MAN ON FIRE PRESENTS

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

EPISODE TWENTY-FIVE
TAKE TWO

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Shawn: Welcome to "The Combustion Chronicles" podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for "The Combustion Chronicles." Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us. I'm here with my co-host Michael Harper.

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Shawn: On this episode, we have Chris McCarthy, the Vice President of Strategy and Design from HopeLab, which is described as, "A social innovation lab that creates behavior change tech to help teens and young adults live happier, healthier lives." Chris is also the founder of the Innovation Learning Network, and his work has been featured in the Harvard Business Review, as well as Fast Company, and The New York Times. He collaborated on multiple books, including "Innovation with Information Technologies in Healthcare" and "Spreading Improvement Across your Healthcare Organization." As well, Chris was named the 2015 H.I.T. Innovator and the 2011 Ellerbe Becket Lecturer, and is an international speaker on innovation and design. And in his spare time, he obsesses about fitness and an occasional donut. Chris, welcome to the "Combustion Chronicles."

Chris: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Shawn: Well, Chris, this is actually take-two for us. We recorded with you a few weeks ago. And in full transparency to our listeners, I received, and our team received, an email from Chris a couple of days afterwards where Chris said, "Hey, can we do a take two of that podcast recording?" And you wrote something, and then I'm gonna allow you to elaborate on it. You gave two reasons. And I loved the first reason where you say it demonstrates a whole lot of concepts in the world of innovation, so we're living out exactly what you preach, Chris, what we preach. But most importantly, you wrote this bullet point that said the reason for the emotional state was because of a retreat that you had been on that morning. And you talked about justice, equality, diversity, and inclusion. So, here we are, three weeks later, we're rerecording take two of this podcast. You wanna share about that reflection when you finished that recording and why you felt like we needed to do this?

Chris: Yeah. And thank you for the take two, first of all. You know, I think the easier bullet point really is the first one. And, you know, as innovation leaders, we preach that we are open to

iteration, not even open, that we desire iteration, and that we should not be afraid of failure, and that we need to ask for things that we need. That is really a part of the innovation journey. And really, at the conclusion of that interview, something just was not sitting well for me. And I had dinner with my partner that evening. And sometimes you just need someone to hold up a mirror to you.

He just made a very simple statement, he's like, "Why don't you just ask them for a take two?" And I was like, ah "Damn it. You know, that is exactly what you're supposed to do." In everything, we're just trying to help people be just very comfortable that, "It's okay to fail, it's okay to flub up. And when you do, ask forgiveness and ask if you can try something else." And I was really appreciative that my partner did that, and I immediately emailed you. And sure enough, often when you ask for something, almost always people come through with an, "Of course," just like you did.

But the more complicated bullet point is that second one. And it's the content of what we were talking about during take one, which I'm guessing we're gonna get into it for take two as well, I hope. But it's this time that we're living in right now, which is, you know, a really looking at the pain of racism in this country and how it manifests in all kinds of ways, from the micro to the macro level. HopeLab, we are not exempt from that. We view ourselves as a very progressive organization. And I think because we're really, I do believe, very progressive, we do a lot of work on ourselves, and on our teams, and on our organization.

And so, that morning, our executive team, we did a virtual retreat. And we're all very close, so a virtual retreat actually worked, even though I don't think it normally could work virtually. And we went deep into, how is white supremacy manifesting at HopeLab, and in our own lives, and in the world around us? And we all, as a team, took a four-part seminar called Whiteness at Work that really just blew our minds. And there was one particular example for myself when we started sharing in our retreat that just started unwinding me. And I got pretty emotional, and so did our whole team, in a very positive way. Like, it was almost a release, to be able to talk about things that we normally don't get to talk about.

And the second the retreat ended, take one of this podcast started, and I really felt like my brain was just a discombobulated bowl of jello. Yeah. And I think when I finally finished the take one, I just felt like there was more articulation and clarity I wanted to bring to our conversation together. So, I so deeply appreciate the take two. And it manifests even in you, what a disruptor is and what an innovator is, that we need to iterate, we need to have take twos, and take

threes, and take fours sometimes, as far as you need to go and what the business paradigm will allow us. But if you don't ask, you'll never get it.

