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TRANSCRIPT

# Lisa Tallman on Building Community Teams

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

organization, community, build, team, leadership, tool, people, work, easter seals, strategy, technology, affiliates, challenges, started, prior, fit, restructure, understand, role, managers

**SPEAKERS**

Lisa Tallman, Anne Mbugua

00:03

So Lisa, it's a great to meet you. So I would like you to just sort of briefly describe what you do at Easter Seals and the kind of community that you work with.

**Lisa Tallman** 00:16

Sure. So I've only been at Easterseals for a little over a year. So I'm just sort of starting community here. I, my title is VP of data and information management. So my responsibilities extend beyond community at Easterseals. But I am getting started with community just getting started with it, we, and it's for our, we have 68 affiliates across the country. So I'm at the national office, we provide support and services for affiliates across the country. And so they are my, you know, community members and customers are people, members of our staff, of our 68 affiliates across the country. I personally facilitate or moderate three communities in the operation space. So it and data, HR and our CFO group, and then I have others in the organization with other subject matter expertise, moderating a few other different types of communities related to some of the services that Easter Seals offer

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offers. Fantastic,

**Lisa Tallman** 01:34

really, yeah, we're really just getting started. We've only launched a couple pilots last year, and in q1, in March in April, this year, we'll be launching some additional communities.

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Oh, that's, that's wonderful, I should say congratulations on that role. So this leads to us sort of kind of briefly describing, you know, a specific experience with building a team, because I know that you're pretty knowledgeable in building a team. So if you can just, you know, talk about, you know, what are some of the challenges that you have faced building a team, some of the lessons that you're faced, or are facing building a team? And this would really help those who are thinking about how they can build out their team?

**Lisa Tallman** 02:23

Yeah, absolutely. So I mean, I think I'll talk. You know, I'm starting from scratch here. And I also started from scratch at my previous job. So I was in at an another nonprofit organization for about 10 years. Prior to coming to Easter Seals at both of these positions. I started as a team, I'm starting as a team of one. And I was able to build at my last job, a team at the end, pre COVID. Right before COVID, we was a team of seven, including myself, which I was able to build over time. So I think the biggest things for me about building a team is you need to one have a clearly defined strategy. And if you don't, because if you don't have a strategy, there's there's no reason to build a team to execute it. Right? Right, clearly defined strategy that aligns with the organization's goals and provides value to the organization, you need to have a business like what I call a business case, like you need to prove why do you need these people? Why do you need headcount? What are they going to do? And what metrics any metrics that you can gather have to prove that, you know, you need additional additional individuals. But I think, again, the proving value is probably the biggest, you know, lesson along the way, if you can't prove value, and you can't actually get the headcount, right. If you're not returning something of value to the organization, then they're going to say, Why am I going to spend, you know, resources on you know, it's, it's, it's really that and it's hard to do, it's hard to do and community from pure numbers, but I think there's lots of value that community managers can offer in other ways across an organization. So not only the community that they're building, but how to connect the dots across the organization in a number of different ways with the community and outside the community.

04:41

So I'm curious, so you built a team before and your prior role. And now you're also at a point where you're building a team, right? So what are you know, what are the challenges based on you know, how you built your team before and now you starting to sort of build your team out now.

