

Stand Out Moments From Season 1: Insights from 2024's Industry Leaders with multiple guests

SEASON 1, EPISODE 12 (*December 2024*)

Susan Quinn (narration): Over the past year, we have talked about everything from building a strong company culture, to mastering the art of effective communication, how business professionals and even top athletes can tap into their zone of excellence. And today we're going to revisit some of those powerful moments. As we go through these clips, you'll see just how interconnected leadership, culture, and personal growth are to creating better experiences, whether it's for your clients, your team, or for yourself. Let's dive into the first segment, where we hear from Susan Baier, who's an expert in audience in insights and market research. She shares the importance of truly understanding your audience. Not just who they are, but why they think and act the way they do. It's a perspective that can transform the way we approach, how we interact with our clients, and actually everyone.

Susan Baier: So, quite a while ago now I was working for a very large fortune 500 firm at a relatively senior level, and I'd been there for, I think four or five years before I had gone on maternity leave to have my second child, and while I was out on leave, I decided that what I really need to do was work part time. So, I reached out to my manager, and the reaction I got back was, yeah, we don't do that here. Nobody at the director level in this company globally works part time. And I said, okay, well, I'm gonna have to quit, then. And they said, well, hold on just a minute, and then they wanted me to meet with the Vice President. Now I had the same Vice President for many years, worked in the department as a director. They brought me into see him, and he sat on the edge of his desk, and he said, we're worried about you, because don't you want to be a vice president here someday? And I will tell you, Susan, I couldn't help it, I laughed, because no, I did not want to be [laughter], that was not a goal of mine, to be a Vice president there someday. And I wasn't only surprised that he asked, I was surprised at how astonished he was that anyone would not want that. And that was a function of just not understanding me, and what drove me, and why I liked my work there, and what my goals were. And I think, as leaders, if we don't understand that, we risk making really poor decisions with regard to the people that we're trying to lead. If we think everybody wants the same things we do, we're gonna be in trouble, and this is true for thought leadership, too. If we wanna really resonate and be helpful to an audience, we have to understand that audience in a way that goes beyond what kind of car do you drive and how much money do you make, or treats everyone as if they're the same, and worse, the same as us, with the same goals and challenges and perspectives and attitudes and assumptions. It just doesn't work very well. So, the research we built is designed to get into that, whether you are trying to understand your clients and prospects, or you're trying to understand your thought leadership audience that you're spending quite frankly a lot of time and effort and opportunity cost at a minimum to serve. We want to help you do it better.

Susan Quinn: First of all, I love this story. We can't decide for everyone else what it should be. And

we have to know how people are thinking and what's important to them, what is relevant to them, what will be helpful to them. And then you create your content, your thought leadership around that.

Susan Baier: Sure, so the answer, regardless of what kind of organization you're in, the audience you serve, your industry, how big you are, the answer to how can we understand our audience, and their perspectives, and their needs better is a one-word answer for everybody, and it's ask.

Susan Quinn (narration): It's important to understand your audience, but let's take that concept one step further. Let's jump into the world of business development. In our conversation with Drew McLellan, he shares how businesses need to shift from that traditional selling method to a more client-centered approach. Drew's insights are a perfect example of how businesses can evolve to stay ahead of the competition.

Susan Quinn: Can you share with us how thought leadership really is part of business development?