Michael: Hi, Chris, this is Michael. And thank you for ending with that phrase because that's what I'm just dying to dig into with you. Because when you said it earlier, when you ask, that's when opportunity opens up, right? And what are those barriers that prevent so many of us from even asking? So, step one is realizing what are the hurdles we have to get over to actually be bold enough to ask. And I have a feeling it somehow ties back into everything you're talking about.

[00:06:52]
Chris: Yeah. You know, as I said, it was such a shocking moment for me at dinner with my partner to debrief this. And even I, who have been living in this innovation space for 20 years, who teach people to be comfortable with failure, and learning, and moving on, and asking questions, even that it took a very simple moment to remind me that I too am allowed to do that and need to do that. And, you know, I think part of the challenge, part of the barrier is that we're all trained for perfection. And even take one of this podcast, you know, when it ended, I unintentionally assumed that it was done and never even considered to challenge the assumption that it wasn't done. And having somebody that can hold a mirror up or someone... You know, this is where I think process can get really important, where you can have official moments where mirrors are held up or different diverse groups of people stop and ask questions about what you're up to.

You know, some people call those gates, but those are really important moments to take a pause because we all unintentionally have all kinds of barriers and biases built into us that we don't even recognize. And so, no, we weren't done, and just by asking for the take two, I realized that "Oh, they too are on board with us not being done yet." So, so much of it is built into us, and I think that is the insidious nature of these unseen biases and unseen barriers, and those are the assumptions that we need to challenge.

Michael: And they really are different for all of us, right? And yet, they all build up for the same consequence.

Chris: Yeah, absolutely. Just one small pivot on an assumption. At HopeLab, we have a product that we released to the world about four, five months ago called Nod. And it's an app that helps lonely college students build up their ability to connect with others and helps them reflect and really think critically about some of these smaller social tacit skills that we all take for granted,

that many of us take for granted. And one big assumption that we built it on was that the only way this tool would be useful is if we got young people to get off of their smartphones and interacting in person.

And all of a sudden, COVID-19 hits the world, and the foundational assumption that you had to be in person to build connection got flipped on its head. And that challenging of that assumption actually unlocked an even better product because we accidentally were only designing for people who could be in person and we were forgetting about some people, for various reasons, cannot be in person. And so, I could have never have known that assumption existed. We all didn't even know we had that assumption, but there we have COVID holding up a mirror to us, and we realized we were excluding some people.

Shawn: Powerful, powerful words, Chris. Thanks for sharing that. And definitely wanna get back even more around Nod and the process you guys used to create that. You know, in July of this year, we at MOFI and our Disruptor League, we released a report called "Humanizing our Community: Blowing Up Traditional Models for Diversity and Inclusion." And one of the mindsets that we actually have started to embrace is this mindset around embracing the mess. And that's what I'm hearing as we're talking here in this take two version as what you have been doing with Nod.

[00:11:03]
You know, another disruptor that you and I both know, Sean Slovenski, he shared about this whole concept of his whole career has been nothing but failures. And when he first said that it kind of, like, caught us off guard. But what he talked about is, as a leader, as a CEO, every place he's been brought into has been because that organization needed to be turned around, that that mess needed to be cleaned up, that something new needed to be started, and that through all these failures, you know, he was seeing such great success. And you know what I'm even sitting here listening as we're doing this take two is it's even a richer conversation, it's deeper, and we're really getting to some truths. And I love this whole concept that you just talked about, or we've talked about, stage gates or, you know, the path with just mirrors held up. That's embracing the mess, right? Like, holding the mirror up within your own team to say, "Do we need a take two or are we good to go?" That's a powerful nugget that I don't want us to overlook here at all today. So, thank you for your transparency in that.

Chris: First of all, I love the paper that you all put out, and I think those three mindsets are spot on. And when I think about that third one, the embrace the mess. So much of the ability to embrace the mess has to do with, I think, leading from both the heart and the mind, you know,

how do we bring our best intellect to the work that we do but ensure that we are heart-forward. You know, it's very hard to not embrace the mess when you are not heart-forward. It just allows you to say, "Okay, we're all doing our best work here. It doesn't mean it's always going to be successful.

