

Corey Rekers (00:12)

Welcome back to The Accel Advantage podcast where we discuss insurance and financial services for our business leaders. I am your host, Corey Rekers, Partner and President of our Property Casualty division here at The Accel Group. Today, I have a very special guest with me, our very own Kara Roeder. Kara is the Director of Benefits Operations here at Accel. And today we're going

a topic of leadership,

or what Kara likes to call impactful leadership. I've had the pleasure of working with Kara now for five years, and I've seen firsthand the impact she has on her team and the growth she's experienced for herself as a leader. So before we dive in to her wisdom and knowledge on the topic, let's get to know Kara. Kara, can you share a little bit about yourself to our audience?

Kara Roeder (01:03)

I would love to. As Corey said, currently I'm the Director of Benefit Operations here at The Accel Group. I bring more than 25 years of experience in the insurance industry to our agency. I hold a Bachelor of Arts from

University of Iowa in Psychology and a Master's of Arts in Leadership from Wartburg College. Currently in my role, I lead and manage all aspects of the service and operational functions

of our benefits department, overseeing day-to-day operations, developing policies and procedures, fostering the collaboration between our sales and service team. So as a leader, I thrive on leading with empathy, transparency, trust, and purpose, and I enjoy creating an environment where innovation thrives and people are empowered to take ownership for their growth and their impact.

Corey Rekers (01:55)

Not only that, probably the most important thing, Kara is a mom of two boys who I know keep you very, very busy.

Kara Roeder (02:03)

Yes, yes they do. I have a 19 year old Jack and a 16 year old Max. So they are both sophomores. Jack is a sophomore in college and Max is a sophomore in high school. So they keep me busy and very entertained.

Corey Rekers (02:15)

That's awesome. So,

lastly, fun fact on Kara. We do a core value award every year here at Accel for those teammates, we feel exemplify our core values at the highest level. So we have five of those. Those are Act with Honor and Integrity, Consistency Strengthens Our Brand, Embracing Change,

empowerment helps us grow and finally laugh every day which Kara has won and exemplifies every day here at The Accel Group so not only does she

lead with empathy and understanding but she has a great sense of humor to boot.

Kara Roeder (02:54)

This is true. I do like a good laugh. I take my work seriously, but not myself seriously. So I'm the first to make fun of myself and be able to laugh. So I hope it brings joy to everybody who I get to work with here at The Accel Group.

Corey Rekers (03:07)

It certainly does. So all right, Kara, to kick us off, in your intro, you talked specifically about pursuing your master's degree in leadership. So let's dig into that a little bit here. What was the driver behind pursuing a master's in leadership versus something else per se? So I'm sure there's a why story behind that somewhere.

Kara Roeder (03:29)

Sure. So pursuing my master's really was an unexpected turn in my life. It wasn't on my bucket list. It really wasn't something that I ever aspired to do of getting a master's degree. So when the opportunity was presented to me, just, I was curious. I'm a learner. And so I'm really curious about gaining knowledge and just that process of learning. So that curious moment really led to a conversation with the college to learn

about the program. I kind of went to my best friends and people that I trust and really gained their perspective on is this a good idea? What is this going to look like? So I decided I'm going to apply. Let's see if I get accepted. And at that point it got kind of real. Like this is now reachable. It's not just an idea. So I told myself if I could arrange the funding I would be all in. So I got full funding.

Again, this made no sense on paper. I'm old, I'm a single mom, I work a full-time job. I just thought this was crazy. However, deep down I knew it was for me. I knew this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up, was just kind of like a, it was a God thing saying this is what you need to do. And I just had no idea where it would lead, but I enrolled and I graduated this past May of this year.

Corey Rekers (04:50)

Well, first off, congratulations. Anytime you pursue something like that outside of work, obviously you have a busy personal life with the two boys. It can be very, very demanding. Anything about that pursuit that surprised you at all?

Kara Roeder (04:52)

Thank you,

gosh, yes, first class. I was really surprised. I really thought we were gonna get into the nuts and bolts, like the five step plan of being a great leader, but no, first class was leadership of mind, body, and spirit, and I was like, what?

Where is this going? So it was really, it was like turning the mirror around. Like the class was focused on me. How I lead my own self, how I lead my mind, my body, my spirit. It was really about developing me as a whole person because the whole person is what we bring to our organization. That whole person is what we bring into parenting. The whole person is what we bring into friendships. And it's really any environment where we lead.

where we have influence.