**Lisa Tallman** 05:00

So I think challenges are getting started, right? Yeah. Often and I don't know how other community like, I've come into both organizations, kind of starting from scratch, okay. There really hasn't been a community prior, in my, in my previous role, the position I took had been vacant for two years, okay. And the organization I went, now, no one has really been doing this work, or they've had some failed attempts in the past that really has not turned out well, and really haven't had not dedicated the time and energy to it, nor really had the anyone with a lot of experience and community in the past sort of trying to bring this forward in the organization. So I think the challenges is determining where to get started often often having to do multiple things at once, get a technology platform launched, understand the organization, determine where you can find value, figure out who your allies are, and the organization that is going to support this work. So coming to really understand the organization and being able to balance some of those priorities, whether it's the technology priority, determining where to provide value, creating a strategy, that balance always presents a bit of a challenge, while you're trying to determine, Okay, how do I prove value that I actually need more people? Right. So it is definitely, I think it's definitely a balancing act. You know, proving to leadership is also extremely important. At my prior job, my first boss was really supportive. And she also had quite a bit of influence in the organization, which has, you know, which really helped me, I think, depending on, you know, where you sit in the organization, your proximity to leadership, your exposure to leadership, how much influence you can have on leadership, that can also be a challenge that you're going to have to deal with, you need to, at the end of the day, leadership controls resources, right. So you need to figure out how to get exposure and influence the leadership of your organization. So they under First, understand what community is great, because a lot of them don't, and then help them show, show them show them the value and how it connects to the organization's goals. So I think, for me, it's when I've had good leadership in place, it's using that leadership to my advantage. And then with other members of leadership in the organization, helping them educating them and helping them to understand how it can fit with their particular goals. So you can't just be general, like community's going to make us all create more engagement, right, it has to be really specific to what might what that leader what that leadership member cares about. And that takes some time to do right getting to know leadership members getting to know what what they value, what's important to them, what their goals are. So, building all those relationships, does take some time, right, take some time, take some effort, and we're also busy, it's hard to, to carve that out, but it's super important that we make those, building those relationships a priority. So that we're seeing in the organization, I think, you know, some community managers you know, want to heads down do their work, right. And, and, but that's not always seen, unless you're, you're out there talking to others in the organization, particularly those in your senior leadership staff. So those are a few of the challenges that that I can, you know, that I've really tried to focus on is strategy proving value and building relationships, particularly with leadership but also across the organization.

09:35

I really liked that thought process you know, it's it is about proving value and being able to align, you know, leadership goals and business goals with what you were doing. I think that would definitely help with trying to get new members on your on your team. So I am curious. So coming from, you know, your prior role to this role now and doing it over What would you do differently now that you already had the experience of building a team? So here you are a second time around building a team? What would you do differently?

**Lisa Tallman** 10:10

So I think one of the things is the focus on technology. So first of all, technology has evolved, since I

10:19

had to do this, I think, you know, 12 years ago, now, when I was doing this at

**Lisa Tallman** 10:24

my prior job. So I think the good news is, is technology has evolved and has, you know, more user friendly, more intuitive, which is, which is a real positive, I think, in my previous role, I spent a lot of time the first two to three years, really just trying to fix technology issues and, and make make it more user friendly for people that need it to use the platform, rather than spending more time on things like engagement. You know, adaption and awareness, not that I didn't work on those things, but the technology sort of kept getting in the way. So one of the things that I have done differently at this job is really a much I have put, I made technology, a less significant focus. I did some early discovery focus groups. And the big thing I heard loud and clear was, I don't want to learn another tool. Particularly in this time of COVID, when everyone is just so stressed with just just waking up and dealing not only with work and family and what's going on in your home, like I and I really took it to heart like people are just like I am tired. And please do not ask me to learn yet another tool. And so I wind up using Microsoft Teams. Okay, it was there, it was available, people had it in their organizations, again, I'm dealing with affiliate, so they're their own separate organizations. They had it in their own organizations. I don't know that teams was personally what I would choose right? To build community, probably not. But I really took it to heart and said, You know what, let's, I agree, let's not bring in something new that is going to take time and effort to build and rollout we've got teams, let's just use it. And then let's focus on the other things. Let's focus on adoption, let's focus on engagement, let's focus on awareness and make technology unimportant, you know, as unimportant as possible in this. And so I think that's what I've done very differently this time around than I did last time around last summer, I was all about like, what, how can we get a great tool that everyone's gonna join? And like, and, you know, and I was like, okay, you know, we're who cares about the tack? Let's worry a lot more about the people and process part of of community.

13:14

Yeah. Because I think there is there's that argument out there. And some community managers are really focused on, you know, having, I'm going to say, quote, unquote, the perfect tool, or platform to work with, you know, but sometimes that might not be the case. Do you think that it really depends on this kind of community that you have, and the tools that are already there to use? Because that's what that was? What was at your disposal? Right.

