounds ridiculous, right? But those are the things that have to happen that take up time, and it's not actually valuable time, right? I mean, it's valuable time, but it's not really a valuable thing. And I think sometimes if you can plot out, like, if I can carve out this stuff, does that allow me to go back? Or does that allow me to take that promotion or go for that job that maybe I normally wouldn't be. I know it sounds silly, but I have so many conversations with women about what I call the tactics of running a household. And when you remove that barrier for them, it kind of helps them to say, "Okay, I think I can take that job where I have to travel, or, "I can, I think, come back to work again and you know, restart my career again."

Liz 31:33

- You know, and to me it prompts the idea, too, is just like, embracing the village, embracing that we do. We always say, "It takes a village, but you have to embrace the village." And as moms, sometimes we always wanna run the village, but like, you have to be willing to tap into the people around you who are very willing and want to help you succeed, your loved ones in life, family members, all the services that Mariam mentions that can help you run your life more successfully. I remember going into the pandemic and like, so many parents all around the globe found themselves playing the role of doing their professional responsibilities and also playing the role of elementary school teacher. My son was in second grade at the time, and you know, when I think now about how I felt then of, how is it even conceivable that I'm going to ensure that he's joining Zoom calls, participating in these activities, doing all the fundamentals of learning, of reading and writing and I'm gonna help him with that while I simultaneously manage my professional responsibilities? And it is still a little bit of a marvel to think, I'm not quite sure how all of us as a society swung that, but the only way, and I think there's some lessons we can take from that situation about how we found the space to do what we needed to do. But I am a really big proponent as well about taking advantage of the help that's around you when you can. And what I find is that many people are very willing and want to be part of your village, be part of your solution set.

Brendan 32:57

- Mm-hmm, it kind of reminds me, so you both mentioned early on in our conversation about like, the sense or feeling that you have to be perfect or that you have to be the one that does it all. So it's great to kind of think about or actually hear from you, and Mariam, you talked about the tactics, you know, kind of breaking it down, all the things that you have to do and where, whether it's outsourcing to some, you know, third-party technology or whatnot or leveraging family. I think that's a great point. Liz, one of the things that you talked about is sort of, you know, finding your voice or maybe even your place, you know, at the table at a company, finding your identity, being comfortable in being who you are. There was statistics from

McKinsey & Company in 2022 where they talk about, actually specifically in healthcare, representation of women drops with every successive career level to only about 32% at the C-suite level. I imagine a few times in your career you were probably the only woman at the table. It's not unique to the healthcare industry, it's across all industries. So I'm curious, how did you approach experiences like that? And maybe even to say, how did you approach experiences like that in different points in your career? And then maybe what advice would you give to others that are perhaps experiencing that in a professional setting?

Liz 34:15

- Well, for one, I feel really fortunate that the table that Mariam and I are both a part of right now, there's a lot of women at that table. So I think we have found ourselves in a well gender-balanced leadership team presently. But I think that you're absolutely right, Brendan, that at points throughout my career, I can recall being, you know, whether in a certain leadership role on a team being the only female in the room. And I think that a couple things come to mind there. One is, it's still about how you connect with all those individuals in the room, in this case a group of other men about how you're going to connect with those individuals still being your authentic self and not trying to, 'cause I always conscious not to try to change who I was or show up in a different way because I'm the only woman in the room and I'm surrounded by a group of men 'cause actually I think that is the opposite of the key to success. I think that if you try to not be yourself, if you try to change yourself in some way, then actually you're not performing at your best. And then it's actually gonna accentuate the challenges that happen of being in a minority in a situation and now you're not gonna be flourishing and then that's not gonna help the cause, so that's one thing that comes to mind. I also think that when I've found myself in situations where I'm the only female leader as part of an initiative, a project, a team, to me I see it as an opportunity that I can help be an individual who can help bring more women to the table. You know, granted, if you're on a particular leadership team or it's a defined set of individuals, you know, you're not necessarily hiring the next person to join the team, but I think that oftentimes we're part of cross-functional partnerships, project teams. And so if there isn't the right balance in the room, whether it's gender diversity, diversity of ethnicity, if I'm in that position, I try to find out, how can I help be a catalyst to bring more diversity to the table? 'Cause what I've consistently found throughout many different teams I've been a part of is that when we have that diversity, the gender diversity, the ethnic diversity, the diversity of thought and experiences, we get better outcomes. We are able to think through more lenses. We are able to solve problems better. When I have found myself in situations like that, rather than focusing on, hmm, this is interesting that I'm the only female in the room, it's, actually how can I help be a catalyst to change it and get more diverse experiences and opinions to the table?

