

LuAnn Heinen ([00:02](#)):

You start a job as the head of a great organization; you have a vision and people to lead during a pandemic; and the organization you've taken over is focused on health and well-being in the midst of the biggest health care crisis of our generation, maybe of our lifetime. That's the challenge facing Ellen Kelsay, president and CEO of Business Group on Health as of May 1st, 2020. She's unfazed, energetic, and like so many of us working from home with a spouse, two kids, and a dog. Heir-apparent since joining the Business Group as chief strategy officer three years ago, Ellen has played a significant role shaping the organization's growth and success. I'm LuAnn Heinen and this is the Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most relevant health and well-being issues facing employers today. In this inaugural episode of Business Group on Health podcast, I asked Ellen about her leadership mindset, what has to change in health care, and top priorities for the balance of 2020.

LuAnn Heinen ([01:03](#)):

Hi Ellen, I'm so excited to be here with you as we launch Business Group on Health's new podcast together. What's it been like since you started as CEO?

Ellen Kelsay ([01:12](#)):

Thank you so much, LuAnn. I am so excited to do this, too. We've been talking about launching a podcast for a long time within the organization and excited to be kicking this off with you. Gosh, what's it been like since I became CEO? Which was just not even a full month ago and it feels like it's been a lifetime; four weeks feels like four years. Certainly surreal. Surreal is the first word that comes to mind. It's been a wild ride. It's certainly an interesting time to step into a new role. Fortunately I'm not new to the organization. I have been here for a number of years and have a good sense of our organizational membership, whom we serve, the team.

Ellen Kelsay ([01:56](#)):

So that makes stepping into a role like this a little bit easier during a very challenging time. That said, I would say it's quite an interesting time in our organization. I've been really fulfilled and inspired by seeing how hard our team is rallying in support of our members. I've also been equally impressed and inspired by how our members are rallying to support their employees, and also our partners who have also really stepped up in a big way to innovate very, very quickly to support employers during this time. I've for a long, long time, believed strongly in the value of our organization and do believe that we're uniquely positioned in what we do and how we do it, but I feel so much more so strongly about that now in light of the pandemic. So I feel an immense sense of gratitude to be leading the organization, a huge sense of responsibility to be leading the organization, but also it's honestly pretty amazing the opportunity ahead of us and the ability we have to provide support and help our employer members navigate this challenging time.

LuAnn Heinen ([03:04](#)):

So we came together as one Business Group on Health earlier in the year and the rightness of that decision seems really underscored by this pandemic.

Ellen Kelsay ([03:15](#)):

Yes, for those who may not be familiar with what LuAnn's referring to, we for a while had legacy institutes within our organization focused on U.S. predominantly, and then separately global predominantly. We made a decision last year to both rebrand, rename ourselves, but also to really

reconfigure how we orient the work that we do in support of our members and to break down that artificial barrier between global and U.S., and really take a one mindset approach to the support of our members who themselves have a one mindset approach of managing global health and population issues across their workforce. So that artificial barrier that we removed, the way that we've redeployed our team and reconfigured some of our resources in support of members couldn't have been more fortuitous, as we did not know a pandemic was right around the corner. But certainly as we have to think about supporting our members in a very real way globally across all the myriad of issues related to the pandemic response on behalf of employers has been, again, very fortuitous, but fortunate thing that we did and I think it served us well, and more importantly, it has served our members well.

LuAnn Heinen ([04:34](#)):

How do you see Business Group on Health contributing to the global and national dialogue?

Ellen Kelsay ([04:39](#)):

Well, in a number of different ways. Just taking a step back about the organization, we are membership based, representing large self-funded employers who operate in over 200 countries around the world, and we represent their interests on a variety of health and well-being and workforce strategy related issues. Those employers are the largest employers. They span every (manufacturing, technological, financial services), any industry you can think of, they span. And they're working really hard to address some of those more challenging and thorny issues in health and well-being. So how we're positioned to help with that is that we sit at this really unique, and fortunate position quite honestly; it's sitting at the intersection of not only representing those large employers, but also working in very strong collaboration with all of the partners who service those employers.

