THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

EPISODE SEVENTY-SIX
BEYOND DEI: SHAPING THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

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GUEST: MARK RICKMEIER

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Shawn (00:01):

Welcome to the seventh season of The Combustion Chronicles podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason, CEO, and founder of MOFI. As a maverick-minded, human obsessed, experienced evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is to put people first. Throughout this season, we'll be connecting you, the listener, with cutting edge leaders in the experience world who are challenging old ways of thinking with bold, new ideas and a commitment to human-centric design. Experience matters, people matter and revenue matters. That's why it's time to ignite a people-first experience revolution.

My guest today, Mark Rickmeier, is CEO of TXI, a product innovation company based in the Chicago area. Over the past 20 years, he's created more than a hundred mobile apps, custom web applications and intuitive user experiences for clients ranging from AccuWeather to the Field Museum. But he doesn't just share his amazing ideas with clients, he's also the founder of the Kermit Collective, a high-trust community of software company leaders and Walkshop, which organizes multi-day hiking and design thinking experiences. And he has created two card games to drive employee engagement, both in person and distributed settings. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Mark.

Mark (01:32):

Thanks for having me.

Shawn (01:34):

Yeah. You know, Mark, there's a lot of stuff just in your bio, but I love how so much of what you do focuses on very different aspects of our, what we call our Experience Ecosystem™ from the digital experience, but really into leadership and culture. Was there like a specific moment, story in your career when you realized, hey, I'm creating experiences and not just software? Or did your ecosystem mindset evolve over time?

Mark (02:03):

So early in my start at TXI, we had a client in Tokyo and they created a storytelling framework called PechaKucha, that means chit-chat in Japanese. Basically, it's a way

of, of telling a story. So rather than people prattling on and on and on, they said, you get exactly 400 seconds to tell a story. And the way the story will work is you get 20 images. So don't give me slides with lots of text, you get one image and that slide will advance whether you're ready or not, every 20 seconds. So you will have exactly 400 seconds to tell this story. And I had never heard of this concept before, they were coming to us to help build a platform that people could record and, you know, and host our talks, things, you know, like this big global website, like Ted, where you have these talks all over the world.

And initially I thought this was gonna be just a normal web application. You know, I could see, I could see a map, I could see talks in different cities. I could follow different speakers. And then I started actually watching these talks and better, I went to PechaKucha nights and I saw people giving these talks and there is a whole global community of thought leaders and creatives, you know, artists, musicians, people who are giving these talks. One of my favorites actually that the founder told me about was a 400-second talk on what, if anything, is Big Bird? Like what is Big Bird seriously? Like it was like a, it was like a scientific analysis of like, what is he, is he a dinosaur? Is it a real bird? It was one of the funniest things, but taken from a very scientific lens. It was just some of the most incredible conversations.

And, and when it is, when you have a really good speaker and they're nailing those transitions, they're really fun. And if you're really a bad speaker, they're done in 400 seconds, it's like a really great way to organize an event. And there's so much energy in these PechaKucha nights. So they happen literally, they're in thousands of cities all over the world. I was, I had not heard of this before. And so when I first got introduced to this community, this wasn't about building a website where people could upload content and match their audio to the content. This was the experience of facilitating this community, of bringing this community. And we started seeing the power in storytelling. So we adopted that every single person who joins our company now has to give a PechaKucha to the rest of the company, introducing themselves. And people will take it in such creative directions.

One person explained their path to TXI, one person walked around their apartment and showed all the favorite things they've ever bought and like what those things meant to them. One person went through their, like their favorite music history. Like it's really

interesting when you have exactly 400 seconds to tell a story. It's like, you know, like Twitter, like when you can give someone a constraint, it, you know, involves incredible creativity. How can you just use those small amount of characters? This creative constraint has created this whole community around storytelling. And this website was the beginnings of that, I guess me learning the power of storytelling and build, you know, not just the experience of being there, the energy of being in the room when that happens. But bringing that into our company and making it part of now our, our own company culture and our own onboarding experience.

