

TALENT TALKS WITH WXN & BOYDEN

An interview with
 Dr. Catherine Zahn - President & CEO
 Centre for Addiction and Mental Health



Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) President & CEO, Dr. Catherine Zahn, is at the core of healthcare leadership in Canada. Not immune to feeling discrimination along her own path, Catherine is a strong advocate for mentorship and inclusion, challenges the status quo, and envisions a future where leadership reflects the populations they serve. Her support in the advancement of women in healthcare is reflected in the conscious steps she takes towards removing these barriers. Boyden sat down with Catherine to talk career drivers, leadership, and the diversity challenges that continue to face us today.

BOYDEN: How have your personal passions guided and impacted you throughout your career?

CATHERINE: I've had a passion for helping people that dates back to my first job as a nurse's aide. I find that being a caregiver has been a crucial factor for my success in healthcare leadership. Down the line, the transition into leadership roles was rather intuitive.

As a neurologist, I could only help a handful of patients a day, however, in a leadership position in neurology, neuroscience or mental health I can create the conditions that support others to help so many more. It becomes very engaging to find that you have the strength and wherewithal to do that. Although I'm in a leadership role, in my heart I'm a physician.

BOYDEN: How do you feel that translates into your leadership style?

CATHERINE: I hope to be known for how I mentor people into leadership positions. I use skills that other mentors have taught me.

One of my favourite mentors once told me that to accomplish something as a leader, you have to be able to describe your vision and you have to speak to values that are greater than your own self interest.

I've since added to that message – to know your own values and principles and never go off-brand. If you lead from principles and base them on your values and vision, your decisions will be unassailable.

BOYDEN: Talent engagement is critical to achieving success. How do you achieve that?

CATHERINE: My ideal team is a group of people who are able to take risks and have a bias towards action, yet at the same time, work interdependent as a team. So I seek people who are highly adept or have great potential. I try to make my expectations clear.

When it comes to team development, I try to be aware of where people are at in their career trajectory. I strongly believe if you're able to maintain your curiosity of the world, you maintain your creativity, so I try to mentor people with that in mind. I'm open to the possibility that my team members have skills and experiences that I don't have – and I appreciate receiving mentorship from them.

BOYDEN: There is more attention to diversity today but we are still far from where we should be. From your observations, what does diversity look like within healthcare?

CATHERINE: There are groups of individuals in our society that don't benefit from the miracles of modern science and this I know from experience. It's important to appreciate the issue of intersectionality too.

Being a woman who is a member of another disadvantaged population – for example someone with African-Caribbean heritage, or a member of the LGBTQ community – can have a much more difficult experience. I'm learning to be alert to that and work with members of these communities to correct it.

BOYDEN: How does diversity, gender or otherwise, fit within your hiring strategy?

CATHERINE: I am in favour of setting targets and making it a priority as we want our staff and leadership to reflect the population that we serve. We are not there but it is very much in my consciousness as I strive to understand how to make our diverse organization equitable and inclusive.

I'm extremely vocal in environments where we hear "We can't just hire for diversity, we want the best people." I counter with: "If you want the best people, why would you eliminate most of the population from consideration?"

BOYDEN: What, in your view, are the key obstacles preventing greater representation of women in these critical roles?

CATHERINE: I think we talk about change incorrectly - we start out by saying change is so hard and in doing so we make people resistant. This influences the idea that there is an option not to change and that's not the case.

We can be inspired by change. In today's world, what's intriguing to me about women in leadership is that it's clearly not about lack of skilled, experienced and competent people – after all, women are a visible majority. It's always about maintaining power.

People make assumptions about you based on your sex and have schemas about gender so, in short, the obstacle is sexism. The argument that you can't find a woman who is strong enough or smart enough – or who wants to do the job – is simply bogus.

BOYDEN: What advice would you give someone striving to lead?

CATHERINE: Make your big vision simple and clear and talk about how it challenges the status quo. Be sure to home in on those characteristics that are valued in leadership.

To me, the most important leadership characteristics are self-awareness and self-control; good communication skills; and curiosity. Communication is so important. You must be able to present yourself intelligently, listen to people, and make meaningful and logical connections in your responses. Some of this you're born with, some of it you learn.


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About the series:

Talent Talks with WXN & Boyden is a feature series highlighting leadership, talent, and diversity discussions with top leaders of today. The series focuses on topics and themes with a purpose to inspire women and our diverse community to lead. Talent Talks also appears on WXN website.

Women's Executive Network (WXN) is a leading organization dedicated to advancement and recognition of women in management, executive, professional, and board roles.

For more information about WXN, please visit their website: www.wxnetwork.com
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