Erika Irby on the truth About success in Tech, AI’s potential, and why careers don’t go as planned

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One of my mantras is I will figure it out, and I had to figure a lot out.

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Hello, this is Transcending Tech, a podcast about the people behind the platforms and the stories that transcend technology.

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I'm your host, Ashleigh Vogstad.

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Our guest today on the show is Erika Irby.

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She is the director of channel marketing at Veeam,

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And she was actually Channel Marketing Association's 2025 visionary marketer.

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We're thrilled to have her on the show.

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Over the past two decades, she has built an impressive career at global technology companies like Veeam and Microsoft

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and she intimately understands what it means to be successful in the channel ecosystem.

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Getting to know Erika myself, her authenticity really does ring true, and we're going to hear from her how this is the bedrock of her leadership style.

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Erika, it's an honor to have you on the show.

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Welcome.

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Thank you so much.

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I am totally fangirling over you.

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This is awesome.

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Well, that's kind of where I want to start, in almost the opposite place of fangirling over you.

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Going kind of beyond the glitz of the stage, which is often where I see you at big technology conferences and commanding the room, I actually want to go back in time and really start from what created Erika and maybe just share some of the major themes or happenings in your childhood that you think influenced the person that you are today.

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Yeah, it's interesting.

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I thought about this and I was a military brat growing up.

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My dad was in the Air Force and there's a lot of positives about being a military brat.

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You really have to be adaptable.

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You move around a ton.

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You have to make new friends.

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You have to, you know, jump right in to feel accepted and feel like you belong.

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You get to travel all over the place.

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But with that, there's struggles that come with that too.

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You lose your friends.

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You have to leave people behind.

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You have to give up things.

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You don't feel like you are like rooted or you have a foundation or you have like a hometown.

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There was all these things that I had to kind of deal with as a kid.

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And it's challenging when you're young and

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going through, of course, I mean, my awkward stage lasted for like 18 years because I never really.

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I was in reading for this and learning about your background as a child of parents in the military.

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One of the things that came up is that a lot of kids in that situation don't like being asked the question, where are you from?

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Oh yeah, you don't have an answer.

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And it's interesting because my,

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I'm married now, and I've been married for 21 years this year, and we have two teenage boys.

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And when I met him, he's also a military brat.

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So when I met him, we lived in Dunedin, and I moved, he had a house, and I moved into his house.

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And then when we got pregnant again the second time, we needed a bigger house.

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And we moved from this house to this house in the same city.

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in the same town, less than a mile away, because we're like, we're not leaving.

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So our kids are born in the hospital in the neighboring city, Safety Harbor, because Dunedin Hospital can't deliver children, but that's the size our town is.

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We will never leave.

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But both of us grew up always leaving, and now this is where we're from.

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This is our hometown.

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Our kids know everyone, all the community.

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They have all this freedom.

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They have a completely different childhood than either of us did.

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So it's interesting.

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But I hope, but we still travel a lot with them because I do think that seeing new cultures, learning new things, experiencing that there are other incredible places in the world besides the United States,

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is very good for your education as a human.

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And it really helps you become aware that these other cultures are thriving around the world and offer, these incredible things.

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And I do think the adaptability has definitely helped me.

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I feel even if I'm uncomfortable, I can push through an uncomfortable situation because I've done that so many times, you know, growing up that it's just kind of become

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just a part of who I am.

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Yeah, you've built up that resilience.

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And our brains do wire differently in exposure to the experiences that we live.

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One of the things, when I was thinking about your upbringing, I heard this term recently at a conference, domicide, which is about kind of the experience of losing a home, which can be quite traumatic.

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And for me, very different upbringing than you.

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we were quite rooted, but when my parents became divorced, we lost the family home.

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And I now realize, in reflecting back, that was really this tipping point that I spent about 12 years living on the road.

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I didn't make it to six months on a lease in over a decade.

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And now I feel, I've met my partner, and I feel very settled in where we live.

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But I was curious if that resonated with you at all?

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It's interesting because I have lived in so many different places.

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And when I did meet my husband, we ended up living in this smaller house for, he had lived there for several years already.

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And I, we ended up living there for like 10 years or something.

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And I remember when we moved,

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I don't want to get emotional about it too, but it's a little two-bedroom house.

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But when we moved, I was like, oh my gosh, we have done so many Christmases here.

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Our, my first son, we brought him home, you know, this, that was, or his first house.

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We just, we've even built onto the house, which at the time when we were really young, getting alone and building onto the house was like incredible.

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Like we had done all this stuff here and I was like, oh my gosh, who am I?

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Who am I giving up this house to?

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Are they going to take care of it?

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Are they going to, like I had this very interesting, like visceral connection, you know, to this home.

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Luckily, we ended up, my husband's brother moved into it.

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Oh, wow.

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So it like stayed in the family.

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And then even when he moved out with his now wife, my husband's parents still own the house.

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So

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that doesn't always work out.

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But it also is interesting because both, they were the military people.

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And so now they're like ensuring that we have kept this house.

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This continuity.

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Yeah.

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So it's, I totally feel you.

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And then you, almost don't want to get like too comfortable in places because it's not really your home or, you know, you're renting it.

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So you can't like necessarily put stuff on the walls or, you know, make it your own.

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But

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Which is funny because I have repainted the walls in my house like 14 times.

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And I'm like, who cares?

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I can do whatever I want.

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It's my house.

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It's a very freeing sensation.

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Yes.

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So my understanding is you were about 17 years old when you decided that you weren't going to do the next move with your family.

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What was that like?

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Yes.

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So we were in Florida.

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We had moved there when I was in the 9th grade.

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My dad was stationed at MacDill Air Force Base.

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And he received a fellowship at Georgetown University in DC.

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And he decided to move with my brother.

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And my mom was like, well, I can't leave Erika because I refuse to, like, I'm not moving again.

