

The Now Of Work: Fostering Flexibility | Brea Starmer | Power Lounge S2 E24

Amy Vaughan: 0:08

Welcome to our weekly Power Lounge, your place to hear authentic conversations from those who have power to share. My name is Amy Vaughn and I am the owner and Chief Empowerment Officer of Together Digital, a diverse and collaborative community of women who work in digital and choose to share their knowledge, power and connections. Join the movement at www.togetherindigital.com. Let's get started. In today's episode, we'll be discussing the now of work and why flexibility is a must. We have Bria Starmer, who is the founder and CEO of Lions and Tigers, a professional staffing and workforce solutions. Partner Enterprises like Microsoft, google, alaska Airlines and setup organizations call on her team to modernize their culture and tap into diverse consulting talent for added capacity and innovation. Because of Bria's unique talent model, lions and Tigers has enabled \$26 million of economic access to over 100 plus consultants, who are 70% women, 65% caretakers and 32% buyback. These are such great stats, bria. Thank you so much for being here. I'm excited to talk with you today.

Brea Starmer: 1:47

I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me. This is such an epic platform that you have built and I'm so happy to dig in today.

Amy Vaughan: 1:54

Thank you so much. I know, as a fellow founder and entrepreneur, it's not something we can do alone. It takes a village.

Brea Starmer: 2:03

Absolutely.

Amy Vaughan: 2:05

I love, love, love that you're here. I've been a big fan of Lions and Tigers for a long time. Actually have another woman we probably know in common Kimfer Flannery Rye is also a big fan of Lions and Tigers and has been telling me for probably years you need to get Bria on the podcast. Here we are, kimfer. I know you might not be listening right this moment, but if you are in the future, thank you so much for helping make the connection and encouraging this opportunity. All right, let's get into it, bria. We've got a lot to cover.

Amy Vaughan: 2:34

Today we're talking about the great resignation a bit. So in 2021, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 47 million Americans voluntarily quit their jobs. 47 million, that's a lot of people. An unprecedented mass exodus from the workforce, spurred by COVID-19, now called the great resignation. I kind of hesitate there with the COVID-19, because I know it wasn't just that, but let's just say that was a big factor. So my question is for you how has the great resignation affected progress, specifically for women, communities of color and caretakers in the workforce, which I know we both work hard to serve?

Brea Starmer: 3:17

Yeah, thank you for that question, amy, and it's really just next to be in this community and with this group of folks who I know are making incredible change in your organization. So I'm going to talk fast and I'm going to give you a lot of data and hopefully you can use that to justify and build some change within whatever organization you're influencing. And I love this question as an opener because we should take a step back and think about where we work is. So much has changed in the last three years and I don't know about you, but I never want to hear terms like she's session again. These are not things like concepts that I want to see in my future, but if we're to step back and think about kind of the great resignation and what that meant for underrepresented communities in 2020, that that year was such an important one as we look at female labor economics because our labor force participation as we closed out 2020 was under 55%. So, and as we, as we took that out to 2021, we saw women working at historic lows 33 years. We had never seen that women in the workforce. And, of course, if you layer in racial data and other underrepresented identities, that gets exacerbated.

Brea Starmer: 4:37

You know you talked about folks resigning in droves, which is true. I mean, we saw 4 million people a month quitting their jobs and, of course, caretaking was a major reason for that. Schools were closed, of course, and we saw that caretakers especially those women especially that were in age 30 to 45, they were resigning 20% faster than anyone else in our economy. Now, and, of course, communities of color were really hit. We lost 200,000 black and Latina women over the course of the great resignation, who have not returned to work. So there was just a real like absolute cliff for our talent ecosystem and our economy. But if we're like, let's catch you up now, I mean that was the great resignation and then we have a great reset, or whatever we call it. We've made some really strong gains back.

Brea Starmer: 5:28

So in 2022, we really saw a recovery that I don't think a lot of us anticipated that really, by the end of 2022, we had recovered to pre-pandemic levels, so it really dipped and it came back up. It's not nothing. We lost a million mothers that year, in 2022. And so we still had trouble. I mean there is still disparity in our groups, but now, in 2023, this is a pretty wild labor market we're in today. I mean it's a little bit many. So mothers, especially you asked about that group. I just saw a report last week Mothers with kids aged five and under.

Brea Starmer: 6:09

I followed that category. You're just outside that category. 70% of us are working who are from 55% to 70% within the matter of three years. That is wild, and we're still seeing a very tight labor market. I mean, we see 3% unemployment. Now that's different for communities of color. Black women are our biggest concern. They see almost two times the amount of unemployment as white women. So almost 6% unemployment among black women, and that's. They're really still seeing a lag in recovery. But here's what I think is really interesting Okay, so there's like a whole stat salad for you, but I think is underrepresented in our media and that I think is really fascinating Is that is the amount of Americans and global, even in global economies, of folks preferring independent work, and I know that your community is really a home for folks who are thinking about independent work and the fluidity of work, especially in the digital space, and so this is something that I think is really validating is that in our economy, the fastest growing segment of work is independent workers.