Ellen Kelsay ([05:40](#)):

So that could be their health plans, their consultants, any number of startups or innovators, their pharmacy manufacturers, PBMs, data providers, health systems, physician groups, anybody who's really interfacing with employers in offering those health and well-being services. And so our membership is not just the employers, but all of those other stakeholders. And convening them to work collectively to understand what the challenges are, to understand from the various perspectives of those different stakeholders what success looks like, what their perspectives are on the challenges and what needs to be overcome, and then to work collectively, to mutually align on advancing on those issues. So we leverage that network to do a number of things, certainly to learn and to share best practices, but also to shape and influence policy and to craft innovative solutions to ultimately improve hopefully employee health and well-being.

Ellen Kelsay ([06:42](#)):

We call that our new tagline, Driving Change Together. So what can we do together across our membership, across all those stakeholders, to collectively advance and to drive change across the industry.

LuAnn Heinen ([06:54](#)):

It's a great bird's eye view; it's great for trend spotting. What are some of the top trends that you're seeing? Name one or two?

Ellen Kelsay ([07:03](#)):

There are a number. I would say the top one or two would probably be the movement towards virtual, as well as, mental and behavioral health. Those were trends that we identified a number of years ago. And as we headed into 2020, they were among our top five trends that we were watching for 2020. They have certainly been magnified exponentially in this pandemic environment.

LuAnn Heinen ([07:28](#)):

What have you seen change since the pandemic began?

Ellen Kelsay ([07:35](#)):

Well, certainly the explosion of innovation. First and foremost, there is a lot of innovation that was happening in our industry for a number of years. I think the more focused innovation around virtual capabilities with people under quarantine, at stay at home orders, not able to see their physician and person, telehealth, virtual resourcing became paramount. So we've just seen such an acceleration of innovation, in particular, along those dimensions. Also a doubling down and a heightened focus on mental and behavioral health resourcing and things that employers are doing to support the myriad of issues that have been some of them newly surfaced because of the pandemic and others underscored considerably in light of the pandemic. So I would say those are not necessarily changes, but certainly increased fervor around both of those things. I would also say another thing, LuAnn, I know you and your team here at the Business Group spend a large part of your time working on is broader well-being issues.

Ellen Kelsay ([08:45](#)):

The pandemic certainly has been a near-term focus on health and the physical aspects of the virus and dealing with treatment and testing and coverage issues. There are many very important broader well-being issues that have come to light. I mentioned just a couple of them related to mental and behavioral health, but also when you think about the pandemic and the toll that it has placed on many workers and their families around the world from an economic and financial perspective. And then also social connectedness and social connectedness in every way. So this broadening of the lens on well-being has also really become front and center, which is good to see because it's something I know we have been focused on organizationally, many of our members have, and now it's really become mainstream.

LuAnn Heinen ([09:41](#)):

So important. Yes, it's really reinforcing our mantra 'well-being is the way', and it's certainly key to Workforce Strategy. If there's a silver lining for me, that certainly it. I just heard today from one of our members that phone calls for financial counseling in his organization were up 50 percent in March and April. People are just needing to talk to someone about the financial economic situation.

Ellen Kelsay ([10:11](#)):

That's sobering on one hand, but it's good to hear that employer had a resource in place to actually assist with their employees who have those questions.

LuAnn Heinen ([10:22](#)):

So what changes do you think need to happen? One I'm thinking about is patient experience, which had been such an important trend in health care pre-pandemic. It's sort of a cruel irony that it has been top

of mind, then COVID struck and patients, especially hospitalized patients, and caregivers are having some of the worst imaginable experiences despite the best efforts of hospitals and others. It's the nature of this virus and the lack of a cure. How do you think we're going to come out of this and what lasting effects will we see in health care delivery?