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I was a senior in high school.

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I was about to graduate.

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I was like, what, this is not, I cannot do it again.

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And it ended up my parents, my dad, my mom did stay with me.

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My dad went to Georgetown for like, it was like 9 months.

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And then he got stationed to Germany.

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And I was, I'm like, I'm not doing it.

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I absolutely cannot move.

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Because that's close to Florida.

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Right.

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I was like, you've got to be kidding me.

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I'm like, I'm not moving to DC.

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I'm not moving to Germany.

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So, and plus I had already been accepted to the University of South Florida.

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And so my mom begrudgingly moved me into an apartment and they left.

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Yeah.

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And what was maybe, what was one of the tough lessons that you learned during that period of your life?

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One of my mantras is I will figure it out, and I had to figure a lot out.

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I still had military privileges because I was still dependent on my dad, but I had to go down to the base and renew some things, my ID card and the sticker on my car and different things, which I had never done before.

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But I just thought, well,

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Surely somebody will point me in the right direction.

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Surely I will figure it out.

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And I did.

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And I had to figure out how to, of course, register for my classes.

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And this was a million years ago.

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It's still challenging.

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I mean, my partner just went back to school for engineering and trying to help him navigate.

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Oh, it's wild.

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My son in college, or about to start college now, is in a completely different universe.

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When I went to college, I applied to one college.

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I got accepted to one college.

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I registered for classes on a phone, like a push phone, where I was like, would you like this class?

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And they were like, yes, 147.

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You know, you had to put in the code.

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Ridiculous.

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It took you like an hour and a half to register for your classes.

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But nowadays, everything's online.

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You have all these different applications that you have to fill out.

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And it's terrifying either way.

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But you just kind of figure it out.

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I remember I was

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this really, this is like looking back and I'm like, my gosh, but I had 0 money.

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I was like a waitress.

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My parents definitely helped out.

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They paid for all kinds of stuff.

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But I still had to pay for a lot of my own bills.

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And I must have just mismanaged that month.

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And I remember having like $100 in my bank account and taking all my little cash tips to Amscot.

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I don't know if anybody even knows what that is, but you can, they give you money orders.

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And so I would buy money orders for each of my bills with this, my waitress cash.

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my gosh.

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But whatever, bills still got paid.

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And, you just made it work.

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I ate ramen and survived.

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This reminds me of one of what I believe is one of your other mantras, the universe will provide, which spoke to me quite deeply as well.

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But I haven't actually heard directly from you.

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Like, what does that mean to you?

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And how did that mantra come about for you?

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Yeah, I think it's another way of just saying like, everything happens for a reason.

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And sometimes when you're just in a crappy situation or you're just in need of something or it feels like the situation is just untenable, the universe pulls through.

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Like it will provide something, a solution, an opportunity, a way out, another option.

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You know, it'll provide you what you need.

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And

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Full transparency.

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The first time I saw this phrase, I was watching like some Instagram reel and this girl had a shirt on that just said, the universe provides.

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And I was like, oh my God, done.

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That's it.

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That's a forever I'm saying that.

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But it's so true.

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I was just, had an unfortunate incident yesterday with a co-worker of mine.

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She's really struggling with something and something came up and I'm like, okay, well,

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let's talk about it.

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We talked it through and this very unlikely scenario arose and I was like, there it is.

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The universe provides.

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That is what the action that you need to take to make sure that you feel better and feel safe.

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And she did and it worked out.

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So it's just, I think, a good reminder of like, you know, sometimes if you just wait or you just let things or just believe that it will be okay and it always will.

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You know, one of my favorite tools

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I wrote a Fast Company article about this years ago now, but Brian Scudamore, he's this famous entrepreneur from a company called 1-800-Got-Junk.

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And it was really like a market-making business.

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There weren't any junk removal companies that were famous.

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And they did these incredible marketing campaigns.

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And he fairly quickly grew the company to over $100 million in valuation.

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And I think I read about his story in a book called Scaling Up by Vern Harnish.

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But anyways, it is very inspirational.

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And one of the tools that Brian used to grow his business, he called the Painted Picture, which is about picking a random date in the future.

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So at December 31st, 2026, and telling the story of your life, of what it looks like from that vantage point in the future.

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And we do this sometimes when we do goal setting at Transcends, or once a year I'll often paint a picture of what 10 years in the future looks like for my business.

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And it can be really challenging, confronting in a way.

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It's scary to think big and to dream big, and it's even scarier to put that out there publicly to people.

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But that's kind of what came up for me when I was thinking of the universe will provide

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at least in my experience, there's also this aspect of asking for it or visualizing.

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And I wondered if there was any tools in your toolkit that, practices that you have that help you with that side of goal setting, visioning, manifesting, whatever feels good to call it.

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Yeah, I love that.

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So I'm pretty woo-woo.

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Like I can get deep.

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But I've read a lot about how when you, if you want something to happen, I mean,

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And this is just, I think, like a psychological thing, but if you're negative about stuff, like you'll just continue to perpetuate that negativity.

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So on the opposite side, if you're positive about something, you will continue to kind of perpetuate that positivity.

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You'll start to believe your own inner voice.

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We talk to ourselves more than we talk to anybody.

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And we're like, you know, if you're going to hurt somebody's feelings, you're hurting yourself when you say things like, oh,

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I'm not a morning person, or gosh, I'm so slow, or dang, I've got that double chin, or all these things that we say about ourselves, or I'm not really good at public speaking, or I'm not really good at this.

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But I remember the first couple of times I was asked to present something, and I sort of had those thoughts, like any normal person being nervous.

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But if you tell yourself the good story, eventually you'll believe it.

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And of course, that's really what manifesting is, that you

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believe that something already is yours or you've already made it happen.

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And then inevitably it happens, which is, and it can be, I tell people like, look, try something very small.

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I remember I read this once.

