

VoiceAmerica (0:0.239)

show starting at five four three two

Chris Meek (0:6.208)

Hello, ~ you've tuned into this week's episode of Next Steps Forward, and I'm your host, Chris Meek. As always, it's an honor to have you with us. Next Step Forward is committed to helping others achieve more than ever while experiencing greater personal empowerment and wellbeing. Our special guest today is Katina Sawyer. Katina is a co-founder of Worker Being and an Associate Professor of Management and Organizations at the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management. Her areas of expertise include diversity, work-life balance, leadership, and positive workplace behaviors. Over the years, Katina has published more than 50 peer-reviewed studies, book chapters, and Harvard Business Review articles. Her work has been cited in many public outlets, including The Washington Post, Bloomberg Businessweek, The Atlantic, and Forbes. She published the book, Leading for Wellness, How to Create a Team Culture Where Everyone Thrives, with co-author Patricia Grabrik in March, 2025. Katina earned her BA in psychology from Villanova University. and a dual PhD, yes, dual PhD in industrial and organizational psychology and women's studies from Penn State. Katina Sawyer, welcome to Next Steps Forward.

Katina Sawyer (1:14.403)

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Chris Meek (1:17.078)

Before we start to two things here. I mentioned, I apologize. I'm fighting a head cold and you're in Arizona and you guys don't get sick out there. I'm in the Northeast and we do. But one thing I also like to talk about the show is, you know, I brag about the show being a show of firsts and I'm fairly confident you were the first dual PhD on the show. So, you know, let me brag on you a little bit. We like to have great guests on here and so I'm just going to brag for you. So we've just got another great guest for everybody listening and viewing. So

Katina Sawyer (1:23.801)

you

Katina Sawyer (1:37.581)

Thank you. ~

Chris Meek (1:43.648)

know, Katina, I first learned about you when I saw a Fast Company article about creating a work-life balance in which you were quoted. And we'll get to that topic shortly, but first, how did you become interested in studying the intersection of work, well-being, and

organizational psychology? You know, was there a moment or an internship or a job or in your career that really, you know, set you on that path?

Katina Sawyer (2:2.967)

Yeah.

I always have had an interest in human behavior and I was a psychology major ~ at Villanova, but I wasn't ever sure how I wanted to apply that. ~ I didn't really think that I wanted to go down the clinical or counseling end. That's not necessarily the best fit for me. ~ And at the time, organizational psychology was not as well known of a field as it has become to be. It's really a growing career ~ for folks over the last decade or so. At the time I was looking at it, I didn't know that it existed. So ~ I loved psychology, didn't know what I wanted to do with it and then found

out about organizational psychology and decided I wanted to focus there. But at the same time, I was also doing a lot of philanthropic work in the community ~ as an undergraduate at Villanova, doing tutoring work ~ in inner city schools, ~ and volunteering at a domestic violence shelter ~ in Philadelphia. And so I, when I left my ~ environment and went to grad school, I really liked what I was learning in all my organizational psychology PhD classes ~ at Penn State, but I

wanted to maintain that like heart ~ of making people's lives better, particularly people on the margins, people who might be overlooked. And so I started to really think about the amount of time that we spend at work and how much of an impact it has on people's well-being and thinking about work as a mechanism for creating a better ~ and more healthy and happy society ~ as sort of a motivating purpose for the work that I did. And so that's how I ended up combining these two programs ~ to do a dual PhD ~ and kind of keeping both of those things in mind at all

times as I was ~ doing my dissertation and also my coursework.

Chris Meek (3:37.920)

So undergraduate was Villanova, graduate school, Penn State. ~ My viewers and listeners know my beloved alma mater, Syracuse, your rival for both of those. ~ Before the show, I'm showing my age, so when I went to Syracuse, we were dominant in both basketball and football. Unfortunately, those years are long gone. But before the show, you mentioned your folks are coming to visit you shortly and they're from the Philadelphia area. I have to ask, and I actually hate to ask, my viewers and listeners also know my NFL team.

Katina Sawyer (3:46.465)

Yeah, that's true. ~

Katina Sawyer (4:0.941)

Yeah.

Chris Meek (4:7.582)

Are you an Eagles fan?

Katina Sawyer (4:9.081)

~ You know I've got to be an Eagles fan if I'm from Philadelphia. ~

Chris Meek (4:11.666)

Okay, so Jordan, my sound engineer, let's pull the plug on the show because I'm a diehard ~ Dallas Cowboys fan. so Katina, it's been nice having you. We appreciate your time. I'm sorry the bears kicked your ass last week, but we'll move on from that. ~ All right, ~ back to serious stuff here. ~ So we all have people who are role models, whether we've met them or not.

Katina Sawyer (4:15.609)

~ Interviews done. ~

Katina Sawyer (4:26.435)

We played terribly. Yeah. ~

Chris Meek (4:37.504)

So who were the mentors or role models that shaped your thinking about organizational psychology or workplace well-being? And what did they share with you that was so illuminating?

Katina Sawyer (4:46.029)

Yeah, you know, ~ I ~ was thinking about ~ this recently, kind of where did this early spark come from? And I think really I have to go back to my parents ~ and ~ also a particular teacher who I had, my high school English teacher. ~ I think that both of those, ~ you my parents and my teacher and other teachers too, but she stands out in particular, made me realize the importance of environment.

So ~ you can be the same person in a different environment and it can impact you in really long lasting ways. ~ And I grew up in a house that was really happy and supportive and ~ my parents really grew my confidence and instilled in me a love for learning and encouraged me to pursue whatever pathway I wanted to pursue. ~ And I came to learn over time that that's not always the case and it can really have. ~ negative impact on people's health and wellness, also their sense of self and identity. ~ And my teacher, for example, created a classroom environment.

where I was just able to thrive. And I loved going to that class every time I had, I had her all four years, I went to a small all girls school. And so ~ every time I had her class, I was excited to go and I did the best in her class because I felt the best in her class. And so when I started to think back on kind of why am I so interested in

contextual, ~ the ways in which context interacts with personality and and your capabilities to create potential and outcomes, ~ it really comes from those early experiences of knowing that I was really lucky to find myself in these environments that helped me to unlock my potential and wanting other people to be able to be in those environments when they were working as well.

