

15 Minutes with Charlie - Kevin Johnson Part 1

Charlie Mechem:

Hello and welcome to 15 Minutes with Charlie. I'm your host, Charlie Mechem and I want to help you communicate more effectively and I believe the use of anecdotes can get you there. Explore this with me as I share anecdotes from my recently published book, Total Anecdotal and ask guests to react in relation to their own experience and careers. In today's episode, I have a truly special guest, Kevin Johnson. Kevin is the CEO of a company that needs no introduction as it is one of the world's largest and most successful franchises, Starbucks. Kevin is a good friend and is doing a superb job at Starbucks. That said, welcome to the show Kevin

Kevin Johnson:

Well thanks Charlie. Good morning. It's great to be with you today.

Charlie Mechem:

Thank you. As I said in the intro, my approach in earlier podcasts has been to read some anecdotes from the book and then ask you to comment on how that particular anecdote might have impacted or influenced your career. So here we go.

Charlie Mechem:

The first one comes under the heading of Courage and Risk Taking in the book, and in it I speculate on what it would've been like if the people involved in some of the great moments in history had lacked courage or had been risk averse. For example, supposed Sir Edmund Hillary as he and his sherpa neared the summit of Mount Everest had said, "Tenzing it's getting dark. It's really cold. I'm having trouble breathing. Let's go back down to base camp and have a drink. We'll try this again tomorrow." Or suppose Neil Armstrong said to Buzz Aldrin, " , Buzz, we're running a little low on fuel. Maybe we better let somebody else be the first man on the moon." So your thoughts, Kevin, on the importance of courage and risk-taking.

Kevin Johnson:

Well, Charlie, I guess in my life journey I've always thought of myself as a lifelong learner and part of that for me is always being willing to push outside the comfort zone, which oftentimes means taking on a little bit of risk. But I think about the founders of great companies that I've had the privilege to work for over the last 25 years or so. My journey working at Microsoft and being on the senior leadership team with Bill Gates, at Juniper Networks, working with Pradeep Sindhu who was the founder of Juniper, and then certainly here at Starbucks with Howard Schultz.

Kevin Johnson:

In all those cases, those individuals are individuals that believed in a mission or a vision that they had, whether it was in technology or in Howard's case, the vision for how you could bring people together over coffee.

Kevin Johnson:

And they boldly pursued those missions. And in every one of those cases they had the courage to take risk. And part of what drove them, I think was number one, was an emotional connection to the mission and the pursuit of the vision that they had, their willingness to step out of the comfort zone and put a stake in the ground and be public about it and bring people together to work in common cause toward those missions. So I think having a purpose is a very important part of enabling people to take risks.

Charlie Mechem:

I totally agree with you and thanks for those comments. The second anecdote, actually it's a couple of anecdotes comes in the section of the book under Marketing, which obviously is one of your great strengths. One of my dearest friends when I was a young man, he was a good deal older than I was a man named Ed Harness who served as the CEO of Proctor and Gamble and he received an award in New York City for marketing and his speech was quite impressive. But the line in it that made the most impression on me, he said, "I thank you for this award. We're very grateful and honored, but let me simply say that the key to successful marketing is superior product performance." And I've always really felt that that was a critical line for people to remember.

Doesn't matter how much marketing you have or how well you do it if the product isn't good. I'd like your thoughts on that.

Kevin Johnson:

Yeah, I think in many ways understanding what you're good at and what your brand stands for is sort of at the core of great marketing. And the brand in many ways is brought to life through the product or the service and the experience that's created.

Kevin Johnson:

In Starbucks' case certainly we serve premium Arabica coffee, some of the finest coffees from around the world. But it's really the experience that we work to create in our stores that is what differentiates us. And it's that combination of great product and how that's translated into an experience, that's the brand. A lot of times people think they can control the brand. The brand really is how customers perceive you and the way they're going to perceive you as the experience they have with your product or service. And so it has to start there.

Charlie Mechem:

Quite right. There's an amusing anecdote under this section of the book of marketing that I think just underscores what we're talking about and it goes like this. The president of a dog food company was addressing the annual sales meeting of his company. He wasn't very happy, sales were not good, and he was giving the group a stern lecture. He said, "I simply don't understand it. We've got the finest product in the business. Our packaging and marketing are second to none. Yet sales are terrible. You guys must not be doing your jobs. Tell me what's wrong."

Charlie Mechem:

There were several seconds of silence until one little guy in the back raised his hand. The president said, "Okay, so you think you know what's wrong, Ted? Then tell me." And the guy said, in a frightened voice, "Sir, the problem is the dogs don't like it." I love this story because it gets to the heart of the service and the product.

