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## **Courtney Holladay, PhD**

### **Interview Session One: June 29, 2021**

#### **Chapter 01: Applying Psychology to the Workplace**

Main Chapter Topic: D: On the Nature of Institutions

Abstract: In this chapter, Dr. Holladay talks about her background in applying organizational psychology to the workplace, the importance of embracing and fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion, and how diversity and leadership are inextricably connected.

Chapter Topics:

A: Personal Background;

D: On Leadership;

C: Diversity at MD Anderson;

C: Leadership;

***Nina Nevill***

[00:00:03]

All right. I think we're going. So, I have a few things to just read off before we get into the questions for the sake of having some of this data stored. So, I'm Nina Nevill, interviewing Dr. Courtney Holladay for an oral history project run by the Historical Resources Center at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. Dr. Holladay was first recruited to MD Anderson as an Organizational Development Specialist in 2004 and now works as an Executive Director in the Leadership Institute. This session is being held for actually over Zoom and it is the first and only interview session, however a second one can be scheduled if need. And today is June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and the time is about 1:07 p.m. Thank you, again, so much for your time and devoting this time and space for our project. So, I suppose my first question, I would love if you could tell me just a little bit about your educational path and how you got to where you are now.

[00:01:15]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:01:15]

Sure. Well, thank you for having me today and talking with me. I'm looking forward to our conversation. So, I started my journey knowing that I wanted to help people and thought that would be in the healthcare space and was in an engineering program specifically focused on bioengineering, and as part of my degree program, had to take some psychology courses and by happenstance into a course on Industrial Organizational Psychology. And when I took it, I knew

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that was what I wanted to do, which is applying psychology into the workplace and understanding what makes employees happy at work, what allows them to be as productive, what leaders need to do to help support the employees. And so, as part of my undergraduate work at Texas A&M, I began working with graduate students there on research and getting more involved to understand what are the different types of studies that you can do when it involves employees and organizations. And then from there applied to graduate school and came to Rice University in Houston, did both my master's and dissertation work at Rice. My work was primarily focused on training and understanding the design of training interventions that could lead to more successful application back into the workplace. And specifically, within my dissertation, my focus was on diversity training and understanding the parameters that would allow the diversity training to be more effective for those who are participating in it, and ultimately, the organizations that were supporting it.

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And throughout my master's in education, or master's and doctoral work, I was involved in research along the way looking at different components of organizational psychology, some in the leadership realm, some in the selection realm, survey research as well, so while my master's and dissertation were focused on training, my educational background was much more diverse through the research that I was also engaged in.

[00:03:50]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:03:50]

That's so neat. I was looking through your CV a little bit and it just seems so cool. What inspired your commitment to diversity in particular, leading towards that?

[00:04:04]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:04:05]

So, at the time, when I was trying to decide what I would want to focus on within my dissertation, I was very much interested in something that was going to have a heavy application focus. The theory is definitely very interesting, but I wanted to make sure whatever I did, I could see real implications into organizations in the workplace. And as I was—like I said, my master's was focused on training so I'd gotten pretty familiar with the literature in the training space, and what I was seeing was really an absence of much research on diversity training, specifically. And at the time, I was also doing an internship with a technology organization and they were implementing some diversity training. And observing that process that they were going through to implement the training just rose for me the point that there wasn't a lot of grounded evidence for how to do it successfully, how to do it with evidence behind while you're making certain decisions. I think there are some assumptions that go into what could make it successful and

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looking at the literature there wasn't really anything that had tested it and had shown that these are the kind of design elements that are going to lead to more successful outcomes. And there's a lot of evidence in the literature that talks about diverse teams have more successful outcomes. And that's true, but left just to their own devices, that may not be true.

[00:05:57]

There are some conditions that need to be in place for those teams to truly thrive and make the ultimate use of the diversity that is represented within the teams. And so, piggybacking on the literature that talked about how teams can be successful because of their diversity, well, the assumption would be if we do diversity training, we should have some success that comes out as a result. But we need to do it in the right way because again, just doing it training may or may not work. And so, what are the parameters that would allow it to be successful? And that was, I think, the culmination of what I was seeing in my internship with what I was reading in the literature and the absence that existed at the time was what took me down that road of, this could be a very interesting project to take on as my dissertation. And what I even tell people to this day, you have to love what you're going to spend your time on with your dissertation because you will spend a lot of time with it. So, it was really a wonderful opportunity and I enjoyed working on it through its entirety.

[00:07:12]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:07:12]

Yeah, that sounds very relevant still, with a lot of what's been going on in the past year. But I won't jump ahead too much because I guess I'm still interested a little bit in how, now working in leadership and with the Leadership Institute, how did you make that connection or how does diversity connect to leadership, I suppose?

