

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. 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 little to 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.

Charlie Mechem:

I want to just quote, and you may have heard this before, a limerick that I have never forgotten. I heard this years and years ago, but I'd love your reaction. "He was a very cautious lad who'd never romped nor played. He never smoked, he never drank, nor even kissed a maid. When he upped and passed away, insurance was denied, for since he hadn't ever lived, they claimed he never died." Your thoughts on the importance of sense of humor?

Kevin Johnson:

Oh. I think the ... One of the things that really connects people is being able to share energy and emotion, and a lot of that comes down to being able to have fun in life. Life is short, so I think it's important that we all step back and take the opportunity to enjoy life. When things are stressful or you go through a challenging period, there's nothing better than to have someone share a smile or a laugh with you, so I think that's a very healthy thing.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, I can think of a number of situations in my own career where, in a very tense meeting, sometimes a board of directors meeting or stockholders meeting or whatever, a little humor, not humor at the expense of somebody else, but humor, maybe self-deprecating, maybe on the human condition in general, almost inevitably eases the tension. Doesn't solve the problem, but it probably makes it easier to solve.

Kevin Johnson:

Yeah. No question. I think humor in an appropriate way can put people at ease and put ... and help people, make them more comfortable, and then, often, help them ... make them more comfortable to share ideas and help think through problems. I think there's always room for humor, and attitude of optimism is a reflection of that.

Charlie Mechem:

I, when I became the commissioner of the LPGA back in the Dark Ages, the LPGA was struggling a bit in those days, and we really went to work on just making everybody stand a little taller, feel a little better. One of the major golf writers said, "Charlie, you are a terminal optimist." I've never forgotten that phrase, and I said, "Well, if that describes me, I'm happy to claim the title." Before we end, Kevin, let me take advantage of your success and experience and just ask you a couple other things. These are not anecdotes from book, but one have to do with leadership in general.

Charlie Mechem:

I have always said that in my mind, there are three forms of leadership, and there may be 33, but the three in my mind are, number one, those who rule by intimidation, making life so miserable for the person that he has no choice, or she has no choice but to follow. The second is bribery, where people are paid an exorbitant amount to stay in the job they're in, or they otherwise wouldn't. The third is leadership by example, and the best description of that I could give is you're following the leader because you simply can't bear to let him or her down. You're dedicated to his or her success because you know, in the final analysis, your own success depends on it. I'd appreciate any thoughts you might have on qualities of leadership.

Kevin Johnson:

Well, hey, first of all, you sort of highlight there's two strong motivators in the world. One is fear, and the other is love. Of fear and love, love is the most powerful motivator in the world ...

Charlie Mechem:

Good.

Kevin Johnson:

... and so starting anything where there's an emotional connection to a shared mission and that people are a part of that mission and a part of something bigger than themselves, and I think great leaders are ones that not only create that emotional connection to a shared mission, but leaders are ones that also have the connection to the people they serve so that they understand ... A servant leader is someone who understands what people in the organization need to be able to do their best and to achieve their aspirations and to help fulfill that mission. I think connection and being a servant leader is one significant attribute.

Kevin Johnson:

Great leaders have strong conviction. They're not ... When there's a hard decision to be made, they will talk to people. They'll get perspectives, and at the end of the day, those great leaders will make the hard decision. They have courage. Not only will they make the hard decision, they will also be accountable for that decision, explain that decision, and great leaders have composure. I think at the center of every great leader is a set of values, values around authenticity and compassion and vulnerability and being a servant leader, and then, they apply that in a way to create an emotional connection to a shared mission. They connect with the people they serve. They aren't afraid of the hard decisions, and they have strong conviction. They have the courage to stand up for them, and they maintain composure. Composure is one that says at times of success, they don't become arrogant, and at times of adversity, they don't give up. Those are attributes that I think make a great leader.

Charlie Mechem:

That's really, really helpful, and let me stay on this theme just for another minute or two. I was a young lawyer, and through circumstances much too complicated to relate here, I was asked to become the CEO of one of my client companies where the founder and the chairman, was killed in a tragic accident. I took the job because I felt it was an opportunity I'd probably never have again to move from the law into business. So I did that. What I learned, somewhat to

my amazement, that your people are watching everything you do, not just everything you say, but everything you do.

Charlie Mechem:

I remember walking down the hall, one of the first days I was at my desk, and there was a gal sitting at a desk. Right across her desk on the wall was the most awful looking painting I'd ever seen, and I just commented on my way down the hall. I said, "God. You must be sick and tired of looking at that painting all day." Well, the next day, I walked out, and the painting was gone, and I thought, "Whoa. I got to be careful here, because not only what I do, but what I say is important." I'd appreciate your thoughts on becoming CEO under those circumstances.

Kevin Johnson:

Well, certainly, I think you should highlight that values are demonstrated through behaviors. You think about culture is really the set of behaviors that, oftentimes, leaders demonstrate through their actions and behaviors, and you're right. People are always watching. I think one of the things about leadership in all dimensions is that you are in the arena, and people are watching. People are judging constantly, and it's why one of my favorite quotes is one from Teddy Roosevelt, The Man in the Arena. Let me just share that with you, Charlie.

Charlie Mechem:

Yes.

Kevin Johnson:

Teddy Roosevelt wrote, he said, "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes up short again and again, because there is no error ... there's no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends

himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly ... "

Charlie Mechem:

Wow.

Kevin Johnson:

" ... so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." Teddy Roosevelt.

Charlie Mechem:

Boy. That is incredible. I remember reading that years ago, but I hadn't heard it recently, so thanks for sharing that. Experience, and of course, I'm almost 89 years old, so I've had a lot of experiences, some good, some bad. You learn from all of them, but I've never forgotten, when I was a young lawyer, the senior partner in my law firm also had a lot of business interests, radio, TV, newspapers. I did his legal work, which is sort of terrifying when you think of it, doing the legal work for your ultimate boss lawyer, but I was flattered to do it.

Charlie Mechem:

One time, on some merger or acquisition, I made some error. It wasn't a big error. I fixed it, but I was very embarrassed, and I didn't ... I wanted him to hear from me what had happened and what I had done to fix it, so I went through it and explained the problem and that I'd now fixed it. Then, I sat back, expecting to be probably criticized pretty severely. He pushed backed in his chair. His name was also Charles, and he said, "Charles, forget about it. At my age, there's nothing that hasn't happened to me at least three times." I never forgot that, because I'm now at that age where there's nothing that hasn't happened to me at least three, maybe four times, but experience, experience, experience. It goes to the Teddy Roosevelt quote. The experience is being in the arena.

Kevin Johnson:

Well, Charlie, you sort of reinforced that unless you're willing to take risks, you will never have the opportunity to learn, and much of life is about learning and adapting. That's what helps each of us grow. It helps each of us become better people, better leaders, better contributors to society.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, thank you, and Kevin, thanks for this really fascinating chat. I admire you greatly for the job you've done at Starbucks and the job that you will do ahead. You've provided outstanding leadership, and it shows, so thank you for sharing some of your thoughts with us. The book of Total Anecdotal has been a joy for me. I'm thinking of writing another one, because I still got a lot of anecdotes to share.

Kevin Johnson:

Well, Charlie, you're a good friend, and you've got some great stories to share. Thanks for spending some time with me today.

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. If you're 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 charliemechem.com/book. That's charliemechem.com/book, or you can acquire the book either through Amazon or Barnes & Noble. Thank you.