Shawn (04:52):

Well, and you know, Mark, when I first met you, we were in an event in Chicago and you grabbed my attention. And like you said, it wasn't 400 seconds in with some of those speakers because there's some of them I wish may have been 400 seconds, but you, but it was a story. And that's what connected you and I, and, and how you look at experience and, and particularly how you look at experience as a CEO of a company. And I think that is really valuable for what our listeners need to hear. And so much of your culture now at TXI is built around this type of experience. I know like you've gone to a remote-first model in the company, you know, what are two or three things that companies need to be doing to take care of their employees, whether it be remote or in an office?

Mark (05:44):

So it's one of the things I've been thinking. Well, we think about the employee experience an awful lot. That's a big part of what I guess takes up my mental CPU every day. And our journey towards being remote-first, I would say is relatively new. You know, this is a company that had created an amazingly, but hyper-optimized Chicago experience. You never got to see it before we shut it down in pandemic, but we had the best smelling office in Chicago. It was wonderful. We had a chef, we had a kitchen, we would make meals together every day. You could smell it, when you walked into the building, we made all the other offices pissed off, especially on bacon days. Like the whole building smelled great, at least our floor, and it was amazing, oh God. So when you came in, like, and clients would just, you know, rock up surprisingly at 11:15, like, oh, what's on the menu today?

Like people would spend time and get away from the keyboard and spend time together. That was a very intentional experience when you think about the cost of building out a commercial grade kitchen, the ovens, the duct work, the multiple dishwashers in what would've been normally office space. But as we started getting, you know, more and more people working from home more and more people hired from not in Chicago, the experiences we need to cultivate were no longer the, I need to be able to eat with you in person in Chicago, cos the person you're now talking to is in a different part of the country, or I didn't, like, as we said in our client in Japan, a different country altogether. And so we had to, I think first really realize that the experiences that had gotten us that far, the ones that really helped shape our culture were ones we had outgrown and we needed to let go of, and we needed to be thinking about new rituals and new experiences that would help us to foster the same sense of culture and connection and belonging, but that would work for who we were now.

And so this has been kind of a, a level of, of investigation and experimentation of how do we make that same sense of belonging happen when you are remote? And I think one of the things we just realized slowly but surely, is that like rent is a dumb way to facilitate experiences. You think about dropping 20 grand a month in rent and you know, maybe out of 70 people, 10 are taking advantage of it, that's a pretty bad ROI. What if you could take that money you're dropping in rent and say like, hey, every, every couple of months we're gonna try to fly everyone together and have a co-working week and we're gonna work together. Or what if we, we started creating these home office days where home stands for Hang Out and Meet Experiment as an acronym. And we're gonna get together for a couple days and, you know, have that time to be together.

You can do more in-depth experiences around bringing people together than you could just shopping money and rent where it's gonna sit empty most of the time for most of the people. So this has been a kind of a big learning curve for us, trying to be more intentional with how we're using that investment to foster connection. And so we found, just to give very practical advice, different tools that help us to bridge those connection gaps. One is a tool called Notion that we use very heavily. This is where, if you have everyone in different parts of the world, you need to find a way to solve the library problem, where you don't have information in a shared drive in Google Drive, in Tettra, in a handbook, like you need to have everything easily accessible to improve

transparency and equitable access to everyone. So something like Notion is now what we use to capture all of our internal thoughts and document all of our policies and decisions and things, everyone can find something. Two, there's a tool I really like called ThoughtExchange, I don't know if you're familiar with that one.

Shawn (08:48):

No.

Mark (08:48):

So one of the biggest challenges is when people are remote and they're not all together is that you can't read body language, you know, the same way you can't really understand what's going on. And if you do something, like I first did, when I first did this, something silly, like setting a survey, you are the only person who sees the results. And so you will assume that the thing that is most frequently mentioned is the thing that's most important. So let's say in your company, you really wanna promote transparency. You haven't asked me anything and you get up and say, hey, employees, anything you want, let me know what you wanna talk about, I'll answer any questions. If you send a survey like that out, you will, of course see all the answers and then you'll assume the most frequently mentioned thing is the most important thing you should talk about. We did that. And at the time, the most frequently mentioned thing was space. You know, do we need office space? Do we just need meeting space? Do we need, do, is there a purpose to physical space at all? Like all these questions about office space, but only two people mentioned this mental health and anxiety and burnout. This was at the height of the pandemic. And when we went to something like ThoughtExchange, a totally different way of thinking about the distributed listening experience. When you answer a question like that, you then get out to anonymously see everyone else's answers and you could up vote and down vote those answers, you get to engage with each other's thoughts. And when two people were like, listen, I'm going through a lot right now. I really wish we could talk about burnout and anxiety. When other people saw those, so like, you know what? I didn't think of that or more probably, more recently, I wasn't brave enough to say that, but now that I see that I'm putting my chips on that, that's what we should be talking about. And so when you change the access and say, don't show me the most frequently mentioned, show me the highest voted. Then what