[00:07:36]

[Redacted]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:08:10.00]

Leadership and diversity are intertwined. They go hand-in-hand. You are a leader of people. You can't lead if you don't have anyone that you are leading. And those individuals come with just a myriad of differences that make up the unique individuals that they are. And to be a successful leader you have to be skilled in cultural humility, cultural intelligence, cultural awareness. These are things that as a leader in today's environment, if you do not have the skills, you are not going to be able to bring people together and to communicate in a way that's inclusive, to help bring about change that's needed. There are many practices that are unintentionally biased that over time we have to take intentional action, and leaders have to be at

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the forefront of that. And so, I don't think one exists without the other. I think, like I said, they go hand-in-hand. And today's leader has to be inclusive and focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

[00:09:27]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:09:28]

Yeah, thank you. That's helpful to see how those operate, it seems like, in a very connected—in a way that you can't separate one from the other.

[00:09:42]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:09:43]

Yeah. And we have defined at MD Anderson eight characteristics that make up a successful leader. Some are at the leading self level of, what do I need to be focused on for myself to be successful? And then some are focused outward on others. One of the fundamental characteristics that we say is part of leading self is inclusion. And then, each of the characteristics has competencies that are associated with how are you behaviorally going to show them? So, inclusion, some of the components I just mentioned, there's cultural awareness, humility, and intelligence. But we also have this component at a leadership level focus on others about capacity building. And one of those competencies is inclusive leadership, how am I recruiting a diverse pipeline? How am I mentoring, making sure I'm just not mentoring people like me, but people who may be different from me in some way, shape, or form? How am I sponsoring people and making sure they're diverse and again, not similar to me, but canvassing and making sure the talent that I support and advocate for are having equitable opportunities across communities?

[00:11:08]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:11:09]

So, during your time then with MD Anderson, have you seen—I guess I'm unfamiliar with when the eight-step model was brought forth, but have you seen change in the way that diversity, equity, and inclusion are practiced or are taught in your time here?

[00:11:29]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:11:31]

Yeah, so the eight characteristics, we introduced seven of them in—it was about two years ago. And we just introduced inclusion as the eighth characteristic this past fiscal year. And now, it's part of the performance evaluation that people are evaluated on their inclusive demonstration, which is a huge cultural shift. We are actually in the process of a project right now to evaluate

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one, people's awareness of the introduction of the inclusion characteristic, and also, the impact that they now see as it being part of the performance evaluation. So, we're looking at some of those outcomes but don't have the data just yet. But I will say in terms of changes I've seen over the last several years, we've had diversity training for a number of years. It's not new. What is new is I think the openness and direct conversations that are occurring as a result of some of the societal events that have happened over the last couple years. Having our executive leadership acknowledge these events, talking about the social injustice, how this isn't the kind of environment we are going to be okay with at MD Anderson, how we want to support all populations, and even to the extent of our president of the institution having a virtual background as similar to mine that has Pride Month 2021. That's a representation of inclusion and wanting to make sure we're putting our actions where our words are. And you'll see our president in a meeting have the virtual background. And that's just one simple example. But what's not simple is the talking about it and having the forums for people to feel safe to raise these issues. I think over the last year-and-a-half, we've had much greater conversation at a much deeper level within the organization than what's been present over the years prior. And actually, to the extent even using words like "racism," or "sexism," I don't feel that we were as comfortable to acknowledge that some of those things existed. But you have to acknowledge it before you can really address it and move forward from it.

[00:14:19]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:14:19]

Absolutely. That's so fascinating that it seems like things have changed rapidly in the past few years. Are there anything specific in the past, I would say, year-and-a-half in terms of events around racial violence or around the pandemic that have led to any changes in the way that you guys are training or, like you said, are addressing each other within the community of MD Anderson?

[00:14:58]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:14:58]

The one that I would highlight that I think really—what's sad is it's not the only one for sure but it is one that received great attention, and I think really forced the hand of organizations to start having the conversation, was the murder of George Floyd. And I think with that, to actually have executive leaders comment on it, hold a meeting at town hall where it was openly discussed, I had sent a message to my own team to acknowledge that I know that it's not an experience that I obviously have any firsthand knowledge, but I know some of my team do and I wanted to acknowledge that experience and how I want to be now, and I want to know better, what I can do. And one of the things that I can say within my team, things that I heard in other parts of the organization were that this was the first time that they had heard leaders speak to such an event, actually calling it out, saying "This is not the thing that we will stand by," and

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bringing it into the workplace. Because the components that make up who we are, whether it's race, whether it's gender, or whether it's our sexuality, we don't leave them at the door when we come to work. They're part of who we are. And so, trying to separate that from the workplace. I think while it's maybe previously felt safer, I don't think it's allowed for as inclusive as an environment as I think our employees would want because we spend so much time in the workplace and to separate who I am from how I show up every day is, I think, an unfair ask. And we want people to feel comfortable to be who they are, obviously, so long as it's constructive.

[00:17:19]

Because there may be some values that don't align with the values that we do hold. But assuming the value system lines up, that sexuality preference, the racial background, gender, any of those things, should not make a difference. It should be part of who you are and we're celebrating who everyone is and celebrating the communities that haven't been celebrated in the past. And I think being able to talk about Black Lives Matter, and Stop Asian Hate, those aren't things that I think previously you were able to openly discuss.