Corey Rekers (05:47)

Yeah, I completely agree with that. It's an interesting concept that they started with that first, right? So do you mind if we dive into that a little bit here? ,À I can tell that that first class had a pretty big impact on how you viewed leadership moving forward. I know you are a learner. It's one of your strengths. ,À So can you share a little bit more about that particular experience and why you felt maybe it had such an impact on you from a leadership perspective?

Kara Roeder (05:53)

Mm-hmm.

sure.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah, absolutely. So beginning with the courage of looking inside and reflecting on who you are and how you develop yourself. So really true leadership starts from within.

I want to explore just what it means to lead your own mind, body and spirit and really how to develop yourself as a whole person and who can show up in every space that you influence. Again, your organization, your family, your friendships and your community. So I love to quote Abe Lincoln, good old Abe. He once said, give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first hour sharpening the ax. So in leadership, that

is you. If you're not sharpening yourself, your mindset, your habits and clarity, you're swinging dull. You're swinging dull.

Corey Rekers (07:05)

Got it. It makes complete sense, right? So really kind of what you're saying is it made you think a little bit deeper on how you're showing up for people ,À and how that starts from within. For instance, if you don't take care of yourself mentally, physically, it's going to be very, very challenging to be quote unquote, in this case, sharp or all there for the people that need you. So whether that's your kids at home, your teammates at work, your clients. So for you, it really started with

Kara Roeder (07:14)

Mm-hmm.

Corey Rekers (07:33)

with that mindset shift, is that right?

Kara Roeder (07:36)

That is

correct. So really, it was really pivotal for me to make some space and just take some time for me to really think about how I'm thinking. Like a specific thought process that needed to change for me was really, I had a fixed mindset. And I needed to pivot that to a growth mindset. So when I talk about a fixed mindset, it really is thinking that who I am or my abilities can't change. Like I was just born that way.

I was born stubborn, or I was born not knowing how to 'math' all that well. So that when you have that kind of mindset, you avoid challenges, you don't like to be challenged, because it kind of gets you out of your comfort zone. And it challenges that thought process of I can't do it, because I just don't know how you refuse to receive criticism or feedback. So you're not able to gain maybe the areas... have your blind spot.

exposed to like, I need to improve on this. I want to be a better person.

if you have a fixed mindset, you focus on proving yourself, like not really accepting accountability, like I gotta pretend that I know what I'm doing. You feel threatened by other people's success, you can't just celebrate with them because you're trying to prove yourself, and you really don't accept failures or mistakes. You don't accept accountability for them. So how effective do you think a leader would be with that type of thinking?

Corey Rekers (09:00)

Probably not so great, right? There's a really great quote. I mean, you quoted Abe Lincoln. I'm not sure who said this, but it makes me think of the phrase comparison is the thief of joy. So for you, not so much worrying about what others are doing, but working on yourself and not being so intimidated or threatened by other's success, but really focusing on honing your skills

Kara Roeder (09:13)

Mm-hmm.

Corey Rekers (09:26)

, and creating a better mindset. So that transition of focusing what you could do to be your very best when you show up for people...

Kara Roeder (09:27)

Mm-hmm.

Yeah, exactly. So really, the opposite of that fixed mindset is a growth mindset, which is... you believe that your talents and your intelligence can be developed. Like, I don't know it now, but I want to learn it. I want to get better. So you develop that through hard work, dedication, willingness to learn from mistakes. So you view challenges as

opportunities. Like, yeah, I didn't get that right, but here's an opportunity for me to develop,

develop myself. You want that feedback. You embrace that constructive feedback. Hey, tell me where I went awry, because I want to do it better the next time. You focus on the process and not that end result, the process of learning and developing. You're inspired by other people's success. Like, ooh, look at them grow. I want to partner with them. I want to learn something from them. And I think as a leader, once you have that mindset, you respond to the people you have informed

with that same mindset. So their mistakes, you're not critical of, like you want to say, you know what, yep, you made a mistake. Let's let's fix this together. Let's go back and see where we went awry. And they are more apt to come to you and, and admit where they're wrong. Take accountability and you move forward. Like you as a team and members of your team are so much effective when you're able to thrive in that kind of

of environment and culture where we're all here to grow together.

