

Charlie - Welcome to another "15 Minutes with Charlie." I'm your host, Charlie Mechem. I want to help you become a more effective communicator, and I have found anecdotes to be a powerful communication tool. In each episode I select anecdotes from my book, *Total Anecdotal*, and I have guests explain how they relate to their own life.

Charlie - My guest today is Tom Keckeis, who is the CEO of Messer Construction Company. Messer is employee owned, and it's over a billion dollar company. Highly regarded in the world of business and construction. Tom went with Messer right out of college, and speaking as someone who serves on the Messer board of directors, I have admired seeing Tom successfully lead this fast growing company.

Charlie - Please enjoy my discussion with Tom.

Charlie - Messer is an ESOP company, meaning that its owned by its employees. Tom believes very strongly in the employee ownership of the company being a very positive force in Messer's growth, and the results certainly support that belief.

Charlie - So Tom, welcome.

Tom - Thank you, Charlie.

Charlie - What we're going to do, as you know, is hopefully you've had a chance to at least browse the book.

Tom - I did. I was very impressed with it. I read through it, and obviously you've got a couple of them you want me to focus on, but I read the book from start to finish so that I could get an understanding.

Tom - I could hear your voice as I was reading it, Charlie. It sounded just like what you would be talking about them, so I had this image of you telling the stories as you were going through.

Charlie - Well, that's the nicest compliment you could pay, because that's what I'm always hoping for.

Charlie - So, for those watching the podcast, the pattern here has been I'll throw out four or five anecdotes to Tom that are in the book and that maybe have some relevance to his experience and background.

Charlie - So we'll start, Tom, with the anecdote under "Adaptability and Flexibility," that category in the book. It's a quote from the great business philosopher, I would say, Peter Drucker. Here's what he said, "We no longer even understand the question, whether change is by itself good or bad. We start with the axiom that it is the norm. We do not see change as altering the order. We see change as being order in itself. Indeed the only order we can comprehend today is a dynamic, a moving, a changing one."

Charlie - What's your reaction to that anecdote?

Tom - Well, I think it's absolutely true. I think that, you know, change is something that we deal with all of the time consistently, whether it's technology that is changing it, it is the relationships and the expectations of our customers to the workforce and what their expectations are. And it's an ever changing world and, you know, it is one of these things that you just build into what you're doing every day.

Tom - The only comment I would have about change that is, sometimes I see people wanting to change just for the sake of change, and that's something you gotta have a reason to be making the changes that you have.

Tom - I think as a... running a business you gotta stop and say "Okay, what's the real purpose of this?" You gotta keep stepping back and looking at the values and what you're trying to achieve and make sure that the change is the right thing to be implementing in a company. But, there's no question, change, there is nothing that stands still any longer.

Charlie - That's certainly true, and moving at, what do they say, "Warp speed."

Tom - Yes it is.

Charlie - The next anecdote is really a story that I've always loved. It'll take me a second to read it for our viewers or listeners. It's under the category of "Experts" in the book, it goes like this: "There was a renowned chemistry

professor who was out on his annual lecture tour. He went from campus to campus discoursing on his field of expertise. To help him with the mechanics of the trip was his long time loyal chauffeur. The professor always gave the same lecture at the various stops and towards the end of the tour, both he and his chauffeur were getting a little weary of the whole exercise. So as they approached the site of the last lecture, the chauffeur said, 'You know, let's have a little fun tonight. I know your lecture by heart, I've heard it 38 times, I'd like to deliver it.' To which the professor said, 'Sounds like a wonderful idea. You do that, I'll put on your chauffeur's uniform. I'll sit in the back of the audience and pretend to be you. It'll be great.'

Charlie - "The chauffeur did a marvelous job of giving the speech and no one was the wiser. When the speech was over, there was a great round of applause. The chauffeur nodded modestly and was about to retire when from the audience came, 'Question, question.' Well, of course, all lectures are followed by Q & A, so the chauffeur looked at the raised hand and said, 'By all means, go ahead.' Well, the question was from a chemistry professor at the university. He said 'What is the co-efficient of plutonium times the valence of copper as a factor of stress in the early curve of nuclear fission development when the reactor is lead based?' "

Charlie - "Well, the chauffeur didn't miss a beat. He said, 'Sir, I recognize you from photographs that I've seen in trade journals, and I know you're very renowned and respected. But I must say, I'm astounded that a man of your reputation could ask such an absolutely absurd juvenile question. Why, my chauffeur in the back of the room could answer that.' "

Charlie - I love that because, I think we probably share views, but tell me your thoughts on the experts.

Tom - Well, I don't know if it's under expert. Adaptability and quick on his feet is what I summed.

Charlie - Yeah. Yeah, amen.

Tom - He did a fantastic job of diverting it to the right person that could answer. I laughed when I read it, Charlie, so...

Charlie - I've always loved it because if someone describes himself as an expert, you gotta take several deep breaths and be careful.

Tom - Yes, you do.