we saw was that only two brave souls of ones you mentioned, they were like second to bottom on the most frequently mentioned. But when we changed the access, it was second to the top. It was the most highest topic was around mental health and anxiety. And so what we found was that if we use a tool like Notion to improve how we communicate, we use a tool like ThoughtExchange to improve how we listen and we engage different conversation that way.

And then as I said, using rent to foster connection is I think a stupid use of resources these days. So like, how do you foster that sense of connection and belonging by doing things like co-working weeks or doing retreats or finding other ways to intentionally working with a client and bringing them together? There are a lot of fun things. I think you can do that way. But again, all the things that brought us to here is amazing in person optimized experience with the chef and the food and the cooking, it was great for what it was, but it no longer serves us now. So I think a big lesson for us is to unlearn and let go of some of the things that historically worked to experiment and find new things that work. So those are a couple of the, the tools and some suggestions I'd have for companies that are grappling with this change.

Shawn (11:13):

Yeah, and I love it. And I remember when you were, when we were sitting outside in Chicago and you were telling me, and I'm a numbers guy, so all of a sudden I started thinking to myself, wow, that's $240,000 that you can spend on some amazing experiences with your employees instead of rent, which is what you're doing. And I wanna, because what we're talking about a lot this season is around being maverick-minded and human obsessed. And from the moment I met you, Mark, you are maverick-minded for a CEO, and you're very human obsessed and making these experiences, right? But I want, I wanna talk a little bit about the talk you gave because for our listeners, Mark and I were at a one day event, and Mark gets up to talk about diversity, equity and inclusion, not typically what you see a middle aged white male doing at a conference. And I just remember your talk in your journey as a CEO. And I think that maverick-minded and human obsessed aspect, our listeners need to hear, because I think it validates how important experience is and the Experience Ecosystem™. Can you just share a little bit about your philosophy around DEI and where that plays for you as a CEO?

Mark (12:32):

Yeah, I mean, so the brief history, the journey that we started this with, this was back to 2014 and, you know, we were talking about, at the time we had a number of people leave the organization and each one of those were, as we said at the time, like individually explainable, one person went to get their MBA. Fine, fair enough. One person wanted to move across the country, especially when we were very co-located in Chicago, leaving Chicago, generally met leaving the organization. One person went to go do a startup with one of their best friends. Like every one of those, I was like, okay, yeah, I get it. You know, good luck on your next endeavor, but all of them were women. And when we step back to look at this, we were wondering like, is there a bigger pattern? Is there something going on here that we can't see and ever, you know, in my naivety at the time saying like, surely not, right? Like we're good, right? We, we have a great company culture, but just in case let's, let's do an audit on how, like, what is the real employee experience at the company? And so we brought in a third party, someone that could independently look at us and talk to our alumni and talk to people who are still in the company and say like, just in case, where are the blind spots? Are there parts of your experience that you don't have a handle on? I remember joking, I'm like, surely there is no blind spots with an all straight white male leadership team, right? Like there's, there's nothing we would've missed in that experience. So when we started doing this, we're like, wow, we got, I mean, we got this amazing, I remember reading it, report of all the good things and then all the things that were not so good and reading it in black and white and seeing about what the experience was not what we wanted it to be was one of the more eye-opening things.