Brea Starmer: 7:19

So we are, as of last year, 42% of the American economy is preferring independent work 8% gain in one year. So it seems like everybody you know is going freelance. It's because a lot of them are, and of that group it's not just gig workers, these are not just delivery drivers, these, as of last year, there are more highly skilled independent workers than most independent workers. So, anyway, I think what's interesting about this discussion, as we think about what I consider the future of work economy gap, is to think about the sort of major trends affecting who wants to work where how is it access for those people?

Brea Starmer: 7:59

So I want to dig into that with you and start talking about that kind of economic gap that's really available for us today.

Amy Vaughan: 8:06

Yeah, absolutely yeah, you are spot on. We were founded on the premise of helping women who work in digital, and it was typically marketing advertising agencies brand side. But we were just talking even before we went on here to start recording how, like looking at our member numbers and surveys, like there's more women that are going independent, and definitely all with a number of reasons for that. So seeing that entrepreneur solopreneur group grow has been something that we've been really focused on and keenly aware of. So I'm glad to see that the data supporting our own suspicions as well, because it's not just a trend. I do really think it's the way that we're looking at the future of working.

Amy Vaughan: 8:43

Our mindset's so different. Our minds have been changed by everything we've experienced over the last three years. But let's focus on organizations for just a moment. What are some immediate strategies that organizations can do to start to implement and address some of these challenges that are being posed by the great resignation? Because, again, you do have this more of a change in gig economy. You've got people wanting to work hybrid, remote. It's a different playing field for them as well. What can they do?

Brea Starmer: 9:09

Yeah, I mean I think so. I have a lot of thoughts on this, but let me start with kind of recapping this economic gap that I just talked about, the sort of like future of work economic gap. So, if we just look at, if we're to step back and say, the role of an employer in a couple of six societies to make money and profit, right, so how do we use labor to our benefit when we're designing our work systems? And so the major issue is who do we get to do these jobs? We need highly skilled, dedicated workers to do the work, and if we look at kind of the trends over the last three years of what people's preferences are, this is where the gap comes in.

Brea Starmer: 9:46

And one thing that I think that folks are really not taking advantage of and that I love to spend time talking about is building blended workforces as an economic lever, and this is what's so interesting, as your suspicions and data are suggesting.

Brea Starmer: 10:02

This move towards independent work, the idea that we can harness that work, those workers, and integrate them into these blended work ecosystems thoughtfully as a driver of economic impact and business impact and, by the way, equity as well is really, to me, the big unlock of this next generation of work, and so basically, what the major

trends to think about is that there's a high number of jobs available we saw the five million job gap in America that we have unfilled there are. It's a low unemployment rate. There's just not enough people who want those jobs and a rise of independent workers. So how are we going to get the work done? It's blended work ecosystems. That's really where this is headed, and so we can get into some of the specifics of that and what that looks like, but that's the headline that I want to share with the community.

Brea Starmer: 10:51

I like to see about that yeah.

Amy Vaughan: 10:53

Blended work communities. That makes a lot of sense. I mean, I worked in agencies for close to 15 years and I had plenty of relationships with permanent answers, as we would call them, and then you're seeing the rise of fractional C-suite folks as well. So I do think there are some companies and organizations that are getting that, that are starting to understand the value and the equity at play when you don't have to have people, even in a culture of fear instead of independence as an employee when the pendulum swings.

Amy Vaughan: 11:26

I mean that's something I've seen agencies and companies do for a long time. It's like when you are waiting for the dollars to come in but you need the extra help. You do contract versus permanent, Like there's times when it even behooves the company. So I think taking another look at that and amplifying the benefits of a blended approach to that workforce I think makes a lot of sense. It's smart, it's a win-win, in my opinion, possibly for everyone.

Brea Starmer: 11:51

Yeah, and I want to come into, I want to step out of context. For the folks that work in digital every day, this industry, this work that you all are doing, is far more advanced than most of the rest of the ecosystem, like basically most other industries. Are behind digital in your adoption of freelancers, of blended workforces.

Brea Starmer: 12:12

And so a lot of what I do is convincing other people to believe you all. So it's a great point. I mean, my husband's been in and out of agencies for years and there's a really big practice of copywriters and freelancers and designers and that's just really part of

the ethos. But when we think about client-side, brand-side, it's a very different model for how they're considering tapping in this talent.