Drew McLellan: Yeah, so it's one of the most critical parts of our business, and frankly, most businesses do it completely wrong. We do it the old way, and the old way doesn't work anymore. So, if you think about how we act as consumers, the reality is we go shopping long before we get in the car or go to the mall or call three accountants to hire one of them. We start shopping around the internet. We start looking for subject matter experts. We start looking for somebody who can answer our questions. And so the old way of selling was we would show up at events and we would demonstrate that we were interested in doing work with someone, and the new way of selling is to be interesting and to be relevant for as long as it takes for that person to be interested in hiring. Because for most of us, and it doesn't really matter what kind of a business we own unless we are a retail store, we don't have a holiday that encourages people to shop like Black Friday. We don't have coupons or buy one, get one free offers. Most of us, we hold out our wares, our services and our products, and we have to wait until the prospect needs what we sell and then is ready to buy it. So, our goal really is to be on their radar screen and to be relevant to them and important to them and to have already added value to them before they're ready to buy. So, most businesses or most consumers are going to consider three to four choices when they're actually ready to buy. Our job is to be in that subset, and if we're the best at being in that subset by being a thought leader, by teaching what we know, by helping that prospect learn how to be better at their job every day and giving that away freely and consistently and regularly, we're going to be in the subset of three or four, and if we're really good at it, they can't imagine hiring anybody but us. So, on the day they're ready to hire us, we're the default choice, or we're at least in the consideration set. That's how you sell today, and it really is all around thought leadership and being an expert in your craft, and then teaching and sharing your expertise. It's like when we go to a great restaurant and ask the waiter can you get the recipe for the xyz from the chef? That doesn't mean we're not going to go back to that restaurant. And in fact, odds are after we try it at home, we're going to go back to the restaurant more because we can't quite do it like they do it. But they're willing to give us the recipe. They're willing to tell us how they did it, which makes us think we can do it and makes us think we can be better. And that's today, I think, the way we have to sell is that we have to be a subject matter expert that freely and generously teaches our expertise, helps people be better at their job, and then be ready and available when they're ready to add our expertise on to their roster.

Susan Quinn (narration): With a clear understanding of your audience and a client-centered approach to business development, let's turn our attention to company culture and leadership. Jeff Szyperski of Chesapeake Bank shows us at the heart of any thriving business. It lies in its people. In our conversation, he shares how his company fosters a culture of care. One that goes beyond just attracting talent. It's a powerful reminder that when you take care of your team, they take care of everything else. Let's hear from Jeff.

Susan Quinn: So, you've survived the Great Depression, the Great Resignation. And if my math is right, to be in the 11 years you are a top place to work in the nation, that's like 1% of the banks. So, what are you doing to be recognized in that those aren't just all small markets? What is the secret sauce?

Jeff Szyperski: I honestly feel top to bottom this organization, we all really care for each other. We try to hire people that don't just want a job, they want a career. We screen for people when we hire them that they have a penchant for helping others, and so that can take the form of helping a customer on a one-on-one basis, or going out into the community and doing what we do as a community bank, to help foster the well-being of our community. We look for that in our people, we encourage that in our people. We give them time to do that as part of their job. But I think at its root, we connect with the person at an employee level. I think, in our surveys that come back as part of that best banks to work for – there's a bunch of anonymous surveys that are given to all employees, and comments are part of that, and a common thread you see through those is family, or familial or, they care about me as a person. And I think we do that in authentic way, because we really do care. You just inculcate it, one little block at a time.

Susan Quinn: How do you spread that amongst 300 people? Because that sounds like a lot of heavy lifting to make sure that you care for everyone. You're caring for your community and all the people around. Oh, and by the way, you also run a bank.

Jeff Szyperski: You know. There are little things, I think, Susan. One of the small things I do is I call every employee on their birthday. So I know through the course of the year I will have talked to every employee minimum one-on-one, just through that call alone, and they're very appreciative of that. We have four times a year – we have 20 different locations, so we don't – have everyone under one roof, so we have to be very deliberate in how we foster our employee experience. The four times we get together a year, two of them are for business and two of them are for fun, and we socialize with them. I just finished last week, I do labeled my Santa tour, but I dress up every year. It used to be just Santa. This year, I was Ralphie from A Christmas Story. But I go to every branch in every department, and just have fun doing that about the 3 days before Christmas. So, you know, it's really the silly stuff. You know, you try to make good decisions from a business perspective, that's obviously a given. But to layer that with a level of erring, and then fun – fun is one of our corporate values – so to live that corporate value is fun, and it attracts fun people through the course of time.