Chris Meek (6:30.774)

You know, listening to your response, two things really resonated with me. One is that you talked about your parents and the number of guests I've had in the show and we're over 200 now. I'm blessed to be over 200 shows now in terms of, you know, I asked folks who their mentors or the role models were the number of people who have said, you know, it's the parents or my mom or my dad or both, depending if it was one parent or two parents is through the roof. so

You I guess I, you you kind of take that for granted. And I always talk about how my mom is just, you know, single parent, single mom, um, who was a role model for me. And, know, she went back to college to get her bachelor's, her master's and almost her doctorate before she passed her breast cancer. You know, I think people take that for granted in terms of, know, who your role models are. like, Oh, my mom said this or my dad said that and they're real pain in the butt or whatever. But their job is to provide what's best for you and to be the role model for you. Like that's, is to provide the best opportunities for you in life. And so I guess,

Katina Sawyer (7:17.080)

Yeah.

Chris Meek (7:25.398)

for those who might be sort of 25 and younger right now who are hopefully listening, at some point you're going to realize like, yep, mom and dad were right. God, I hate to admit it, but they were. But then also you talk about environment. And that's something I never thought about. And so not everyone has the right environment, whether they're a child or a teen or in the workplace. And we're going talk about that a little bit in terms of employees.

Katina Sawyer (7:32.663)

Yeah. ~

Katina Sawyer (7:47.224)

Yeah.

Chris Meek (7:52.506)

they look for the right job, but then also they're looking for that right environment because you're going to thrive if you have that right environment. ~

Katina Sawyer (7:58.871)

Yeah, yeah, same employee, different environment. You can get very different results. And people often think that a person, that it's a person problem when it can be a context problem. We don't give enough credence to context. ~

Chris Meek (8:12.736)

Maybe can you elaborate on that a little bit because you could, and I'll pick, I'm in financial services. So say I've got job A and I'm at firm ~ C and I'm doing okay, and then I go to do the exact same job at firm J and I thrive. ~ What could be some of the differences there that make me succeed or fail at two different firms?

Katina Sawyer (8:27.961)

Mm-hmm. ~

Katina Sawyer (8:33.143)

Yeah, we really focus a lot on culture and leaders as sort of the arbiters and ~ keepers of culture. you can have the same exact job and be, we have a concept called person job fit, which is how well do your talents and skills align with what's required on the job? You can have a great fit with a job, but that's only part of the equation. You can really feel good and capable about your ability to succeed in a particular job. But if you have somebody who is creating negative energy around you, ~

~ Maybe only stepping in ~ to discuss your performance when you've done something wrong never commenting when you've done something right ~ Or even worse, know political behaviors, you know You're doing a good job But for some reason the person doesn't want you to do a good job or want somebody else to look like they're doing a better job ~ all of these things can really get inside people's heads and become very demotivating and you know, every Every person's performance is a mixture of their ability and their motivation And it's really that motivation piece that starts to decrease when you're in an environment that's

that's kind of sucking the energy out of you and making you feel like maybe you aren't as capable or confident as you could be ~ compared to another environment where you have somebody who's really helping you understand where your strengths are and like, that was great, do that again, right? As opposed to like, that was bad, don't do that again. ~ Those are two different approaches. They can go together, but if you're only pointing out people's flaws, they're never gonna understand how to replicate their strengths and everybody has strengths in position. So being in an environment that's really supportive of you being successful in the job is so energizing and so same employee, same job, different environment, you can get really different results because half of that equation is how you feel your motivation to actually perform.

Chris Meek (10:15.434)

You know, it's interesting. talk about people being part of a team at a specific job, but you also talk about sort of that, ~ the political environment in terms of maybe someone that team doesn't want you to succeed because you're both trying for that promotion or that bonus or whatever it is. ~ you know, ~ how do you teach, you know, the younger employees today to ~ overcome that or to, to navigate that in that, that team environment where

Katina Sawyer (10:27.149)

Mm-hmm.

Chris Meek (10:42.868)

Yes, all ebb and flow with the rising tide, ~ yet ~ we all want to succeed to advance our own personal career.

Katina Sawyer (10:50.904)

Yeah.

It's a great question. I teach an undergraduate course here at University of Arizona called Leading for Wellness. ~ We actually ~ were about to have our final exam review today. So the class is wrapping up. ~ And in that class, the students ask a lot of questions about that because it's a class on leadership. So I'm teaching them how to lead and manage teams in a way that supports health and happiness. But their questions as new entrants into the workforce who are currently looking for their post-graduation jobs, their questions are, well, what if I find myself in a bad environment? Like I'm not, I'm not

influential out of the gate on my career? What do I do to navigate these bad environments? there are some strategies that we talk about. First of all, thinking about whether or not the people around you are intentionally doing these things or if these are things that people are replicating because they've seen other people do it it's not really the leader that they want to be. ~ Is there a way to have open conversations? Is there a glimmer of promise to have an open conversation with whoever this person is about how you're seeing your trajectory and getting some information about how you can work together to make sure you fulfill your potential?

and get the outcomes that they care about as well. Can you frame some of these things in terms of what's keeping them up at night? You know, what really helps me to work well is to be in an environment that has these two elements or these three elements. If we could work together to try to make the environment more similar to that, I can deliver on these results much more easily. And then we also talk about finding like champions or communities of people who can help you to better understand what's going on. So if you can't change what's going on, you can at least find some other people in your environment who can help you better understand why. And maybe reverse some of those internal feelings that like I'm just not good

enough to be here ~ or I didn't deserve that. ~ So you know trying to find people who can counterbalance some of the lack of hype that you're getting from somebody else in your work environment.

Chris Meek (12:37.470)

And through your research, have you found any specific industry that that political tension is greater than in other industries?