And so it became this journey to think about how could we change our company to be more inclusive, to be more equitable and to be more diverse? We eventually changed the DEI program to include the letter B, focusing on belonging, which is where we talk a lot about things like our onboarding program and how we can actually foster that even in a, in a distributed office environment. But I think the big thing that happened, so in, after George Floyd's murder in 2020, I wanted to reach out to other people. We had been doing this now for about, you know, six years. And I wanted to find other leaders that were running a DEI program. And I had a Vistage peer group, and I had my own like

software company peer group, the one I had started called Kermit, but I wanted to find other leaders that were really invested in DEI cos I was thinking about this, you know, I have a coach that helps me on my sales side, I've got a coach that works with me on organizational development, I didn't have a, a DEI coach. These are all internal conversations we had. And Loyola University in Chicago was building a cohort for leaders who specifically wanted to learn more about how to drive organizational change and how to actually get involved with the DEI leaders. And so I applied for and got into the very first inaugural program for DEI leadership. And one of the things that they were telling us in that program was most of you were thinking about this DEI work as an initiative and you should be thinking about it as a strategy. And I first, I honestly, I was like, those are the same things. What do you mean, that's semantics. And when they think about as initiative, you think about it as a, as a project initiatives have generally a start date and an end date, they have like a small task force and you think about it as a thing to get done, but like no one has a sales and marketing initiative.

As you get bigger, you just have a different go-to market strategy. You're always talking about it. You're always investing. And you're always thinking about your go-to market and your sales. And just as you get bigger, your, your tactics change and your techniques change and maybe your target audience, your target market changes. That was their point is like, if you think about all the things you're doing for that in your business, you probably have a sales and marketing budget and you probably have a director of sales and marketing. You probably have a coach that helps you think through that. And every, every quarter you re-evaluate those with your board, all of those things that make it a strategy, those same things should apply to your DEI focus, that you should have a dedicated budget for it. You should have leaders who are getting trained in it.

You should be having an outside coach on your advisory board. You should be making the same metrics that you have and the goals of, kind of KPIs you have on, on your sales side, you should have the exact same things on, on your DEI side. And it really helped us to kind of think about our journey differently. And this is a company had been doing work in this space for year, you know, six years going in. It helped us to re-evaluate techniques to make this more core to the company strategy. And to really help us think about really, changes to all levels of our organization, not just at the employee

experience level. I love talking about that obviously quite a lot, but who owns the company? Who runs the company? Who advises the company? Like how can we think about systemic change to really make this strategy more, more intentional in the company? And so there was a lot of focus, I think, for us to take the lessons we had learned those last six years, but really make it more core to the central mission of the organization.

Shawn (16:48):

So let's get real about this, so Mark, we hear a lot of organizations, we hear a lot of leaders talk about DEI, you know, and, and that it's a focus forum, but they're not really doing it. I mean, when I heard all the things that you were doing at TXI, as you were just saying, your advisory board, who advises, who owns the company, all those pieces that is very, in our terms, maverick-minded, right? Like most leaders don't do that. So I guess my question to you then, as you are probably now starting to coach people in doing this, what would be the first one or two things you would say to a CEO, to a senior leader in an organization around this DEI experience for the whole organization that fits into the Experience Ecosystems™?

Mark (17:41):

A couple things. One, don't underestimate how much, if you really focus on this, how much it will change things, let's just take the E for example, the one that's gonna be most underappreciated. How do you make things equitable? One of the biggest pieces of advice, the phrase that changed TXI the most was take things that are implicit and make them very explicit. Make sure everyone has the same equitable understanding. Let's say like, how do I get promoted? How do I get raised? Before this, you know, we were very flat company and very small company. So it's very obvious to say, oh, this person's a senior developer and this person's a developer and this person's a lead developer. People, you know, and everyone just knew that cause we all worked with each other. And then at some point you're like, well, why, why do this person get promoted?

Maybe it's because they are very comfortable. And they come from a very privileged background and they can say, hey, I'm ready for that promotion. Here's what I've done. They can justify and advocate for themselves. Not everyone always feels as

comfortable doing that. They can put themselves and make themselves here very visible. There are all kinds of statistics where you post a job and men who maybe meet 50% of the qualifications will apply. And women who meet 90% of the qualifications will not apply because they don't think they meet the right criteria. And so if you make the role, like here's how we think about promotions, here's how we think about compensation, and you make that very explicit. Everyone now has the same equitable understanding for what growth means, but to do that, you have to write down the observable behaviors of what it takes to grow in the organization and for something, for a company that was always very small, and that was always just like we thought, like in the ether and known, but we never actually wrote it very explicitly. This meant changing how we think about career progression, how we think about support, how we think about feedback, meant creating manager structure to actually help support people in their growth. It meant writing down salary bands and communicating salary more transparently. We broke LinkedIn, when you post a job, I think you're supposed to have 10,000 characters. And our job descriptions had, I think like 14,000 characters. Cos we were trying to describe what success looks like six months in, nine months in, one year in, we talked about what your salary's gonna be. We talked about the kind of projects you're gonna have. So anyone who applies the company knows what they're getting into. We publish our diversity report, people can see where we are as a company and where we're trying to change. That one sentence of take something that's implicit and make it explicit, fundamentally change the entire strategy we had around human growth and support in their careers.