Susan Quinn (narration): As we've seen, a great company culture isn't just about policies. It's about the way leaders communicate and how they interact with their associates. In this next segment, we hear from Lena Sisco, who's an expert in communication and leadership. Whether you're leading a team or you're negotiating with your clients, her advice is invaluable to anyone looking to strengthen their communication skills. Let's dive into Lena's approach to leadership and communication.

Susan Quinn: Is there open communication to make sure that you have what you need to do your job well, and there's a safe place to discuss it? And so, I love that you talk about be clear, lose the emotion. The empathy part that you have someone's back, do you think if you were to rank that, are they all equal? Or is there one that you would put above the other? Like you even said, this self-awareness. Like everyone has to be self-aware.

Lena Sisco: Yes, and here's what self-awareness does, though, it makes us aware of all the differences out there. So, now I understand that I'm this one type, and these are my preferences. Well, guess what? There's other types of preferences. So, I may be working with someone who's more of a feeler, and because I'm a T, we may clash in a conversation or planning a project. If I'm working with a perceiver, somebody who's a little more flexible in their guidelines and their timelines, we are definitely gonna be clashing. And sometimes if I don't understand their type, I may be labeled as a micromanager. And if I don't understand they're a perceiver, I may label them as a slacker. And this is what our brain does. Our brain wants to make sense of everything all the time. The unfortunate thing is, if it doesn't have the correct information, it will make it up. And that's where the judging and the labeling and the mind-reading comes in, and the making up a story. And usually that story puts us as the victim, and it usually puts us as, well, I did what I was supposed to do, you didn't, and it makes it really difficult. So, I always tell people you have to be an investigator. If someone's behavior doesn't make sense to you, talk to them. People are not scary. Well, most people aren't. Don't be afraid to have a conversation with people. Talk to them and bring up the fact that they distribute an observable behavior that doesn't make sense to you, or just ask them about how they feel, about you, about how you are leading the project, about your leadership skills, whatever it is, because once you ask somebody those questions, they feel they have a voice, and if you make people feel heard and appreciated, they will talk to you, money back guarantee. Because that's what everybody wants. Every human wants to feel that. So, give that. I'm always saying, you know, there's different leadership models out there. There's modeling the way, there's the servant leadership, there is the transformational leadership. I just say, listen. You have to have your critical communication skills, and with that will naturally come your leadership qualities and abilities. But with the communication like we talked about, that whole body experience, there's a lot of components to it. It is your thoughts, it's your feeling, it's your emotions. It's being able to actively listen to people, and listening doesn't mean you agree or comply, listening is listening to understand. And then also being empathetic, being able to deliver a message without fear, without feeling, ooh, I have to shy away from this feedback, or I have to shy away from saying that because they may get upset. Well, if it has to be said, it has to be said. And again, if you have that person's trust, you can say anything. I always like to tell people my job was to put people in prison for committing crimes, and they would tell me everything they did and thank me afterwards because it felt good to confess, knowing they were going away to prison for life.

Susan Quinn (narration): Effective communication and emotional intelligence are crucial to leadership success. But there's another key component to achieving excellence, and that's performance under pressure. In our conversation with Jeff Salzenstein, who was a former professional tennis player turned executive coach, we explored the whole concept of this zone of excellence. and Jeff shares how athletes and business leaders can tap into their highest potential by managing stress, staying present, and overcoming limiting beliefs.

Susan Quinn: So, I'd love to circle back on you hit a ceiling. Was the ceiling self-doubt or you had already achieved what you thought was the zone of excellence and you couldn't continue? like

what was going through your mind at that time?

