

Leader in Focus - Laurie Spoon, Executive Consultant

Where did you grow up?

I've always been very proud to say I'm from Detroit (even though I actually grew up in Southfield, Michigan, which is one suburb over). But it's not too much of an exaggeration to say that most of my childhood was spent at Olympia Stadium, where the Detroit Red Wings used to play hockey. In fact, I saw my first game when I was two weeks old because my dad didn't see any reason why having a newborn baby should get in the way of perfectly good season tickets.

What did you want to be when you were young?

I wanted to be like Mary Tyler Moore or Barbara Walters—I saw myself moving away from home and working at a TV or radio station. When I was eight or nine, I had a regular guest spot on a popular local talk show. The radio station had a booth at the outdoor mall where everyone could see the disc jockey on the air. After school, I'd run over and sit with them as a guest commentator to talk about the thoughts of the youth on the topics of the day. So from a young age, I envisioned myself in broadcasting and communications.

I continued doing a lot with radio in high school, too. I had several friends who worked at Top 40 radio stations, and since I was like their little sister they'd take me with them and introduce me to the disc jockeys and the news people and let me sit in their chairs (though they never let me on the air). And I used to love staying up late listening to the radio, because after a certain hour you could pick up stations from all over. I'd keep a log of the DJs on different stations and keep track of what they were playing. And I was one of those people who loved calling the request line to have them play my favorite songs.



Laurie Spoon



Hanging out with Mayer Hawthorne at the 2011 Detroit Music Awards

And I became very involved at my high school's radio station. As the news director, I'd go in to do the early morning news at 6 a.m. every day. It turns out that a lot of well-known radio people came out of that station, and 60 of us got together for a reunion a year ago and had a great time. I had to laugh when several of them told me that I was a tough and demanding boss, but they were grateful because they'd learned so much from me—some things never change. But it couldn't have been too bad, because we all had a great time hanging out 37 years later. And while I was in town, I had the chance to help the current students prepare a newscast and to give a guest lecture in their class to share with them what I'd learned over the years.

What was your first job?

Well, I went to Arizona State, but shortly after I arrived, I received an offer to work at a Top 40 station in Phoenix. It was my first paying broadcast gig (I've been working since I was 15), and I was excited, so of course that meant I had to leave college to pursue my passion full time. We were right next to Sun Devil Stadium, and the station sponsored lots of cool events, including a big show by Peter Frampton, and the filming of the concert scene of *A Star is Born* with Kris Kristofferson and Barbara Streisand. It was a fantastic job.

How did you come to choose your career? Were there any defining moments along the way?

I'm still trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up. In many ways, my career has always had a way of choosing me. I tend to just fall into things, and I consider myself lucky to have been able to do so many different things in my life. After Phoenix, I went to L.A. to work for Buddah Records, which was the label that recorded Gladys Knight and the Pips. I worked at MCA Records. And then I got to work with Tommy Matola (a great music executive who used to be married to Mariah Carey), and his protégés Daryl Hall and John Oates. Being in the music business is kind of like being at KP—everyone and everything is interconnected and you go from one place to another based on who you know and the doors that open up for you.



Laurie and the Vandellas

My health care and political career began with a chance encounter (the way so many things began in my life). I was in a hospital in Florida when I lived there, and I fell into a conversation with the two physicians in charge of the emergency room. We clicked, and I ended up helping them set up and manage their own practice. And I became an activist for children's education, which led to some work with Lauro Cavazos, the first George Bush's Secretary of Education, and then Jeb Bush selected me for a committee called Floridians for Educational Choice (I guess he needed at least one liberal on the committee), which then led to my becoming the Public Information Officer for the Kansas City, Missouri, School District. And somehow, in the mid-'90s, I wound up running a

communications team for a private hospital in Malaysia, and advising the Minister of Health—it's been such an unpredictable ride.

What do you see as your primary responsibilities in your current role?

Making things work. In Procurement & Supply, we do a lot of very complex things, especially around implementations. And many times what will work best it isn't readily apparent, and you have to go around the block to get next door, which can be frustrating. But doing it that way is what will work, so that's what you do. So my responsibility is to use my hard-earned experience about how certain things work to help people come up with the best solution. And I've been known, on more than one occasion, to walk into someone's office to make an argument, then argue the other side, and finally take a third position to be sure we're seeing things from all different perspectives.

One of the things that helped me see things from a variety of perspectives was being assigned a buddy in LMP communications, who was there to be a sounding board when I first came to KP. She helped me navigate around several pitfalls (though even with her help I managed to fall into a few black holes anyway). And in the past few years, I had the opportunity to work with approximately 5,000 physicians in my role as the executive consultant to Jeff Weisz, the executive director for SCPMG. Interacting with them provided a priceless understanding of how things look from the clinical side, and now I can share that expanded view from the medical group with my PS colleagues.



The PS Communications team: Juan Aguilar (left), Laurie, John Lathrop, Marion White, and Ross Wilken

There's no doubt that KP is a challenging organization, but that makes it all the more rewarding when I can help people find their way. After working in the music business, education, politics, and high tech, I want the balance of my career to be focused on mentoring and advising other people to help them be successful at KP.

Why did you choose to work in health care?