[00:17:58]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:18:01]

Well, I'm sure that it's felt for everyone that these changes are moving in a direction of progress. It seems like most people are open to wanting that change and to wanting to be part of these conversations that are happening. Now, in terms of the more open dialogue and the conversations that it seems like have taken place in the last year or so, if you could ideally shift the goals or the culture at MD Anderson moving forward a little bit is there anything that you would recommend or like to see put in place that isn't quite there yet?

[00:18:49]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:18:53]

So, I will highlight that we just conducted our employee opinion survey in February of 2021 and the results were released a couple months later. And one of the things I think we saw for the first time was asking for one word that would describe the culture of MD Anderson, and things that you might expect, like safety and caring, popped up. But what was in the top five, diversity and inclusion for the first time that I think I can recall seeing that prominence of that aspect of the culture that we want at MD Anderson. Now, to the point of where we want to go and what we need to do to make that the reality is, I think a lot of the foundation has been set. I think we're doing the right things. I think leadership is showing up in the way that it needs to, to talk about the importance. I think it's getting integrated into a lot of our systems and practices and policies where it needs to be part of the fabric. And going back to the survey, what would know is there

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are different experiences for different communities. And so, what we need to do now is understand what's going on that's different in the environment for some populations versus others. And that requires some time, talking with individuals, understanding what their experience might be like, and trying to take some, what I would say, specific actions that will lead to system actions. But we still need to understand what is it that's different, why are the experiences different? We don't just yet have a good handle on that. We have some data; we're trying to dig into it. But this is where conversations are going to be part of that, to understand and dive deeper into it.

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## **Chapter 02: Challenges of Remote and Virtual Work**

Main Chapter Topic: C: Obstacles, Challenges

Abstract: In this chapter, Dr. Holladay talks about the challenges presented by a remote/virtual working environment, how to broaden the resources and support systems that are available to people, how to measure and address the issue of burnout, the importance of taking care of yourself, and how best to promote and encourage female leaders.

Chapter Topics:

D: On the Nature of Institutions;

B: Working Environment;

B: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion;

C: Women and Minorities at Work;

D: Diversity at MD Anderson;

***Nina Nevill***

[00:21:10]

Sure. And not to jump around too much, but it seems like in the past year, one big difference in perhaps community and in culture has been the shift to this online, virtual model, rather than being all on campus or being all present together. And so, what disparities did you see or were visible in terms of people having to work from home, and the work-from-home needs and things like fatigue and all of that? I'd just love to know a little bit about your experience with that and things that you witnessed or observed.

[00:21:54]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:21:54]

Yeah. So, the remote or virtual environment, there are some positives that were brought as a result. I will say, one of the things that I've seen is that some of these more challenging conversations are actually able to be had in the virtual environment. It does seem like there's a little more willingness to speak up, or even through chat, offer a perspective where people might have sat quietly in a physical room not feeling comfortable. There seems to be a little more comfort in the virtual environment to voice some of the concerns or thoughts. It still requires a psychological safety, obviously, that has to be present whether you're in person or virtual. But I will say that's been a welcome surprise of the virtual environment, is that it has lent itself, in some ways, to having some of these more challenging conversations. Now, the other piece is that to the point of people have been working from home. Their lives have become completely blurred. And for some that challenge was more difficult than for others, where education, if they



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are the primary caregiver for their children, they were also trying to do online education. There were, I can't even count how many articles or pieces that were coming out about how women in some ways were more burdened with the transition to work from home because they were not only working but they were also the teacher, the technology support, all of these different roles that were in some way asked of them to take on whereas some of their male counterparts didn't have those same obligations or had another support system that was able to help.

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There was also some indication, at least from what was being shared across the organization, not necessarily specific to MD Anderson, but that the technology capabilities for some were not as— not having stable Wi-Fi, not having a setup where they could have a dedicated space in their home. And so, some socio-economic impact that was realized as people were having to transition very quickly into working from home. And so, I think that was something as an organization that we were trying to take into consideration, talking about the flexibility of work. For the example of the individual who may also have kids that they're caring for who are in online school, are they still getting the work done even if maybe their hours now are from 7:00 to 11:00 in the evening. If they're still getting the work done, they're still getting the work done, and how can we flex to support individuals? If people don't have the stable Wi-Fi that they need then as an organization how do we provide them hotspots? How do we get them the software or the technology tools to support them in their home environment or create spaces for them to be able to do their work? And so, those were some of the considerations that we had to think about to open up so that we weren't having impact to different communities negatively because of the realities that they were facing.

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***Nina Nevill***

[00:26:25]

I think for me, looking at this past year, equity is the word that stands out the most in terms of how to use systemic, or at least institutional support to address some of these inequities that are being seen. So, again, this is somewhat of an ideal world, but from the data that you've collected and from your own experiences seeing some inequities across lines of gender or race or socioeconomic status, from a diversity, equity, and inclusion point of view, what actions would you have liked to have seen or in an ideal world could provide to folks in order to mitigate some of the disparities?