**Lisa Tallman** 13:42

Yeah, I mean, I certainly think it comes into play. I mean, I think, to me, at the end of the day, there are so many tools that do very similar, right? And so, if you're going to pick a a new tool, or you're going to move to a new tool, I think you have to have you know, you have to know a really good, a good have to have a good reason for it. If it's if you're bringing something new, out side it from outside into the organization. And there are certainly absolutely reasons, two reasons to do that. But I think in the past, it was so much of a focus, and it has been for me about building the technology. And I think there are options, there's just so many options right now, right? That it's really about not having the very, you know, absolute rate tool, but picking the mix of tools that people can easily come to and easily, you know, incorporate in their daily work life and if they already have a tool that they're doing that with right then how can you just leverage, how can we actually leverage that, as opposed to asking them to switch to something else? So it's for me over the last couple of years, that's definitely, I think, been a sort of turning point in the way I've thought about community. And because it's really about we have now a digital workplace, right? We, especially over the last few years, where we've all gone remote, we have many organizations have a number of tools at their disposal. And so how do we just leverage what we've got versus, you know, picking this rate tool that does it all?

15:39

Yes, that's, that's, that's, that's a good way of thinking about it. So I do have a question. And I'm thinking about, what is your onboarding process for basically, you know, when you're thinking about building out your team, and the kind of team that you'd like to have? So how do you onboard? Yeah, so

**Lisa Tallman** 16:01

I think people get need to get to know the organization, right. At the end of the day, community is about engagement with your, your community members, whoever they may be, that might be employees, that might be customers. And so how do you get them in front of the community? Right, whether that's me, you know, internal meetings, if they're, if it's an internal community, that might be internal meetings, whether they actually have a direct tie to that or not, I think, you know, I incur have always encouraged my staff to sort of get involved across the organization in various different ways. And it doesn't have to be strictly about community, right it up in other through other projects, whether that's, you know, just, you know, employee resource groups or, or whatever else it might be, or volunteering for another project. That helps them just to get to know and understand the organization. So I think that is, one thing that I focus on is how do I get my team, particularly new people, and have community members in some way, right, and it Pertino in that first year, so they build relationships, so they get to know people get involved with the organization, because it's all about relationships, so much of community is about relationships. So that's probably one of the number one things that I think about is how to help them build relationships and encourage them to do that. The other things around onboarding is sort of just, you know, figuring helping them figure out what their role is on pain and where they can offer the most value to the team. I think I've been strategic, as I have built out teams about thinking okay, what what do we need? What, what was our skill set are missing? What type of personality? Do we need to inject? You know, I've had very, super detailed oriented, like, Okay, we need to balance that, right, we need someone that is, you know, more extroverted and outgoing, right. And so I think you need to understand the skills your team has, what you have, but also what you need in terms of work style and personality, so that you build a really well rounded team, rather than hiring a whole bunch of people like yourself, or type, all this same type of person, that's not really going to help your team. And so I've been cognizant of that over over the years about what type of people we I've needed to add to my team? And how does that fit into what the organization needs? needs as well.

19:12

So leading to that, to what to what you're saying, cuz I'm thinking about it now. And you know, in the community management space, job descriptions are very nebulous. That's what I find, right? And even these titles that are there, so do you, you know, like, what is your process? Do you write these job descriptions? Because you know, the kind of people that you want to have when you're building your team, or how do you go about it. So you have, I'm not even I don't even want to use the word fit right fit. But I want to say maybe having a team that is dynamic and that you would work really well with.