Katina Sawyer (12:45.869)

You know, it's not so much industry, but it is kind of like culture ~ and ~ sort of history of being more thought of as more like cutthroat or competitive. ~ you know, I have a lot of students in tech ~ and they talk a lot about how tech environments are not ~ always very supportive of health and wellness, which is interesting because a lot of the wellbeing related benefits and perks that companies offer come out of, you know, early, aughts Google.

and Facebook and you know these tech companies that were ~ trying to you know make these more well-being focused environments are these like cooler interesting environments for people to work in. But ultimately what I hear is that a lot of these things are more like window dressing for what then ends up being an actually ~ more cutthroat competitive

~ culture that doesn't really align with, you you can have all the ping pong tables in the world, but ~ if you know that that's not actually what's going to predict whether you get promoted or it's unclear ambiguous ~ how people get ahead, that starts to take a toll.

Chris Meek (13:49.558)

It's funny you mentioned that the ping pong table and the early odds, I'm thinking back to the foosball table and the fuzzy bunny slippers and the zipper hoodie. And that was the first sort of Silicon Valley. Come here and put your necktie and cufflinks away and make more money and be cool and drink a \$10 espresso.

Katina Sawyer (13:56.642)

Yes.

Katina Sawyer (14:0.257)

Exactly.

Katina Sawyer (14:5.505)

Yep. Yeah, exactly. ~

Chris Meek (14:9.488)

So you're a co-founder of WorkerBeing. Before we talk about that, how'd you come up with the name?

Katina Sawyer (14:16.899)

Yeah.

So we actually had kind of like an early version of AI where you put in, ~ Patricia and I, my co-founder, we did a brainstorming retreat where we thought about all the things that we wanted our company to be. And we made a dictionary of words that we wanted people to associate with our work. And then we threw that dictionary of words in and had it come out with some creative ideas for us. And worker being kind of stuck because, you the idea of a worker bee is that they're just there to put their head down and just ~ And worker being really incorporates this idea of, well, you you can get those results, but you also have to think about the well-being ~ that's happening in the workforce. So that's how we came up with it.

Chris Meek (14:58.208)

I love that. So I know that WorkerBeing is a consultancy and platform focused on improving workplace well-being, engagement, and human sustainability. ~ What inspired you to co-found WorkerBeing? ~ Were there gaps you're hoping to fill, or was there something else?

Katina Sawyer (15:12.825)

Yeah, so Patricia and I are very good friends from graduate school. And so we had stayed in touch, not just us, but a bunch of other people who went to Penn State, stayed in touch after our graduate program. And Patricia went into practice and I went into academia. And we actually were at a friend's wedding, another organizational psychologist wedding. And she was talking about how, you know, in consulting and working with clients, she was hearing people ask like the same questions over and over again about how to create healthier, happier environments.

They were kind of basic questions and she was always surprised that they didn't have the answers or even like a semblance of a start to an answer. When we know there's so much great science out there and has been for decades on how to do this well, that's really reliable and gets replicable results. And I was hearing similar stuff from my students, particularly my MBA students who are living and breathing this stuff every day. I teach a leadership course and so they're all trying to amplify their leadership and talking about the struggles of positive cultures and they don't know where to get started. They have good intentions but not a lot of action. ~ And we were like, you know, there's so much science on this. It's obviously not getting translated to the students, to the clients. Let's start something where we can for free make these insights available in an easy to access way. So we started with a blog ~ and we were doing a weekly blog post where we discuss research on well-being related topics and sort of broke them down into key action steps. Here's what the researchers did and here's what you can do to apply it.

~ And then from there people said well, we like your blog, but you know, I don't always have time to read things physically Maybe you should do a podcast and then we start a podcast and then from there We started to get some clients who are interested in having us come into

their organization and speak And then over time we kind of thought that we should ~ Write a book which helped to fill some more gaps which we can talk about later That we were seeing as we got more invested in working with clients in this space ~ that answered some more specific questions that ~ we saw were recurring but yeah, we kind of just to bring the science of workplace wellness to employees everywhere in a platform that was not boring. ~ that because because the articles we had to read in grad school were not the most ~ lively content, right? They were quite dry. So we're like, how do we make this so that it's not torture to read?

Chris Meek (17:29.696)

Now your blog's still out there, do you still actively post?

Katina Sawyer (17:31.629)

Yeah, yes, our blog has moved to psychology today. So we're bloggers over there now. ~ But yes, ~ we still write, we still write posts and, ~ and still like that medium as a form of getting the science out there. Really, whatever sticks, we're happy. We're very outcomes focused.

Chris Meek (17:47.754)

And for those out there who are not PhDs or in this case, dual PhDs, psychology today ~ is the real deal. Like that is the platform for those who are overachievers, ~ like our Penn State grad here, Katina. So ~ that's the real deal, but we knew that already. So Katina, without violating any confidences, obviously, would you share a story or two about a company or a client that really got it right after the information insights that you provide helped their culture or employees well being improved significantly?

Katina Sawyer (18:17.175)

Yeah, ~ of course we've seen ~ changes that get put in place, boost workplace cultures and team outcomes. But I want to talk about one very specific example of an organization that ~ is already doing it well, who we work with to help amplify what they're doing and sort of pull through the concepts that they're putting out there. But ~ I was absolutely blown away. ~ We worked with a large hospital and in ~ that hospital system, they have ~ sort of a well-being focused ~ department, like a whole department focused on workplace well-being. And they have an event every year ~ where they bring speakers in to talk about how to do even better in this area. know, healthcare professionals are burnout and exhausted and see lots of really tough and emotional things to process. so, ~ and they're and they're not a hard sell that health is important, right? So, ~ so, ~ you know, I had come in to do a keynote for them. ~ on how to build relationships quickly because that's something that

healthcare professionals often have to do. ~ And afterwards they had this panel ~ of actual leaders in the organization who had been selected ~ by their teams as people who were sort of beacons of creating these wellness and well-being focused ~ cultures. And ~ they talked about what they're doing. And I was sitting there and as I was sitting there and they were mentioning ~ all the things that they're enacting and they have their teams in the audience listening and ~ and being proud of their leader that they're up there. It was just like every concept they said map back to the stuff that we talk about in the book, map back to the modules that we discussed. And I was just like, ~ this is such a cool experience to say, OK, you we have this book. We obviously believe in our research and believe in it. But here it is coming to life in like if I had a checklist of the leader behaviors we promote in the book, it would have been full of checks. Right. And so ~ and then also just.

the feeling of being there. You walk into an organization, ~ I am a scientist and I don't know how to describe vibes, but places have vibes. I don't know what, don't know the science of vibes, but you can walk into an organization and it has just either icky vibes or neutral vibes. This place had such positive vibes for a place that deals with such tough stuff all the time. And so just seeing that in action ~ really reinforced. ~

Katina Sawyer (20:40.407)

my already positive feelings about kind what we have to share with organizations.