Ellen Kelsay ([10:52](#)):

Oh my gosh, I think it is heartbreaking on the one hand, when you think about people who are in ICU or in hospice, and even on a positive note having a baby, but they can't have their loved ones there with them during those really profound moments in their lives. So that is not a good experience. It's maybe understandable on the one hand, but it's not a good thing to be experiencing on a human level. On the other hand, you called it earlier a silver lining, I think there are some aspects of this that have been beneficial to the overall experience equation and whether that's broadening access through some of these virtual capabilities or providers learning how to practice differently and being a little bit more compassionate, and bedside manner, and the empathy that we're all feeling.

Ellen Kelsay ([11:49](#)):

For those of us who work in the system, to do a better job on behalf of the people that we all serve and that's ultimately employees and their family members. So really not just talking about experience and giving lip service to experience, but really thinking long and hard about what that means. How we come out of it, I think is going to be interesting. One thing that I keep hearing, in a number of conversations, pop-up is a little bit of a future foreshadowing and a bit of consternation about provider consolidation and what happens as we've seen so many provider groups, and large health systems even, experience economic hardship during this time. Are they able to remain viable? Are they able to stay in business? And again, whether that's a large health system, all the way down to a local independent practitioner and everything in between, the financial hardships on physician practices and those health systems and what that might mean from a consolidation perspective. In the past when we've seen, and when we've surveyed our members on consolidation, we have heard that consolidation does not necessarily equate to better experience.

Ellen Kelsay ([13:03](#)):

So I do have a little bit of an antenna up and a red flag keeping a watchful eye on what we might see in terms of consolidation and what it might then manifest itself in, in terms of experience. So I think there are some certainly very favorable aspects that have come out of this related to experience. And we talk about mental and behavioral health and the access to resources and services that employers have really exponentially availed to employees, is wonderful to see and it's awesome. Our members have been long focused on this and really have heightened their efforts, but it's also counterbalanced by some uncertainty around some other things. I think that is something that is so important that we don't sacrifice, but we'll be keeping a watchful eye on.

LuAnn Heinen ([13:51](#)):

You've talked in the past about employers taking an activist role to drive change in healthcare, what can employers do about a thorny challenge like consolidation? Is there a role for employer activism there?

Ellen Kelsay ([14:04](#)):

Absolutely. Again, we sit at this great intersection of some of the largest, most knowledgeable, sophisticated employers in the world, but also health systems, health plans, and other partners, and

having first and foremost just a dialogue about that very issue is important. Understanding the concerns employers have about the issue, understanding from health systems and provider groups what their business realities are and what are the things they can and can't give on. But really I think having that honest conversation. Our employers have been very vocal. I don't think they're going to become any less vocal in the coming months and years. And they have high expectations and are going to continue to ask a lot of their partners, as they should. I think those conversations are really an important place to start, but it's not the end and it's going to take a lot of conversations repeatedly with a number of partners to make sure that they can continue to advance on those issues.

LuAnn Heinen ([15:08](#)):

And we're kind of in a situation now where hierarchy of needs comes to mind right now. It's been a fire drill for a lot of companies; even our organization it's a pedal on the gas to do everything we can to prepare for return to work, counter the effects of COVID. How long do you think it will be before we sort of return to normal and employers are able to convene again and talk about things like reform and delivery?

Ellen Kelsay ([15:35](#)):

Well, I was going to say, first of all, your guess is as good as mine. I don't have a crystal ball about when things return to normal and I don't think they'll return to the way that they were.

LuAnn Heinen ([15:37](#)):

But you're the CEO now.

Ellen Kelsay ([15:46](#)):

Any good CEO knows that they are never the smartest person in the room; so seek input from lots of people all the time. But hearing you with the balance of the question, I don't think our employer members have taken their foot off the gas of those issues. So yes, they are very focused near term on this pandemic response and they are focused on return to work, but at the same time they have been keeping their foot on the gas of movement towards payment reform, focus on policy issues, focus on supply chain dynamics on the pharmacy side, the relentless pursuit of quality, and quality perhaps in a nuanced way in a virtual environment. So I think that employers have kept their eye on the ball from some of those strategies that were predating the pandemic and have if anything, then again, underscored and magnified, because of the pandemic. So I think new priorities may emerge. There may be some shifting and in their ability to execute within certain timelines, but I don't think that the fundamental strategy and focuses have shifted significantly.