Miriam 36:35

- Yeah, I guess my experience has been, well, maybe the same, maybe a little bit different. I would say if I look back on my career, you know, both in and outside of the company, I actually see a lot of progress, right? It's not as fast as it should be. It's not as equitable as it could be. But between the start of my legal career and where I am today at AstraZeneca, there's a huge amount of progress just with the faces I see around and just with the voices that I hear, right? And by voices I don't mean just the women in the room, but the fact that many of us are in positions because we had really strong male allies who pushed and helped us and opened doors for us. So I always say to people like, "There has been progress. It's just not fast enough or it's not just as much as we want it to be." But I guess I would, I share what Liz has to say in the sense that I'm not often anymore in places where I'm the only woman in the room. Actually, it's very rare these days than I am, but in most of my early career I usually was. And you know, I'm an extrovert and I have an opinion and so maybe that's part of the personality, but I always use it as an opportunity to point out, usually in a funny way, that I was. Like, "Isn't this interesting? I'm the only woman here, right?" And I would kind of joke and giggle about it, but

then that would always open up a conversation with somebody who had a daughter or something else to say like, "Wouldn't it be nice if there was, you know, somebody else here, too, right?" I agree with Liz. Conforming to somebody else's version of what successful looks like never works. It never works fundamentally because you're uncomfortable and so therefore you don't bring everything you've got to it. You're always holding something back, and the person on the other side can feel it. So I think we call it authenticity now in corporate lingo, right? But I think it's really about being who you are as much as you possibly can be and that you're comfortable being. And I think over time, also, you get more and more comfortable with being who you are the older you get. You frankly don't have the energy to not be anyone that you're, other than who you are. And I guess the final piece I would say is, for much of the time that I was the only woman at the table, I had a son. My first child is a son, and I felt a huge responsibility to make sure that my privileged son, when he entered the workforce, would have had a mom who pushed it through. And that when he got to the table he would say, "Listen, what's going on here?" And that really kind of fueled me to always say something in my own way. You don't have to say it 24 hours a day. You know, you don't have to be marching around, (laughs) you know, picketing or anything. But I think in my own way, I tried to bring it up everywhere I could because I could picture where he was going to be, and I wanted that table to look different. And I'm proud to say it already does. You know, he's not even remotely close to the workforce yet. And as Liz mentioned, I mean, I don't actually know the numbers, but I think we're more women at the table that Liz and I sit on

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Liz 39:30

- I think so.

Miriam 39:31

- Than men. So I think progress has happened in actually a fairly short amount of time.

Liz 39:38

- Yeah, you know, Miriam, I love your part about humor, too, and I'm a big fan of allowing a little bit of humor and levity to situations. And I think that it can be refreshing to male colleagues who are advocates for change as well. I mean, for us to make progress in this area, it can't be strictly the responsibility of women to progress these initiatives. It happens in close collaboration with allies. And so I think when a situation is a little bit uncomfortable or how do we navigate having a single woman on this team and we wanna bring more women into this team or more diversity into this team, being able to, you know, to create levity in the situation, to help bring perspective to the situation is a powerful vehicle as well. (upbeat electronic music)

Brendan 40:20

- It's upsetting that the COVID-19 pandemic still has negatively impacted the careers of so many women in STEM leadership positions, but Miriam's little life hacks or tactics about delegating roles and responsibilities can be a huge help to a lot of people looking to get back into the swing of things. And going back to Liz's mention of being your authentic self and allowing yourself to speak up and be a catalyst of change, it's almost as if she's doing everything in her power to take any sort of luck out of the equation. It's really sound advice and it's really where progress gets its wings. So I think we're at a point now where we're nearing the end of our conversation and so I'd like to kind of bring it back full circle. So Miriam, you mentioned your son recently graduated from high school. I think this is that time of year where people are graduating high school, college. We have interns around here and I think hopefully they'll all listen to this and learn some insight from your experience and helping them sort of navigate the transition into their career, college, whatever it is. But I'd love to sort of end the conversation with a question about, if you look back, what is one thing that you would tell your younger self when she was just starting out in her career? Maybe Liz, I'll start with you.