Chris Meek (20:45.366)

You know, I appreciate you sharing that because that's something, you know, a hospital, something I wouldn't think about. You know, just thinking business, you know, traditional business, but you know, a hospital is a business, even though it's, you know, most of them are nonprofits, which that in itself is a different conversation. But to your point, I do a lot of work in the first responder space and healthcare workers are certainly in that the frontline workers there. And your point, they deal with a lot of crap every single day. And, you know, I remember in, uh, in the height of COVID,

Katina Sawyer (20:49.859)

Mm-hmm.

Katina Sawyer (20:56.611)

Yeah.

Katina Sawyer (21:4.215)

Yeah.

Chris Meek (21:14.420)

you know, the top ER doctor in New York City, she committed suicide

because just all the everything, just the death and everything that they saw. And so to hear you use that as your case study, if you will, ~ is a breath of fresh air because I wouldn't think of that. And to hear them, you know, like you said, going through your checklist and being your case study, if you will, that's amazing. It's phenomenal. And so, you know, for all of those hospitals out there listening, hopefully,

Katina Sawyer (21:18.583)
Yeah.

Katina Sawyer (21:23.863)
Yeah.

Katina Sawyer (21:31.790)
Yeah.

Chris Meek (21:42.692)
know, continue, where can people find you?

Katina Sawyer (21:44.855)
Yeah, I can be found at worker being W-O-R-K-R-B-E-E-I-N-G on all platforms or on LinkedIn as Katina Sawyer and our website is ~ W-O-R-K-R-B-E-E-I-N-G dot com and you can find all of our offerings there.

Chris Meek (22:1.194)
and we will put that in our social media as well. ~ So thank you for sharing that. And really that it was a fascinating case study. I really wouldn't have thought of that. And back to that question, I noticed that I had just separate, I just separated culture and wellbeing in that question. When I said culture or employees wellbeing, can the two be separated? ~ Can a company have a lousy culture yet still have employees ~ who have a sound wellbeing or terrific culture and still have miserable employees?

Katina Sawyer (22:7.149)
Thanks.

Katina Sawyer (22:29.145)
Hmm. Yeah. So I think the former is more prevalent than the latter. And so I think
One thing that we really stress is that if you're in an organization that has a top-down terrible culture, and we hear this a lot, right? Like, I'm just in an organization where this stuff wouldn't fly. It doesn't matter what I do as a leader for my team because what's coming from top-down is so bad. We find that that's not true. ~ Managers and even peer-to-peer, the positivity that you put out into the workplace in your interactions with other people, ~
~ The way that you set the tone on your individual team can help to

shield or combat broader cultures that might be more negative or less affirming. ~ so leaders do have jurisdiction to do things differently on their own team and also to be transparent about, you know, what their goals are as a leader and the type of culture that they want to create and to co-create that culture with their team, even if they're housed in something that's not ~ that that's at odds with what they're trying to do. So it's not the easiest situation to be in.

But can you have a bad culture and still happy employees? Yeah, if you have ~ leaders who are trying to create those sort of force fields around their team. ~ The other is more rare, I would say, but I would say that if you have a great culture and the employees are still miserable, ~ there might be other things that are missing that are more brass tacks. Is your selection process working? Like are employees in jobs that they can actually do and that they feel confident doing? Are you paying people?

fairly. You know, these are more base level HR issues that can sometimes cause people to be unhappy because the job and the structure of the job is not quite right, even if the culture is good.

Chris Meek (24:12.534)

You know, and unfortunately or fortunately, depends on which side of the coin you're on, we can't talk about today's workplace and the future of the workplace without talking about artificial intelligence. You know, let's start with the 30,000 foot view first. When you look at the rise of artificial intelligence in the workplace, what excites you the most and what concerns you the most?

Katina Sawyer (24:21.774)

Mm-hmm.

Katina Sawyer (24:31.384)

Yeah.

Excites me the most is that there's a lot of repetitive tasks that we spend a lot of time on that don't really contribute to our health and well-being that we might be able to outsource in ways that help free us up to do things that we do find more meaningful. So, you know, how much time do we spend answering emails? ~ If there was a way to use a lot of predictive, I think about this all the time, there's some predictive text, but not a lot. If we could predictive text our way through emails much faster, that would free me up to do a lot more things, right? So there are certain more rote tasks that I think are helpful to get off our plates that AI can be exciting for. What I think it's ~ scary for, or what makes me worry, is that ~ just because we can have a robot do something doesn't mean that we should. And human beings are social creatures who like to achieve and have goals and find meaning and purpose in life. And so if we allow AI to take that away, ~ or we're using AI to replace...

so many people's meaning and purpose or things that they find fulfilling. Now, like, what do we do? We got to replace that with

something, something else that's human, something else that has meaning, something else that has purpose. We can't just leave a void there. So I am excited about it taking things off our plates that are not helping well-being. I'm scared about us forgetting that we have a choice here about what to use it for and whether we're using it for ends that good for humans.

Chris Meek (26:2.760)

One last question before the break. You know, we've seen a lot of research in terms of people calling for AI, you know, massive reductions in the job force, 20%, 50%, 90%. What does research tell us about how job uncertainty and technological change affect motivation, mental health, and overall wellbeing?

Katina Sawyer (26:22.061)

Yeah, so any type of change people usually struggle with, whether it's technological change or otherwise. ~ And so there is a risk as things change, especially when the changes create, like you said, instability, insecurity. These are all things that ~ cause people to go into threat mode.