Amy Vaughan: 12:35

No, exactly that's a great point. All right. How does flexibility and impact play a role in creating a sustainable workplace and the cultures of belonging in new work? Again sticking to the side of what organizations are doing and how they can do it, yeah, it's a great question because you know we're thinking about the now of work.

Brea Starmer: 12:54

I mean, so much of us are thinking about researching at least I am this future of work concept and what that means. But I really am focused on the now of work because this is already happening. You know we're already seeing organizations that implement, you know, intersectional identity strategies, that think about ESG or environmental, social, societal and governance approaches, have strong HR policies, outperform those without right. So you're starting to already see some outpacing and some performance with the organizations that do that. But from a people perspective, you know, the common thread is that people are tired. Yeah, yeah, I mean, I feel very tired all the time. They are still driven. There are still loyal and committed folks inside of organizations that want to be there and so really, no matter how you are building from your HR side, how you're, how you're how you're having people are thinking about flex policies and HR, hr. Well, you know cures, the symptoms still sit and lie with the leadership team and the way that they run an organization.

Brea Starmer: 14:05

Yes, now, the position that Lions and Tigers takes on the world is kind of. The unique view that we have in me is that we have a concept called highest and best use. Now, it's a term that we stole from real estate, but you buy it to people because it makes so much sense to me to think that if you are working in the space that only you can do with the true capacity that you have, and when we do that in alignment with the work ecosystem around you, that we can create more sustainability and more economic access to diverse voices. If we truly spread that work out in a more sustainable way, we would have worked out, we'd increase innovation, we'd increase profitability, we'd lower nutrition. Those are all the benefits of a system like highest and best use being applied from an organizational design perspective.

Amy Vaughan: 14:57

I love it. I love these kinds of systems because I think it really helps to do what I think you know corporations, namely, have struggled to do in the past, and that's put people

over profits and then be able to see the return on their investment for doing such systems like this. We're going to definitely talk a little bit more about the era of sustainability and HPUs, but for the moment, what's the impact of prioritizing people in the corporate setting and do you have any data to help back that up, to help convince these corporate folks?

Brea Starmer: 15:25

a little bit more.

Brea Starmer: 15:27

Yeah, let me, let's break this down a little bit. I told you I was going to help you justify some of this to the folks in power that you need to believe in this model. So, yes, certainly, there's tons of data available about you know, especially from an HR perspective, we think about retention as one of the major levers we use, thinking about prioritizing people and, of course, companies with a strong track record and emphasis on gender issues especially are 15% more likely to have higher earnings than their peers. So there are many data points, supported across many studies, that show us time and time again the benefits of having caring workplaces. But I want to talk a little bit, amy, to the CFOs and the Chief Innovation Officer. So I want to frame this discussion a little bit differently. I want to run a quick cost scenario for you, so I'm going to justify my point here really quickly.

Brea Starmer: 16:17

Yeah, though, let's just take an employee. Let's follow her, amy, and Amy, let's just say she makes \$100,000 a year, just for easy math. Okay, if Amy quits her job, she's an employee. We wish that she wouldn't quit. She does a great job. It will take us, on average, six months to backfill her through a recruiting cycle. It'll take us, if we're lucky, three months to train her up to the same level of productivity and so and to onboard her. So that's a \$75,000 sunk time cost.

Brea Starmer: 16:49

In losing Amy at nine months worth of progress we would have made on that work. Now, as we compare that to a blended work ecosystem where we're starting to think about layering and workers thoughtfully, we take that same Amy \$100,000 employee that we love and we want to cherish and we added 15 hours of support, freelance support, capacity support underneath her. Let's call her a contractor, we'll call her a bill \$100 an hour for her time. That scenario will cost us \$58,000. To add Brea to Amy's team, we will have gained nine months worth of productivity at 1.4 heads people's productivity. So we will not only have saved \$17,000, but we will have gained almost

2000 hours of productivity by having those folks in our workforce and Amy's probably a lot happier. She also has this continuity. In case she wants to take a vacation, have her for a bit.

Brea Starmer: 17:46

We have standard operating procedures for us to transfer to somebody else should Brea want to take another contract. And then for Brea, you know, there's no expectation that I'm with you full time or long term. I can damage my own life and schedule in this model. So I just wanted to run through a little cost scenario because I think we're often talking to the heads of people and I want to be talking to the CFO and then Chief of Curement Officer, who are designing our people systems and our cost systems.

Amy Vaughan: 18:13

I love it. That's a great example. I love a good breakdown of numbers and time, because time is also money. Right, that's another return on your investment and something worth considering. And I also appreciate it because, especially in the space of digital marketing, advertising and TAC, where women seem to land and oftentimes we land vague titles marketing director but we do everything soup to nuts, beginning to end with zero support, and so it's like women doing vague titles with basically doing multiple jobs, multiple roles, and then they're like why are they?

