

When it Mattered

Episode 48: Linda Souza

Chitra Ragavan:

Linda Souza was driving home from her martial arts class one afternoon in the middle of a January snow storm in Pittsburgh. As she merged onto the icy freeway, Souza lost control of her Dodge Dakota pickup truck. The Mack Truck could not avoid hitting the back of Souza's pickup, but she was able to accelerate into a grassy ditch, narrowly avoiding serious injury. Hello everyone, I'm Chitra Ragavan. And this is When it Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Good Story, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative.

Chitra Ragavan:

Needless to say that was Souza's last winter on the east coast. She moved to Los Angeles where she's now Senior Vice President of Marketing at CareerArc, which offers technology based social recruiting and outplacement solutions to help HR leaders recruit and transition employees. Souza is a 7 x tech startup marketer with more than 20 years of experience helping lead early stage and growth stage startups to successful exits. Prior to CareerArc, Linda served as Vice President of Marketing for cryptocurrency and blockchain startup Gem, where she was my colleague. Souza also served as Vice President of Marketing for Deep Six AI, an award-winning artificial intelligence company. Linda, welcome to the podcast.

Linda Souza:

Thank you Chitra, I'm excited to be here.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell us about that potentially fatal highway accident that January day.

Linda Souza:

So I was training at a martial arts workshop actually. This is back when I was living in Pittsburgh in the early two thousands, and it had started snowing while I was in the class because it was in January. And by the time I got out and had to hit the road to get home, which was a good 30 or 40 minute drive home, it was full on snowstorm. And I was driving a pickup truck at the time, which unfortunately does not have great traction all the time in the snow. And as I was trying to merge onto the highway, which had not been plowed or otherwise treated, I just started to spin out of control. And basically I just lost control of steering and started to slide sideways across the lanes of traffic.

Linda Souza:

And as I looked to my right, I could see this Mack Truck coming at me in my lane. And it was kind of like that one micro moment where I had to figure out what do I do because he's coming right at my driver's side. And I thought to myself, "This is how people die." So within that split second, I just jammed my foot on the gas and accelerated as quickly as I could and managed to make it into the ditch that separated the two sides of the highway. And while he still hit the back end of my truck fortunately, it was enough that it didn't do serious damage to me, it did a lot of damage both to my truck and to his truck, but no one was hurt. So you know, if I had been even a split second sooner, if I had frozen or if that instinct to just take action hadn't kicked in, we might not be talking today.

Chitra Ragavan:

How did you regain control of the situation, and what did that teach you about yourself?

Linda Souza:

What it taught me about myself is we never know in a moment of emergency like that when something's going to happen, what our reaction is going to be. I mean, we'd all like to think that we're going to take the right action, we'll be a hero and whatever, but you really don't know until you're in a scenario like that, whether your reaction will be fight or flight or freeze. Right? And so for me, fortunately, what it showed me is that in that split second, in that moment, my instinct is to be very clear minded, to focus, not to panic, but just to focus on what do I need to do to get myself out of this and to take quick action.

Chitra Ragavan:

So that almost fatal, the brush with the Mac truck was in a way the culmination of a kind of a difficult childhood and early adulthood wasn't it? Tell us a little bit about that.

Linda Souza:

So I actually grew up on a dairy farm in upstate New York until I was about 17 and actually moved my senior year of high school, which also is not an easy thing. But yeah, it was for anybody who has ever done any type of farming, for me it was a dairy farm, farmers are incredibly hardworking people really because you have no choice. It's 24/7, 365. And for us, that was certainly the case. I know in my parents' case, they felt like by the time we were my sister and I were seven years old, that was old enough to have chores and to be responsible as contributors on keeping up the farm and so forth. So at that point, that that sort of began, I guess you could say my working life. From the point I was seven on, I always was on the hook for working and contributing and if there were holidays or vacations or summer holidays or whatever, or weekends, that meant that we were available to work more.

Linda Souza:

So, while during the school year on school days, I would come home and go directly out to the barn and spend a couple hours working. If it was a weekend or vacation, I would do chores in the morning as well as in the evening. And each time of year had additional

chores as well. So in the summers, it was haying season, spending time in a hot hayloft all day, wearing long pants and gloves and long sleeves and working, in addition to my normal chores. And in the winters, it meant going out into the woods with my dad and he would chop the firewood and my sister and I would help throw it into the truck and then throw it into our cellar and then carry it up the cellar stairs for the wood fireplace, the stove that we had to keep the house.

