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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 173: KRISTEN ROBY DIMLOW – HOLISTIC WELLBEING AT MICROSOFT

Female Speaker

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program, offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world, sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, more than ever before, companies and organizations are placing great emphasis on their employees by offering more flexible work schedules or investing greatly in education and training programs. Some, like Microsoft, are focusing on the general well-being of their employees. Microsoft has created and launched its Holistic Well Being program, a series of offerings that support employees in four specific well-being areas: physical, mental, financial, and social. Kristen Roby Dimlow is a graduate of William & Mary. She's Vice President, Total Rewards, Performance, and HR Business Intelligence at Microsoft. She joins us to talk about the Holistic Well-being program there, what it entails and what it's doing for Microsoft and its employees. Here's our conversation with Kristen Roby Dimlow.

Ken White

Well, Kristen, it's nice to see you. Thank you very much for sharing your time with us.

Kristen Roby Dimlow

I am thrilled to be here. Thanks, Ken.

Ken White

So when you think about William & Mary. What comes to mind?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

Oh, my gosh. I have so many happy memories of William & Mary, and it was a great education. And I also had so much fun being in Williamsburg, and I still have some very close friends. So it's been with me my whole life just about.

Ken White

That's great. And I walk these halls every day, and I'm just in awe of the students who are a part of our University and our business school. It's really something here. Yeah. And it's nice to speak to graduates like you. Who've been doing some really wonderful things. So Microsoft, how long have you been there, and what's your role?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

I've been with Microsoft off and on for 23 years, and I'm what we call a boomerang. So about seven years ago, I left Microsoft to be a head of HR for a small technology company in Seattle. And I lasted all of 16 months because I missed Microsoft so much. But my current role there is head of Total Rewards and HR Business Insights. And so that is compensation benefits, global mobility, and people analytics. And it's perfect for me because it's a blend of HR and finance. And my career has kind of been half and half started out in finance and then moved into HR and have found myself in the perfect hybrid role for both.

Ken White

Yeah, fantastic. So tell us about the Holistic Well-being at Microsoft. This is interesting.

Kristen Roby Dimlow

This is really neat. I think most companies have always been very thoughtful about physical well-being. If you think about benefits, everybody has some sort of health care plan. Many of us have more recently started to accentuate the importance of fitness for a healthy body. But what we've realized is I think of it as a positive success loop where there are different elements of well-being and wellness. So physical, obviously, but mental more recently, I think we're getting more and more comfortable across the globe in talking about mental well-being and mental health, financial well-being, and then we talk about social well-being. And what we found is if you're off on any one of these, it manifests in the others. And so over the last, say, four or five years, we've been really trying to promote holistic well-being.

Ken White

And what's the response been? The reaction?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

Fantastic, I would say, especially on mental well-being. This was something that we started a few years ago, and we were somewhat naive. We had an employee assistance program, just like many people do, where people can call and get counseling support as needed. But we started 1 May. May is mental health awareness month, and we started that year with a campaign called It's Okay Not to Be Okay. And our idea was to try to destigmatize mental health. We started in a very sort of small way. We just reminded people about the EAP. We also brought in a few documentaries on mental health. And what we didn't expect was the outpouring of support. And we had leaders who actually stood up and told their own stories. And we got such a positive response that just this little foray into reminding people it's okay not to be okay really started something very, very cool at Microsoft. And we've continued to build since then. One of the things that's been interesting, the COVID pandemic, has really accelerated the destigmatization of mental well-being. I think there was a study that 42% of Americans about a year ago were feeling more anxious. And I would say that anxiety has only grown given geopolitical events, given some of the racial injustice, given just the lack of control in people's lives. My heart really goes out to people with young children where they're trying to juggle school from home or even when they do go back, then having to have them come back because someone in the classroom has become infected. It's just ongoing anxiety. And so we've all sort of woken up to realize this is something we all have. And so it's been, I would say a bit of a silver lining is that it's really destigmatized mental health.

Ken White

No question. It is amazing how people will self-disclose in that area now compared to even just a few years ago. I think you're right. It's the pandemic, right. I think it put everybody on equal footing. So other than the initial introduction to that piece of it, have you done more or plan to do more in other things?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

We have done more. And I would say we're only really getting started because I think there's so much going on in this space that we're just learning every day. But beyond our EAP, we tried to make sure that people understood what their medical benefits included. We wanted to make sure that they understood leave practices. At Microsoft, we have a certain amount of sick days per year. We relabeled them sick and mental well-being days. And that was something that didn't cost us a dime but was hugely influential. And again, saying, it's okay not to be okay. It's okay to take time off from work if you need it. We also have an amazing what we call an ERG, which is an employee resource group on mental health. And so, they have been phenomenal. And then even in our products, Microsoft is trying really hard to build products that are accessible, and that includes for mental health or neurodiverse populations. And so, I would give big kudos to our Xbox group. We have a game studio in the UK that is building a game based on mental health, has a character