Corey Rekers (11:01)

And the other cool thing too is that as you start to go in that journey, and that growth mindset journey, you start to attract people that are also that same way. And so there's also a great analogy of you are the sum of the five people you hang out with the most. And so I think that's kind of what you're saying here is like once you started to shift that for yourself, I'm sure like the whole world kind of opened up to you. I would assume that would be the case.

Kara Roeder (11:16)

Absolutely, yes.

Yeah,

exactly.

you're not limited by what you think you can do. Like if an opportunity, like getting a master's degree, I never thought that I would be able to do that. And so I just...it takes courage. You have to be brave and step out and like I can do this. I've seen other people do this. I'm gonna partner with people. I have my community around me... absolutely, like the limited thinking and that just fixed mindset really doesn't allow for growth,

for development, and we all want to be better. We all want to be better for our community. We all want to be better for our team at work. So it starts really again with us, how you think.

Corey Rekers (12:04)

Absolutely, and obviously there's there's lots of folks out there that that have written about this that do podcasts about this I just I'm thinking of people that have that mind-body connection like a Tony Robbins, Ed Mylett , Jon Gordon, all of them share kind of a philosophy

of working on your physical and mental well-being. So honestly you can have that stamina, that mental wherewithal to be all in for those that you lead so at home, office... To be there for your people takes obviously a significant

Kara Roeder (12:16)
Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Corey Rekers (12:34)
amount of energy. So all those things kind of are encompassed in this. So, Kara, great

can we now expand a little bit more on the importance of maybe body language in your leadership?

Kara Roeder (12:46)
Right, so leadership of mind, so the mindset, so then leadership of body, again, the connection between how you care for your physical body and just the stamina, the stress levels, how you can reduce stress levels by just taking care of your body. That's part of it. Another aspect and really relevant

part of leading your body in leadership is your body language. So within seven seconds of meeting someone, you make an impression with your body language. A smile is a sign of welcome and inclusion. The

contact indicates interest. You leaning in shows you're engaged. Shaking hands establishes rapport. What's your posture saying? Like if you go into a meeting with your arms folded and

I'm really open to your ideas like your body language is saying something different. So paying attention to how your body is communicating what you're thinking or how your body is leading. A great example for me is, what's your face saying? Like I, I have a hard time hiding what I'm thinking what's going through my head from my face. So a lot of peers during our Zoom call,

will text me on the side and say hey Kara check your face man you got to change your face because it looks like you are mad or something which I'm really not I'm just thinking but being aware like what are you communicating with your body?

Corey Rekers (14:10)
And don't be so hard on yourself on that one. I think I can attest to myself too on that as well. So having somebody around you that is willing to give you ,À positive

Kara Roeder (14:20)
Yeah.

Corey Rekers (14:21)
feedback on that is always welcomed. So obviously all great points,

Kara Roeder (14:24)

Yeah, for sure.

Corey Rekers (14:27)

unfortunately, we may be thinking we're showing up one way, but also being perceived completely a different way than we are. So, if you think it's important...

Kara Roeder (14:33)

Yep.

Corey Rekers (14:36)

Like I just said earlier, to have people around us that will tell us the truth, because the truth is kind and not what we want to hear. Because you said it earlier, we all have our blind spots, right? So whether it's in leadership or just simply how we show up every

Kara Roeder (14:44)

Yes.

Yes, yep.

Corey Rekers (14:52)

stuff. So I'm going to pivot just slightly

I wanted to get into your faith a little bit. I know it's extremely important.

important

to you. I know everyone has their own thoughts and ideas on this, but I know it's a big part of your life. So can you share with us how that faith journey has applied to your leadership journey as well?

Kara Roeder (15:12)

Absolutely.

So yeah, I do have a strong faith. So going back to the master's program, so that first class of leadership of mind, body, spirit, when they said spirit, I was like, where are going with this? So as we got into it, it's really more than just

my belief in God or my faith or spirituality, it had to do with, also had to do with what are the things that make you feel alive? Like, what are the things that really fill your bucket? So part of our, when we were talking about our spirit, it's really about the values that we hold, the beliefs, our purpose, our life purpose.

So part of master's program, I had the

into writing my purpose statement and my personal professional code of ethics, which really reflect my values and my beliefs. So, an example, my leadership purpose is to inspire and uplift others by offering support and encouragement, helping them overcome challenges and achieve their fullest potential.