And I think that is an important innovative skill that I think many of us have known for many, many decades, but now when you think about right now in 2020, as we're dealing with wounds that are part of this country's fabric for hundreds of years, boy, we really need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable for a long time. This is gonna be work for us, to really raise the justice and equity across our organizations, and it may even hurt a little bit too, and that's okay. You know, when we work out, our muscles hurt. We don't shy away...well, hopefully we don't shy away from that. But pain isn't always bad.

Shawn: Wow. Again, powerful, powerful. So, Chris, I don't wanna shy away from this topic, but I wanna also be true to, I think, where you probably, and that we were just talking a little bit earlier, three and a half years ago kind of embraced the mess in your life. You had spent 20-plus years in a great career at Kaiser Permanente, you had, you know, started the Innovation Consultancy there, you started the Innovation Learning Network. I remember you and I sitting at dinner one night, and you said, "You know, I feel like it's time for a change." And who knew what the change would lead you to in 2017 and moving to HopeLab?

And the powerful thing that I wanna talk about in that move is...you know, we talked about this in take one around...you know, your title is Strategy and Design, and then the process that you guys have built at HopeLab, it is different. Again, you don't hear strategy and design very often as the same role, but even the process that you use...and, I'm really excited to hear that you're saying that Nod 2.0 is coming out. So, I'm sure you used all of this process there. But what made you jump there in 2017? And talk about some of your role and the roles within HopeLab and the process.

[00:15:11]
Chris: Yeah. A couple of things. First, I had already had a decade-long crush on HopeLab. I distinctly remember the first time I met them, I invited them to join us at Kaiser Permanente to basically show off some of their work. We heard some really amazing things about them. And I was just blown away, they were one of the first organizations that I ever heard of...this is way back in 2006, that they were talking elegantly about science and design together, this blended way of solving complex challenges. And they were doing that in a really, really unique way. Their founding product was a game called Re-Mission. And it was a video game that...you got

shrunk down to microscopic level, jumped into a spaceship, had to power that spaceship up with chemo power packs, and you would fly around your body blowing up cancer cells. And the young kids that played the game ended up living longer, healthier lives. And part of that was that they were able to tolerate longer, higher doses of chemo.

And it just blew me away that that kind of design and science approach was yielding that kind of effect. But I was at the time on my own journey at Kaiser Permanente. And Kaiser Permanente will always be my hometown. I mean, I can't even believe that I spent 20 years there, it flew by. I look back on it fondly like a hometown to me. But at 20 years, you start wondering, "Oh my, is this it?" And at the same time, I'm wondering, the universe wondered with me and served me up this incredible opportunity to take on this role, which was gonna be brand new at HopeLab. And, by the way, those are my favorite roles, are roles that have never been held before. I love being able to craft that.

And yeah, my first big push at HopeLab was to do something that was implicit for that organization. They knew how to do their work, but they never made it explicit. What is the model that drives what they're able to do? How do you articulate this to the world? And even though it was implicit, it was hard work, to make it visible and knowable. But where we are now, we very generically call it the Innovation Framework. I actually don't like big, strange, branded words for things that are very simple. And so, our Innovation framework is this beautiful combination of good science methodology and really good human-centered design with a third lens of product development and management. And those three streams together allow us to thoughtfully move through a process, put in gates to hold up those mirrors, and question, "Do we know enough? And should we move forward?" and ultimately producing products that help young people.

[00:18:17]
Shawn: Love that. What a powerhouse that would be if many corporations brought those together.

Chris: Even worse is that, you know, I think a lot of us in design have been trained that very simple before-and-after metrics or three or four sets of measurements will be good enough. And worse than that, there's no measurement at all, it was just built truly from the heart, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but it may have no evidence that it does anything. And, in fact, that's the vast majority of digital health products out in the world right now. The vast majority don't have evidence, they're built from somebody with a good intention. But by blending good

science and design together, you ensure a much higher degree of efficacy and you can be confident that what you're producing actually makes a difference for the people that use it.