Liz 41:31

- Sure, I feel like I have many words of wisdom I would want to give my younger self. (laughs) Probably the first thing that comes to mind is telling her to be herself. It builds off of everything we've said about authenticity, but it's when we're authentic, we're ourselves, we're comfortable that we're at our best so I definitely would encourage that in myself, my younger self as it does come with time that you become more and more comfortable being yourself. I would also encourage my younger self to continue to retain close connections with the entire network I've built throughout the course of my career because I think it's those connections that, you know, you build early in your career that seem like, you know, two individuals who work on a team together at a moment in time and then go on to do other things, but it is amazing to me about how many people, actually, I still work in close connection with as close colleagues here at this organization, 22 years, that I worked with over two decades ago. And so those relationships and those foundations that you build with other individuals can be quite lasting over time. It can help you be more effective at your job. It can help one another succeed. And actually over those same relationships, sharing your own career interests and ambitions with them because those are the same individuals that you both can help each other continue to learn and grow together. And so those were a couple things that come to mind.

Brendan 42:55

- Yeah, that's great advice. Mariam?

Miriam 42:57

- So this is one of my favorite yet least favorite questions because I think life is a journey and you get there when you get there. What I would tell my younger self, actually is, enjoy the ride. I think I was a little bit too trying to figure it all out, and in reality, you know, by and large it kind of works out. I know it seems like, to anyone listening, I actually sat next to a 23-year-old on the train home from New York last night and I gave him the same advice, which is like, just try to enjoy it a little bit. Try not to like, plan so much. I spent a lot of time planning things which were irrelevant, actually, because the road that you end up on, you don't have as much control over it as you think you do. Like, the world's a dynamic place. Our industry in particular is a very dynamic industry, and it changes all the time. And so it took me almost 10 years to just enjoy it. Enjoy it in the moment, enjoy the project I was working on, the people I was with, whatever I was struggling with, which a lot of it was struggle, actually, just trying to figure something out. That's the advice I would give my younger self, but I'm confident she wouldn't listen because I think

Miriam 44:02

- (Brendan and Liz laughing) No, because I think that's...

Liz 44:04

- 'Cause she was driven.

Miriam 44:06

- No, because that's part of being young and that's part of growing and it's part of learning, and my journey had to be what it was. But if I could, you know, if I could convince her, that's the thing I would convince her to do 'cause I wish I would have enjoyed it a little bit more in those early years and not worried so much about making a mistake or what would happen if I made a mistake. And it's like, in reality nothing was gonna happen. I was gonna fix the mistake and life would continue. But anyway, that's my advice that won't be taken by my younger self. (laughs) (Brendan and Liz laughing)

Brendan 44:40

- I think that's a great point to end on, right? Two inspiring point of views on advice to the younger self, whether they would take it or not. So thank you both so much for taking the time to be here, for sharing your experiences about your careers, the advice that you have. I hope that the listeners will really get something out of it. But before we close, we always like to end the episodes with a quick rapid-fire game of five questions. This is really about sort of getting to know Mariam and Liz beyond their role, sort of, you know, outside of their role, outside of work, a little bit more about sort of the three-dimensional people that you are. So if you'll both agree to play along, I guess you don't have a choice 'cause you're here with me (Mariam and Liz laughing) so yeah.

Liz 45:21

- We're a captive audience.

Brendan 45:22

- Yeah, we'll jump right in. So I will ask the question and then sort of whatever comes top of mind to you. So, for this first one, Liz, I'll start with you. What is the most interesting movie or TV show you've seen in the past year?

Liz 45:35

- Oh, I'm not always the most current. We are binge watching from season one to current "The Office" as a family. I know that's a little dated at this point, but that's what we're doing.