And so committing to this is not a light commitment. I mean, that was, and actually I should tell you the first, talking about experiences, the first time we did it, we totally screwed it up. Oh my God, it was awful. We, it was so, it came from such a good place, such a lovely intention to take this growth path. We'd never written down and make it very explicit, but we got it so wrong and it really pissed people off. And so, you know, lesson learned there, we had to think about how we can make our growth path better when we first did it, it was very like a, it was like a ladder. It was very linear. And so it looked like the only way to grow was to become eventually a salesperson and make it rain or become the CTO. That was it, like there's one of only two options.

And so, you know, people were like, I don't want do that. I'm a developer. I wanna be a

good technologist. I don't wanna sell. And there's only one CTO. So where do I go from here? Like it was such a linear path that we had really boxed people in. Of course, humans don't grow that way. Humans have different interests, they have different experiences and they have wanna grow in different ways. And so one of the, I guess, you know, the intention was to make it very explicit, good intention, but really poor execution our first time in doing that and frustrated a lot of people, that's when we actually brought in a member of our advisory board to help us think through this growth model where you could either grow in core skills, like as a developer or in influence skills. And there's multiple directions you can take.

And there's a whole discussion we can have around growth paths and how to think about employee development. But it was one of those just really key lessons learned of, to do this well takes a serious commitment and you're probably gonna get it wrong. Cause these things are hard. And when we did, thankfully, we're able to iterate on it relatively quickly. And then by that, I mean within a few years to really dial in, learn from it. But yeah, it's not for the faint of heart taking on these challenges, if you're gonna really go from like a, you know, initiative driven by a small select handful that doesn't gain much adoption to a strategy that really changes the core of who you are as a company, it challenges almost all of your company rituals and experiences. It challenges the vision for the company and even things like how you level, promote, compensate and recognize people. A lot of those things change.

Shawn (21:48):

Which goes, you know, I talked about my Disney days, it's, I remember when I was in finance, getting that document that said, here are all the core skills. Here's everything. This is how you get your way through your promotion and how power, how empowered I felt as a cast member there, but you're doing this on a smaller scale. This is affecting your whole Experience Ecosystems™. I don't wanna leave out the, what you're doing outside of TXI either, because I think you are doing some powerful things in the community. When I say the community at large for leadership. And you talked about the Kermit Collective camps, which I really love because we're gonna do something this winter of 2023 and this term around the unconference approach. And we're, we're getting a lot of feedback on that. Can you tell me what can other leaders in your opinion

learn from this unconference approach? Because I think it's really hard because many are type A personality. They want this big agenda, everything written out and everything. Give us some advice around that and what you're doing with the Kermit Collective.

Mark (22:56):

Well for, let's give, I mean this, even the, if the idea of where that came from was hysterical. So we made the, I don't know, brave, stupid decision. One of those two in 2012 to fire our biggest client, suffice to say it was, you know, the CCR or stands for Client Concentration Risk, how many eggs do you have in one basket? And you never want more than about 20% of your revenue in one area. We had like 55% of our revenue with one client in a very bad relationship. And so when we, to intentionally protect our culture, we parted ways for this client and then realize, oh my goodness, we have massive problems now, we have a pipeline problem. We have a collections problem. We had a utilization, people were on the beach, they had nothing to do, like all these things we needed to figure out.

And so we started reaching out to our direct competitors just to get a sense of how they were doing what we could learn from them. I had just come to this company from a much larger global consulting company. And so I thought I can teach people what I know in some of these areas, but I really need to know about how to run a small, medium sized business. I'd never done that before. Not as an owner, at least I, you know, I'd always been like a doer. And so I started this group reaching out to my direct competitors. People who knew exactly what I was going through, who understood the challenges of running a software organization, who had been in the community, people I thought I could learn from and said, I think there's something to say about the value of what we called cooperatition, like direct competitors collaborating together and cooperating together.