Linda Souza:

So definitely my childhood, I would say is characterized by a lot of work. With a type of environment like that with kind of the pressure and the stress that farmers are under, both the amount of work that they're doing ongoing, which never stops. And then also the financial distress of that as well, because unless you're a very big commercial farm, a lot of these small family farms, you barely make enough to get by. It wasn't unusual for example, we'd wear our boots literally until there were many holes in them and we couldn't wear them anymore. Our idea of waterproofing so to speak, would be to put our feet in Wonderbread bags, empty bread bags, and then put our feet in the boots. And that was kind of the waterproofing. So even if the boots got holes, we could still wear them until they were at the point where you just couldn't wear them anymore. And kind of-

Chitra Ragavan:

That's amazing. That's incredibly, I mean, I'm exhausted just hearing about it. And you were wearing hand-me-downs too, and long sleeves, you mentioned long sleeves and they almost got you in a whole bunch of trouble one day, didn't they?

Linda Souza:

Yes, actually I was wearing a hand-me-down winter coat from my grandfather, and obviously it was way too big for me. And I was in the milk room, which is where all the milk gets stored in this big metal tank. And it has an agitator that keeps the milk stirred, it basically just continually rotates with a big paddle. And I got my coat caught on a piece of the machinery because it was too big for me. And it basically pulled it into the machine.

Chitra Ragavan:

And what happened?

Linda Souza:

I ended up with a compound fracture. Basically the bones poked through my wrist. My forearm was kind of in an S shape, almost like having an extra hinge in the middle of my forearm.

Chitra Ragavan:

Oh my gosh. That sounds terrible. And so did you go to the hospital? What happened next?

Linda Souza:

Yeah, so they had to cut me out of the machine. I was fortunate actually that my sister, because we were in the middle of doing chores, walked into the milk room when she did and ran to get my parents. But they cut me out of the machine, out of the coat. And then I had to walk the long driveway between the barn and the car to then go to the hospital, which was about 25 minutes away.

Chitra Ragavan:

And how old were you at the time?

Linda Souza:

I was 12.

Chitra Ragavan:

And that wasn't the end of that broken arm story was it? You spent many, many years dealing with that same broken arm that seemed to get broken over and over again.

Linda Souza:

No. Unfortunately the bones weren't set right. So actually I had, I used to call it my ski slope. So the arm was still not straight and it was just weak at that point where the bones kind of knit together. And six months later I broke it again. And again, it was set wrong by the same doctor. I'm not sure why we went back to him, but maybe we didn't have many choices given our financial situation and actually Shriner's Hospital for Children, the location in Montreal took me in. They specialize in both orthopedics and burns in children. And my case I guess, was fair enough that they accepted me into their program. And that's when obviously they had to rebreak the bones again and reset it and put in metal plate and steel screws.

Chitra Ragavan:

And did that help heal it?

Linda Souza:

It did. I still have the screws and the metal plate in there.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you had other issues too in those days with your childhood, with your father, et cetera.

Linda Souza:

Yeah. Unfortunately I think with the stress of farm life and financials and so forth, it kind of led to alcoholism for as far back as I can remember. So that's also something as a child that's hard to deal with. He was a little bit of an angry drunk. He didn't physically abuse us, but obviously he did a lot of yelling and breaking things. And sometimes there were times for example, he would send my sister and I out into the field to pick up

stones and things like that until it rained or my mom came out to get us. So that yeah, definitely added another kind of layer of challenge to my childhood.

Chitra Ragavan:

So what was the lasting impact of all of these stress points with the lack of money and your father's situation and all of those layers of stress, would you say? What did that teach you and how did that shape you?

Linda Souza:

I mean, I think those difficult situations, anytime you're faced with hardship, either you fall victim to it, or it makes you stronger as a result. And I think for me, it was the latter. I think it was definitely a character building time. It gave me a lot of grit and perseverance. It gave me an appreciation for the value of hard work. And I would say also a great deal of resourcefulness, which comes in handy, especially in my role, working with startups. When we were working on the farm, you don't always have the luxury of being able to throw money at a problem, for example. So you need to find other creative ways of solving a problem that's maybe not the obvious path. So having done that as a child actually, has benefited me as an adult.

Chitra Ragavan:

And I remember one particularly vivid story you told me one day when we were in LA, about one of your tasks that had to deal with literally watching manure on the dairy farm. And you were talking about what that taught you.

Linda Souza:

Yeah. In terms of worst jobs, one of my jobs you mentioned, because I was in upstate New York, it was very, very cold winters. And if our machines froze due to the cold, but continued to try to run, it would burn out the machine. So one of my jobs, when we were cleaning the gutters in the barn would be to, it was... I don't know even know what the official name was for it, it's kind of like a manure elevator that takes the manure from the barn up this almost like an escalator type thing.