Amy Vaughan: 18:44

leaving. What are they? What do you need? More help or support, instead of having teams to support them. They're kind of expected to do it all and be it all.

Brea Starmer: 18:53

So I, you. I want to pause that because you hit on such an important topic. The do it all mentality, the all or nothing mentality yeah, it is what's causing our burnout. It is the system and it's not our fault. I have a playbook and we can reference this to, that is open and available. But I talk in there about the unicorn mindset and this is like I Absolutely want to get rid of this idea. That because how many times that we finally said you know what? I just need a unicorn. They can do it. Yeah, they can write copy, they can build ads, they can do paid out, paid strategy on the weekends and the? The answer is like we are Burning out our people by asking them to stretch into areas that are not in their highest and best use, and it's instead we thought solely about the work that was best suited for our folks. Yep, we would have much more depth of experiences and we would not be burning out our people.

Amy Vaughan: 19:46

Oh, 100%, because we're not unicorns, we're no you're looking for a unicorn. It's a mystical animal, y'all.

Amy Vaughan: 19:52

Yes, you're gonna find it, yeah, but you might find it by looking at your existing workforce and understanding what are their desires. Where do they want to grow? How do they want to grow? What do they want to do? And you know, I think that's another thing too. Just get in, gosh. I could go on so many tangential. I'm trying not to, but like even this idea of going and staying and being in your lane is another thing.

Amy Vaughan: 20:11

I think that holds, you know, a lot of people back, because they feel like there's only one way to grow and there's only one path for them within an Organization, and if you don't have opportunity and flexibility to let them test their own limits in a way that's healthy for them, they're not gonna stick around. You're right, burnout is going to be the result and, yes, it is not. It is not your fault, ladies, please. I want to underline that. Thank you for saying that. I'm Priya. It is important. It is not your fault. Triple underline all right, we talked about retention and the air. You. You reference a lot of the era of sustainability, csrs and whatnot, and why is it that leaders should focus on building these? We've talked about already a little bit of blended teams of Of employees and non-employees, and how can this benefit the workforce and the organization itself. So let's take a little deeper on that blended teams idea.

Brea Starmer: 21:03

Yeah, I mean, data suggests that we are already in the middle of another industrial revolution. So that's why I say we're in the now of work, because the rise of AI and the talent shifts that are underway, we're already doing this as it's happening, and so we're starting to think about, you know, going from the great resignation to the great reset. You know, my belief is that this next phase, as we think about sustainability in all the ways you would define sustainability to, I mean, we think about sort of the environmental impact, the societal impact yeah, health and wellness of our, of our people, reading up to, you know, capacity for innovation and growth inside of our workforces, so that we achieve more profitability at work. Like though there's just so. To me, it's just the most obvious place for this to go.

Brea Starmer: 21:54

It will take, though, leaders believing that that bet is the right bet, and that requires change, and that's the biggest barrier that all of us collectively have to acknowledge. Like I'm not completely living in the clouds. Like we are working with clients who think

this way, who build teams this way, that see the benefit of it and are able to move faster, with more agility, with less risk to their P&L. There's many reasons why people are enlightened to think like this. But it is not everybody I certainly run into. People Don't believe me, and that's okay, like I'm happy to compete with them time will prove.

Amy Vaughan: 22:32

Time Data will prove. I think that's great. Let's say get a little bit more to, because we are talking about these blended teams and making the most of Retention and sustainability. Let's talk more about the HPU, or, yeah, hpu, the highest and best use. How would you describe this in the context of today's workforce and how can leaders identify it and leverage this idea?

Brea Starmer: 22:56

Yeah, I mean, I think in the past you know there's been a lot of Like zone of genius like this is where you you think, like okay, to my, you to your point earlier, like I'm in my lane, yeah, and I think that that work is super important and I and I want to acknowledge that your highest and best use changes over time, of course, like as you ascend within an organization.

Brea Starmer: 23:16

You do, you know more strategic work, etc. The, the stretching that I want us to do and the introduction, introduction of highest and best use as a system, helps us think not only about our individual zone of genius or skills and practices, but also the capacity Relative to the business objectives at hand and the total ecosystem of talent we have available to us. The biggest question for leaders right now is who do I give this project, this project that I trust, someone that can come in and do this work? Are they on my payroll? Are they employees? Are they numbers? What is available to me to now? And the answer to that is very different than it was 10 years ago. There are so many more options to who you can tap and how you can tap them to do that work, and so HPU is a system that aligns all of that talent in a way that is in service of the business and in service of the people.