[00:27:17]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

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I'm not sure I'm going to have a different answer because I think what I've recognized is there is no one-size-fits-all. It really comes down to having an individual conversation. So, each leader

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has to talk to the individuals on their team. Those leaders have to talk to the individuals on their team. It has to be a cascading set of conversations to understand, what are the individual needs that people have, and then, how can we roll those up to care for a wider population? But the biggest thing that I see is it's not a one-size-fits-all, where one person may need some more help with internet and Wi-Fi connection, another person needs more help with care because elder parents that they're caring for. And so, I think it gets back to, so there's a diversity in the needs that people have, so our resources have to be diverse to meet the needs of the populations that we serve. And I think what I would say from the perspective of MD Anderson is, I think the institution has done a really incredible job of trying to broaden the resources and support systems and mechanisms that are available to people. I think we still have room to grow but I think the intent and the support is there and it's continuing to add to it.

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***Nina Nevill***

[00:29:25]

That seems like a really—the kind of solution that could be applied to a lot of institutions. It's just understanding the diversity of needs and how resources can be allocated and all of that. And so, it seems like a really solid plan for folks in all kinds of situations in institutions. I guess I don't mean to go too far back in the timeline, but I did see that you have published on burnout before and have experience with this phenomenon of burnout that I think is slowly being integrated into conversations more. But if you could talk just a little bit about burnout in the work environment here at MD Anderson that would be great.

[00:30:18]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:30:19]

Sure. So, we've been measuring burnout for a number of years on our employee opinion survey, getting a pulse of the institution, how employees are coping with the different stressors and demands that they have in the workplace. And we've seen some opportunities where it was at one place it dipped down and then it came back up. So, we have seen fluctuation over the years and with this most recent survey, it did dip a little bit and I think that was not a surprise for anyone. I think the fact that it didn't dip farther was probably the surprise. And what I think it really highlighted was going back to part of the earlier conversation where there's just so much of the blending of lives and what the last year and a half really has been where it's just been crisis and pandemic and societal injustices. And so, it's not just what's going on in the workplace, it's everything else is going on in the world and that's all impacting how resilient we are as individuals, and how we're coping and dealing with the work that we have in front of us. And so, I think where the institution has moved to really have a focus on wellness and the whole person, how are we as an individual, taking care of, holistically, I think it's a very important piece. And that self-care is not selfish. It's that whole—there's often the story use or the

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example used of you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself first before you help the person next to you on the plane. I mean, that's the same piece when it comes to self-care.

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If you're not taking care of yourself, you cannot care for those around you. And in a healthcare environment where the focus is traditionally on others, on the patient, I think that can be a very hard mentality that we need to give ourselves that grace to care for ourselves and care for our colleagues and the patient. But it's not an either or. If we're not caring for ourselves, there's no way we can take the care of the patient that everyone wants to put front and center and needs to. But that self-care is truly important. So, I think where the organization has gone, focused on the wellness and the whole person, really speaks to how we can address burnout moving forward from more of the, what's the support that we empower the individual with? And what are the resources that we as an institution provide to support the person from a shared responsibility component?

[00:33:40]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:33:42]

What, I guess, either similarities or differences, do you see between these practices regarding care, self-care, burnout, with MD Anderson and other institutions? Do you see more similarities in these across the board or does it seem like MD Anderson is doing something differently?

[00:34:02]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:34:05]

So, when we compare where we're scoring on burnout compared to other organizations, we're actually fairing a little bit better. But I think what we would say is, that's great from a comparison standpoint but that's not where we're going to rest. We don't want a quarter of our population feeling burned out we want to make sure it's an environment where people feel like they're thriving, where people feel engaged and supported, and so, even though our numbers might look better than other organization, it's not enough for us. We want to make sure that everyone is feeling healthy, happy, and engaged in the work they're doing at MD Anderson.

[00:34:59]

***Nina Nevill***

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Do you think in any way other institutions are in comparison to MD Anderson more concerned with the data than with, going what it sounds like above and beyond in making sure that it doesn't just stop where the report stops?

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***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

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So, I think there are a few organizations, similar healthcare organizations, that are very much focused on this like we are. So, I do think like Mayo, Stanford, are exemplars in this space. I know that's not the case across the board but I do know there are exemplars similar to ourselves that are trying to, to your point, do more than just, "Okay, we have the data and it shows this," well, what are the actions, the practices, support mechanisms we're going to put in place to help?

[00:36:02]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:36:03]

That's definitely good to know that there are others adhering to this quality of, or a culture, I guess, of care, especially in this time with the past year-and-a-half that, like you said, the boundary between the workplace and what's going on in the rest of the world, it's feeling more and more impossible to make that a firm boundary. I think the next thing that I'd like to ask, and this is more of a fun question than anything, is if you could say that you are better than roughly 10,000 people at any one thing or large group of people at any one thing what would that thing be? Nobody likes that question. (laughs)

[00:37:07]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:37:07]

Yeah, because I think that just goes against my philosophy, is—so, if I could be better?

[00:37:16]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:37:17]

If you had to say that you are better than most people at one thing, or that you succeed in one area more so than others, what would that be?

[00:37:29]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:37:30]

Honestly, I think that's—I don't think there is anything that I am better than most people that I succeed. I feel like that's part of my drive in life, is to constantly be learning and constantly be learning from others who have more experience, have more expertise, and surrounding myself with those who are incredibly brilliant and smart people, and just good at a lot of different things. So, I honestly don't see myself as in that camp, which I know is a non-answer for you, I'm sorry. It's just like, I don't think there's anything I could point to.