Shawn: So, let's dig a little deeper into that, Chris. So, what does success look like and how is that measured then in this process for you all at HopeLab?

Chris: Yeah. Ultimately, the success that we're looking for is that many young people use the product and get a positive health impact because they did. So, that is the ultimate goal, is really shifting their health to the positive. But as a social innovation lab, we don't necessarily have control all the way to the very end. In fact, we don't. We go to the version 1.0, version 2.0 of the product before we even build. We're looking for a partner who can eventually nurture and own the product and get it into the hands of young people. So, we need to look at a variety of impact metrics. Some are some very early, early, early things, like we all use downloads. However, that is not even remotely good enough.

There's one that I really like that we're using, which is slightly better than downloads, which we call Product Initiated. All that means is that an end-user took the next step and maybe created an account. So, you get rid of all the people that just clicked on something to download it, but you don't know, "Did it do anything?" At least this metric is giving us that people were interested enough to make an account. And then, the most important one for us is Lives Impacted. And we can do that because we have long-term partnerships with organizations like the Nurse-Family Partnership or Grit Digital Health, who we jointly agree that we'll keep measuring our products and see the effects that they're having on young people.

[00:21:02]
Michael: I think, for me, Chris, the big piece of all this is the fact that you all at HopeLab can actually crank stuff out. You've got designers, and dreamers, and creative folks with the science folks, right? And you're talking metrics and you're talking usability. Talk a little bit about the tension between all those different voices and different agendas in there. Talk about messiness, how that tension leads to these successes.

Chris: Well, there's two keywords I'm gonna pick up on that you just said. One is crank out and the other's tension. I don't think anybody would say we crank out products. We are intentionally slower than most product firms who are cranking products out, and we are faster than very traditional academic research. And there's a sweet spot between the two of those which allows us to thoughtfully put a product out that truly we know makes a difference. And that does take some time. The next iteration of our model...we are trying to figure out, "How

can we go faster?" This is not about going so fast that you don't understand, and that, I think, is a problem right now in the startup world. Again, we're not cranking, we're putting a product out about every 18 to 24 months. And I think if you're in the startup world, you might be like, "Oh, my God, like, that is slow." But for us that, again, allows us to thoughtfully understand if we're having an effect and ensure that we're not hurting anybody.

Michael: That's a really helpful conversation in terms of how do you find that sweet spot, right? You have all these pressures coming at you, all these voices, all these demands. How do you find that sweet spot of patience versus speed?

Chris: Yeah. So, that is the tension that you were asking about a little bit earlier. So, I deeply believe in creative tension. And there is a creative tension between our science and the design side. Now, we are one team. So, just to be clear, like, while we are clear about the three major angles that make our products, we are integrated. So, we try very hard not to allow ourselves to fall into camps, although it happens. But it really is this tension that I think creates the best responses. And so, the last thing I'm looking for is kumbaya like, "Everybody, let's go left. Okay, we all go left." Okay. While that might be faster, that might not be exactly where we should be going.

So, you know, I think design is traditionally trying to sprint fast and science is thinking about a more measured approach. And it's the conversation between the two, "What are we trying to accomplish? How do we talk to enough young people and talk to enough academics to understand what the needs are and what the appropriate interventions are? And how do we weave those together and test them so that we know something can make a difference?" And all of that is bespoke per area we're in. And while we have a meta-framework that holds us through the whole process, it's a lot of bespoke conversations between the scientists and the designers, really thinking critically. What time is needed for each activity? And it's not easy. The external world wants us to go faster. We feel the pain that young people are having and want to get products out there faster. And yet, if you're doing a randomized control trial, there's only so fast that you can go.

[00:25:08]
Shawn: Yeah. So many nuggets that just came out in what you said there, Chris. So, here we are seven months into this thing called COVID-19. And we all thought, "Oh, this is gonna be around for a little while, maybe six months." But we talk about the new norm, which I don't love anymore because it's just the norm. What does the future look like for HopeLab bringing this

COVID-19 pandemic in the new norm into life? What does the future hold for you guys, and what do you see the next big thing for you guys to tackle?