In the late '70s and '80s, KP was a very different place than it is now. But even when I was leaving high tech eight years ago, and brought up the idea of working here with some friends, they said "You have an entrepreneurial mindset, and you say what's on your mind, so you'll never fit in there! You're too opinionated and it just wouldn't work." I said "Ok!" and immediately went home and applied for a job, because I had a reputation as a contrarian to live up to.

The more research I did for my interviews, the more impressed I was with the organization. From the division of research, to the Care Management Institute, to so many other things that set KP apart, I couldn't wait to become a part of it. And in my interviews, I realized there are a lot of really intelligent people working here, and while my emotional IQ may be pretty high, I'm not that smart. So I love to surround myself with people who are a lot smarter than me, and that's been really easy to do here.

So I was hired into corporate communications and communication services, and I was thrilled to have a chance to work with many members of KP's executive leadership team. I was impressed by their vision for the future.

What are some of the biggest challenges and opportunities KP faces in the next five years?

Health care reform provides us with great financial opportunities and challenges. I saw a headline in the *New York Times* a few years ago that said, “Is Kaiser Permanente the Future of Health Care in America?” and I am convinced it is. It’s a great system, and we’ve really improved the quality of care we provide for our members. And not enough can be said about our core belief in preventative care.

As a personal example, when I turned 50 (several years ago), the clinicians were amazingly proactive and hounded me with calls to make sure I was taking all the tests I needed. And the coordination of our care impresses me so much. I’ve seen friends with cancer try to coordinate all their physicians and medicines on their own, and it’s just horrible. With the strides we’ve made in quality of care, and our advances in technology, we’ve become a dynamic leader in the field of health care, and I feel honored to be a part of the organization.

Another thing I love about working at KP is how our history ties in to what we do every day. There’s a song that says “I hope to find my future in my past,” and I think that’s how KP continues to find its way forward. When you look at our history of leveraging technology in health care, and of committing to environmental sustainability and diversity long before they were fashionable, it’s obvious that so much of what we do today has its roots in the genius of the people who started the organization. I’ve read a lot about Henry Kaiser and Sidney Garfield, and believe that if they were alive today, they would be incredibly proud of what we’re continuing to do.

Do you have a motto or philosophy that’s fundamental to your leadership style?

A number of years ago, an unnamed newspaper quoted me as saying, “Diplomacy is the art of saying ‘Nice doggy!’ while looking for a rock.” (P.S.: No angry e-mails are necessary. I am a dog-lover and adopted two dogs from the humane society whom I love very much.)

But seriously, my philosophy is that you have to come in the door every day willing to lose your job for standing up for what you believe and for doing the right thing. Every day you earn the right to come in again the next day, and you do that by staying with your basic principles, understanding the mission of the organization, and being willing to have the tough conversations.

I believe I’m here to tell the truth and to make things happen. And that’s how I can help the people I work with every day, the company as a whole, be as successful as possible.

What do you like to do outside of work?

I dabble here and there in the music business. My goal for next year is to start a music foundation in Detroit to help emerging artists. I want to give back to my hometown. I went back three or four times last year, and it was devastating to see the condition of the city I grew up in. It’s been hard to see everything they’ve gone through, but there are so many people stepping up and coming back to help the city, it’s been inspiring to be a part of it.

I’m also a gym rat—I love to go in and run and lift weights. This year, I started both CrossFit and Krav Maga through the influence of two of my dear friends from PS, and while things have gotten a little crazy lately, I plan to get back to both of them after the first of the year. (I’m really striving to do better on the whole work-life balance thing, but there is this little Office Products project that is going to be great for the organization, and has become a little labor of love for many of us. It



Backstage with Jack Ashton at the 2011 DMAs

was a very stark reminder of the immense challenge of moving this ship on a dime. But we're moving it—and I'm so thrilled to be a part of the team that is making it happen.)



Laurie and Gordie

And finally, I love hockey. Fortunately, I live in San Jose, so I get to see quite a few games a year. In fact, this week I'm going to see the Sharks play the Wild, and very soon I get to see my beloved Red Wings!

Tell us about your family

My daughter Alicia lives in Sarasota, Florida and is going to turn 29 soon. We lived about an hour from there for 12 years when she was younger, and she has friends and relatives in the area, so she feels close to home. In case you didn't realize it yet, I like hockey, and one of my favorite moments last year was taking Alicia to see the Red Wings play at "the Joe" in Detroit. Before the game she confessed that she wasn't sure if she was a Sharks fan or a Red Wings fan, since she went to high school in San Jose. I told her not to let family pressure

impact her true feelings. But when she saw the Sharks skate out onto the ice to warm up, and then the Wings, she turned to me and said "Mom, I think I'm a Detroit fan," and I said "I knew I wouldn't have to convince you. It's in the DNA. There's nothing you can do about it."

My other girls are Lorrie and Priscilla, my two dogs. And I have an adopted brother in Florida, one brother in Phoenix, and some nieces and nephews in San Clemente, California.

But I have a global family made up of people I'm not related to by blood. Some of my friends have been around with me 40 years (okay, and some for as many as 55), and I have an amazing collection of friends all over the world who I work really hard to stay in touch with. And that's what I consider to be my true family.



Laurie with her daughter Alicia, along with Lorrie and Priscilla