Jeff Salzenstein: Well, the research says that we have 60,000 thoughts per day, whether we realize it or not. And 80% of our thoughts are negative. And so, I can only imagine that that thought, thank God you didn't embarrass yourself, that was the dominant thought that was overriding any thoughts like, I'm going to kick this guy's butt, I'm better than the number two guy in the world. And so, I think our limiting beliefs and our thoughts, they get in the way of us performing at our highest level. And that set point plays a role in us stopping going to that next level. And then we end up sabotaging in some way. And we go to our level of our belief system, the level of our identity. And for me, growing up, you know I grew up in Colorado. It's not a tennis state. I grew up in a nice neighborhood with my family. I wasn't raised to be a pro tennis player. It wasn't indoctrinated in me that I was going to do all these things. So, I believe that when I got on that big stage, there was that little Jeff, that little Colorado kid that's that didn't really believe I could do it. And I do think we all have that voice. We all have those inner voices and the ones that hold us back. But I think we now know, at least I know, that there are tools available and strategies and ways of working with that little voice and playing bigger and stepping into something greater and being the best version of ourselves. And so, I just didn't have access or awareness of that ah to be able to practice it enough. And that really is what separates the elite from those that are wanting to get there is, well, one of the big things is the mind. And so, for me, what a great experience and lesson where I can share with people, listen, we're all extraordinary, we all have our geniuses, but we're also at ordinary when we're not focusing on the right things and we're in behaviors and habits that aren't our best selves. And so, sport is a great, and tennis is a great microcosm of life and business. And that's what I love sharing with folks in a relatable way, right? That just because you're on this big stage and everyone thinks you're the best at what you do, there's still the inner demons that can hold you back.

Susan Quinn: Talk to us a little bit about how understanding yourself got you to where you were, your top 100 player in the world. What does the journey look like? How do you coach people to find their zone of excellence as we move to the business side of things?

Jeff Salzenstein: I always tell people that you have two choices, especially if you're a successful leader or you're running a successful organization. You have two choices. You can be successful and stressed out, or you can be successful and happy. Which one do you want? Like you really, you actually could choose to be successful and happy and instead of successful and stressed out. But I think we're conditioned by the world and by who we were raised that you got to work hard all the time. You got to grind. You got to hustle. It's the only way to win. And to a certain extent, it's true. Like in tennis, you have to suffer to win. But what about practicing the other tools, you know a mindfulness practice, getting your sleep, eating healthy food, cutting back or eliminating alcohol, reducing or eliminating caffeine, like all of these external things are, helping us in the moment, maybe be calmer or have more energy, but it's that short term gain that hurts us in the long term because we're using external things to feed us and to give us energy. What about knowing ourselves where we really have the tools, the strategies, and the perspectives that take care of ourselves? What about that? And who is teaching us that? We're not taught that in school. We learn math. We learn English. So, we have all these years of conditioning in school and at home. Imagine a place where parents and teachers and coaches were actually teaching the things we're talking about every day. Like, hey, kids, you get your sleep. Hey, how are you eating? And a lot of kids, they're not going to eat well right now. But maybe they're small little things that we can help them with. Or can we give them a mindfulness practice? Can we teach them how

to, a gratitude practice? So many tools, cool little micro habits that are not front of mind until we have a conversation like this. And then we're like, wait a minute. We haven't been doing these things. Let's get back on it. And you'll see the best companies, the best sports teams, they have a culture where this is embedded into it at some level...You're seeing more and more leaders, athletes and entrepreneurs and founders and CEOs embracing this because the science shows and the research shows that it improves performance and that's what I'm about is like how do I help people improve performance and become successful and also be more peaceful and happy and calm that's the part that's the journey I went on because I played pro tennis and I know what it's like to be burned out I know what it's like to be stressed out and unhappy and I know I wasn't doing a lot of the things to so support me during the tough times ... if we can be heart-centered leaders, if we can connect to our heart more and get out of our ego and not be in our head all day long, then we're more connected to our intuition, making decisions to really...know yourself... and finding your zone.

Susan Quinn (narration): Whether on the court or in business, achieving peak performance requires adaptability and a focus on continuous growth. And that's something Mark Hourigan of the Hourigan Group knows well. Mark's approach to construction has been shaped by the belief that growth isn't just about expanding services. It's about staying nimble and adaptable in the face of change. Let's hear how Mark's leadership and commitment to constantly evolving have shaped Hourigan Group into the powerhouse it is today.

