

# SHARON CALLAHAN

## A Call to Action

There are few people in healthcare marketing with a more impressive resume than Sharon Callahan. For more than 30 years, she has led the way for the industry to navigate change through her strategic expertise and knowledge of consumer and professional advertising, medical education, clinical programs, publishing, and digital.

In April 2020, Sharon was named CEO of the CDM Group in addition to her roles as chairman of TBWA\WorldHealth and chief client officer of Omnicom Health Group.

Described by her colleagues as an influencer and true disruptor, Sharon has earned almost every industry award possible. With a long track record of nurturing top talent, and a special commitment to advancing the influence and impact of women in the industry, Sharon was named Woman of the Year in 2019 by the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association. She is a trusted advisor, visionary, and industry thought leader, and has long been committed to championing diverse and inclusive workplaces where everyone feels safe bringing their whole self to work. Colleagues are inspired by her authenticity, her accessibility, and her willingness to be a sounding board and mentor — formally and informally.

**PV: You are a recognized innovator in healthcare marketing. How are you raising the bar for yourself and your organization?**

**CALLAHAN:** It starts by calling people to action, because without action you don't get results. This extends from collaborations across the ecosystem that impact innovation to driving improvements.

As an example, in my new role as CEO of CDM, I'm trying to find the white space and ask how we differentiate ourselves beyond just being great at what we do. I'm requiring every person in the agency to go through agility training, which is something that our industry is not known for on the client side or the agency side, although it's the future.

It's not just about being faster, it's about being smarter. We need to be able to find more efficient, viable ways to launch creative, innovative ideas into the market — then test, gather insights, make the process better, and keep going. This is how we are going to have to do things going forward.

We see this happening now with the development of therapies for COVID-19 and vaccines. It's hard to imagine a drug getting approved in less than a year from the time it was put into clinical trials. It's never happened before, but it's going to have to happen in the future.

The companies that are going to make it will be those that are agile. Going to make it will be those that are agile.

**PV: How do you become agile in a creative industry?**

**CALLAHAN:** It's about not chasing perfection. This is

something that has held back creative agencies; often, the thought was that everything had to be perfect before it went to the client. We have to develop new types of relationships where it's okay to present something that is good so the concept can be tested before putting so much money into making it perfect before we know it works.

We have to start to think differently. Consider how telemedicine is taking hold. I was speaking recently to a health system client who told me in February they had 200 telehealth calls. In April, they had 35,000. Suddenly, there are all these doctors working from home. In addition to the technology, there's a real creative opportunity to be had, because doctors were not trained to diagnose and treat patients over the telephone.

**PV: Do you see the pandemic changing the industry in other ways?**

**CALLAHAN:** I think digital is going to take hold, and we have to invest in that. We have to think differently about the physician-patient interaction, and actually, the rep-physician interaction. These face-to-face interactions aren't going to go away, but they're not going to be the primary way that people interact. So, how do we reinvent how we do things so that we can still have real, authentic relationships?

**PV: How do you approach innovation? Is it a top down, bottom up, or across company approach?**

**CALLAHAN:** I think innovation is a cultural thing. I want to create an empowering environment

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**Raising the bar...  
by calling people to take action**

where everyone feels like their voice can be heard and their ideas matter. People are much more innovative when they feel that they're important and that they're valued.

If a company wants to innovate and thrive, everyone has to feel like they're equal. People also need to see leaders embracing bold ideas.

**PV: How do you start to build that kind of culture where people do feel valued?**

**CALLAHAN:** You have to show examples of it all the time, and you have to allow people to fail fast, experiment, and do something different, because that's where innovation comes from. If you're always afraid that you're going to fail, you will just do the safe thing, and that's never going to lead to innovation or transformation.

**PV: How do you believe your leadership style inspires others to reach their personal and professional goals?**

**CALLAHAN:** I lead and make decisions from gut instincts or intuition, and really, it's the only way I know how to do it. I'm not sure this approach served me well early in my career when I felt the culture was much more male-dominated or there was a certain way I had to act or look. Now, I don't feel I have an option but to be who I am. I've always felt that even if a decision I make is wrong, it's better to be decisive, because you can fix a wrong decision, but you can't fix not being decisive.