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It's like one of these little exercises to do just to see if things really happen.

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There's a couple of little fun things you can do.

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One, believe that you're lucky.

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So this morning, I'm kind of running to the airport, getting there as fast as I can.

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and I cannot find a parking space to save my life.

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And I'm like, holy bananas, I've got to park this car and go catch my flight before they start boarding.

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So I just started telling myself, I'm like, I am going to find this incredible spot right around this corner.

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Of course, first couple corners I didn't, but I was like, we're doing this.

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And boom, there it was, this ridiculous, sweet parking spot.

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And I'm like, amazing.

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Now,

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It wasn't just by chance that it was there, probably, but in my brain I'm like, look what I manifested.

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So you can kind of just like tell yourself like these like small things throughout, they're teeny little confidence boosters, but I've always kind of done that.

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It is how the neuroscience of our brains work.

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I mean, these are, they're pattern recognition engines and they are really reflective of what we feed into them.

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Yes.

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And you know, there's this, speaking of Lulu,

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one of the most woo-woo people that I follow.

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And it took me a long time to really understand her stuff, but Byron Katie.

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And the fundamental principle is all unhappiness, suffering is rooted in not wanting something that is.

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And so let's say I'm anxious to go up on stage and I'm dreading, I'm very nervous, so I'm dreading going out there.

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I mean, where my unhappiness is really coming is from the belief that I don't want to do something that I know that I have to do.

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Or, you know, an even simpler one.

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It's like I have to hand in an assignment for school.

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I don't want to do the assignment on a Sunday night.

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But if you can somehow, and I appreciate that it's much easier said than done, but as someone who tries to practice it, you know, it's

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It's amazing on the times that you can choose to want to do something that you maybe previously didn't want to do.

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How much that can genuinely change your whole demeanor towards something.

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Absolutely.

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It's very powerful.

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There's a book, I think it's called The War of Art.

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I listened to him, a quick little snippet of his book, and he was talking about the thing that you're actually afraid of is what you should go towards.

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because you're afraid of it because you probably could kill it.

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you probably could do this incredible job, but you're just like protecting yourself.

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Because it's really what fear is.

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It's really what that apprehension is and what anxiety is, to protect you.

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If you feel nervous about going and doing something, it's because your body and your brain are like, well, don't, you don't want to fail.

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But you have to push through and be like, what if I don't fail?

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What's something that scares you?

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Oh my gosh, this, is super, it's nerve-wracking because in my brain I'm like, am I sounding like an idiot?

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Am I just like saying stupid things?

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So, but then, you know, I'm like, well, who cares?

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I mean, we're having a conversation and, you know, presenting in front of like your SVPs and your CEOs and that is super intimidating.

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But again,

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They're just people.

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And so a lot of times, if you kind of just remind yourself, like, just be smart, be succinct, say what you got to say.

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Don't like panic.

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I mean, you're not going to get like fired on the spot.

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I mean, maybe, but I hope, you know, wouldn't want to work there anyway.

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But you know, they're doing their jobs too.

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And actually, Microsoft taught me a lot about this.

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Huge, big time leaders there, right?

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They're massive.

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These CVPs are rolling in and they have just a remit of billions of dollars that they're responsible for.

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Pressure is incredible.

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They are answering to Judson on calls.

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I mean, super intimidating.

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And a couple of times, Travis Walter was one of the leaders that I really noticed this.

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Someone would ask a question or he would even ask, you know, well, what should we do about this?

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And then he would say, I don't have the answer either.

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Let's try to figure it out.

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And I remember being like, wow, that's such a relief.

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Because if you asked me right now, I would also be like, I don't know.

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But his approach was, we don't know the answer or else we'd be killing it, right?

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But we don't, we have a gap.

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So let's put our heads together and put together a plan.

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And I know that seems so silly, but sometimes you roll into these, you're trying to read out, you're trying to demonstrate your job, you're trying to show your work, and you may not have all the answers, but that's okay because part of your job is to actually discover better ways of doing things.

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Or I think about it like creating space for other people.

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I mean, so often,

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People want to help.

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They want to contribute and creating a safe space.

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And I think that that's something you do uniquely well.

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And I was so interested by the fact that your early career, you were actually a teacher.

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You weren't working in tech at all.

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So when I think about teaching, I think of someone who really is skilled in creating environments for people to learn, to grow, to express themselves.

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Tell me about your decision, post-university to teaching, and then what was that moment when you decided to do something different from teaching?

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Yeah, it's interesting.

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My dad was a teacher before he went to the military.

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So he also had this like, he was a professor at SEMO in Missouri.

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And there's a lot of teachers in my family.

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My brother's wife is a teacher.

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I have multiple cousins that are teachers.

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And it kind of was just something that like ran in my family.

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And I always

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I was distinctly remember being like in 3rd grade, 4th grade.

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Like I knew I wanted to be a teacher from day one.

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And I've always been a big nerd too.

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I love writing.

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I was in the poetry club, all of the nerdy things, you know, Shakespeare, all the reading, all the writing.

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I read books like crazy.

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I love to write.

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So I gravitated towards like English and literature and I really wanted to do that.

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So I got my degree.

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I thought, amazing, here I go.

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I'm going to go do these incredible things.

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Well, one of my first teaching jobs was actually at an alternative school.

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And that school was for children who broke the student code of conduct.

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So they were removed from mainstream and they were put in this special school.

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And they ranged from children who had legitimate, intense behavioral issues, who really needed a lot of help, more so than the school could provide,

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Some kids were just brats, right?

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They just needed time to grow up and, maybe be grounded or something, have some structure.

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I mean, others had just really intense, horrible things that happened to them.

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And that was an eye-opening experience.

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That was really hard to like leave my work at home because

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a lot of these kids, and I was like 22 years old, 21 years old, and I was...

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So you weren't much older than them, really.

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Exactly.

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And I was the most stable adult in their life.