Linda Souza:

It's like a big arm over this big pile of manure. And literally my job was to stand outside and to watch the manure fall off the end of this manure escalator type thing into the pile to make sure that it didn't stall, that it didn't freeze and cause the engine to burn out. So, when I think about, sometimes with any job, there's always things that you enjoy less than other aspects of your job, or even working up through the ranks and so forth, there are a lot of jobs that are maybe not the most fun or most glamorous or whatever, but you know what, in comparison, it's made me not... There's nothing that I wouldn't do within reason, of course. But there's no job that I feel is below me let's say, because there's no job that's worse than that, that I've done so far.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah, and it's easy to laugh about it now, looking back, but I'm sure as a young girl, there were many days when you just thought, "What am I doing?"

Linda Souza:

It was not my favorite, no. And I did when I was a kid, I did think about because I really do love animals. And one of the things that I thought about was, "Do I want to be a vet when I get older?" And I did think, "I don't want to... I'd like to work in a nice clean environment where I don't have to be surrounded by manure." So that's why I ended up pursuing business, which was also very interesting to me.

Chitra Ragavan:

So how did you end up in marketing?

Linda Souza:

So when I was an undergrad, I was taking a lot of foreign language classes. I was actually majoring in foreign languages because I was always interested in people, in language, and communication and so forth. And I ended up taking a marketing class as part of my French marketing business certificate and just realized, "Wow, I really love this." For whatever reason, it just really clicked with me and was extremely interesting. And from there, I just took as many marketing classes as I could. And actually my Master's Degree is in marketing.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you're now at CareerArc as senior VP for marketing. What is CareerArc?

Linda Souza:

So we're an HR tech company that helps businesses basically recruit and transition the modern workforce.

Chitra Ragavan:

And I guess it's a particularly relevant job right now with the massive numbers of unemployed people due to COVID-19. What trends are you seeing? You've got a particularly interesting perch looking at the layoffs and hirings and firings and placements and all of that.

Linda Souza:

Yeah. This has been a challenging time for a lot of companies that's for sure. And we did a little internal study a couple of weeks ago to look at the impact of COVID across all of our customers, both on the recruiting side, as well as layoffs. And what we've seen was that hiring, obviously hiring slowed across the board, but it has already started to come back, which is very promising. The impact has been different for companies both within and across industries. So for example, if you take an industry like healthcare, there are some hospitals for example, who can't hire quickly enough. And then there are

others, for example, who have a lot of elective procedures and so forth, which was paused for a while. And so for them, the impact was quite different.

Linda Souza:

Same thing with, for example, senior living communities, where they continue to ramped up hiring because there was an outsized impact of coronavirus on the older population. So it's just very interesting that even within industries, and we've seen that even within regions where certain states, for example, based on the regulations and guidance put in place at the state level have been impacted differently, even if it's the same company and just a different location,

Chitra Ragavan:

COVID-19 has caused these sweeping changes in the way people work. What are you seeing, and what do you think is going to be the longterm impact? Not just remote work, but talent strategy, compensation, pay scales, all of those things.

Linda Souza:

Well, yeah, I mean, I think right now it's causing a lot of us to reimagine the way that we're working. And I think some of the changes we're seeing will be a little more permanent. So obviously people were already starting to work from home. But I think a lot of companies still felt a little bit of hesitation in terms of can people actually be productive, will they be? And now this has proven, yes, in the majority of cases that model could work. So I think we'll see a lot more of that going forward.

Linda Souza:

I don't think it will be everybody will permanently work from home at all companies, but I think there's going to be a bigger appetite for that and a bigger demand for that. And then that opens up things like, "Okay, well does that mean, for example, if I'm in a place where it's very expensive to live and so salaries are elevated, does that open me up to talent in different parts of the country if I don't need someone to physically come in every single day?" And that also entails, "Well, now we have to rethink the compensation structure. Do I pay less if I'm hiring in Kansas versus Los Angeles?"

Linda Souza:

What about employees who were coming in, were living in a very expensive area, but now they've decided if their role has been deemed okay for remote work. Now they're deciding, "Okay, I don't need to live in Silicon Valley anymore. I'm going to go live in Idaho." Should we adjust their salaries? Is that fair? Can we do that? These are the questions that companies are asking. And I think there's going to be many more questions and sometimes it might be on a case by case basis. Sometimes it might be setting a policy for new hires coming in versus how you handle existing employees, maybe it's a little bit different. I don't know, but I know a lot of HR people are already thinking about those implications kind of down the line, but there will be many more for us to address.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yes, in terms of pay scales, you've already seen one big company Facebook say that, if employees, all employees can work remotely, however, their pay might change depending on where they are. And I think particularly for new employees, they may face a very, very different workplace and pay scales and all of that, then those who are already in place.