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***Nina Nevill***

[00:38:13]

No, that's completely fine. I think it's a hard question, especially for folks who see themselves very rooted in community, and as a collective, doing things as a collective rather than in an individualistic sense. But it is fun to ask because I never know what people say.

[00:38:32]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:38:32]

What's the funniest thing that you've gotten?

[00:38:35]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:38:36]

Oh, gosh. I don't know if there's necessarily been a funny thing, but typically it's some very specific skill having to do with something that the person has done for decades, many, many years. It's usually something either technical or a soft skill, something like, compassion, something like that where people feel that is the thing that others can rely on them to bring through, every time. Nothing necessarily funny, yet, but I'll definitely be on the lookout. I'm sure somebody's going to have some sort of quick answer, like, "Building model planes," or something like that.

[00:39:18]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:39:18]

Yeah. Man, I need to think on something or work on something so that I can be. (laughs)

[00:39:25]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:39:26]

Well, I guess in terms of, you mentioned surrounding yourself with other people and with brilliant people. I think MD Anderson is obviously a great place for that. Is there anybody who, any key people that you can think of, especially during your early time at MD Anderson, that you felt you could rely on, or that helped you get to where you are now? Mentors, that kind of thing.

[00:39:52]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:39:54]

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For sure. I think you're only—like, one of the best—I think that any success that we have as individuals is part of the work that we do with others and learning from others and having sounding boards, having mentors, having coaches, I think is important for all of us to continue to grow. The people that would come to mind for me that I think I've learned from and been able to tap into during my journey, Allyson Kinzel, she's our Chief Legal Officer. She is an incredible female leader that demonstrates such, I think, clarity in how she approaches decisions, and how she takes some really difficult, I mean with law, as you can imagine, with compliance, with some issues that are very challenging, and she's able to approach them with just such thoughtfulness, and in a way that pulls people together versus creating a divide, especially when you're coming into things, like I said, compliance, where there's usually something that's maybe the right way to do it and something that's maybe the wrong way to do it, or something that's in conflict, and she is the one who is just an incredible model for how to bring people together in difficult situations.

[00:41:44]

Another colleague I would highlight would be Yolanda Campbell. She's currently the Associate Vice President of Human Resources and she will, starting September 1, be the Vice President of Human Resources. And she has been a colleague of mine for quite a while and just had such a sense of calm and community and we can do this together, and there is that path forward, we keep persisting, we can keep going, and has always been a great reality check for me to check in with, of, "Okay, here's what I'm thinking, here's what I'm seeing, can you check this for me?" Because we all have baggage that we bring to situations and our lens may not be as unfiltered as we think it is. And so, having her has been, I think, a wonderful source of comfort and learning throughout my journey. And then, the third person I would highlight would be Shibu Varghese. He's our Senior Vice President of People, Culture, and Infrastructure. And I've had the opportunity to work with him now for over a decade. And he, too, is someone that just—I think the positivity of all three of them is a commonality that I see in the three that I've highlighted. I think it's just important for me to surround myself with people who believe we can achieve; we can do something. And Shibu is definitely a role model in that respect of what is possible, where we can go. And he is incredibly supportive of the people on his team and how he can help them be successful and help with—prop them up and give them recognition. And so, just being able to see that, be mentored by that and be a part of that has been an incredible part of my journey, as well.

[00:44:12]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:44:12]

That's so lovely to hear. Do you mind staying one more time the second person you mentioned's first name?

[00:44:17]

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***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:44:18]

Yolan.

[00:44:18]

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### **Chapter 03: Building Leaders at MD Anderson**

Main Chapter Topic: C: Leadership;

Abstract:

In this chapter, Dr. Holladay talks about the MD Anderson Leadership Institute, why she values her work so much in a “service-oriented industry,” and the importance of succession planning.

Chapter Topics:

A: Personal Background;

D: On Leadership;

C: Diversity at MD Anderson;

***Nina Nevill***

[00:44:19]

Yolan. Thank you. And do you remember, I suppose from when you first started with MD Anderson, who recruited you?

[00:44:31]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:44:33]

So, I actually was working at a consulting firm, Houston-based, and one of the clients was MD Anderson. So, I was working on a project with MD Anderson at the time and they had an opening become available. And I knew working in the consulting realm that that wasn't where I wanted to be long-term. I mean, I enjoyed working with clients, being Houston, it was healthcare, oil and gas, finance, but I definitely had more of my passion in wanting to be in more of a service-oriented industry and so, healthcare is definitely something that I wanted to be a part of. And MD Anderson has always—I'm from Houston. My mom is a patient of MD Anderson, a cancer survivor. And so, I've known about MD Anderson essentially my whole life, and feel a lot of gratitude for the institution, and the fact that I think it has helped keep my mom in my life for my entirety. So, I think it's—so, when I was consulting for the company that had MD Anderson as a client, when I heard there was an opening, I just went all in and applied and reached out to contacts and went for it.