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Terrifying, you know, to think about that.

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But we had moments in there, like I would just read these stories to them that I like, and we would, you know, read these books, and we would make,

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like art projects around them or just do these neat things.

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Because I had very small classes and there was one time this other teacher like came to our class and she's like, the bell has rung.

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I'm waiting for the kids to come to my class.

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And we were like, oh gosh.

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We were so like, the kids were just enthralled in this book, The Outsiders.

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Oh yeah, love The Outsiders.

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And the class was all boys.

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All these, you know, because often the boys were the ones that got in trouble the most.

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But so they were just into it.

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And

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I mean, I also had terrible moments.

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I had a chair thrown at me.

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I had all kinds of horrible things, said to me or whatever.

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But, I think that you can really have incredible impact on people more than you even realize.

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And finally, after a while, I talked for about five years or so, and I got burnt out.

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It's emotionally draining.

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That sounds very emotionally draining.

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You know, I think even when I think back to

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my rocky teenage years, I maybe fell into that category of needed some discipline and structure.

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Not that my parents didn't discipline, because they certainly did, but I acted out a lot.

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And thinking back to some of the things I said to my teachers or the way that I acted, I'm still mortified by it.

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hurts my soul when I think about it.

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You know, I was just like an angsty teenager, and I'm sure that's

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it's very hard to hear.

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But, the young people refer to it as cringe, I believe, right?

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That feeling that you're explaining.

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And I have it all the time too, but I think everybody does.

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And I live in the same town and I very once in a while, every once in a while we'll see a kid who's now an adult person and they're a stable adult person.

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You know, like it, you, everyone, mostly everyone, you know, grows out of it.

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And unless you have some,

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some issues that you need to have, addressed by like a professional.

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I mean, so much of that is like normal.

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And I think teachers make such an incredible impact.

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And I think that foundation of teaching, and it was hard for me to leave, but I just felt like I became grouchy, frankly.

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And I became like to a point where I was like, I don't know if I'm benefiting this.

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Like I'm struggling, you know, to do this.

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It was challenging for me.

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I remember I told my husband, I was like, I'm going to quit this job.

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I had a panic attack that night.

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First panic attack I've ever had in my life, and maybe like my only one.

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And the next day I'd started a job that I found, oddly, in this teeny town that we lived in, it was a company that created certification exams.

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So, you know, when you're a cosmetologist or a nurse or a tattoo artist even, or a variety of these different jobs, you have to get a certificate as opposed to a degree sometimes.

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and they created the certification exams.

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So weirdly, my education just flowed beautifully into this corporate job.

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And that was a great experience.

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And from there, I went to a marketing

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role for a few years, learned a ton about marketing, all kinds of different industries.

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And I guess that kind of blended in with your love for writing and poetry.

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Yep, it really helped me.

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I was able to do a lot of writing.

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I learned like instructional design, which again is a form of teaching, but more with like a digital framework and you built out these different modules.

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And then from there, I got a job at Tech Data, which is now TD Cynics.

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which is headquartered in Clearwater, Florida.

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So that's a very strange way that I got into IT.

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And in between that time, I went back to school and got my master's degree in mass comm.

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And I had a baby.

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So for anybody who's like, you know, oh my gosh, I don't know if I can do a career change.

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You can do freaking anything.

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It may take you 8 years.

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But

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you'll be fine.

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You will get there.

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Yeah, no, I definitely believe that.

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and it's funny, your early career following in the family footsteps.

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I mean, I never thought in a million years that I would follow in my dad's footsteps and did not want to, especially as a teenager, even university.

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But he was in a senior leadership role in

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We live in British Columbia, Canada, and so provincially they run public transportation.

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And he was essentially head of technology for public transport.

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And in the world of ecosystem partnerships, they're one of the largest Microsoft partners in Canada.

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And I fought against that for so long, and I also had different careers.

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worked in non-profit, for example, for a long time.

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And I was thinking of that when you talked about teaching, because the emotional toll for me after a while.

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I mean, when you think even, you can hear the heaviness, because when you work in marketing, really what my job was, to tell the most powerful stories that got people to give the most money in the form of donations.

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And so you're eliciting emotions.

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And I worked with Holocaust survivors and rape victims and

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the genocide in Rwanda, and it was just really heavy, challenging stuff.

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And while I felt great that my work was really contributing to something, similar to you, I got very cranky by the end of it.

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I was just so burnt out.

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I was working these insane hours, and it was just never good enough because there was never enough money to help enough people.

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And that model of the nonprofit is something I've always had a bit of tension with because of that.

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And then for me, switching gears and working in tech, in my personal case, is just so empowering.

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I really enjoy the size and the scope and what's possible and being on this leading edge of innovation.

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It really, it

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Like you, I'm A voracious reader.

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there's just no end to what you can learn and consume in this world of fast-changing technology.

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But I want to hear from you.

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So you land at TechData.

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So for those listening, TechData is one of the largest ecosystem companies on the planet.

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And they're really, and feel free to correct any of this, but

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They're really a distribution, a software distribution company is the core of the business.

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So yeah, talk about your experience there.

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So I had absolutely no idea what a distributor was.

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And my husband actually worked there first.

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And this is going to sound so hilarious, I think back on this, but I remember the first time I walked into the office before I had worked there, I was like meeting him for lunch and

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he had to come down and get me and let me in because of all the security.

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And they still have this giant cafeteria for their employees.

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And I remember being like, my gosh, how cool to work here.

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And eventually, when I did get a job there, we both worked there at the same time.

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But it was fascinating.

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So all of the sausage making in the IT industry happens at the distributor.

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And I have often said that if you want to learn everything about

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the channel work and distribution just for a little bit.

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At least you will see everything.

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because you see the whole thing from soup to nuts.

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The vendors, the end users, the resellers, and then this like machine that, is driving all these, all the deals and is processing everything.