Brendan 45:48

- I feel like it's become a classic, though, so I think it's a lot of people's go-to.

Liz 45:49

- It is. It's classic.

Brendan 45:50

- Yeah. How about you, Mariam?

Miriam 46:23

- So if you had asked me this question a week ago, I would have said "Succession" because I just find, I mean, they're horrible people, but it's such a strategic show, actually. But as of a couple of days ago, my favorite show, which isn't terribly inspiring, but it's hilarious, is "Jury Duty" on Amazon Prime, which is this like, yeah, I won't ruin it, but it's basically a fake jury show, and it is absolutely hilarious.

Brendan 46:21

- I'll have to check that one out. So, Mariam, how about we'll start with you. So if you could have dinner with one person, alive or not, who would it be?

Miriam 46:27

- So mine would be my grandfather. My grandfather passed away when I was, I guess I was about nine years old, but for most of my life I didn't grow up with him. But he's been a very seminal figure in our family because almost every quote or piece of wisdom that my dad has ever passed to us has been from him. So I'd just love to actually know if he said these things or if my dad made it up or... I'd just like to get to know him better.

Brendan 46:53

- Yeah. How about you, Liz?

Liz 46:54

- This is an easy one. I would have dinner with my mom. I lost her last year. She passed away, and what I wouldn't give for just one more dinner together.

Brendan 47:05

- Yeah, that sounds great. Liz, what is one thing you do in the morning to set yourself up for a good day?

Liz 47:10

- Exercise in the morning because if it doesn't happen in the morning, it's never gonna happen throughout the rest of the day so it's now or never.

Brendan 47:17

- Yeah. How about you, Mariam?

Miriam 47:18

- I make my bed.

Brendan 47:21

- Hm. (Mariam laughs) That's a lesson I have yet to learn. (laughs)

Miriam 47:23

- There's a whole book on that. Making your bed.

Brendan 47:25

- Really?

Miriam 47:23

- There is, yeah.

Liz 47:29

- Mm-hmm. I do make my bed, too.

Brendan 47:31

- I gotta get on the bandwagon with that one. Mariam, what is your favorite board game?

Miriam 47:35

- Oh gosh, I'm a big, I know it's gonna shock you two, I'm a hugely competitive person, and I love every board game you could possibly imagine. But I guess I would pick, I think I would pick "Monopoly" 'cause I love real estate and I love the like, you know, I love it when somebody lands on the property that I've spent like \$12 for and they have to pay me 60 so that's my favorite, I guess.

Brendan 48:00

- That's great. How about you, Liz?

Liz 48:02

- Mariam, you can hang out with my youngest son 'cause that is his favorite game, and it is hands down my least favorite game. Not a big board game person. Not really how I'm wired. We do play a lot of card games so I'll say that our go-to card game, the deck of cards will come with us to pretty much most family dinners and things like that is the card game Thirty-One. You can play it anywhere. It's very simple.

Brendan 48:25

- Cool. All right, last question. Liz, this one's for you first. If you could go anywhere in the world for a week, where would it be?

Liz 48:32

- Oh, gosh. Just drop me in some great European city and let me wander around for a week and explore all of the museums and historical sites and wander through the squares. That would be heaven on Earth.

Brendan 48:47

- Sounds great. How about you, Mariam?

Miriam 48:49

- So I'm a big foodie, and this is a very hard question because there's a lot of places that could qualify, but I would say Italy, and in particular, I love Florence so I'd love to return again. I've been there many times and I'd love to return again.

Brendan 49:07

- Yeah, it's a fantastic city.

Liz 49:09

- I'll meet you there when I'm wandering around the squares, Mariam. (laughs)

Brendan 49:12

- Well, on that note, Mariam and Liz, thank you for sharing a little look into your personalities as well as your valuable insights on the topic of women in leadership. Despite the challenges faced by women and girls navigating careers in science, technology, engineering, and math, I'm encouraged by leaders like Mariam and Liz who are exemplifying for other women and girls that they not only have a place in science world, but are needed to make it better. Thanks for joining me today. Until next time, be well, be healthy, be understanding. (upbeat music)