[00:46:01]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:46:05]

That's incredible. Let me see if I have anything else from this part of the interview. So, earlier on in your career, if you could look back now and say that there were one or two key points,



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things that you remember, whether that be something that felt like a success, or something that was a stumbling block, what points would you point to?

[00:46:37]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:46:41]

So, there are a couple points. One would be probably about 14 years ago, at this point, where I had the opportunity to work on a project and we were implementing our new performance evaluation system. And this has remained true for decades, and I think will always be the case, no one loves during performance evaluations. It just, it is what it is. People recognize the intent, why we do them, but it's never a like, "Yay, I get to do performance evals." So, we were implementing a new technology and changing the process. And as part of that project, we had a number of leadership transitions. So, I was working on the project, the individual that I was working with on the project left the organization. The person that replaced that individual as the leader of the project left the organization. We were so far into the project that at the time, it was, do we bring someone else new as the leader to take on the project? Or was there an opportunity in this situation for me to step in and stretch myself to take on some of the lead aspects of the project? And I will say it was an institution-wide project and there were a lot of change resisters to the project, but it was an opportunity for me to really stretch and I was given that opportunity with some leaders at a higher level that supported me and thought I could. And so, even in those moments where I was like, "What am I doing? Can I do this?" They believed I could and I will say, while again, I don't know that everyone loves performance evals or ever will, but the fact that we came in on the project on time, implemented it in the functionality that we had said we would, we were able to deliver. It was one of the, I would say, high performing teams that I've been a part of.

[00:49:12]

But it was, I think for me, an opportunity of in those moments where you have hesitation in yourself, of whether you can do something to not be the one that holds yourself back, to try. If you fall, you fall, but you get back up. So, that was one, I think, key moment for me. Another, I would say, is more recent which was with the formation of the Leadership Institute. And there were a lot of dynamics. I mean, going into how to create it, who was going to be involved as part of it, and even over time, that's evolved. And going through a period of time where I think there's an organization, we've had different levels of commitment to leadership development has been something I've had the opportunity to see over my tenure at MD Anderson where we had support and then we went through a period where we really had to stay under the radar. We were there as a support system but we weren't doing anything that was out in front. And then, to have a transition period where are executive leaders were all in, are all in, has definitely been a career-changing place for me, to where I get to dream big. I get to work with a team of phenomenal individuals and put in place things that I think were on wish lists where we're getting to actually

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implement. And that's been to have the executive leadership support of Dr. Pisters, Shibu Varghese, and others where they're not just saying they support it, they actually come to our classes. They are getting coaches. They're participating. They're making use of the services. And at this point, to say we've now saturated over half of the leaders within the institution participating in our programs and it hasn't even been a full three years, it's pretty incredible to be part of a team that's been able to achieve that.

[00:51:27]

And I think in the coming year we are making a transition where the development function as a whole will be together under the Leadership Institute so it will serve formal leaders but also all employees with the recognition that everyone can be a leader no matter their title. And that, I think, ultimately gets back to our original conversation around inclusion. Everyone's included in leadership. And to me, that's a huge step forward and how we can really make the environment as inclusive and how about leadership and inclusion really do tie together because we're including all when we talk about developing leadership skills.

[00:52:14]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:52:14]

That's so wonderful to hear. I didn't realize that it just within the past three years. Speaking of projects or ideas that felt maybe, at one point, more like a dream or a wish, what's an example of one that you were able to follow through with or that you received support for?

[00:52:37]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:52:40]

Sure. So, there are a couple of different ones that I could highlight. One, we've been talking about talent reviews and succession planning for years. And it was just something that we could never really get off the ground. But I think as we started to put things in place over the last few years, what we were able to shift was the view of what succession planning is. I think there was a myth that it meant, I'm picking the person that I think should replace me, and if I'm picking someone that means maybe I need to be replaced. And so, what we were able to do was actually shift that and think about, this is about talent development and leadership planning and how are we ensuring everyone has an equal opportunity to be prepared for future leadership growth opportunities? And it's not about picking a person, it's about reviewing everyone's talent, seeing the potential they have, where could they grow in the organization and then intentionally looking at those pipelines to say, "You know what? In this area for some reason we're lacking a diversity of qualified individuals so we need to be intentional to say why in this community are women underrepresented, or why are Black African Americans underrepresented?" But without doing it from a systematic lens we can't answer that question and we can't do anything to impact

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it. So, being able to lift that project off and actually start to bring it in with a systematic way that we can develop all leaders and ensure that equity is present has been one of the wish lists that I've had.

[00:54:37]

Another area would be, we focus a lot on where leaders are today and what they need to do to upskill or reskill or be prepared for the challenges they're facing right now but we also know we need to prepare now for what's on the horizon, where we're going. And so we've been able to develop some programs that we call "Accelerate," to prepare people for transitions that may come in the future. And as part of those programs that are cohort based, we are able to really set up a community support those individuals are seen as multiplying potentially provide a coach, we provide a mentor, we provide a sponsor, so that that way they really do have a network built-in because we know the dynamics are such that you have to have that social network community to support you to be successful and to apply it back in the organization. So, those would be a couple I would highlight.

[00:55:42]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:55:42]

And in both of those did you receive from executive levels, support or resistance? Was it welcomed, a welcome change?