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All the logistics, all of the inventory, all of the loans, even, everything that they do, to help the business.

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And of course now, distributors have their own marketplaces and, they have to obviously keep pace with them.

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with technology and buying trends as well.

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So that job was fascinating.

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I learned, I was on the software side at 1st and I was a marketing account executive, which essentially meant I was responsible for selling the annual marketing programs that distribution provided to all the vendors, all the OEMs.

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And the funny thing about distribution is even though

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Tech Data at the time I worked there, I think they made something like $26 million a day, which is like unbelievable to think about.

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But they make pennies on the dollar.

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They are making 3% margin, 2% margin, sometimes less on the deals, profit on the product itself.

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But they make a ton of money on services and also on marketing.

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It's a huge profit maker for them.

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So I sold a lot of this marketing.

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And when you say marketing, so

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Is that, say I'm a company and I want to get access to your e-mail list.

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And so you would send out a flyer, an e-mail flyer on my behalf and I'm paying for that advertising space.

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Yes, so we would build these programs that had a variety of routes to market to either access the resellers, the value added resellers or service providers that want your product and will go sell it to the customers.

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Or the sales folks internally, because having access to those sales folks meant that you were top of mind for them as they were chatting with partners and customers.

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And then they're like, oh, you should go with so-and-so because in the back of their head, you just had a lunch and learn.

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It just reminded me this product was blah, blah, blah.

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So we would sell that type of marketing, which is a little wild because

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you're marketing to another business to go sell on your behalf.

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Yes.

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And I had to learn that because in my mind, marketing, of course, this is 100 years ago, but it was like, the ads in my magazine or commercials that you see on TV, but to the consumer.

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But this was, you know, a little bit different.

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You are marketing to another business to convince them it is beneficial for you to sell my product because, you know, of all these reasons.

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Yeah, it's almost

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business through business to business in these different levels.

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Like one of the things that struck me about you, and actually until you said it about working in distribution and seeing it end to end, I'd never actually thought about that before.

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And it makes sense to me a little bit more now with your career in channel.

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Because I think for the average person, I mean, myself included, channel's complicated.

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Oh yeah.

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Or it seems complicated, sounds complicated.

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I mean, there's so many acronyms.

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but it's the business transactions are layered.

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It's not point A to point B.

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It's always rooted through different pathways and sometimes, like you mentioned, also marketplaces.

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So what would you say were your big kind of takeaways from tech data that enabled you to be in this director of channel role today?

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Great question.

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I mean, I think a lot of it is relationships.

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I would really say

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The foundation of the channel is built so much on relationships, which of course are built on trust.

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And I saw this hand in hand, right, folks working hand in hand.

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And really, I remember one time sitting in this meeting, it was a QBR and the vendor happened to be Symantec at the time.

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Quarterly business review.

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Yep.

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And one of our VPs was there and Symantec was informing us that they were cutting our backend rebate.

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which is a huge part of profit and revenue for a distributor.

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And we, would use it for a bottom line, but we would also use it to reinvest sometimes and, continue to drive the business.

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So receiving that cut was pretty like devastating news.

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And I watched my VP express her displeasure in a very professional way.

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about how frustrated she was and that this was not going to be good for their business.

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And then later that night, we all went out to dinner and then we talked about it over drinks.

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And, it wasn't like resolved immediately, but over time, things were repaired and we found other ways to, continue to make the business profitable.

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But had the relationship not been there, it would have been a very challenging, even more miserable, conversation.

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And

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I think it helps you when it comes to competition a lot too, because if you folks want to work with people that they trust and they feel comfortable with and they know that they have their business at heart, and there's so much competition in the channel.

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And if you don't have those relationships and if folks don't trust that you really are going to be mindful with all of the data and knowledge of their business and all the stuff that you have,

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And you're not going to turn around and just be like, Oh, so-and-so has got a plan here.

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Let's just use it over here and we'll just give their business, you know, to this group of customers over here or this group of ours.

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And some folks will say, Well, there's the old boys club or the good old boys club, and there's some of that, of course.

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I mean, a lot of those businesses, you know, are started like that, but more and more, it's really about if

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you can still build trust.

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you can still be brought into a group.

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You can still represent your brand and people will be like, okay, I absolutely want to do business with you.

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I can't always promise you everything, but we will do whatever we can, you know, to maybe give you a higher up level in a program.

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And these all seem like such small, silly things.

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And somebody else listening who doesn't work on the channel may be like, who cares?

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But these things can make huge differences because the more mind share you have at these companies,

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just the more successful that you will be there.

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Yeah, I think trust is absolutely critical.

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I started Transcends in 2018 when I lived in New Zealand, actually, and we were doing business in the US and in Canada.

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And partially for that reason, I founded the company as Remote.

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And one of the things that we say at Transcends is remote first, not remote only.

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And I think if you peel back the layers, what we're actually saying with that comment is trust is built.

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enrich channels of communication.

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And face-to-face is a much richer channel of communication than, say, digital, whether that's chat or even video.

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And what I really notice is we do our best to get the company together at least once a year, everybody in the company.

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And that time out and that face-to-face connection,

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I mean, it's good for so many reasons, but definitely one of the more tangible benefits is like speed.

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I find after we do the FaceTime, the engine is just moving quicker.

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And I really believe that is lubricated by trust.

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It's when you know your colleagues, you can problem solve more effectively.

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You're more likely to be creative as opposed to defensive.

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You know, all of these things start to come into play.

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How do you see trust changing in an AI world now?

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This is interesting.

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And I don't want to be any type of like a doomsday person by any means.

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But I think the most successful people are going to have a little bit of a healthy mindfulness about technology.

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And not a mistrust, but a knowledge of discernment.

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always making sure that a human has judgment over final output of whatever is produced, with AI.

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Is it an incredible tool?

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Yes.

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It's fascinating.

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I mean, I use Copilot all the time.