And when you're in threat mode, you're much more likely to feel negative emotions. It's more challenging to see positive things around you. You're less likely to want to connect or think outside of the box, a creative. ~ You're more likely to cling to what you know. ~ So my advice would be that as people go through these changes, being really transparent, being really human ~ in the way that you're rolling them out, understanding that people might feel unstable, decreasing those feelings of instability by reassuring people about what's actually happening. Like there are ways that you can combat that.

~ But yes, that could be a recipe for bad things from a well-being perspective if not handled carefully.

Chris Meek (27:20.118)

We've been talking to Katina Sawyer, and I think I've asked enough scary questions about artificial intelligence. We'll be right back after a break to talk about how we can all take better care of ourselves in the workplace. Stay right here.

VoiceAmerica (27:35.254)

clear let me know when you're ready for your count in back in.

Chris Meek (27:38.294)

How we doing Katina?

Katina Sawyer (27:39.619)

Great, yeah, thank you. ~ I might have a sip of water. ~

Chris Meek (27:41.302)

Need a water break or anything?

And feel free to have water during the show. I take my coffee. Jordan, you can have water too. You're okay.

Katina Sawyer (27:47.895)

Yeah, I will. ~

Katina Sawyer (27:53.145)

~ Everyone's allowed to have water. ~ No, I think I'm good. This is great. Fun conversation. ~

Chris Meek (27:55.976)

Exactly.

VoiceAmerica (27:56.846)

~ We'll do.

Chris Meek (28:1.696)

Give ~ me five seconds. think my daughter's going back to college. Bear with me one second.

Katina Sawyer (28:7.969)

Yeah. ~

Chris Meek (28:17.758)

Alright, she's ~ going back after Thanksgiving. Yeah. ~ Alright, you ready Katina? Big man, you ready back there?

Katina Sawyer (28:20.495)

~ nice.

Yes, I'm ready.

Chris Meek (28:29.622)

That was you, Jordan.

VoiceAmerica (28:32.627)

sorry, I'm still muted there. All right, coming back in five, four, ~ three, two. ~

Chris Meek (28:40.756)

We are back. I'm Chris Meek, host of Next Steps Forward. And my guest today is Katina Sawyer. Katina is a co-founder of Worker Being and an associate professor of management and organizations at the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management. Her areas of expertise include diversity, work-life balance, leadership, and positive workplace behaviors. Over the years, Katina has published more than 50 peer-reviewed studies, book chapters, and Harvard Business Review articles. Her work has been cited in many public outlets, including the Washington Post, Bloomberg Business Week, The Atlantic,

and Forbes. She published the book, *Leading for Wellness, How to Create a Team Culture Where Everyone Thrives*, with co-author Patricia Grabreck in March, 2025. Katina, the COVID-19 pandemic was a watershed event in many ways, which I'm expecting a huge Harvard Business case study or something in the coming years. Did the pandemic permanently change our expectations of work and what a, quote, healthy work environment looks like?

Katina Sawyer (29:30.777)

Mm-hmm. ~

Chris Meek (29:38.772)

or the return to work movement and the jitters about unemployment taking us right back to where we were pre-pandemic?

Katina Sawyer (29:44.385)

It's a great question. ~ I think what really happened in the pandemic was that

The masks were off. ~ I know that's ~ maybe a double entendre there, but ~ people had ~ really ~ no time to process what was happening and had to make significant changes very quickly to the way that they worked. But also they were managing so much family related stress, kids changing the way they were going to school, all of these things going on. And at the same time, experiencing a lot of fear about what was going on in society, family members, ~ or friends might be getting sick, individuals might be sick themselves. ~ And so all of this was happening while people were still trying to work and working remotely, working from home, right? ~ And I think what happened was, like I said, the masks kind of came off that people couldn't just hold it all together and act like things were normal. And so one silver lining, I think, was that the workplace really got injected with more humanity, ~ a greater leeway for emotionality.

a greater recognition that mental health is important.

~ And so I think that all of these things kind of happened at once. We saw a huge influx of people who were interested in hearing about our content during the pandemic ~ virtually because, you know, employees were suffering and well-being was hitting a low. And ~ so we saw companies really investing more resources, more time in trying to solve for this in ways that they hadn't before. However, ~ I don't think that we can go back. Like, you can't just sit at home as the ~

Katina Sawyer (31:24.431)

CFO of a company ~ in your sweatshirt and your hair in a ponytail and your kids are in the background and now you go back into the workplace and expect that you're just gonna be back to this persona where like, well, that didn't happen. That's not happening. ~ I don't think that that's where we're at. And so trying to put that back into the box, I

don't think that's the right move. ~ I understand that companies have a lot of financial concerns about the real estate that they own and physical property and that's all very complicated, but
What I think really worked well in what ~ employees appreciated in the pandemic was a focus on listening and learning from what they need. And I think that when employers responded that way, they got positive responses from their employees. We're all going through this together. We want to know what you need to support. Continuing to do that, regardless of whether we're in a pandemic, ~ is a best practice. And I think that companies are starting to maybe lose their way on that a bit. And going back to this more top-down that people now know doesn't need to be the way.

Chris Meek (32:25.358)

You just mentioned that during the heart of COVID, corporations were reaching out to you looking for your content. Are they still reaching out as much or have you seen that drop off from that ~ larger corporate perspective now that we're back to that post pandemic influx?

Katina Sawyer (32:36.781)

Yeah.

It's interesting. So we're still seeing a lot of interest in these topics. And of course, HR still has wellness related budget and things of that nature. But we are kind of seeing that people are forgetting the initial value that these conversations added. ~ you know, they've been doing this work for a while and they're like, you know, well, we've already done three seminars on this. So we don't have to do seminars anymore. ~ You know, and forgetting that this is an ongoing process that you can't just drop. A culture has to be created every day. ~ And so if you're going to create a culture that's sticky and you want to have a positive workplace culture, you can't invest a bunch of in it upfront and then expect that
If you don't do anything else to sustain it, it's going to continue being as strong and as positive as it was. You need to continue to create that culture and co-create that culture. That's what culture is. It's what happens on a daily basis, right? ~ And so ~ I do think that companies may think, okay, well, we did that. Check, we did that. And now we're moving on to doing something else. ~ And that's just not the way that ~ these positive workplace cultures get sustained in the long term.