with mental health condition. And so, all of this is coming together in a beautiful way. My team sort of brings the benefits. We've also introduced talk space where people can do chat counseling. In addition to the EAP, we've offered Headspace, which is a really cool app to support mindfulness and mental well-being. And then the ERG brings in their own expertise. They have people who are very brave and willing to share their own journeys and support each other. We've also worked with our training organization to provide trainings to both employees and managers about what to do when you're not feeling okay, how to articulate it, whom to go to for help. If you're a manager, hey, you don't need to be a counselor. You do not need to be the one to diagnose. 80% of it is listening, and then 20% is helping them find the resources that they need to support. So it's been amazing. I would say it's a beautiful one Microsoft moment where everybody's coming in together to try to lift this initiative because we all have experienced anxiety ourselves, or we know people with mental health conditions.

Ken White

Are you seeing in terms of participation any more from younger versus older, male versus female, one sector or part of the company than the other?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

That's a wonderful question. I actually haven't broken it down in a huge amount of detail, but I would say across the board, we're pretty much up. And one of the challenges we've had, and I think everyone's experiencing this is our EAP providers are overloaded. And one of the things I did I had a leadership team strategy meeting, and we invited one of the counselors to come in and talk to us about what they're seeing. And they said they just feel bad, that they cannot get through all of the people in their cues. And so there are cues of people that are sort of waiting. They also talked about the importance of putting their own oxygen masks on. So even our counselors need counseling, so that was helpful. The other thing we learned through this, again from our ERG group. So not from the one on accessibility or on mental health, but our Blacks at Microsoft ERG asked us to have more diversity in the counselors themselves, which makes so much sense, right? There are different cultures around the world, different races, different ideas on things. And so it's important that the counselors look like the employees whom they're serving. And so that was a huge unlock for us. I don't see it as one area or another. I will say that across the board, we have to think of that diversity and inclusion piece. And I'd also say anecdotally. I feel like younger generation is more comfortable saying that they're not feeling okay. So I think maybe some of us call myself out baby boomers. You were taught to be stoic and not complain. And I think that's really unhealthy. So I love to see that earlier in career, are a little more willing to step up and say, hey, I need a mental well-being day.

Ken White

Being around young people, they are changing the world for the better, I can tell you for sure.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Kristen Roby Dimlow in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. If your organization is interested in retaining your best people, consider enrolling them in one of our MBA programs for working professionals. William & Mary's online MBA, part-time MBA, and executive MBA programs are designed for the professional who works full-time. So both the employee and the organization benefit. Show your employees you care by investing in their growth. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation on Holistic Well-being at Microsoft with Kristen Roby Dimlow.

Ken White

So how about the financial side? What do you see there and the needs that you're seeing?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

Well, this is great. So many companies have a lot of financial well-being benefits for employees, starting with pay. And so pay, 401K, some people have ESPP programs. A lot of times, if you have a 401K program, you probably have access to financial counseling. And we do through our provider. And so we try to spend a lot of time working with employees to make sure they understand what their benefits are and then try to also think about what are the different groups, what are their needs. So earlier in career care a lot about student loan payback. So we try to offer that up at the right time. People who are maybe a little older have children who are thinking of going off to college, need assistance, thinking about how am I going to finance that. As you get close to retirement, thinking about how am I going to retire? What do I need to know? So we try to think about those different constituencies. I think another interesting one is people who might be new to the United States. So we have a lot of global mobility. We have people come in from other countries where the financial landscape is very different, or maybe there's a greater social safety net than in the United States. And so we need to teach them what is a 401k program? What is an ESPP? Why is this? I was talking to a young woman, and I said to her, hey, you're investing in our 401k, right, because there's a massive upside for you to do that. And she said I have so many student loans. I'm really not. I have a real cash flow issue. First of all, that motivated me to do more on student loans, but also made me realize I really need to educate people of the importance of retirement and really thinking about how to put their money to work for them.

Ken White

This is a massive undertaking. I mean, employers, a generation ago, it was a paycheck and maybe some health insurance. Wow. How did this start? I mean, I know it's a big organization, but where did it all come from and the momentum?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

Yeah, well, we were lucky in that we've always had pretty decent benefits, but we have more recently been more thoughtful of our diverse populations and what sorts of things they need. And so we've been trying to ensure that when we look across the landscape that our benefits are inclusive, that they're supporting our culture. So Satya Nadella has been our CEO for about seven years. He brought us the idea of growth mindset. He's very inspired by Carol Dweck, who wrote the book Mindset and brought that to Microsoft. And so, as part of growth mindset, we also have cultural pillars around diversity and inclusion, customer obsession, and one Microsoft. What he brought us was so incredible because we really needed to reinvent ourselves. We were sort of like the 45-year-old startup, and it was time to let some of our old practices go and embrace some new ones. And one of them was this idea of growth mindset where we don't have all the answers. We need to think more about our customers, and we needed to act as one Microsoft. So that sort of started a lot of stuff, including this idea of what do we need to do with our benefits and compensation in order to be more diverse and inclusive and to promote one Microsoft. So that's how some of this started. It's been really great.