Amy Vaughan: 24:09

That's great, I love it. That's great framework and I can imagine it's tremendously valuable and insightful, like all the things that you have to learn it. Just it satisfies the curiosity in me to know you know what is it that we have the capabilities to unlock To help the business grow. I don't know why this, I don't know why people don't believe you, brea. It doesn't make any sense to me. But you did reference zone of genius and I do you

want to say, for those of you who are individuals or independent contractors or just kind of Are in a space, zona genius.

Amy Vaughan: 24:37

I don't know if you're pulling exactly from that reference, but the big leap, the book the big leap talks a lot about you working from your zone of competence and competence, competence, excellence in genius, and it's a great way to distinguish for yourself when you sit and what your zone of genius is. Because I think a lot of us, especially women, find ourselves trapped in our zone of excellence. We get picked for projects because we are a finisher or because we are an organizer or planner, and it's maybe because that's what we're great at, but it's not our zone of genius, it's not where we find the most passion and purpose and so we end up doing all of this hard, exhausting work because it's our zone of excellence or zone of competence versus our zone of genius. So I wanted to throw out that book reference, because it's not a podcast unless we're referencing a book In an episode.

Amy Vaughan: 25:22

I feel like Co-hatch is a new kind of shared work, social and family space built on community. Members get access to workspace amenities Like rock walls and sports simulators and more to live a fully integrated life that balances work, family, well-being, community and giving back. Co-hatch has 31 locations open or under construction nationwide, throughout Ohio, indiana, florida, pennsylvania, north Carolina, georgia and Tennessee. Visit www.cohatch.com for more information. Alright, we've got another framework, which again love all the frameworks that you have built and established with Lions and Tigers. Could you elaborate on the significance of what you call the three M's, which is magnets, momentums and maximums, and how do they help contribute to achieving the highest and best use?

Brea Starmer: 26:24

Yeah, so so high. Some of us. You think of this as sort of like the philosophy and the framework for organizational design to unlock talent. Right, the way that that plays out is that we use three M's to build the structure. So three M's can apply to like if you're kind of talking about zone of genius or if you're thinking about your individual sense, but it also works across the system and across an organization.

Brea Starmer: 26:45

So the three M's M number one magnets. These are the things that draw us together. So for an individual, these are our skills and talents, the gifts that you talked about. For an organization, these are the strategies, the product market fit, the things that bring us

money for the work that we do. So that's M number one. And number two is momentum. These are the unseen forces that drive us forward. For an individual, that might be your network, that might be the kinds of things that people bring you into speaking events for, for example, press you might get. For an organization of momentum might look like product market fit, they might look like increased, like culture scores, for instance.

Brea Starmer: 27:29

So again, I'm trying to kind of give you the basics of the framework as you apply it to these various scenarios. And the last thing that I think is different than what you're seeing in a lot of other frameworks. The third M is maximums, and this is how we achieve the era of sustainability is by being truly honest with what our capacity is, what our limits are, and really talking about those things in a way that is guilt free. Maximums for an individual, it might be ours, it might be location, it might be return to office. For an organization, your maximums might be the pace at which your team can work without breaking them. So think about three M's and so when we're designing the systems, we use that framework for us to be able to audit and make recommendations of how we do or design a line to those three M's.

Amy Vaughan: 28:13

That's beautiful. I love it because I think what it also does is it bring some inclusivity, especially with the maximums, by allowing to create the healthy boundaries that they need in order to operate and provide what they do best. I love it, love it, love it, love it. All right, I've got a few more questions and then, of course, as always, live listening audience will have time at the end for extra questions for Brea. So if you have a question while we're talking, feel free to drop it in the chat, otherwise I'll keep rolling and then, as we get to the end, I'll give you one more chance. So my next question we talked about the three M's now. Do you have any inspiring examples of corporate community building initiatives that has successfully jumpstarted the HPU ideation within organizations like? What does this look like once it's finally in process?

Brea Starmer: 29:02

Yeah, well, I'll tell you two stories, okay. One is one of my team worked on and one is one that I just admire. Okay, so the first one we're working with a big client at Microsoft. She got a bunch of funding. She wrote a business case, got a bunch of funding. She had 11 team members. They had been working super hard, which is why they got funding to expand. They basically got some investment for scale.

Brea Starmer: 29:22

But the the that we're working with was really worried about the attrition of these team members because they had been working so hard and had really gotten her there and she wanted to sort of honor them. On my team I have a licensed psychologist, dr Renee, on staff, and so she comes in often to an organization that is either burned out or there's something just not quite highly optimized about the org and we do some assessment, and so we built basically a culture rectification plan or protection plan for this organization as they took on this investment in scale, and so we did some change management work associated with this group. And then what this this boss did that I thought was so smart is that she bought staffing services as a means of employee wellness. So instead of just, you know, giving some additional benefits around. Like you know, jim, she said I will give every person on this team half head of a project manager to help you as we scale. So we buy team staffed in 20 people to support the 11.