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Help me research, help me aggregate something, help me, you know, look up something.

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Sometimes I just have like a jumble of thoughts or I have an idea

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and I dump it all in there and it helps me create a framework.

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But it's also inaccurate sometimes because it only can aggregate and pull data, but it doesn't have like a fact checker or a brain to be like, well, that's not true because at that time there was this.

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And it only picks like certain pieces of data from an article or something that it has leveraged as a resource, which isn't

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which taken out of context can sometimes be, incorrect or not the message that you want to, portray.

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So I do think that the smartest companies out there, they start with a ethics committee and then they build their AI practice from there.

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Yeah, I mean, it's a very hot topic right now in market with

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So one of the big issues is one of the frontier models, Anthropic, is one of the big AI leaders in the space right now, and they have these incredible tools, Claude for Code and Claude Cowork, and these have been blowing up.

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And I think it was perhaps last weekend, they became the number one most downloaded app.

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And the headline news is really around where is the CEO, Dario, where is he going to shift to in terms of AI ethics under all this pressure to open up?

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And

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they have started to rephrase and change some of their vision, mission, purpose to peel back on the high bar on safety, which can be very concerning.

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And then I just read recently this book by Mustafa Suleiman, who's the CEO of AI at Microsoft.

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And he's very much, I would say, to paraphrase, hopefully,

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doing it justice, he talks a lot about containment and really comes from a perspective of the average person is simply not aware of the very real risks in AI and particularly in the biomedical space and what there's a very real possibility of happening there.

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So no, I think that ethics is very, very topical.

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One of our clients

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I guess I won't say who right now, but hopefully the story will become public soon.

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But they're a large global player, and they've been hired by the Australian government to build compliance tools because, and I know you're a parent, in Australia, it's very restricted getting access to social media when you're under the age of 16.

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They have put an end to that, but the challenge is there hasn't been a way to actually monitor or reinforce.

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And they just lie their way around it.

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Yes, exactly.

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So I was wondering for you as a parent, kind of putting a different lens on it, how are you seeing AI play out with your kids and what kind of advice do you give them around using AI?

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Yeah, great question.

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I, think about, I think it was Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg both have made comments about how they restrict their own children from their own technology because they know how addictive it is because they actually, not they personally, but their companies have purposefully created addictive mechanisms within, their social media to obviously continue

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consumption, which is in essence marketing, right?

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I mean, everybody is doing this.

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I am a marketer.

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I would like people to consume Veeam.

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Yeah.

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Hands down.

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I don't have not yet figured out the addictive quality there yet, but this is it's happening.

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And we see this a lot, especially with boys who are prone to ADHD and immediate gratification of the social media.

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can really inflame a lot of issues.

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And one of them is this epidemic of loneliness that a lot of research has actually called out that so many people are, you know, they're communicating with like ChatGPT all day long as if it were a friend.

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And then their actual real friends, they're losing this connection.

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And they

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constantly, or scrolling, scrolling, scrolling, and then they go to have a real life conversation that's slower, and they're like easily frustrated.

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So, my kids sit on their phones a lot, and it's definitely something that we do have a challenge about.

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I mean, it's huge, like some of what you said in there.

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I mean, Harvard Business Review came out with an article in April 2025, where the number one use case of AI, chatbot AI, is actually therapy.

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Number one use case.

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And, there was all this, you used the word woo-woo, there was all this woo-woo stuff in the past.

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Like, there was almost this unstated belief that it was a bizarre path of thinking that humans would ever interface with a machine in that kind of a way.

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And actually, number one use case, like this is not a fringe thing, or people building chatbots,

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There's chatbots of the dead, they sometimes say, which are people are building chatbots by ingesting materials that are left behind by loved ones who are deceased and recreating in different.

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aspects, part of that persona to still exist.

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And there's a lot of research happening on, what the impact of this is to our psyche and is it really helping us to grieve through the process or, is it harmful in some ways?

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I think the jury is still out.

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Oh, yeah.

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Well, think about how wild it is that we agonize over, you know, security systems for like the physical premise of our house.

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But then we have these listening devices that live in our house and hear us and we're typing our passwords into everything.

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And our money financials are just flowing through systems that our chat bots are just like, well, actually you do have enough money to go on that cruise because I've now access to your bank account.

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Like there's all these like wild things.

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And you know, there was a terrible, terrible story about a boy who had depression and he

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did speak to chat, I think it was ChatGPT, or forgive me if it wasn't that one, looking for guidance.

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And it indicated that he should just, not bother his parents because it would stress them out and just gave him horrible, terrible advice and he ended up taking his life.

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And, you know, I don't

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I think that's happening all over the place, but it one time is bad enough.

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Yeah, it's devastating.

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I think there's a lot of like changes now that the companies are making.

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I mean, there should be immediate warnings and triggers and thresholds and things that as soon as anyone, a child or not, makes a comment about, you know, I mean, I don't feel like I should live anymore, whatever, that it immediately warnings and it automatically calls the suicide hotline.

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Like,

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There actually probably is all these incredible ways that we could be using this technology to change the world and make it a better place and save lives.

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And unfortunately, sometimes I think we, we're so focused on consumerism that the more profitable way is the way we end up, going down and then folks, suffer from it.

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And with my kids, I mean, kind of back to that question, I mean, I'm not a good ideal parent by any means because we use both my husband and I work in technology.

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We use our phones all the time.

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My husband and I make jokes sometimes.

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We parent by phone because we'll be out, you know, the two of us on a date night or with friends.

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And, you know, we're like ordering food for our youngest through Uber.

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And the oldest one says, hey, I'm going here.

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And we're like, okay, great, love you.

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And I mean, that's our parenting.

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But

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on one hand, at least we're having this connection where I can track them.

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I mean, there's like all these things about it that are beneficial, but we do have to forcibly remove the technology from them sometimes.