[00:55:54]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:55:55]

Yeah, so like I said, since 2018, our support has been incredible. So, much so with the example of succession planning, we started with our executive leadership team. They went first. They went through the process, and then we've cascaded it down from there, so it showcases them setting the example and it just eases our way as we cascade it through the organization because there's not a question that it's valued. There's not a question that, why isn't our president, or why isn't our chief operating officer doing it? Well, they are. And so, that obviously paves the way. When it comes to our Accelerate program, that's who we're engaging as our sponsors. So, they're engaged from the beginning so that that way it's not like, "Oh, these individuals have gone through this program. That's great. And now what?" Who was supporting them? Who was helping advocate for them? We start that at the front end so that they continue to be supported after the program.

[00:57:04]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:57:07]

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That sounds incredible, a very different approach to start at that level and like you said, go forward from there. Have there been any projects or anything that you've worked on, an example that you could give, of running into some sort of obstacle or stumbling block, something where project didn't necessarily go as planned? An example of something like that would be great.

[00:57:39]

[Redacted]

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## **Chapter 04: Lessons from COVID**

Main Chapter Topic: B: Critical Perspectives on MD Anderson

### **Abstract:**

In this chapter, Dr. Holladay talks about the unique institutional challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the development and importance of coaching and mentoring, studying how people learn, and how to preserve the lessons learned from the pandemic to improve the post-pandemic institution.

### **Chapter Topics:**

B: MD Anderson in the Future;  
D: On Leadership;  
C: Diversity at MD Anderson;  
C: Leadership;  
C: Mentoring;

### ***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[00:59:20]

Thinking about the pandemic, all of our programs and our services were completely in person before COVID. And we had actually started the conversations of trying to move things into a virtual format but had gotten a lot of resistance. It would never work, people wouldn't want to attend, you can't have that personal connection with people. You can't do the activities in the same way. You can't have interpersonal connections. There were a number of reasons why it was not going to work. And so, we were at the place of, we were planning to run a pilot of a particular program where we would actually do something virtual. And then COVID hit. And so, then we had a period of time of okay, all of our programs and services, everything we do is in person. We cannot offer them in person so what are we going to do?

[01:00:38]

So, we took two months, and we're completely, I guess I would say dark, and converted all of our programming as much as we could, obviously some of it was staged, but we converted a large chunk during those two months and then started to stand it back up. One program as an example is a program that we work with Rice University, the Doerr Institute, we deliver at MD Anderson for our leaders called CoachRICE. And we had gone through one module in person, COVID hit, and so we were going to have to convert the rest to the virtual. And we actually had a couple people drop out of the cohort. They said, "I just don't think the experience is going to be as high-quality. I'll wait until the next in-person opportunity. I don't want to pursue it at this

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time.” So, we had a couple of people drop out of the cohort and the rest stayed with us. And this is where I say the incredible people that I work with were able to convert into the virtual environment and after the second module, like I was saying earlier, some of the silver lining that we’ve heard is they were able to have more intimate conversations than they thought they could in the virtual realm. Coaching, as an example, is a very personal engagement. And when they’re in the coach training, there are people observing them. And in a virtual environment you can turn off your cameras and people forget that those observers are there. When you’re in person, you can’t ever forget those people are there, they’re just right there.

[01:02:34]

So, this is where some of the, like I said, silver lining of where you can have some of those very real interactions. We also saw that in the case of some of the simulations that we run. In person, we were doing it in the Simulation Center, which was awesome. You would have the mirror that they can’t see on the other side, and so people could observe and watch. But you still know that mirror is there. And so, it still feels a little simulated, which it is. We moved those simulations into Zoom, and then again, observers turned off their camera, and it’s just those two people having a conversation. And some of the feedback we got was, it felt more real because you can’t see anyone watching you, you’re just having the dialogue with that person and the trained actor would really get into it. And so, it just felt more real than in the environment where they were in the simulated lab. It just had that context of, “I know I’m here.” And so, it was interesting to go through that experience because like I said at the beginning, we had so much resistance to going down the path of starting virtual programming and then to have the actual pandemic happen, that forced our hand into it. It just showed the possibility of what could be and enabled us to move forward. And so, obviously, you don’t always want—you never want a pandemic to force that hand, but I think what it shows is, even with those obstacles, if you keep plugging away, there’s going to be an opportunity where something lends itself, whether it’s a pilot, whether it’s something, a smaller venue where you can demonstrate the success and try and move in that direction. Does that answer your question?

[01:04:32]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:04:32]

Yeah, sure. It’s definitely clarifying. It seems like there’s—obviously in addition to some of the cons with burnout and things like that, it sounds like there were some absolute benefits to moving virtually. And so, that’s always a good thing to hear. It makes me wonder, though, for the resistance that was there before, now not only talking about the present but moving forward with the Institute, are there any plans on, that you know of, keeping both models, keeping virtual and in person in order to take advantage of some of the positives that you all saw?