Chris Meek (33:45.246)

And again, I guess maybe it's like in the first half of show, are you seeing specific industries sort of lead the way in terms of doing this or not doing this sort of behavior?

Katina Sawyer (33:55.425)

Yeah, we've actually seen and I'll go back to healthcare, not just

hospital systems, but healthcare in general. ~ An industry where they really understand that if you're not well, you can't perform at your peak ~ and really understand the business case for why having a great employee culture matters and why having employees who are not burnout and exhausted, why that matters. ~ They have a lot of health related data that makes that case very strongly. They learn about it in medical training if they're medical professionals. So they get the building blocks of that. And you know, if you can have an organization that supports health and wellbeing, granted, like a surgeon is not gonna be in a position where they can have as much work-life balance as somebody in a nine to five job, right? But compared to other surgeons, how do we make this ~ unit particularly health and wellness focused? ~ You know, when you're thinking through where I'm seeing people still really working hard to make sure that they're pulling these threads through, I am seeing a lot of these conversations in healthcare in particular still persisting.

Chris Meek (34:59.360)

So hopefully they can lead the way in terms of other industries following suit. ~ And especially just given that high pressure situation that they're in 24 seven 365. ~

Katina Sawyer (35:2.349)

Yeah.

Katina Sawyer (35:9.527)

Yeah, and I also think for corporations, one thing that we're really big on discussing is while companies may not always invest as much into what they would traditionally think of as a wellness focus initiative, they usually have leadership development programs. They usually have, you know, training, manager training. And our approach is really to not do these like band-aid one-off solutions where it's like a step challenge or whatever. Like those things can't make up for a bad culture.

but who sets the tone of culture leaders do. So if you already have a leadership development program, integrating the principles of leading in a way that will actually support employees' health and wellbeing, that's not requiring you to do something different or invest additional resources. It's just thinking harder about the content that you want your leaders to embody, not just how to do their job tactically, but also the kind of leader they wanna be and the kind of culture they wanna create, and actually providing resources so that leaders can understand how to do that effectively.

Chris Meek (36:7.030)

You know, it's interesting and I apologize. I'm not going to apologize for a sort of, do you hear my dog Zeke in the background? So, so he's, so he was named after the great Dallas cowboy, Ezekiel Elliott. So

that's why I'm not going to apologize. Um, but you know, you mentioned earlier in show that you teach a class on leadership and just now you're mentioning about how leaders have to do X, Y, and Z to sort of teach or to the lead their, their organization, you know, in these leadership classes now, are there courses on

Katina Sawyer (36:12.429)

Yeah, I love dogs, so hi Z. ~

Katina Sawyer (36:18.649)

~ yeah.

Katina Sawyer (36:24.045)

Mm-hmm.

Chris Meek (36:35.190)

you know, looking at employees' wellbeing from a mental health perspective, from a work-life balance perspective, whatever that definition is of work-life balance, is that part of the curriculum in today's world?

Katina Sawyer (36:44.717)

Yeah, so it's a great question. In my class it is. ~ I teach an undergrad and an MBA class on leadership. And in the MBA class, we have three different modules. I think a lot of times the traditional leadership theories, by the time people get to a certain point in their career, if they take in a leadership class as an undergrad, they know some of the basic models of leadership. And so what I try to do in my leadership MBA class is talk about things that make leaders stand out from other leaders because they're able to have the capability or skills to do them well. So we have a module on flexibility

leadership, have a module on leading for change, and then we have a module on leading for wellness. ~ And in the leading for wellness module, we talk about just that. And it's interesting because often people ~ will have a reaction to the idea of leading for wellness, that it's fluffy. ~

But then if you ask them to tell stories about terrible bosses that they work for, they've got a million of them and they can tell you very clearly that that had a negative impact on their performance. So, you know, this idea that it's fluffy, but then also these visceral stories that people have about leaders who had a really negative impact on their well-being and then indirectly on their performance. ~ You know, they know that it's true and we just have to kind of make those connections for people. yeah. Well, what if you had fewer of those leaders and more of the type of leader that, you you said 10 years ago you had a leader that was absolutely fantastic. and that leader stuck with you as a role model, somebody that you want to emulate, what if you had more leaders like that and less leaders

like that? Like how would you feel at work? And that's important. So ~ when we break it down into ~ sort of the experiences that people have in ~ their own personal data, ~ people realize that this is actually fairly fundamental to creating a workplace where people can do what they need to do.

Chris Meek (38:25.622)

No, I love to hear that because when I think about it, you know, I got my MBA, like to say how long is, know, 25 years ago and it was your traditional, here's your accounting class, here's your investment banking class, whatever. But that world has changed. And to hear that somebody like you is sort of at the tip of the spear in terms of, know, what does that new corporate world look like and what do today's and tomorrow's leaders now need to be aware of and need to learn. It gives me hope for those leaders for today and tomorrow in terms of

Katina Sawyer (38:33.368)

Mm-hmm.

Katina Sawyer (38:38.776)

Yeah.

Chris Meek (38:54.484)

It's not just what the bottom line is and what do we return to shareholders. Is that important? Yes, absolutely. But when you return to shareholders, that comes from the employees who are making those profits and those earnings for that company and for those shareholders. And so if those employees aren't happy and aren't doing their job, well, then the shareholders aren't going to get their returns.

Katina Sawyer (39:3.693)

Yeah. Yeah. Yep.

Katina Sawyer (39:12.521)

Exactly. They're not at odds. They actually work together.

Chris Meek (39:15.905)

Exactly. so I don't think, and correct me if I'm wrong, because you're the pro and the expert in the field, but I don't think there are enough leaders out there realizing this or talking about that. And they're just looking again at that bottom line. And I'm not going to name names because he's been the face of the financial industry since the financial crisis in 2008 and 2009. But he's also the one that was the first one to say, if Wall Street employees want to make Wall Street money, then they've got to come back to work on Wall Street and not working it from home.