Could we share more than we could lose from like potential, you know, fear of, of rivalries or fear of competition? And so we've rented a house. This is funny. I rented a house that slept 25 people and they all said, yes. So I had these people coming in from Costa Rica, Uruguay, Brazil, Scotland, England, and then across the U.S., they're the best software leaders I knew. And they were all like, we don't quite know what's gonna go on, but like, sure, we'll come out and try this out. And so everyone said, yes. And

then someone's like, Mark, you dumbass. When a house says that sleeps 25, you know, that means like two people in a king bed and two people in a queen bed, you're making your competitors sleep together. You know that right? And I was like, oh my God. Yes, you're right. That's not the experience I'm going for.

So I had to go rent two more houses very quickly. But the idea was that everyone would come together. And the very first, you know, time we got together, the important thing we wanted to do was tell like the point of this was learning rather than getting together and saying, what's that awesome thing you can teach me. We threw all that out and said, actually, what's the biggest mistake that you made in the last year, in your role? And we found that if people aren't coming in, you know, chest something about how awesome their company is and this amazing thing they did, they wrote this book. They started a thing. If instead, they're taking themselves down a peg and saying, man, I really screwed this up. It cost us a bunch. Like I just said, I was telling you about the first time we tried to make our career progressions really explicit.

We totally screwed it up. People were able to learn from that and empathize with that. And they built a sense of trust around that. And then the second day we said, now teach us something. But what we wanna do is put up a board and if you've got something you can tell us something that you think would be valuable for the community to learn, put it on a sticky note and put it up and then we'll dot vote on the best idea so people want to hear from. So the un-conference was structured loosely around, we want to learn from each other, but the topics can be what the community votes on. And so we put up things and then people started voting like, so what, the topics I would've picked were very different from what maybe what the community ultimately picked. And a lot of it came from the, like, how did you recover from that failure?

Like you, you just lost your biggest client. How did you recover from that? You rolled out a program that pissed off everybody. How did you recover from that? Like, there were so many good learnings people wanna take from the failures. Anyway, so the unconference was always structured around letting the community have a little bit more autonomy around where the day's conversation could go. And we had other structured talks and we had some agendas for the, you know, the type A group, but it was nice that the community could dictate, today, this is what I wanna dial into. This is what I wanna hear more about. And then, because we have a pretty active community, some of the

talks that just didn't get enough dot votes, but they were still interesting. We could do later on as virtual calls, after the conference was over, we could do later on, you know, through Zoom or whatever.

So we've maintained that, that every time we get together, this, this collective of organizations we call the Kermit Collective, these are all really high-end, amazing, good software companies that I respect as worthy rivals. When we get together, we will start always with mistake because I feel like that is the most important way to learn is through admitting and owning up to failure and kind of thinking about the impact that it had. And then after we get that out of the way, then we talked about, okay, what can you teach me? What can you learn? And allow that unconference style approach to what ideas kind of bubble up to the surface.

Shawn (27:14):

I love it. Love it. Got a lot to pick your brain on around that. So listen, man, you've given us some incredible insights today, but I wanna wrap up with one last question. And in particular for the leaders who are listening, what's the best advice you've ever received about leadership?

Mark (27:35):

I will caveat this by saying, I wish I listened to it more than I always do. And I really try to remember this more. Like I'd like to tell you that I'm always good at this, but it's something I'm really striving to bring back into my life. So the best advice I got, and this was something I was seeing a couple years ago is that busy is the new stupid. And by that, I mean, there was a great interview between, it was Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, and they were talking about, show us your daily planner, and Bill Gates held up this thing. It's like, oh, I'm in this meeting. I'm in this meeting. Look, I'm talking to all these people, like my fingers all over the organization, look at everything, I'm driving. And I think Warren Buffett had like a thing on Thursday.

That was it. He's like, the rest of the time I'm thinking. And I'm reading. We have a, a tendency and I, by side, with we, I mean Americans specifically, depending on how global your audience is, we associate busyness with virtue and value. So when you say like, how are you? Americans will always like a pride of honor. Be like, oh, I'm so busy.