Charlie - Under the category in the book of "Hard Work," is this story, and I was intrigued when I was doing a little homework on your background, you've had a very similar experience to this I think.

Charlie - In the book I remembered that during my, I guess teenage years, I worked on a county highway road crew. First, my work was temporary and I was young, but most of the guys I worked with were a very different category. And I learned a lot. The lesson that I learned from an old guy who was very friendly to me from the very beginning. He'd been part of the highway gang for years. He was an intelligent, pleasant man. Very popular with all of us:

Charlie - He and I were working together one day to dig a trench for some pipe. He watched me stabbing furiously at the ground with my shovel and stopped me to give some advice. He showed me how to shovel slowly and carefully and taught me all the tricks of the trade. He was obviously proud of the fact that he could do something well and that he could pass this knowledge on to someone else. This may seem trivial, but it had a real effect on me both then and now. No matter how menial a task may seem, it can be done well or it can be done badly. It can be done with pride or with resentment. It can be done with total effort or with disdain. I think that lesson applies, or should apply, to any task that anyone ever undertakes. It's funny how and where and when you learn important lessons.

Charlie - And I think, Tom, you had a similar experience.

Tom - Yeah, absolutely. This one hit right at home with me, Charlie. You know, being in the construction. When I got out of high school my dad had a little construction company, and I went to work for him as a laborer in his crews. And there was a labor foreman that took me underneath his arm and, you know, we would pour concrete, big ditches. I had the same experience about learning how to dig a ditch. Jack-hammering concrete, running a jackhammer which weighs 90 pounds. I remember I was out there manhandling the jackhammer trying to pick it up and move it around

and he pulled me over to the side and said "You're going to work yourself to death if you do that. Learn how to lean it into your body, go ahead and let the jackhammer do its work, don't fight it, then lean and pick it up."

Tom - And I can go on and on and tell you stories from moving formwork to the crafts people that you work with that have a lot of pride in what they do, whether it's digging a ditch or pouring concrete or doing carpenter work.

Tom - And I have, personally have, a lot of respect for those people that do that because it is a trade. There is a way to do it. You can kill yourself going out trying to do the same thing if you don't listen to their advice and follow it. And they do have a lot of pride. They come in and they do that work and you will not just go out and start trying to do what they do everyday unless you do learn the tricks of the trade.

Charlie - You got that right. And I think it's important as you move up the ladder in an enterprise to never forget some of the best lessons are all around you. You just, you gotta look for them.

Tom - Yes, you do. I was just in here this morning, one of our operator foremen just came through the office and talking about things that he's been doing, and I learn more from the crafts people that we work with everyday than anything else.

Tom - Obviously, I deal a lot more now with attorneys and other things, but we got a lot of respect for them.

Charlie - The next anecdote I wanted to refer to comes under the category of Meetings and it goes like this: "I have a plaque in my office that sums up my attitude regarding meetings, and it reads like this, 'Any simple problem can be made insoluble if enough meetings are held to discuss it.' "

Charlie - I'd like your thoughts on that.

Tom - Well, there's no question. Meetings, you know, you've gotta look at meetings as more of a communication and then get people bought into stuff.

Tom - But I've seen good ideas just get torn apart by compromise, compromise and then the amount of time that people spend in meetings, not coming in prepared, not coming in organized, you can just destroy good ideas in a meeting. And that's something to be very careful with.

Charlie - You're right. Next anecdote that I'd like to your thoughts on comes under the category in the book of "Patience and Forbearance." This is really one of my favorite stories:

Charlie - "A man had a good friend who owned a cabin deep in the woods. Occasionally his friend would allow him to stay in the cabin for a week or two to enjoy some rest and solitude. Late one night on one such visit, the man heard a noise, door. He opened the door but saw no one until he looked down on the doormat and noticed a small little snail. He reached down, picked up the snail and threw it as far as he could out into the yard. Several years later he went back to the cabin for another visit. Once again, late one night, he heard a noise. He went to the door and opened it and looked down and saw the same snail that he'd seen several years before. The snail looked up at him and said 'What was that all about?' "

Charlie - That is patience, and I'd like your thoughts on the importance of patience.

Tom - I'll tell you what jumped in my mind, I mean, that is a funny story and what jumped to mind was some of the customers that we've tried to get and how much time it takes... and I'll give you an example with TriHealth, here in Cincinnati. For 30 years, Turner has done all their work and we've tried and tried to get our foot in the door there. And you know, you go and you think you're in, and "Bam!" You get the door slammed at us, or we get thrown off to the side.

Tom - Right now we're doing a job for them up at Xavier University, so you know, finally you break it down, but it is... you gotta keep going at it and going at it, and persistence and sticking with it, and finally we'll win the day.

Tom - There are customers like ours, like us is you gotta keep figuring and keep coming back. And sometimes I have that same thing, "What was that all about?" After we get turned down on a job, you know.

Charlie - That's right. That's right. Very good.

Charlie - Next anecdote is under the category in the book of "Rigidity." I ask for pardon from my friends at the Harvard Business School, but, Thomas Edison supposedly once said, or was said about him, "that if he had gone to The Harvard Business School we would all be reading by larger candles."