LuAnn Heinen ([17:04](#)):

We'll get back to priorities in a minute. Just prior to taking on the CEO role, Ellen was chief strategy officer at Business Group on Health. Before that she was a senior leader at a major health care consultancy. So Ellen, you mentioned priorities. what are your top priorities for the balance of this year?

Ellen Kelsay ([17:23](#)):

First and foremost, it's going to be stay focused on the here and now with COVID, and our response to COVID from a member perspective, how we are surveying and supporting and developing resources on behalf of our membership, and convening again all of our thought leaders on those challenging issues. And then also supporting our team here at the Business Group and a high volume of very, very

important work that they're doing, not just on the COVID response, but also all the other business as usual strategic priorities that were top of mind for our members. So keeping the momentum moving on things such as the mental and behavioral health crisis in this country, on accelerating innovation and all of its myriad forms, the doubling down around advocacy and the policy concerns our members are focused on and then the fundamental delivery system changes that need to happen and this movement towards quality, movement towards value. So again, keeping the foot on the gas with all of those things to the balance of the year will absolutely continue to be our priorities.

LuAnn Heinen ([18:34](#)):

Do you want to elaborate at all on what you're doing in the advocacy space?

Ellen Kelsay ([18:38](#)):

Sure. We have been always involved in advocacy on behalf of our members and just over the past year launched a more robust advocacy strategy and really taking a proactive stance to not only educating and informing our members about advocacy related issues and certain legislative impacts that may have on their policies and programs, but also really trying to move more upstream to influence policies before they actually come to pass. And so ensuring that we are carrying forth our members perspectives and voice to legislators, meeting with other organizations, other advocacy groups, other lobbying groups (which we are not), to make sure that they too understand the perspectives that employers have that are keenly important always, but certainly during this time of the pandemic, other issues have risen as well. So making sure that we remain visible, making sure that we keep our finger on the pulse, that we're staying connected to not only our membership broadly, but also other stakeholders from a legislative perspective to make sure that we can influence upstream and ensure that the employer voice is heard early on in that conversation.

LuAnn Heinen ([20:01](#)):

So I'm going to go out on a limb and say I think we both agree that health and well-being as a field is purposeful, it's rewarding, but it can also be taxing. I mean, there's a lot on your to do list and all of our to do lists. What keeps you motivated?

Ellen Kelsay ([20:17](#)):

It's people first and foremost. I'm a people person, relationships are paramount. I get a lot of energy out of connecting from a lot of different people. And yes, it can be hard and it is ever changing, but there are some unbelievably bright, passionate people who work in this field. So that sense of purpose that we all have and certainly that our team here at the Business Group has, LuAnn. We've got a phenomenal team who are all committed working tirelessly on so many important issues on behalf of our members. And the privilege of getting to work for and serve those remarkable, progressive employers is really inspiring. So I would say it's really about the people, the relationships, then the purpose, and the membership that are highly motivating and engaging.

LuAnn Heinen ([21:08](#)):

So give me your sense of Business Group on Health navigating the effects of this global lockdown.

Ellen Kelsay ([21:13](#)):

I would say just interesting on a human level to observe, but then also an organizational level to witness as well first the humanity and the situation and showing empathy to each other, generally speaking to

society and to the people that we all interact with day-to-day, being flexible, certainly allowing yourself and other people a lot of grace and latitude. We are all doing our best under very challenging circumstances that are constantly changing on ourselves. So cutting ourselves some slack, knowing that we're doing our best, and being okay with that is important. I think also being visible and communicating as often as possible, both internally to our team, but then also externally to our members, letting them know what we're up to, letting them know that we're here for them, anticipating what may be coming around the corner and how can we help our members with those emerging issues.