Chris: Oh my, very good question. And, in fact, we are just starting to rally ourselves for our next big strategic push, that begins next year as we really think about the next three years for HopeLab. Well, one, it's insane to do too much strategic planning right now. Even six weeks ago, things are so different than they were the previous six weeks. So, the new norm, which I agree, I don't like that phraseology either, is keeping a more short-term to medium-term mindset so that you're not overthinking the future, which still looks a bit complicated. But I think it's very safe to say that mental health challenges for young people are only getting worse and COVID-19 is making it worse. Young people need socialization for their development. And so, right now, physical health is trumping mental health.

And so, being isolated for this long, young people that were already lonely, this is even more complicated. For queer young people, they're now having sent back to their home that maybe they just left and got to college for the first time and are expressing who they are as a gay person, or maybe even starting hormones because they're a trans person, and now they have to go back home and back into an environment that they were trying to leave. Their mental health is declining. So, while I don't know exactly what we're tackling next, it is safe to say that the mental health and wellbeing of young people is even more challenged right now. There's gonna be a second wave coming when we finally go back to whatever the new, new, new, normal will be afterwards. So, HopeLab and other organizations like us, we have a lot of work ahead of us.

[00:27:49]
Shawn: Well, we wanna thank you guys, and we wanna thank HopeLab. And know that our team is right here rallying behind you guys, believing everything that you guys do and wanna help support in any way possible. So, we've come to this point at the end of the podcast, Chris, where we do these things called the combustion questions, which are three randomly selected questions that come from...you know, you talk about science...this amazing algorithm, which I call Michael's brain. So, I'm gonna turn it over to Michael.

Michael: All right, Chris, are you ready for your combustion questions?

Chris: I don't know if I am, but here we go.

Michael: Here we go. Question number one. If you could jump into a swimming pool that is filled with anything you want, what would be in that swimming pool?

Chris: I'm a very short-term person right now. So, I just had the most delicious bowl of watermelon, and I can just imagine a pulpy, watery, delicious watermelon pool.

Michael: With or without the seeds?

Chris: No seeds. Come on now. (Shawn laughs)

Michael: I mean, you know, it could go either way.

Michael: Sweet and sticky. Question number two. What's your favorite type of donut?

[00:29:05]
Chris: My favorite type of donut is... So, I grew up in Massachusetts where Dunkin Donuts is just king of donuts, and they have this plain old jelly donut. It's just like, this mess of red jelly with a donut and confection sugar. And when you bite into it, the jelly just squirts everywhere, and again, you end up a sticky mess. It is so good. And I always crave that kind of donut. At the end of my bio were, "Occasional donuts." That's the one I will go to.

Michael: I wonder if DoorDash will get them to us from a distance.

Chris: Highly recommend if you can.

Michael: That might be a little bit to ask. All right. Question number three. What do you think about kayaks?

Chris: Kayaks.

Michael: Kayaks.

Chris: I love to be in them, I don't wanna paddle them. I want somebody else to paddle me, and that would be fine.

Michael: So, sit up front and you can be the navigator, basically.

Chris: Or just sit back, let somebody else navigate, and somebody else paddle.

Michael: There you go.

Shawn: There you go. Love it.

Michael: Love it.

[00:30:20]
Shawn: Well, Chris, thank you again for take two, and the transparency, and the honesty during this. And even the richness is even greater in this episode. So, thank you again. You know, good luck, as I said, to you guys at HopeLab. Know that we're behind you and there's a team supporting you guys and can't wait to see you in person again. But until then, stay safe, and be well, and we'll talk soon.

Chris: Thank you. And so appreciate everything you all do.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of "The Combustion Chronicles." None of this is possible without you the listener. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, look up Man on Fire on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and at manonfire.co. Give us a shout. Let us know what you think. And please, subscribe, rate, and review if you like what we're doing and if you don't do it anyways. And remember, always stay safe and be well.