**Lisa Tallman** 19:45

So first of all, I always start with my strategy, where are we going? So I typically have a strategic plan for community that's, that's around three years long. So I kind of know how Here's where we are. And here's where we want to be, right? Here's the team I've got, we have the right people to get us where we want to be right? Do we have the right skills? etc? Or, you know, how do we build, right? Obviously, you may need to build, you can certainly build skills that you've got. So that's those are the the types of things I think about. But you, to me, it's all sorts of strategy, I need to know where I'm going. First of all, once you know where you're going, you can figure out can I build it in the team? I've got? Do we have the bandwidth, right, right user? Do we need to then hire someone in. And that's where I always have a business case, that's where every year I would update a business case are included in that business case was headcount. Here's what my current team is doing. Here's much, here's how much time and effort it's taking them to do that, here's what's not getting done. Because we don't have the resources. And here's what we could be doing. And what we will need to do to fulfill the strategic plan. And here's how that headcount fits into it, and what we need in order to meet the strategic plan goals in the future. So I, I've always updated at least once a year, ready for budget cycle. And I've never been afraid, at budget time to ask for what I've wanted and needed, right. And I think that's, that's the other thing. I knew some years, I was never gonna get it wasn't gonna happen. I knew it wasn't a priority. But I still asked for I still had the business case ready, I still ask for what I need it. Just so leadership, new pay, it's not that there's not a need here, you know, there's always a need here. And we're going to be made aware of it, even if there's no chance that it's actually going to happen in the next budget cycle. So strategy, the business case that fits that strategy. And then again, understanding who's on your current team, can you build those skills, what gaps at what gaps are exist? That you need to fill?

22:24

Mm hmm. That's, that's really good. So I'm thinking about the community manager, who's a team of one right now. And they're thinking, yeah, I really need to add somebody else on my team, what would be a pro tip that you would give them knowing that maybe the, you know, leadership might not have those resources.

**Lisa Tallman** 22:43

So they that this is the borrow, this is where I borrow? I, they're usually again, it's because you've built, I've done a good job building relationships. They're usually hopefully other people in your organization who get what you do, they may be doing something else, right. Now, they may be in a different department. They may be unhappy with their positions and looking for something else. And I've always, you know, reached out to those people say, Hey, can you do a project for me? Do you think your boss would allow you to do this project for me? Right? And so it's something that, you know, if they've expressed interest in, they're happy to do it. And as long as their boss says, yes, then you you've got yourself another resources, it may be time down, it may be limited, but you've got yourself a resource to get something done. And so I have often borrowed people whether it be for us, or short time period, and sometimes they have, you know, you know, eventually become part of my team. And that's the other thing too. You know, maybe it's not so much now, but through the, you know, the last 15 years, I've been doing this almost 20 Now, right, you know, companies restructure, changes happen. One of the last people that I hired at my laptop came from another department, and I actually didn't know her. But her boss, you know, I knew her boss and her boss said, I know you I know, Lisa, I know what Lisa does. And she's looking for someone, I think you might be a good fit for what Lisa's looking for. It's about having built those relationships up people, again, understanding the value of what you've brought to the organization and saying, Hey, I'm going to lose you. We're restructuring but here's another spot that I think might be a fit for you. So again, relationships throughout the organization have been extremely helpful in getting the people that I've needed over time.

25:02

Fantastic. That's good advice. I think for any community managers, that is definitely out there thinking about him. So, I want to thank you so much for your time. I just have one final question, how are we going to end, I would like to know, what inspires you about your community?

**Lisa Tallman** 25:19

You know, right now, because again, I'm starting from scratch, I think it's just what inspires me is getting people involved and connecting them to other people. Again, the current organization that I work with, there are 68 affiliates across the country. And what I found is they don't actually really know each other. All that well. It has not they've haven't had the tools, they haven't had the leadership to get to really know each other. And so for me, it's about getting people connected to other people that can help them solve their problems. And now we have the vehicles within the organization to do that, not just through technology, but also through, you know, regular, you know, monthly meetings and, and things like that to get them connected to each other. And so I'm looking forward to seeing those connections build over time, and really creating a network, a network within Easterseals so that people don't feel so isolated and they know that they can reach out to others to help them with their their challenges.

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Well, thank you so much. Thank you for your time. I'm going to stop the recording now.