Brea Starmer: 30:20

And we all like sort of work together to build out this full ecosystem. And what happened was pretty amazing to her her scores. So as a manager she scored some of the top employee health scores within her career and across all of her peers and she was able to get promotion and more investment in the following year. So it was like a really smart investment strategy. That was a culture first build.

Brea Starmer: 30:43

Oftentimes we see management firms or agencies come in and just like rough shot the way that we do, or change, which is a really different approach to it, and so that was a really inspiring way to think about this kind of change management work.

Brea Starmer: 31:05

And so the really thoughtful organization Unilever, especially, has done a lot of really talent centric work. But they have been piloting for the last five years with a platform, a staff platform called gloat, and what they've done is that they realized that a lot of their more senior talent wanted to retire and they didn't want to lose that talent. There's also, of course, caretakers that wanted a little bit less capacity at work, and so they allowed their full time employees to opt in through this gloat marketplace often to be hourly employees out there a rate, so they can go in and use like basically a full time employee marketplace for people to jump in and say yes to projects without putting their full time jobs, their full time jobs or their permanent jobs, and I thought that was really innovative, and they're doing some really great case studies around the major benefits they've seen as an organization to their brand for doing an investment like that. So there's a couple of stories of innovation happening and how people are thinking about this kind of change.

Amy Vaughan: 31:59

Yeah, and I love that the the first in the first scenario. There I mean she was really taking in an intentional, cultural like moment in a moment of growth which I think a lot of times, you know, business owners start ups especially are just well known for just pushing ahead and pushing those dollars and not really being smart about how it's going to impact those who are actually meant to build and continue to grow with what you've been given. So kudos and to you all for doing that. And then, yeah, I think that's you know very. I mean P&G. They try, they strive hard for innovation and I love that they're striving for innovation even from an internal standpoint. I mean that's the only way you're going to get it out of people is if you provide that space for flexibility and opportunity. So that's brilliant and I'm excited to kind of hear and see more about that as they continue to do the research, because we love the numbers. Those are both fantastic.

Amy Vaughan: 32:53

You know I'm going to add in one little extra question here. I'm kind of curious, but you're like what was like your background before this? You know, I feel like you guys are doing so much a critic, so much impact, and the way that you're doing things is really smart. Where to go to school. What you study? How did you get here to do this? It's amazing.

Brea Starmer: 33:12

I mean I was a horrible student. I barely passed state school. I mean, yeah, okay, I'll step back. I grew up in Seattle. I went to Washington State University. I was involved in student government so I did like sorority stuff, I did student leadership stuff. That was really impactful for me. I went straight into tech. I started out of school.

Brea Starmer: 33:36

And then I felt pulled towards entrepreneurship but scared to leave my corporate job, and so I found this guy who hired me to run his business, which was I was completely unqualified for one, but it was the the safest way for me to sort of learn on the job, and it happened to be a staffing business and so I mean I did every job there. I was like on irsgov, trying to figure out how to pay people to access I don't know, and so scale that business from zero to about 120 employees.

Brea Starmer: 34:05

And then I went to the marketing agency for a while, which has since been acquired. I went to a startup because I really just want to see how different business models worked. And when I was at that startup. I got pregnant. I was very happy about

expanding right in my family. But, when I was seven months pregnant. They went through a layoff and I was laid off seven months pregnant.

Amy Vaughan: 34:24

Yeah, eight months in there with your friend.

Brea Starmer: 34:27

It's tough. Yes, this happens a lot. I hear all this from a lot of people, and the thing was even like, yes, I was pretty bummed, like I was very scared. There's the? You know, I'm the breadwinner in my family and I didn't have medical benefits for my upcoming birth, so there's a lot about that. It was very disruptive, but it was the discrimination I faced post birth that really surprised me. I really wanted to work 35 hours a week and be a mother and an executive. I did not want to compromise on any one of those things, and I couldn't find a job that allowed me to do that, and so this is why I built Lions and Tigers. So I was like there has to be something in the middle where we keep people in. Yes, and so that's how this all started. Is that? You know? I just had a need that felt like the most obvious business of all time.

Amy Vaughan: 35:16

Yeah, that makes all the sense of the world. Thank you so much for that. I'll get back on track here.

Brea Starmer: 35:21

Yeah, yeah, Actually we have a problem.

Amy Vaughan: 35:22

We have to come in from our one of our live listening audience, so I will ask that. Thank you, alison. She's wanting to know, during an interview, what questions can you ask to ensure the business that you're interviewing with believes in this way of organizing as a company?