Charlie - The point is obvious. Sometimes we make life far more complicated than needs to be and also become rigid in what we regard as the way to accomplish something. The observation about Edison suggests that flexibility and adaptability are great qualities.

Charlie - Your thoughts on that?

Tom - Well I think that you get caught up in the processes that you've been taught and learned. Just keep saying, "Well, how do I improve? How do I improve the process?" And sometimes you gotta get completely out of it and try something different.

Tom - I mean, in our case it's probably how to build a building, and how do you go about putting all the pieces together. And then finally the bell rings and says, "Wait a minute. We can build this over at a factory and bring it out in pieces, pre-fabrication, and change the industry." I think in our industry we're going to see more of that. So you've got to do some things out of the box and not the way you've always done them.

Tom - And I think it's right on target.

Charlie - Very good.

Charlie - Next is an anecdote under the category in the book of "What is Really Important?" I really love this one, and I'll be interested in your thoughts.

Charlie - Take me a minute to spell it out here but, this is a quiz. Actually two quizzes. The first quiz says, "Name five of the wealthiest people in the world. Name five Heisman trophy winners. Name five winners of the Miss America contest. Name ten people who won a Nobel or Pulitzer prize. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners, male or female. And name the last ten winners of the World Series."

Charlie - I think most of us would not do particularly well with that quiz. But now, here's the next quiz. "Name three teachers who aided your journey through school. Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time. Name five people who have taught you worthwhile things. Name a few people who have made you feel special. Name five people who you enjoy being with. Name several heroes whose lives have inspired you."

Charlie - I suspect that we would all be able to answer every question quite easily. Your reaction to that anecdote, Tom.

Tom - Well, I think there's no question. I tried to just name some of the wealthiest people in the world, I could name maybe two, and down the line, and it's really what you read and remember of that.

Tom - The second part of the quiz is who really cares about you, who have you connected with in a personal way, and those come right top of mind because you're emotionally connected to those, Charlie. And those are the ones that really do matter in you life. I agree.

Charlie - Certainly been true in my life as well.

Charlie - One final anecdote, which is somewhat related to the one we just went over, but it is under, also, the category in the book of "What is Really Important?"

Charlie - "In life you will realize there's a role for everyone you meet. Some will test you, some will use you, some will love you and some will teach you. But the ones who are truly important are the ones who bring out the best in you. They are the rare and amazing people who remind you why it's worth it." I'd like your thoughts on that.

Tom - With no question, the people that care about you and that have helped you along the way are the ones that you need to make sure you pay attention to, Charlie. And I think that there's no question that, you know, when I looked at all the stuff in your book I kept thinking "Wow. This is about how to live a life, about how to run a business..." This isn't just about how to speak and talk, which I think you could use a lot of this.

- Tom - This is a lesson on how to go through life and focus on what really is important.
- Charlie - Well, thank you. I would share with our listeners this little bit of background. When my son-in-law suggested to me that a book of anecdotes, a glossary, dictionary of anecdotes might be a good idea, I thought to myself, you know, I can do this because for the last 40 years I've been clipping things out or printing things out that I thought were interesting and throwing them in a box, and I got a whole box full of them, so basically the writing of this book was simply a matter of going through that box and coming up with the anecdotes that I felt work best.
- Charlie - I introduce them, as you know from having looked at the book, with a little section on "Intricacies of Speaking" because my point being, doesn't matter how good your anecdotes are, if you can't speak well and get them across, they won't be very much value.
- Charlie - So, that part of the book is really helping you understand the importance of communication and then the anecdotes, as you say, I think you're quite right, they're broader than just quotations. They're reflections of a lot of what I believed, at least, were really important things in life.
- Charlie - I said to somebody the other day "I wish I would have had this book when I was 30 years old instead of where I am now." But hopefully there'll be a lot of young people, and I consider people in your category as young from when you're 88, you know, a lot of people are young.
- Charlie - Anyway, Tom, you've done such a superb job with Messer, and it will continue. I know how hard you work. I know how much your people respect you and care about you, and I thank you for the opportunity to share some of this book with you.
- Tom - Well, thank you for the compliment, thank you for the opportunity back the other way, Charlie.
- Tom - You've actually been one of the most valuable people to our organization, as you said, for the last 15 years change in our company, you've been helping guide this and the things that we're doing, so thank you.

Charlie - Well, I should claim credit for all the growth the last 15 years, but I don't have that kind of arrogance.

Charlie - Thanks for joining me for today's conversation. If you'd like to listen to more episodes, please visit totalanecdotal.co or search for "15 Minutes With Charlie" in your podcasting app. If you are enjoying the show you should check out my book, "*Total Anecdotal: A Fun Guide to Help You Become a Better Speaker and Writer.*" Learn more at totalanecdotal.co/book, that's totalanecdotal.co/book, or it's available through Amazon or Barnes & Noble, and perhaps your local bookstore.