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And we also have to remove it from ourselves because it's very hypocritical to tell a 15-year-old and an 18-year-old to get off your phone when I'm just scrolling away on Instagram and ordering everything that it tells me to.

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And

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so a lot of it, we often look at ourselves and we're like, okay, which?

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I think is a really important and challenging and challenging step.

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both of your boys, I believe, fall in the Gen.

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Z category.

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And Gen.

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Z, in our world of B2B technology, Gen.

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Z is going to be the number one buying audience pretty soon.

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And by 2030, they'll control 12 trillion in spend.

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Bananas.

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It's bananas.

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And I was reading a report with something like,

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in an average month, half of Gen.

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Zs will have, in the United States, will have made a purchase on a social platform, TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube, like directly in app purchases.

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And I'm just wondering, like, what do you think, how does this sort of buying trend and what you're seeing at Veeam and your role of marketing kind of impacting business to business buyers?

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And how are you and Veeam thinking about that?

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Are you gearing more for marketplaces or social purchasing?

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experiences.

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Great question.

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And yes, to all of the above.

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Veeam has an Instagram account, which seems funny sometimes because like, what are we posting?

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But I didn't know that you had an Instagram.

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I mean, it doesn't surprise me because it's a very fun.

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I mean, for those who aren't so familiar, I mean, Veeam is pretty famous, I would say, in the channel for this.

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bold, bright, kind of breaking the mold of B2B tech marketing.

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They've done some really, really fun stuff and hosted these legendary parties.

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But yeah, fast.

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So I think, you know, we want to be on the cutting edge of that marketing.

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And I think our mantra is really around just be where the customer is.

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And sometimes we find, though, there's actually been some changes that, and

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different news outlets and folks have actually kind of reported on this.

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But there's been a resurgence in, like, for example, Barnes and Nobles now has new stores opening.

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Oh, wow.

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I didn't know that.

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And there's been this kind of like a, almost like an anti-technology movement amongst some of the young people because they've discovered that there are books that have pages and they can turn and touch them.

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And

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they refer to some of these places like a Barnes and Nobles or a Starbucks as a third place.

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And to them, it's this new idea.

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It's this new social gathering opportunity for them to like have these face-to-face conversations.

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Now, for someone my age, that's bananas because we used to have poetry readings in high school at Barnes and Nobles like every Thursday night, and obviously it was the coolest place to be.

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But then of course, a lot of that, you know, faded out of style, and especially with COVID.

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Nobody did anything.

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Everybody was, very, very digitally focused.

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But thank God, right?

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Our kids are like starting to recognize that getting off your technology and being face to face with somebody, just like you said about the building the trust and having that human connection is really critical for themselves, first and foremost.

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And then, you know, of course, for eventually for their jobs and things.

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So I think that

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Yes, we want to be where the customer is, but that doesn't automatically mean that we need to think, okay, everyone is buying through TikTok.

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VM should have a TikTok account immediately.

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We also need to look at, there are a lot of really, especially in enterprise sales, they go to live events where thought leadership circles are happening, where people are

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rumbling over what's going to happen next.

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And they have a wallow and they're talking about it and they're engaged and they're listening to one another.

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And they're even competitors sharing what's happening with their businesses for the greater good of the larger ecosystem.

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Absolutely.

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And even as a marketing agency ourselves, I mean, we've seen a big uptick in face-to-face events.

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Everyone's talking about face-to-face events or how do we add on to a face-to-face event that's already taking place?

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Absolutely.

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So I think, yes, there's, to reach these Gen.

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Zers, that the first course of action we think might be, to go to all these places that we know they are, but I think it's shifting a bit.

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I think that the savvy marketer never overlooks, some old school things that are becoming new again.

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One of the, I read this stat back in December, pre-Christmas from PWC.

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They did this survey and it was, I think, a millennial Gen.

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Z survey.

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And it was 81% of Gen.

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Z were planning to buy a dupe during the holiday season.

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81%.

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So a dupe for, I'm guessing, roughly similar age.

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And like a knockoff.

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So the classic would be like a knockoff handbag or something.

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As like a duplet.

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Yeah, it's funny because I've asked quite a few people this, and nobody, no one in our age bracket is familiar with that term, and neither was I.

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Well, I shop at Walmart, so I mean, I think Target, Walmart are actually very fancy, yes.

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So the whole thing with Gen.

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Z, I think for our generation, buying a so-called do was seen as low quality, cheap, like it was something to be embarrassed about.

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But what this PWC survey was arguing is that actually with Gen.

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Z, it represents a values shift because what they care about is actually the product, the underlying product more than the brand.

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They just want the thing.

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Right.

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And it's almost- They want the outcome it provides.

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Yes, exactly.

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They want the outcome it provides.

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And they don't want to come across like a fool or being silly or funny enough, being duped.

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themselves for paying more for something than they need to pay for it.

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So it's actually like a positive sort of a leaning.

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And I do, yeah.

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And I wonder with software coming to our world of business to business technology, I do think that what we're hearing in the market today is increasingly this focus on outcomes.

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Like we don't care what the sticker is on the box.

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What we really need this technology solution to do is a verified thing.

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And to bring this around to what you were talking about with trust, we've been talking about trust in between humans.

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But my kind of research that I'm doing right now at Oxford and kind of one of my areas of passion is really digging into what does trust look like in a machine-to-machine environment.

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So if you have an agent that's making purchase decisions on your behalf, how does it look at a company like Veeam and recognize that this is a credible

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purchase decision that my human back here is going to reward me for.

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My human's going to be happy with the purchase decision that I make on their behalf.

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And kind of where my research is heading is that I'm propositioning that

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co-selling and channel partnerships are going to be one of the ways that machines verify.