Ken White

You're obviously doing it for the right reasons, but there are certainly some benefits to the organization. We're seeing people just leave jobs so quickly now. I mean, it is really something. Have you seen some positive effects in terms of the great resignation?

Kristen Roby Dimlow

We have. So I like to think of it as the great reshuffle because what I see is people taking on new opportunities, and we have been lucky in that while we have seen attrition rates resurge to pre-pandemic levels, I'm not seeing some of what I see in our industry, which is great. And part of that is having a great value proposition. So again, like you're reminding me, one of our challenges was articulating everything that exists for employees at Microsoft. So I had someone on my teamwork with one of our corporate communications people to think about value proposition. And luckily, they didn't listen to me because what I wanted them to do was so far off from what they learned our employees needed. So what they did was global focus groups. They went around the world and talked to all different, and virtually they didn't get on planes. They did it virtually, but they talked to employees all over the world to say, what is it about Microsoft that you love? And it wasn't the pay and benefits. The pay and benefits were like entry into the door. It's the ante to get into the game. But what they loved was it came down to four pillars, community,

growth, the ability to grow, well-being, and flexibility. And Ironically, this all happened pre-COVID, which was wild because these pillars are so durable and, especially during COVID, the idea of flexibility. What they meant at that time when we were doing these focus groups was they loved that they were able to go to a kid's soccer game, that they were able to start early, that they were able to work from home a day or two a week because commutes were so difficult. That was their idea of flexibility. We've now learned after two years of this that there is this future of work which was much more nimble, much more flexible. And so I feel like, to your point, it's important for an employer to try to get all of these things right, and holistic well-being is the primary part of that. So when we articulated the value proposition, then we realized, okay, our go-to-market strategy is to start telling people what exists in each of these buckets and the way we did it, which, again, not my idea. Their idea they were smarter than I am was they got employees to tell the stories. So they went and found employees who would tell stories about why is community important to me? Why is well-being important to me? We got people to tell unbelievable stories. And those I'm sure with your background, you probably know this. There's nothing better than a real person telling, like, I can tell somebody, but as the head of paying benefits, people feel like I have an agenda. So it's much better to hear from one of their peers what's going on.

Ken White

Nice. All forms of media in terms of the storytelling.

Kristen Roby Dimlow

Yeah. Mostly right now, we're doing a lot with just online because videos, but even just short anecdotes that go in mail. And of course, a lot of people don't read mail these days. So we also promote social media. We have a hashtag Microsoft life, and so we encourage employees to do hashtag Microsoft life. My thing is called essentials. So I do hashtag essentials as well. But I think you'll see Microsoft Life more than essentials if I'm honest. But it's been just a fabulous way. It scales globally. It resonates globally. We sort of did a walking kit for people so with lots of PowerPoints or images that they could use so that they can customize campaigns. So if you're in Germany, you can take our collateral and customize it for what's going on in Germany. So that's been great. I'd love to share one other thing we've learned with you, and I got this from my boss. So she came up with it, but her name is Kathleen Hogan. She's the CHRO of Microsoft, and she was trying to articulate the importance of employee engagement, and she took a riff from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. So she came up with the five P's of employee engagement. And so it's purpose at the top, followed by pride, people, perks, and pay. And so, if you think of pay and perks are foundational. It's what I was saying earlier. It's like food and shelter. That's got to be good before you even think about retaining anybody. You need to have a decent story there. But then it's sort of the top of the pyramid are more of the intrinsic benefits. Right. And thanks to Satya for giving us amazing purpose. So the Microsoft

mission is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more. And that's one of the reasons, honestly, why I came back to Microsoft. I probably was at a stage where I could have been done, but Microsoft's purpose is so aligned to my personal purpose. And then the pride in the company, so proud of the products we make and what they do for employees or do for people around the world. And then the people with whom I work, it's really cool. We work with some amazing people. And that was another reason why I think I came back. And then the perks and pay are super important, too. But all of that comes together. So both our five P's as well as our essentials. If we can kind of keep that in balance, then we're able to retain people. And some people do leave. Some people feel like the grass is greener, but we have a lot of boomerangs, too. I think 11% of our hires back are boomerang employees. So I think that they kind of go like, you might get a teaser right, you might get a little bit of a sign-on bonus or a bigger stock package. And I do believe you can get pay anywhere. You can get more pay anywhere where you go. But it's the holistic package that keeps you sort of coming in and feeling great about a company. Anyway, we're trying to make all that work. We're not perfect yet. We're still learning a bunch. But I feel like both of these have been helpful ways to try to articulate what the Microsoft deal is for employees.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Kristen Roby Dimlow, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats, the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. If you are looking for a truly transformational experience, check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Kristin Roby Dimlow, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Speaker

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