Susan Quinn: So, you were named ENR's Mid-Atlantic Contractor of the Year a couple of years ago. So, is there anything that you find, at least from where you started to how you are performing today and what you see for the future that has gotten easier? And is there anything that is more difficult to be able to fulfill your vision and your passion?

Mark Hourigan: I would think most business leaders today would say, there's very little that's easier, it just seems like everything in some ways is harder. And that's not completely true. You know, when you're starting out growing a business from nothing, establishing presence and credibility and brand and reputation, you're asking people to take a leap in the beginning. I think after 30 years, we have a fairly well-established brand and reputation, and I think people in the markets that we serve understand who we are and how we do the things that we do. And I do think, as you and I have talked in the past, likeminded people seek each other out. I think we align well with certain clients that value the things that we value, and vice versa, we value the things that they do. And it's the same for the people who work for us, or the people who we hire to work and do subcontract work for us. You know, we all try and approach work in very much the same way, and that allows us to deliver. When you can create this uncommon camaraderie and alignment and fair treatment of people, there's no telling what you can accomplish. And the pride that people take in the work that they execute, we find those people? We're gonna go do great things. That part in some ways is easier, because we've now had the ability to stand and deliver for 30 plus years in doing those things. You know the things that are harder today, Susan, I think if you do not remain nimble to new technologies, to new approaches, to new methods of delivery, then I think you're going to die a slow death. And so, for us, the need, or the urgency to stay very relevant with the latest trends, the latest technologies, the latest software, the things that we are doing, that's a constant process. And you want people who work for you to be always thinking about, how do we get better today, and how do we get better tomorrow? And if we do that, then we should always be relevant in the markets that we serve.

Susan Quinn: What does that look like?

Mark Hourigan: ...Part of that is understanding how you connect with the marketplace and become that trusted voice and adviser in the marketplace that people seek you out. In doing that, it's staying in front of the developments and technologies that are coming. And what I find today is it probably takes a little bit bigger team than it did in the beginning, to kind of touch all those bases, and then figure out how to drive those changes into your organization at an appropriate pace. Meaning, too fast, too much change sometimes overwhelms people, too slow to change means you're behind the curve, so you've gotta find that balance point on how you establish process procedures and protocols that make sense, but that aren't changing every 6 months so that you can drive some consistency into your organization. That's a little bit of the art and science of what we do is trying to find those balance points, and what is the impetus for change, and do we see high ROI from making the changes that we need to make versus being overly disruptive to your organization.

Susan Quinn (narration): Hunter Lansing wraps up our discussion by showing how a strong, consistent company culture and the right leadership can turn a business into an admired, high-performing organization. He shares how Lansing Building Products uses the flywheel model to drive long-term success.

Susan Quinn: What do you think has been a key indicator to your growth? What gives your company momentum to keep doing excellent work? It sounds like it's not your unique, but you have been able to maintain momentum and keep this company growing. What does that look like?

Hunter Lansing: You used a really key word there, momentum, and that describes, I think, exactly what we're trying to accomplish on a regular basis here at Lansing. But we call our strategy the Flywheel, and a handful of years ago, who, I think, is one of the best business minds of our time, Jim Collins, he wrote a book called Turning the Flywheel. And it's about a 35-page book, and the whole premise behind the flywheel is that every engine has a that critical component inside of it, the flywheel and every other component is hinged off of the flywheel. It's about understanding how energy or pressure is applied to it, and once energy or pressure is applied and it starts to turn, everything else turns around it. Just like every engine has a flywheel, it's about really understanding a company's flywheel architecture, what is it that makes it go? What are the things, in Lansing's case, that have led us to where we are today where we're nearly a 70-year-old business? How did that happen? How did we get to where we are? And if you can really understand what that architecture looks like, you can apply that consistency to the business, to find and to achieve those results day in and day out. And so, we as a leadership team, about five years ago, read this book, and we had given out a picture of a blank flywheel—it was an off-site meeting, and I said, let's come prepared to having read this book, and let's fill out what you think Lansing's flywheel is. We worked on it in person for almost a day, and then after that we got together, went back and forth, and back and forth. But what came out of it was a very clear and distinct picture of what Lansing does on a daily basis that we know leads us to success.