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I'm exhausted. I'm doing all these things. And we're generally overscheduled, anyone during the last couple years probably has changed their calendar quite a bit to have meeting after meeting, after meeting and booking their whole calendar full. And that means you don't have time to think, to read and to contemplate really, to be strategic. It's hard to be thinking about things like experiences or big changes in your business in between half hour meetings. And one of the best pieces advices I got is yeah, busy is the new stupid.

You need to dedicate time to have blocks of time, not 20 minutes here and there to think and to consider, and to make that a priority in your life as a leader, that you can demonstrate that not only as a model for others, but to really give yourself time to think about where am I going with this business and what should I be doing? And that it's valuable time that your time as a leader is not just when you're busy doing a bunch of things. Now I say that and I look at my calendar and say, have I learned this lesson? Like, I, I will try to schedule this block of time. I'm like, do not step over that. And I'm always proud of myself. And I defend that block. I'm like, nope, that's my thinking time. Do not take it. And then there are times when I cave. I'm like, oh, I need to get this done. So just, you know, half hour here, half hour there. And then my whole week is scheduled. It's the best advice I've had as a leader. And I'm, being, moment of vulnerability, I'm still learning that lesson. I firmly defend it.

Shawn (29:44):

I love it. Then I've written this down, so you're gonna probably see this on LinkedIn somewhere, busy is the new stupid. Like I love it and what it stands for. Well, it has come to that point, um, where we have to start to wrap up this episode, but Mark, we do these things called The Combustion Questions and they are three randomly selected questions. And you're from a software company. We have this amazing human algorithm back here. And, um, I just got the three questions handed to me. So I don't even know what they are. So are you ready for your Combustion Questions?

Mark (30:18):

Sure. Why not?

Shawn (30:21):

Well, combustion question number one is if you found a hundred dollar bill on the sidewalk and you had to spend it on yourself, what would you do with it?

Mark (30:33):

Halloween decorations, every time we are,

Shawn (30:36):

Halloween decorations.

Mark (30:37):

It's that time, you know, whenever this gets recorded and published, but it's that time of the year. And my daughter and I are deep into Stranger Things this year, and she really wants to do a Stranger Things party. And I was like, all right, game on. Let's think about that. And so I just found on Etsy because of course, everyone makes everything on Etsy, a demogorgon piñata. So we could literally attack it with Steve Harrington's bat. It'd be great. Uh, we could have a whole, we'd have a whole Stranger Things party going on. So yes, 100%.

Shawn (31:05):

We've definitely gotta talk because I have a 14 year old daughter who is into Stranger Things too. So definitely have to figure some of these things out. All right. Combustion question number two, couch or recliner?

Mark (31:21):

Is my wife getting a say in this? Uh, I would say recliner and I would, I would, I would, I do not control the investments in our family. So we would go couch because I wanna stay happily married.

Shawn (31:33):

All right. Final combustion question. What do you think about cruise ships?

Mark (31:41):

You and I are gonna disagree on this one. I think they are floating Petri dishes and it should be avoided at all costs. I think, especially in this day and age, it is just like you line up for a bunch of like, you know, mediocre food takes three hours to get on and off the boat. The rooms are small. Everyone gets sick. I hadn't seen no value in them whatsoever. Having said that I've never been on a cruise, so I'm judging without ever, ever experienced one. But I gotta tell you, it is like, my dad has his 75th birthday coming up and my sister and I said, whatever you wanna do, we'll do it. And he said, great. I wanna take a cruise to Alaska. And we said, all right, whatever you wanna do, we'll do it. Just not that anything else you wanna do? So I am, uh,

Shawn (32:20):

Mark, Mark, I've got a school you on what cruises are like, I've done three this year. Nobody got sick. So, yes. But I love it.

Mark (32:28):

We agree on so many things in this one point, I'm just like, I'm like a hard, hard note.

Shawn (32:34):

And I have another very dear friend of mine who says the same thing. He's like, why would I get on that? He also doesn't fly in an airplane for the same reason. He's like, it's just a condensed one. So um, well thank you so much. I will let all the listeners know, go out, find Mark on LinkedIn. If you can't find him, he's in my connections, we will be posting about this episode. Mark, thank you again so much for all these amazing nuggets and you know, I think I'm gonna close it with just saying busy is the new stupid. And I love that. So thank you, sir.

Mark (33:10):

Of course. Good catching up this morning.

Shawn (33:12):

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of The Combustion Chronicles. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few minutes to subscribe, rate and review.

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