When I do this, and when I see this in my workplace, as I'm working with my team, I'm so fulfilled, like, look at this, this is amazing. I've, I've offered support, I've been an encouragement, and it really fills my bucket. And then my personal professional code of ethics includes honesty, integrity, respect, accountability, fairness, excellence, professional growth, service to others. So having these

written out, I can more easily align my action with them. Like I know, I know what they are. And so if I'm deciding how to approach something, I align it like, does this follow my personal code of ethics of honesty and integrity? It really frames how I lead with my spirit. And it frames my perspective. And without that standard to hold yourself to, how can you lead your with your spirit? How do you lead your spirit? Like,

really developing and acknowledging what are my values, what are my beliefs so I can hold myself accountable.

Corey Rekers (17:21)

And I think in turn, others see that in yourself and so they hold themselves accountable because Kara does. So it kind of gives you some guardrails. Is that kind of how you would do that?

Kara Roeder (17:26)

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Absolutely,

yeah, absolutely. I even like check and, because you know there's always gossip in the workplace of like, you gotta be careful what you say. Like is this, would I be holding myself to that standard of integrity if I join in? Is that really going to, that doesn't align with my code of ethics, so I'm gonna choose not to enter into that conversation, just an example.

Corey Rekers (17:57)

That's a perfect example because you've already kind of framed your personal code of accountability and you've already made that decision that, that's not a part of that, so I'm not going to partake. That's That's awesome.

Kara Roeder (18:07)

Right, exactly, yeah, yeah,

and then you also are leading the people around you. Like you can stand up and say, let's talk about something different. This is not going to make us better. Like let's shift the conversation. And that's leading other people around you.

Corey Rekers (18:24)

I was gonna say it gives you,

yeah, it gives you permission because you're holding yourself accountable to the fact that you are gonna shift that conversation.

Kara Roeder (18:33)
Yep, absolutely,

yeah.

Corey Rekers (18:34)
Really,

really awesome stuff. So, Kara, this has been really, really good, but before we go, I think our listeners would like to know , maybe some action items that they can work on to become that leader who is intentional, who does lead with empathy, and who takes the time to learn and, I would say, grow themselves before leading or influencing others.

Kara Roeder (18:57)

Right, yes. So we all can read the books, we all can listen to podcasts, we all can go to conferences, but it really is about how it how we apply it, how we apply what we learn. Kind of going back to that quote by Abe Lincoln, give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I'm going to spend the first hour sharpening the axe. So what are the things that you can practically do to sharpen your leadership of yourself?

Which is going to, as we've talked about, going to bleed into how you lead others, which is, for me, scheduling, putting on your calendar, scheduling an hour a week, or two hours a week, just start this week to think about how you're thinking.

How do I think about challenges in front of me? Like ask your coworkers, ask your trusted friends that you know that aren't, that are going to be kind and not nice. What's your body language saying? What is your face saying? Write out your values, your beliefs, and your purpose. Just actually like solidifying like this is who I am, this is what I believe. Like taking that hour or whatever time it takes to just sit down and just do some reflection.

I also think

how we develop ourselves and how we care for our mind, body, spirit really impacts our ability to effectively lead and influence others like as we've talked about. Another favorite person that I love to quote is Brene Brown. So she says leadership is not about titles, status or personal accolades. It's about the ability to take responsibility for your impact, how you influence the people around you. So again, the most important

person that you will lead is you.

Corey Rekers (20:38)

That's awesome. Kara, I just want to say thank you for sitting down today and honestly getting the opportunity for myself and our audience to learn more about your personal journey with leadership and honestly how it's a lifelong journey pursuing your purpose. And it's never gonna be perfect, right?

So I can tell you this, we both have absolute alignment that we can always evolve, we can always get better if our intentions are looking at our day to day from that of a growth mindset. So I just want to say thank you again for sharing, and I do believe our audience got a lot of great takeaways from today's conversation. So thank you for being here.

Kara Roeder (20:58)

No.

My pleasure,

Corey Rekers (21:22)

Alright everyone, so like always be sure to check us out at [AccelAdvantage.com](https://www.AccelAdvantage.com) or [AccelWealthManagement.com](https://www.AccelWealthManagement.com) and follow us on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. Make sure to leave us a review and subscribe so you don't miss our next episode. Lastly, please share this with anyone you know that could benefit from all the wisdom and knowledge that we learned today from Kara.

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