Katina Sawyer (39:40.856)

Mm-hmm. ~

Chris Meek (39:43.082)

and their ponytail and their bunny slippers with their kids behind them. Now they also just built a brand new, gajillion dollar headquarters in Midtown Manhattan. So that's part of the reason. But there's the other side of coin to that as well. And so, you know, I want to talk about your book in a minute here, but if you thought about writing a book in terms of, you know, what that new leadership course looks like or what that new ~ leader looks like in terms of the all encompassing, you know, Renaissance person, if you will, not just the, do you return, you know, the most

Katina Sawyer (39:44.885)

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Chris Meek (40:12.384)

profits to your shareholders.

Katina Sawyer (40:14.059)

Yeah, I think what our take would be, and it's in our, it's not the... focus of our current book, but it's a chapter in our book, we talk about that leaders are trained to think that profits and well being are at odds. ~ And the reality is that these two things go together so closely. And so leaders are chasing these profits and numbers or whatever, and they might get them in the short term, they might get them in the short term. We have a story in the book about a guy who ~ He married his high school sweetheart. They had three kids together. ~ And ~ he was a, she was a stay at home ~ mom, so he didn't have as much to do on the childcare end of things and household stuff. ~ And he was just this like heavy driver in the financial industry. ~ And he was just, ~ you know.

we meet every morning at 7 a.m. and we meet at the end of the day at 6 p.m. to talk and like when you get off that call at 7, like I expect that you're gonna still be in the office executing on whatever still needed to get done. ~ like long hours really and just tons and tons of turnover on his team and his take on that was especially for women and his take on that was well if you can't hack it then you shouldn't be in this job. ~ And then ~ tragically ~ his wife was hit in ~ car accident and passed away. And overnight he became a single dad to three kids. ~ And of course he took time off for grieving. And when he came back to work the very first week he was getting his kids ready for school ~ and they...

Katina Sawyer (41:51.849)

He missed his own 7 a.m. Call because ~ the time got away from him. He was trying to get the kids on the bus ~ and ~ This happened a few times before he realized. my god, like it's not that these people Suck at their jobs ~ It's that I've created an environment that works for a

very specific type of person which is basically me ~ and other people who have similar situations to me and it totally changed him around right and so we share some of these stories in the book about people who would be like this

Renaissance person, like it needs to be this way or the highway. And then they realized, you know, actually, there are a lot of different ways to get to success. And everybody's way doesn't need to be my way. ~ And I can be more flexible in the way that I think about how people achieve. And as long as they're delivering results, ~ if they can't make the 7am call, because they have to get the kids on the bus, what does it really matter? That's still a talented person. So anyway, just one example of ~ kind of what you're talking about there.

Chris Meek (42:49.416)

No, obviously it's a horrible outcome to get to that end result, but a fascinating case study. ~ you know, so let's talk about your book for a minute. ~ So the title of the book is leading for wellness, how to create a team culture where everyone thrives. You're the coauthor of that. First again, where can people find the book?

Katina Sawyer (42:53.337)
100%.

Katina Sawyer (43:10.733)

Yeah, so ~ we have a whole list of booksellers at workerbeing.com/slash/book. And that's W-R-K-R-B-E-E-I-N-G. ~ we ~ also, mean, anywhere that you get books, you can find ~ the book and we have audio book too. So if you're a listener of books, we have that.

Chris Meek (43:30.720)

So one of my executive producers, Eric, who is great at putting together the Q & A for me for the show, actually doesn't have any questions in here about the book, which I know you want to talk about. So I'm going let you just talk about what you want in the book. Like you just mentioned that one case study, you mentioned that there's a chapter on leadership. And so ~ what do you want to highlight about the book that people should go out and buy this?

Katina Sawyer (43:42.243)
Sure.

Katina Sawyer (43:51.361)

Yeah, so ~

We were seeing sort of really two problems. ~ One was that companies were often well intended, that they wanted to spend some money on or invest some time into improving culture and employee wellbeing, but they didn't know how. And so it was sort of this spaghetti at the wall approach. I don't know, maybe yoga at lunch. I don't know, maybe a nutritious eating class. Maybe we bring someone in to do a mindfulness

meditation. And it was all these kind of one-offs. And then they'd ask employees, know, did you like this? And the employees are like, yeah, I liked it. ~

that was fun, I got to do a mindfulness meditation, but they weren't measuring like what's the result of these things. ~ And so they were starting to feel like, you know, we're doing all these things, but I don't know that they're working. ~ And ~ so there was a lot of like confusion and a lack of clarity around what works and what to actually invest in and a lack of a strategic approach to addressing culture and employee wellness. So we saw that going on. We also saw that there were individual leaders who were coming to us and asking, what are some action steps that I can take to make my team culture better? What are some specific things that I can do? And when we went to look at the research, there are things that people can do, but they're all over the map, right? There's no clear and cohesive framework.

that helps people understand what to prioritize, what's going to have the biggest bang for the buck, and it's also very overwhelming ~ and also mostly in the scientific literature too. So ~ it's hard to translate. we were, know, leaders want to do the right thing, but they're confused. Companies want to do the right thing, but they're confused. What actually works here?

Katina Sawyer (45:26.635)

And so we started doing some informal interviews with people asking them, you know, think back to a time when you've been in a company context where you felt like your health and well-being was most supported. What was different about that context versus other contexts you've been in? And time and time again, people were just like, my leader, it was my leader. was the person I directly reported to. That's the person that made the difference for me. So we really started to hone in on, well, leaders are at the crux of this. So if leaders are at the crux of this, what are leaders doing that are standing out to people? ~

So we found these bright spot leaders ~ by asking people to interview with us if they had a leader who they felt was exemplary at supporting their team's health and wellbeing. We analyzed all that data to come up with an actionable roadmap for leaders to follow who want to become what we call generators, leaders who pump their teams full of energy and see more bountiful results versus extinguishers, ~ leaders who kind of suck the energy out of their teams and experience ~ less results than they would otherwise.

~ So yeah, that's kind of the impetus for the book and how it all came about.

Chris Meek (46:29.362)

I love the generators versus extinguishers. Like that really sets the tone in terms of like who is or who isn't.