Susan Quinn: Tell me more. This is interesting.

Hunter Lansing: So, if you picture a fly wheel, or if you haven't seen a fly wheel, maybe you picture a clock, and so sort of up at one o'clock, we would say we would draw in people; recruiting, hiring, and retaining the best, most outstanding people that align with our culture

and values, but are also gonna be additive to our culture and values. So that would be step one, and keep in mind that the flywheel, it's not a bulleted list of nice things to do or of aspirational goals. If you do the first one really well, it should naturally lead you into doing the second part well, and if you do parts one and two well, it should naturally lead you into doing part three well. And so, after we have great people that align with our culture and values, we want to provide them with the very best training so they can be successful in their roles, and so we do a lot of training here at Lansing, both in person and virtually. It's just a big deal, and it's very foundational to our culture, and so, you have to have great people that know how to do their jobs really well, and if you have that, you're gonna have happy people. And that leads us to the third part of the flywheel: great people that know how to do their jobs really well that are also participating in ongoing training. Training isn't a linear thing...You're always learning. You're always training. You're always, as we like to say, around here, making each day better. But once you have great people that know how to do their jobs well, then, naturally, we should be able to provide our customers with a wow experience. And so, you heard me talk a little bit about that earlier where it's our people that make the difference. But what we say at Lansing is what are we doing outside the bounds of our building products? You know, our customers expect us to deliver high quality products on time and to have them in inventory—those are really table stakes for a building products distributor—but what are we doing outside of that that really makes an impact. And so, for us, it's things like helping our customers grow their businesses and finding unique ways to differentiate them from their competitors. We have our own internal marketing group that helps our customers grow their businesses. That's an example of one way in which we try to provide a wow experience, but there's also a ton of just little things that we believe we can do that can really make a big difference in the lives of our customers. And so it could be very simple things, like one of our warehouse associates realizes or sees that our customers trailer tire is low on air, and sort of jumping out and saying, let me take care of bringing you back up to 35 psi, Mr. Customer, so you can be on your way, and it's those kinds of things that we try to really open our eyes to and try to help our customers in many, many different ways, and be as friendly as we can along the way. So great people that are trained, well, are wowing the customer, that leads us to the fourth part of the flywheel, which is being able to sell our products higher than our competitors. Lansing is a little unique in that way. We don't go to market; we're not trying to be a low-cost leader. We go to markets—we need to be competitive, that's important—but we need to sell our products higher than our competitors. Now higher might be a nickel, or a dime or a quarter. It could be one percent, it could be two or three or five, but it's somewhere in that range. If we go back to part three of the flywheel, the wow experience is worth something, and so we expect to be paid for that. And so, there's a lot of training that goes on within Lansing to help our sales team sell their products higher than our competitors. I would also say that the sales team and the operations team, those two functions within the business are so closely intertwined, and so the team has to be really operating at a high level. But our sales team also has to be getting in front of our customers and talking about the right products at the right time, and really representing the company well, which leads us to the fifth part of the flywheel, which is we're able to invest in our culture and our brand, and that has been and will continue to be so critical to Lansing's long term success. And so, we do that in a variety of different ways. In the way we train, and how much time and energy and effort and investment we put into that. It could be the way in which our facilities look, and how we try to have facilities that are clean and modern. Or whether it's racking, or whether it's our trucks or our forklifts, or the way we even dress and wear the uniform. All these things are representative of our brand, but also our culture.

Susan Quinn (narration): As we wrap up today's episode, we heard from incredible leaders who

have shown us how to achieve excellence to understanding communication personal growth and adaptability. Wherever you are on your leadership journey, the key takeaway here is clear. True success comes from constantly learning, staying open to new possibilities and taking care of both the mind and the body. I hope you're feeling inspired to take these insights and to lead forward, bringing them into both your professional and personal life with both confidence and purpose.

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