Linda Souza:

Right. Yeah, exactly. And I kind of wonder, how is that going to go over with existing employees too? Because yeah, once you've set a certain agreement and expectation with an employer, how do you renegotiate that contract in a way that's fair for both, but doesn't leave the employee feeling like somehow they've been devalued. So I think that's a real challenge and something that HR leaders need to look out for just from a morale standpoint, and how that's going to affect your existing workforce.

Chitra Ragavan:

And in terms of how people work even in the workplace with all of the social distancing guidelines, I think morale probably could be a real issue, right? Because people have to work in an entirely different way, looking over their shoulders almost to be safe than they've ever had before.

Linda Souza:

Yeah, totally. And I think that's why you're seeing some companies that are opting to stay out of the office longer. Some have already said, "We're not going back this year. Or some have even just said, "Well, we'll go back, but probably in the fall." Whereas other companies feel that having that face to face interaction is important, but I'm not sure how realistic that's going to be, how employees will respond to that. If I go into the office and I need to wear a mask all day and I need to sit behind a glass partition and I have to be careful, I can only walk one direction in one hallway. And how disruptive will that be?

Linda Souza:

We're rotating parts of teams in and out. Is that creating more disruption than working remotely or will that be to everyone's benefit? And you know, sometimes it even comes down to just the personalities of the people involved. So certainly, some people are very much reveling in this work-from-home opportunity and other people, if they're real social animals, they're really missing that social interaction. For them being back in the office is worth the trade offs. And yeah, so I think it'll be interesting to see how the model works. And I think it will have to be kind of on a case by case basis. I don't think there's one hard and fast rule that works for everyone.

Chitra Ragavan:

What do you think will happen in the fall if there's a second wave of infections?

Linda Souza:

Well, I think the positive thing is that now that this first time that the pandemic happened, none of us was really prepared for it. So there were just number one, there was just the sheer surprise of being blindsided by something on this scale that we never really expected to come to pass. And then the mad scramble to figure out what do we say? How do we communicate to our employees? How do we communicate to our clients and other stakeholders? How do we figure out how to work remotely? I was lucky I was in a tech company, so we were all set up for that. It was a somewhat easy transition, but that's not the case in all companies.

Linda Souza:

So we already had to work through those really big, gnarly problems, and the big surprises. I feel like if we go into a second wave, if that were to happen, at least we've already figured out the routines and the procedures and the communication patterns and things like that. We don't need to figure that out again. So yes, we'll still need to social distance and stay home and things like that. It'll just feel like more of the same, but I feel like people will be able to weather that a little better than this first time. I think it was really difficult, especially in the beginning,

Chitra Ragavan:

Linda, looking back at that 12 year old on the dairy farm, with her arm caught in a paddle or forced to pick up stones or later that young woman fighting for control of her pickup truck. What would you say to her about this journey that you've been on?

Linda Souza:

I would say that this will only make you stronger. I think all of these challenges, I actually, I wouldn't change them, because I think it's the collection of all these experiences that really shape who you are. And I think it has made me a stronger person in general, a stronger person in business, an action-oriented, hardworking person, and a very resourceful person. And all of those traits have served me well, both in life and in business.

Chitra Ragavan:

Well, having worked with you for a couple of years, I second all of that. Do you have any, or have you had any, what I call viral insights about your life and work from that moment of clarity brought upon by a crisis?

Linda Souza:

Honestly, it gives me a sense of calm, I guess, and a sense of confidence that when everything goes wrong and I need to act quickly, that I will have the presence of mind, the clear mindedness to be decisive, to act fast and to make the right choices. So I think that the unknown is scary. And this gives me a little bit of peace of mind that I have in the past reacted in the right way to get myself out of the situation, and I can do that again.

Chitra Ragavan:

Linda, thank you so much for joining me today and for the fascinating conversation.

Linda Souza:

Oh, well thank you so much for having me. I'm honored to be part of your podcast. You've had some wonderful guests and I've really enjoyed hearing all their stories. So thank you for inviting me.

Chitra Ragavan:

Linda Souza is Senior Vice President of Marketing at CareerArc. Souza is a 7 x tech startup marketer... Let me say that again. Linda Souza is Senior Vice President of Marketing at CareerArc. Souza is a 7 x tech startup marketer with more than 20 years of experience helping early stage and growth stage startups to successful exits. Prior to CareerArc, Linda served as Vice President of Marketing for cryptocurrency and blockchain startup Gem, where she was my colleague. Souza also served as Vice President of Marketing for Deep Six AI, an award winning, artificial intelligence software company. This is When it Mattered. I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan:

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