Brea Starmer: 35:37

Oh, my goodness, that is a great question and please be interviewing them along the way. I think so many of us like just yeah, that's definitely a mindset shift. I would ask, I would ask a lot about the organization. Values are usually published, so I would. What a lot of a lot of interviewers do is they tend to ask you questions in alignment with their company values. So for us, we're in. One of our values is courage, and so we tend to ask interview questions in that way. I would take their values and ask them back to them. Tell me how courage plays out for you in how you make investments and how you set

objectives for the year ahead and how you reward and compensate your employees in alignment with those values. I would ask about that. I would definitely understand about some of the cultural, the cultural nuance within an organization that's not published.

Brea Starmer: 36:31

I look for organizations that are mature enough that they have documented team agreements. So the way in which we like, do we respond to email at night? How do we? What do we do with our Slack statuses when we need to go and do drop off for our kids? You know, I was actually. I use this when I'm interviewing clients too. I'm really careful of who we say yes to from a client perspective.

Brea Starmer: 36:54

But I was interviewing a set of clients who brought us in because they were worried about their gender equity of their team and when we were, when we were meeting and kind of scoping the work between our organizations, one of the men there's five folks on the other side and one of the dudes said oh, I need to run to go get my kids at the bus stop, it's three o'clock. And everyone just kept going and I stopped the call and said hey, you know, I just want to call out for a moment that you all are accommodating a caretaker who needs to step out and go to the bus and it didn't even stop your progress as an organization and we should be talking more about that in the cultural strength of this organization. So I'm looking for symptoms and signs like that so that I can really pick up on the stuff that they're not telling you. Those are a few things that I would when scoping or interviewing on this side.

Amy Vaughan: 37:41

those are some great questions and I will tell you if you were in the interviewing process right now ask questions. If you're not showing up to an interview, having done some research and asking questions, I can promise you you're not going to be considered like. I think people that show up ready, that are curious, that are ready to ask the questions are the ones that pique the interest of the interviewers. So great, great question, allison. I appreciate it and keep them coming. If you guys have more back on the topic of you, bria, as the founder and CEO and CEO of Lions and Tigers, what strategies have enabled you to provide economic access to diverse consulting talent and foster inclusivity in the workplace? Kind of again bridging off of my, tell us your backstory.

Brea Starmer: 38:25

Yeah, this is such a good question, amy, and you brought up the reason that we're connected in the first place is Kimfer, so I want to talk about this for a moment. So you know, when I started Lions and Tigers, it was to advocate for mothers. Like this was

really the folks that I wanted to be richest in the world were mothers Like that's. That was my, my intention for starting the business. But as we got into the business, members of my team really started calling me in on equity issues beyond just mothers, and and and our business started in 2018. So we were not far into this business when the pandemic hit and when George Floyd was murdered and that changed fundamentally the way that I think about business and it was right after that that I called Kimfer in and we we did an RFP.

Brea Starmer: 39:08

We met with a number of folks who were experts in equity, but Kimfer Flannery Rye and I would encourage anyone that is thinking about needing an external consultant to think about equity across your organization.

Brea Starmer: 39:20

She was such an important partner for us in not only just thinking about like, how do we do anti harassment and anti discrimination training, but she went through my entire organization and we built HR systems in favor of underrepresented communities, like such things as like we make our, our benefits minimum the lowest that the federal government will allow us to 20 hours a week.

Brea Starmer: 39:41

You get eligible for benefits at my company, so we've looked across the system to try to figure out what are all the advantages that we can build, and so it requires us to be really mindful, though, because that means that my recruiting pipeline needs to be 50% people of color, are, are, are in order for us to achieve our 35% objective of a bipop, or global majority members of our team, so you have to really think systematically about that, and then I have to convince employers on the other side, like that's. The other thing is I have to look for anti discrimination and anti bias across the way in which they procure talent, which is my biggest barrier because I'm training them along the way. So we've done lots dedicated to this, and also I still have so much to learn. Amy, like, this is just a lifelong process that we will be going through to understand the inequities that exist within our labor, our labor system, and I'm going to do everything I damn well can to bias it in our favor.

Amy Vaughan: 40:34

I love it, yes, because you're 100% right is in the systems and it's like it's just so easy to look at it and say that's just the way it is, but it can't always be that way and it's a disservice and it's creating bias and it's creating inequities. So we love it All. Right, I've got one last question for you, and then we've got another question from our live listening

audience. What advice would you give to leaders who are looking to embrace some of these strategies and drive positive change in their organizations in the midst of the great resignation?

Brea Starmer: 41:12

I was on a round table with a bunch of male executives I was the only woman in the room last year and one of them said to the group and he was truly asking this question he said how do you have your employees demonstrate that they're trustworthy, that they can work from home and there's really a lot of dialogue about this, like a lot of folks are like well measure them in different ways and I just was like I was baffled by the question because I just fundamentally don't think that way.