Charlie Mechem:

The next anecdote is in the book under the heading of taking responsibility and it goes like this. When my granddaughter graduated from high school, the program included a talk from a faculty member who had been chosen by the senior class to share his thoughts for the day. He said that in deciding what to talk about, he consulted with his 10 year old son and six year old daughter. He said his son offers some very helpful advice, but it was the advice from his young daughter that he, and I must confess I, found very powerful. Remember this is a six year old who just started school and is learning many new things when her father asked her what she thought he should tell the graduating class. She thought for a moment and then said, "Daddy, tell them to be sure to put their name on their paper.".

Charlie Mechem:

I thought, what a beautiful way to illustrate the simple quality of taking responsibility. I welcome your thoughts on that, Kevin.

Kevin Johnson:

Well, I think in leadership roles much of leadership is about taking responsibility and being accountable and being accountable to the people that you serve. I think much of my role at Starbucks is I get up every morning and I work in service of 400,000 Starbucks partners who proudly wear the green apron and ultimately I've got accountability for everything that happens in everything that we do to empower them and enable them to create the kind of experience they create for our customers.

Kevin Johnson:

And sometimes that's simple things and sometimes it's more complicated things. But at the end of the day, I think accountability is an important part of leadership. And it's an important part of relationships as well. You think about trust-based relationships, trust is earned and it's earned over time in a relationship between people, and it's earned by people being accountable for their actions, accountable for their commitments and accountable to serving one another.

Charlie Mechem:

Thank you very much for that. And let's go to the next one, which is in the book under the category of What's Really Important. And there are two anecdotes here or stories as you might choose to call them, that are favorites of mine and I am really interested in your feelings.

Charlie Mechem:

The first is a wonderful thought provoking quiz on what's really important in life. It goes like this. The first quiz: name five of the wealthiest people in the world. Name five Heisman Trophy winners. Name five winners of the Miss America contest. Name 10 people who won a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners, male and female, and name the last 10 winners of the World Series. Well, how'd you do? Probably not very well.

Charlie Mechem:

Now let's try the next section of the quiz. Name three teachers who aided your journey through school, name three friends who've 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. And I would suspect that you answered every question quite easily. Your comments on that?

Kevin Johnson:

Well, I think that anecdote, what that highlights is that the human experience is about relationships with people and those relationships are what matters the most. And they're going to be the things that you remember the most and those relationships and those interactions are personal. They're people that either helped you or influenced you or that oftentimes I think it's those relationships that really are amplified at times of adversity.

Kevin Johnson:

And one thing I've certainly observed as I travel around the world visiting Starbucks stores and my Starbucks partners around the world is that there's one thing that every one of us on this planet has in common and that's the human experience. That human experience is grounded in each of us in our own vulnerabilities, our own challenges that we faced and the emotions that we've all gone through in life. And being able to share those with other people and other people helping support us in times of adversity and celebrating in times of success, it's those relationships with people that matter the most.

Charlie Mechem:

Absolutely right. I could not agree more. The next anecdote is under the same heading in the book. What's Really Important. Take me a minute to read this, but I'm really interested in your thoughts.

Charlie Mechem:

A philosophy professor stood before his class with some items in front of him. When the class began, without a word, he picked up a very large empty jar and proceeded to fill it with rocks, each about two inches in diameter. He then said to the class, "Is the jar full?" And they all agreed that it was. He then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar, tipped the jar lightly. The pebbles of course rolled into the open areas between the rocks. He then asked the class again if the jar was full and they said yes, so he picked up a bag of sand and poured it into the jar and the sand filled in between the pebbles and then he asked again, is the jar full? And they responded with a unanimous yes. He then produced a bottle of red wine, from under the table and proceeded to pour the entire contents into the jar effectively filling the empty space between the sand.

Charlie Mechem:

"Now," he said, "I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life, the rocks being the important things, your family, your health, your children, things that if everything else were lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The pebbles are the other things that matter, like your job, your house, your car, the sand is everything else. The small stuff. If you put the sand into the jar first, there'd be no room for the pebbles or the rocks. The same goes for your

life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand."

Charlie Mechem:

One of those students raised her hand said, "What does the wine represent?" And he smiled and said, "I'm glad you asked. It just goes to show you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a good bottle of wine." I'd like your thoughts on that, Kevin?

Kevin Johnson:

Well, I've always believed there's always room for a great cup of coffee or a glass of wine. I'm in complete alignment with that. But I mean it really highlights in a lot of ways the importance of relationships and people, the things that matter the most. And I think that certainly has been amplified throughout my life and my experience. I think a key to that is I think is authenticity, and I think people feeling comfortable in being vulnerable and authentic with one another is really what makes those relationships special.

Charlie Mechem:

Thank you for joining me for today's conversation. If you'd like to listen to more episodes, please visit charliemechem.com or search for 15 Minutes with Charlie in your podcasting app. And if you're enjoying the show, you should check out my book Total Anecdotal fun guide to help you become a better speaker and writer. Learn more charliemechem.com/book. That's charliemechem.com/book, or you can acquire the book either through Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Thank you.