Ellen Kelsay ([22:23](#)):

Also I think staying optimistic is really important. It's just something I think I'm hardwired to try and see the positive and to find the silver lining and to look for opportunities to lead and opportunities to seize in terms of being fluid and being a little bit opportunistic about how you can take what seems like a very extremely challenging situation, but also not see too far behind that, that there are a lot of great opportunities to come out of those challenging situations. That's not always easy, and not everybody is wired the same way, but I do think that that is when you think about organizational fortitude and resilience and the esprit de corps that we have within our team, I think those are really helping us as a team weather this time, but also as a team do unbelievable, awesome work on behalf of our membership.

LuAnn Heinen ([23:18](#)):

And take on new challenges. I've seen that optimism form you as we moved our major conference in the fall to all virtual, we're going all virtual, and in the midst of all this we're learning how to podcast together. These new challenges keep me engaged.

Ellen Kelsay ([23:37](#)):

Yes, it's being resilient; it's being adaptable; it's being resourceful and innovation and finding new ways of doing things that in the beginning, not what we would want to have happened, but in the end actually, maybe been just exactly what we all needed. So trying turn lemons into lemonade.

LuAnn Heinen ([24:01](#)):

Ellen, what emerging issues are there out there that you're keeping an eye on?

Ellen Kelsay ([24:05](#)):

Yes, there are a number of things, LuAnn. And, as we surveyed on, some of them aren't necessarily new, but they're underscored by the pandemic. Certainly the virtual, the mental health issues that we've discussed a couple of times, but I would also say again, not necessarily new, but really amplified are the issues of social determinants of health, as well as the future of work. From a social determinants of health perspective we have certainly seen heading into this pandemic that that was an issue that many employers were beginning to get their arms around and their heads around in terms of how they could help address those challenges within their workforce. But then certainly with the pandemic we have seen that those issues are unbelievably amplified and those challenges for those populations in a time of crisis globally related to whether it be their health, their safety, their financial well-being, the communities that they live in are really especially challenged for those populations. So I do think that is something that we're going to begin to see employers have a heightened focus on, but also back to the activism, they're going to be really looking at their partners long and hard and asking tough questions about what their partners are doing to help address those issues as well.

Ellen Kelsay ([25:29](#)):

And then related to the future of work, you know, what does return to work look like? How many people actually go back to an office environment? There are some industries where people have to go back to a manufacturing plant or a retail setting, but there are other industries where maybe that doesn't have to happen or even in those industries maybe their corporate people don't have to go back to a corporate office. So what does that mean in terms of workforce dynamics, workforce planning, but also from a health and well-being perspective, the solutions and resources that employers may have historically offered that may not be as relevant now because they're not deployed as effectively on site, when the site isn't where all the people are anymore. So thinking differently about solutioning and resourcing in a highly virtual environment for an increased percentage of the population. That will be an interesting thing to watch. It will be interesting to see again how many people return to work permanently in the near future, but also a year to two from now, and then how does the industry innovate to support, perhaps some new and emerging needs.

LuAnn Heinen ([26:39](#)):

Yes, such a changed landscape. I heard from another member who said their employer was one of those that was concerned about security and privacy and working remotely and working from home. But now they're converted. People are realizing this can work. Yes, there are a few problems to overcome, but this seems to be the way we're headed.

Ellen Kelsay ([27:02](#)):

It's a total mindset shift. Again, that maybe was thrust upon us unexpectedly, but again a silver lining. People are seeing the light in ways that maybe they would have taken them much longer to see.

LuAnn Heinen ([27:14](#)):

And travel expenses are down.

Ellen Kelsay ([27:15](#)):

Yes, unfortunately I think, yes, that is good, but I think a lot of people are craving to see each other too. So it'll be interesting to see where that balance is struck long term of getting back on the road, but also being mindful of not needing to be on the road all of the time.

LuAnn Heinen ([27:32](#)):

Thanks for listening to the very first Business Group on Health podcast where I've been speaking with Ellen Kelsey, our new CEO. Ellen and I will each be hosting future podcast episodes. We look forward to being with you again, as we continue having conversations with leading experts. By the way, be on the lookout for a new survey. It's the Large Employers' Health Care Strategy and Plan Design Survey in the field now with results coming in August.