Katina Sawyer (46:36.225)

Yeah, yeah, it was interesting because I, we initially started off doing all the interviews just really wanting people to focus on the bright spots. Like, we're really interested on, we're not so interested in what leaders shouldn't do. We're really interested in what are these great leaders doing proactively that we could replicate or other leaders could replicate. And inevitably, in almost every interview, people would tell us about these great leaders and then they would say, but could I please in the last 10 minutes tell you this horror story of this person? You know, they really wanted to tell us the bad stuff.

And instead of leaning out of that, we thought, well, you what it seems like is that it's useful not just to know proactively what to do, but this foil of, ~ what are the things you should absolutely avoid also seems to be something that people find useful in their schema ~ of how to be this type of leader versus that type of leader. we, ~ the extinguisher's term was not necessarily intentional, but came directly from our participants really wanting to tell us ~ about the not so great leaders they had had.

Chris Meek (47:30.944)

So you interviewed the employees to talk about their leaders. Did you interview any of the actual leaders themselves?

Katina Sawyer (47:36.707)

Yeah, so we did some spot checking around ~ whether or not these things aligned and whether there were extra things that the leader was doing that the employee didn't know, et cetera. What we found mostly was that actually the leader was less good ~ at picking up on what it was that the employee found so helpful. So there were lots of stories that the employee would tell that the leader was like, I don't even remember that I did that.

So it really stood out to that person, but maybe was just not as salient to the leader. So we found discussing ~ the ~ leaders from the employee perspective more fruitful. We also did not want to have leaders self-nominate because, ~ you know, there are lots of people who think they're good at leaving and they might not be quite so correct.

Chris Meek (48:20.660)

And in terms of the leaders, any of them ~ player coaches?

Katina Sawyer (48:25.017)

~ Great question. ~ We did not have any coaches ~ in the sample this time around, although there are some folks who do research. There's a whole field of sports management that does research on sports leadership, not necessarily from the perspective that we did, but that's a fascinating angle and I would love to ~ talk to some coaches to see how I imagine there are lots of parallels between great sports

leaders ~ and ~ great corporate leaders.

Chris Meek (48:53.824)

Just curious, to your point, lot of ~ synergies in terms of the mindset in top performing athletes versus top performing corporate employees. ~ And in terms of some of the leaders, were any of them, ~ what's the phrase I want look for, were they also revenue producing as well for the team or were they specifically just leaders?

Katina Sawyer (48:59.053)

Mm-hmm.

Katina Sawyer (49:3.479)

Yeah. Yep.

Katina Sawyer (49:14.469)

They were also revenue producing in many instances. ~ And I also will say, you know, these were leaders at all levels. So it wasn't just the senior, sometimes it was the CFO, but sometimes it was, you know, a first time manager. ~ So we really feel like ~ the breadth of the leaders that we heard about makes us feel confident that there's some of, you won't be able to do all of the behaviors, ~ but there's some subset of the behaviors that any leader at any level could do.

Chris Meek (49:44.918)

And did you come across any leaders, and I'm asking this because I fall into this bucket, or I have fallen into this bucket, that had a hard time delineating from being a buddy and then being the boss?

Katina Sawyer (49:57.581)

Yeah, so I think what these leaders did that was really helpful was that they really understood how to create close but appropriate relationships. And when ~ it seemed that an employee was struggling with something that was beyond the leader's scope, They would like not like rudely like, hey, that's not part of my pay grid. I don't know how to do that. But just like, I really want you to be able to get the help and guidance and support that you need. I don't know that I have the proper training to do that. Here are some resources that you might check out. But then they did one other thing, which is they followed up. So in additional meetings, would say, hey, you know, I know we talked last time about, you know, some resources that might help you with some of what you're grappling with. Have you checked those out? How are things going? Whatever. So they still wanted to have the conversation, but they weren't taking it to the point of like now I'm solving your problems for you, ~ you know, which I think can be challenging if you're in a leadership role and you're thinking part of my job is to guide and give advice. I fall into this trap myself ~ with students sometimes where they're sharing with you personal

problems and you're like, well, have you tried that? Have you tried that? ~ And these leaders were really good about stopping themselves, knowing their own limits and being like, here's what I can help you with. Here's what I can advocate for. Here's where I think you might need to take some steps to cope with this using other resources, but let's keep talking. ~ And I think that seemed to be an appropriate wine.

Chris Meek (51:18.144)

Katina, we're almost at the of our conversation today. How do you personally define success at this stage in your career? Is it impact, balance, connection, or something else entirely?

Katina Sawyer (51:28.460)

I think right now... ~

I'm really thinking about a holistic sense ~ of being energized by what I'm doing. And so I feel super energized about the work that we're doing, but I also want to feel energized when I'm with family and friends and doing things personally, which means that I need to do some personal practices to make sure I'm getting sleep and exercise and whatever. So I want to feel like I'm entering into my day, looking at my schedule and being like, I'm excited for today. ~ And so if I can feel like I'm excited and, ~

usually for me that means my work is having impact, but you can also have impact like in a conversation with a friend, right? If you're like really present and that was a nice part of their day, that's another form of impact. So excitement for me and impact are usually tied together, but that's what I'm really focused on is like when I press play on my day, am I looking at it and being like, this day sounds fun.

Chris Meek (52:21.878)

It's amazing how sleep, exercise and diet tie into everything we do, right? Simple idea, right? Katina Sawyer, co-founder of Worker Being, and Associate Professor of Management and Organizations at the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management, where it's 75 degrees today and 32 in Connecticut. Thank you so much for being with us today. It was a lot of fun. was real pleasure and honor having you with us.

Katina Sawyer (52:23.737)

~ Yes, true. ~

Katina Sawyer (52:40.460)

You

Katina Sawyer (52:44.695)

It was great talking with you. This is an awesome show. Thank you for having me.

Chris Meek (52:48.246)

That was a lot of fun. Thanks for your time. I'm Chris Meek, Run of Time. We'll see you next week. Same time, same place. Until then, stay safe and keep taking your next steps forward.

VoiceAmerica (53:1.931)

All clear. Great show. No problem.

Chris Meek (53:3.616)

Thank you, Jordan.

Katina Sawyer (53:4.663)

Thanks, that was so fun! ~