Brea Starmer: 41:44

I would never ask that question. I would just like trust people until I shouldn't. And they call me an absolute idealist and that's okay, I will take that. But there is a school of thought, there are people that think differently about this, and I'll tell you, my whole business is aligned to the people who don't think like that, who trust first, and when we work with them, we do so in service of their career, so that they ascend and have more power. That is my strategy, amy. I do not have time to spend with the folks who do not trust, who do not work. It is the people who want to change that are looking for the path forward that is equitable, sustainable, and those are the folks that I wanna make as rich as really possible.

Amy Vaughan: 42:31

Yeah, I think I love it. No, I absolutely agree, you have to. You can't be for everybody. You have to be able to attract those who are in the place, that they're ready to be open and to learn and, like you said, to trust people. And the process and the changes and the discomfort that probably comes with it I can imagine, especially for men. It sucks, it's difficult, it's a hard place to sit for them, but it's like if you can be ready to show up and sit in the discomfort, like it only benefits everyone, it only benefits everyone.

Amy Vaughan: 43:08

We could go into another podcast and conversation on that as well, but we won't for today. Instead I'll go back to our question here from our live listener. So she says I have a number of former peers in my company who are quite anxious that their teams are next I'm using air quotes for our podcast listeners with this year's layoffs, with this year's layoffs, like it's just like a routine thing now, anyways, and short-sightedness from the C-suite leadership how can these middle-level managers practically pitch this blended

staffing model with impactful data, case studies, question mark I know many caregivers that would happily volunteer for shorter or reduced working hours versus layoffs.

Brea Starmer: 43:52

I mean hire us and I'll come in and help you do that.

Brea Starmer: 43:54

There, you go Easy, easy, like from a DIY perspective. Honestly, the playbook that we have linked, there's an entire. There's an entire basically like business case in there for you to go and pull in stats and data to show. And I've got I have a P&L side by side in there that I've already built for you to show the benefit of a blended workforce.

Brea Starmer: 44:18

The thing is you have to understand whether they care about attrition. If they do not care about attrition, then this is a very difficult cell. It just is. So we need to really understand what's happening in the rooms that we are not in, that they are, what decisions that they're making Now I know that that feels overwhelming. Everyone should protect themselves by ensuring all of the basics, like good network, good LinkedIn, like prepare yourself for a layoff, but also fight against it too. I have also the privilege of being in those rooms and helping leaders make those decisions and doing what I can to advocate for business case reasons, for layoffs, not HR, women's or not discriminatory behavior, which we also see happen in these moments. So I don't wanna say there's nothing you can do if there is and also there may be nothing you can do. So that's a hard wall to keep running up against.

Amy Vaughan: 45:16

That's a hard wall, depending on your position.

Amy Vaughan: 45:18

I've been and was a middle manager for so many years, so I totally empathize with this question and where you're coming from, because you feel quite powerless. But I would say, if you have any kind of trust, trusted and respectful relationships with anybody in that C-suite, really understanding what would be the win-win. What is it that's keeping them up at night? Because they're humans too and there are things that they're beholden to and responsibilities they are accountable for. And unless you're speaking into those needs in a way that makes it look like, oh, you're helping me, it could still be for the greater good, but what you're doing is you're addressing it in a way that

addresses the things that's keeping them up at night. So if you can ask them and have them understand what that is and it happens to be attrition, great.

Amy Vaughan: 46:00

Let me tell you about this whole Alliance and Tigers things that talks about a blooded workforce and all the great benefits. We also linked the playbook that you're referencing Brea in the chat for all of our live listening audience, and then, of course, we'll include it in the show notes as well. I love having these empowering frameworks and tools and the data points really to help empower those people who are kind of in that middle management role, sort of being stuck again. The sandwich generation.

Brea Starmer: 46:27

Yes, the sandwich generation of our workforce is our middle managers, of course.

Amy Vaughan: 46:30

No, true, that's so true. On top of being the sandwich generation, I feel that yes, yes, this was so great Brea. If anybody else has any other questions, feel free to drop it into the chat, Otherwise I will wrap us up today, unless you have any final parting thoughts. Brea, that you wanted to share with folks, You've given us so much great advice and information and support. I really do appreciate it.

Brea Starmer: 46:56

No problem, amy. I'm so happy to talk with you all, and if this is helpful in your organization, I'm happy to support there as well. This is a message that everyone needs to hear.

Amy Vaughan: 47:04

Absolutely yes. So please share, share, share. We'd love to get the word out. All right, ladies, we'll call it then. Have a fantastic rest of your day. And again, brea. Thank you so much. I'm glad we're connected. Let's keep chatting.

Brea Starmer: 47:16

Sounds good, Amy, Thanks everybody.