I think that just being myself and admitting

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# EVOLVING THE INDUSTRY TAKES GUTS

Congratulations on being recognized as  
a Red Jacket honoree, **Sharon Callahan!**

Courage is rare. And in this unique time when we need it most, Sharon has stepped up and spoken up to make our industry more inclusive. Her bravery is an inspiration to us—and everyone.

**cdm.**

when I'm wrong and taking credit when I'm right inspires others to go with their gut instincts, too. I've certainly done that both personally and professionally, and have received feedback that my approach is inspiring to other people.

**PV: If you had to choose two words to describe yourself, what would they be and why?**

**CALLAHAN:** I'm pretty adaptable to the demands of whatever situation I'm in, yet I don't lose myself in the process of being adaptable. And I'm focused. I know where I'm going but I don't lose sight of where I've been, either.

**PV: I know you are a big proponent of mentoring, why is this important?**

**CALLAHAN:** I believe I get more out of mentoring than I give. Mentoring skills are good to have because the job of senior leaders is to mentor and coach people. When you invest in somebody it makes a difference in their life, and that's where loyalty and trust come from—people feel empowered to bring up new ideas or to be innovative or to be a leader. By mentoring, I get a lot of feedback about what's really happening in the company, not neatly packaged, but through those honest conversations.

I'm involved in some formal mentoring programs, including with the Parsons School of Design, which has a graduate degree in branding.

I'm pretty good at identifying a problem or issue. Mentoring isn't meant to be psychotherapy; it's meant to help people problem-solve in the moment by showing them how to navigate a situation. Being open about where you've failed, you can help others to learn, which creates a pretty good relationship right up front.

**PV: What advice do you have for future leaders?**

**CALLAHAN:** People often don't understand what it takes to move ahead, and a lot of times it's not what you think it is. You really need to get under the hood and understand how decisions



### Sharon Callahan

**TITLE:** CEO

**COMPANY:** CDM

**PERSONAL AWARDS:** Healthcare Businesswomen's Association (HBA) STAR, 2006; PharmaVOICE 100, 2020 (Red Jacket), 2019, 2017; MedAdNews, Industry Person of the Year, 2019; HBA Woman of the Year, 2019

**COMMUNITY AWARDS:** Women's Venture Fund Highest Leaf Award, 2014; Arthritis Foundation, Champion of Yes Award, 2019

**ASSOCIATIONS:** LGBTQ Victory Fund, Board Chair; Arthritis Foundation, NY Board; Coalition for Healthcare Communications (former chair); Medical Advertising Hall of Fame

**TWITTER:** @SharonFCallahan

get made. It's often not about your ability, but your visibility. Nobody is going back and looking at your last five years of performance reviews or going around asking everyone you've ever worked with how good you are. They're going with their gut instinct in that moment when they make a decision about your future. So, you'd better be top of mind, and I don't think people take that as seriously as they should. My advice is to consider is to always be top of mind for your boss and your boss's boss.

**PV: As a leader, what's the one thing that keeps you up at night?**

**CALLAHAN:** There are a lot of things we can't control, and one of them is that there's a lot of toxic leadership in the world right now. There's a lot of arrogance. In this pandemic people's lives are at stake, and we need leaders who are driven by values, and those values need to come through loud and clear. I think if you really want to know what someone's priorities are, all you need to do is look at what they do, not what they say.

**PV: What's the thing that brings you joy in your world?**

**CALLAHAN:** It's the little acts of kindness, which I hope will propel us into the future. Something as simple as the people who go out and bang their pots and pans for essential healthcare workers at 7 pm. I think these gestures touch people a lot more than just talk. We're seeing leadership from places we didn't think it would come from before. Leaders emerge in these times of crisis.

**PV: What mark would you like to leave on the industry as your legacy?**

**CALLAHAN:** I like to believe that the people I've touched can have the career of their dreams. I never imagined I'd have such a wonderful, fulfilling career that has given me so much joy and made me feel so purposeful. **PV**

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