[01:05:12]

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***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[01:05:12]

Yeah. And this is where I think it gets back to, we had a very real situation that presented a constraint that it was kind of all or nothing with the pandemic so that we couldn't be in person even if we wanted to. But in the future, I definitely, getting back to diversity in which people learn, preferences that people have, I absolutely know it will be a blend of some in person, some virtual. Now, what exactly that mix is going to be is still to be determined how we'll exactly carry that out. But I am certain it will be a blend of some in person and some virtual. Because there are so many things that, as an example with the Houston Area Locations, and the Texas Medical Center, for people to come in on site for our training, they would often if they were in a Houston Area Location, they would have to have an hour to get to the Texas Medical Center, then whatever training time, and then, drive back. In the virtual environment it's, "Okay, I have to go down the hall to find if they're on site at that particular HAL, or if they're working remotely, well then, it's just flipping over to Zoom." So, that two-hour commute that was happening to get them into a training class, as an example, went away. And so, that's why I can't ever imagine where we would not have virtual options for that reason, or for what we also saw were differences in introverts versus extroverts. A lot more interaction from some of our more introverted participants because they had different ways they could interact, meaning the chat function where they could put something in and not having to speak in front of a large group, or the fact that we can easily put people in breakout rooms of sizes of three or four, where it's just more intimate, whereas when you're in a physical room, yes, you can have breakouts and they can be absolutely fabulous, but what we also know is, sometimes the more assertive personalities sometimes it's more extroverted, tend to sometimes drive that conversation.

[01:07:36]

And so, that's why we were able to, I think, capitalize on some of the benefits of what the virtual can offer. But we can't lose that when we come back in person because there are some things that you just want to physically connect with people. You want to be in the room and we don't want to lose that. I mean, we're humans. That's part of what keeps us human. So, it's got to be a blend.

[01:08:01]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:08:01]

It sounds like your earlier response that moving forward, a one-size-fits-all solution is not going to cut it, and so, being able to blend both and reach a more diverse population, that sounds like a good path forward, even if it's not quite set in stone yet as to what that'll look like. I'm trying to see if there is anything else that I wrote down that we haven't touched on yet. I think I asked something similar to this earlier, but I want to give a little bit of space for a slightly broader question. Obviously, as people say, hindsight is 20-20 but if you had been in a position to be



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able to do things differently, at least within your job, what would you have done differently regarding the pandemic, and regarding diversity and inclusion? If anything.

[01:09:19]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[01:09:25]

I think it's easier for me to speak from the diversity, equity, inclusion standpoint with respect to, I wish I had been more proactive in the conversations. I think some of the events, like with the social injustice, what I referenced with murder of George Floyd, I was definitely reacting to that, not proactively looking for, "How do I make sure I'm doing everything I can to create the inclusive environment?" I think there were definitely some practices that were in place that supported it but were not as far along as they should have. So, I think that, for me, would be the wish I would have is to have had a more proactive lens to see, "How am I ensuring inclusion is infused in everything that we do, equity is always part of the discussion, and not an afterthought, it's got to be the forethought?" So, that's I think, what I would point to. I'm trying to think, on the pandemic side, that one, I don't know that you could be proactive. I just really don't know that you could ever predict. So, I don't know if it's something I wish I would do differently so much as something I want to make sure I carry forward. So, one thing that I know has been top of mind in the pandemic world, in the COVID world, in this remote environment, has been, how do we keep people connected and feeling socially supported within the teams that they are a part of?

[01:11:36]

And I don't think as much attention was paid to that when we were casually encountering people, and just by natural circumstances, connecting. And so, I actually think that's something we need to carry forward, which is, how do we make sure we give that same attention to the connections that we need to have, whether we're on site, remote, or a mix, how do we make sure that those connections are being placed at the center so that we don't revert back on some of those prior practices.

[01:12:19]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:12:20]

And in terms of moving forward, in addition to what you just mentioned is there anything else that you would like to see carried forward or given more attention to in the future?

[01:12:35]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[01:12:56]



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I don't know that it's more attention so much as continued attention. So, I think the attention on diversity, equity, inclusion over the last year, while it's been present before, it's definitely increased in the level of attention it's gotten over the last year. And my hope, and what I want to continue to advocate for is how do we continue that same level of attention even as what I'm hoping happens with some of the practices that we're able to implement, things continue to get better, that shouldn't have us lift our foot off the pedal. We should continue to keep it all in, making sure this continues to be something that is part of the conversation on a regular basis within our organization, and not something that is forced by events, but something that is just who we are, and how we want to show up as an inclusive community.

[01:14:10]

[Redacted]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:15:03]

Other than that, I think I have been through everything that I, at least, would like to know. Is there anything that you feel like you wish I had asked, or anything that you would like to add on any of the topics that we've covered?

[01:15:31]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[01:15:40]

I can't think of anything.

[01:15:42]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:15:48]

Well, that's a good sign. Maybe that means that I've done my job.

[01:15:51]

***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[01:15:51]

So, what happens from here?

[01:15:53]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:15:55]

So, basically—well, let me say thank you so much for taking the time to do this today. We really appreciate it. I'm going to stop the recording here, at least, if that's okay.

[01:16:06]

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***Courtney Holladay, PhD***

[01:16:06]

Yeah.

[01:16:07]