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So if I'm looking at Veeam, one of the best ways that I could tell that Veeam is a high-quality product, this is theoretically, of course, is looking at your co-selling partnership with Microsoft and

digging into Partner Center and seeing the volume of deals you've won, what your win rate is, what is your volume of transactions on Marketplace, who's reviewing your Marketplace offers.

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And

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Yeah, I don't know if any of this kind of speaks to you and how you're thinking about marketing at Veeam, but I do think that we're coming to this brink of an era where we're going to start thinking less about the humans making purchase decisions, which is what we've been talking about, and more this transition to machines making purchase decisions or AIs making purchase decisions.

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Yeah, I mean, I think that's fascinating.

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I was thinking about, I think it was Warren Buffett that made a comment, a quote about, like, if you lose a sale,

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Okay, we'll work through that.

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But if you take an action that ruins the reputation of my company or hurts the reputation of my company, well, you know, you're dead to me.

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Something like that, I'm trying to say.

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Warren, but it's huge on reputation.

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Yeah, definitely.

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But companies that, I mean, to your point about like Veeam has some validity because a massive company like Microsoft, we signed a five-year agreement with them recently, and that was a massive, huge relevancy point for us because

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they're essentially putting their reputation on the line by investing in a company like us.

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And Beam, back in the day, our tagline was, it just works, because it did.

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And we were a very grassroots kind of engineering led marketing at the time, because it was a lot of word of mouth and a lot of engineers would go and tell their other system engineers and other folks like, hey,

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just use this because it just works.

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And people would be like, what the heck is Veeam?

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And they'd be like, it doesn't matter.

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It just works.

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And a lot of, we had a lot of like deals that generated that way, which was, obviously incredible.

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The word of mouth, really means A lot.

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And of course, over time, we know we amplified that.

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We ended up getting rid of that tagline because there was a perception that it wasn't like enterprisey enough.

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It wasn't, you know, grown up enough.

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But what I think is interesting is that if you asked an executive at, you know, Chase or

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Chevron or some massive company, would you like a company, would you like a product that just works?

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They'd be like, yes, I mean, that's really all I care about, right?

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Because as smart as those executives are, at the end of the day, they're not going to go into the granular detail between, you know, Veeam and Commvault or Rubrik.

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They're going to be like, which one of these will make sure my company's reputation remains intact, that our brand continues, that our profits soars.

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that nobody gets screwed over using us because, it's supported by these products.

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And again, I think that goes back to like the ethics and the rules and regulations and the framework that is put around leveraging these tools because all it would take is 1 slip up and it's just all down the drain.

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Reputation is very important.

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And Veeam going from this, it works, and really being known for backup.

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Today, you're pivoting into being an AI company.

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There's been some massive acquisitions made by Veeam.

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And you've, what did you call, you Veeamerang, just so in Microsoft speak, we talk about boomerangs, who's someone who has a career at Microsoft, leaves and comes back.

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But at Veeam, Veeamerang.

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Everything at Veeam has to have a V at the beginning of it.

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It's just part of the culture.

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And so you've now, you've had like a really long experience there, because you originally joined Veeam, I think, in 2016.

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That was the 10-year anniversary for the company.

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If my AI-ing is correct, there's about 2,200 employees there at the time.

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There's over 7,000 employees there today.

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So you've seen this trajectory of the business grow almost 4x.

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And today it's really about resilience and recreating yourselves in this age of AI.

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Where do you see things going?

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It's fascinating.

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And so I actually started VeeMint in 2014 and we had 800 employees at the time.

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Oh, wow.

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And we had a global kickoff in Atlanta, like out of Ruby Tuesdays or something.

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I swear it was like just a standard regular restaurant.

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It was obviously bigger than that, but everyone could fit in one hotel.

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And we had dinner at that restaurant.

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But it was an incredible place to be and you're right.

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I was there when we had a billion dollars, which was just unbelievable.

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And I went to Microsoft, learned an incredible amount.

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I will never regret that experience.

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And I would absolutely recommend to anybody to go to Microsoft.

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Incredible company.

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What years were you there?

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Microsoft, I was there 2020 to 2025.

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Because I left in 2021.

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I figured that we had some overlap actually.

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I mean, it's so crazy to think about because I, first of all, I still can't even believe I got a job at Microsoft.

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I know.

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I mean, me either at the time.

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It was like, oh my gosh, wow.

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I got a job because of someone named Linda Rindelman.

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She was running the business that I got hired into.

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And oddly, I never actually worked with her, but our paths crossed multiple times between Microsoft and TechData.

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So again, coming back full circle to TechData, all your connections definitely make a difference.

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But that's why I ended up getting hired on there.

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And Veeam had been kind of talking to me for maybe like six months to a year.

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I just had different contacts there, and I would just keep kind of...

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kind of like, hey, what's going on over there?

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And an opportunity came up and I was just thrilled that they offered it to me.

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And I'm so happy to be back.

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And I really do enjoy it.

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But yes, in less than six months, we've had two acquisitions.

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So one of them is Security AI, which we've heard all about.

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That will be a game changer for our enterprise business.

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It's cutting edge.

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It's all of that AI.

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Agent Commander is the new product that is just.

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I saw the headlines.

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It's Agent Commander everywhere.

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Which sounds like this like amazing superhero, right?

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Like Agent Commander, so plenty of marketing to do there.

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And then we also acquired Object First, and that'll really amplify our SMB storage business as well.

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So, you know, as much as Veeam is absolutely breaking into the enterprise

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realm and really, giving our competitors a run for their money there.

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And we have a goal to hit 5 billion in three years.

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Wow.

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So I think we're definitely going to do it.

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But we will not forget the SMB business as well.

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That is our install base.

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And we have a huge push to grow that business as well.

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Yeah, and so, you know, some of what Erika's talking about here is just those customer segments, small, medium business versus the enterprise space.

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Big guys, yeah.

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The big guys, exactly.

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Which, by the way, all those things mean different to different people.

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our big business is Microsoft's like, goodness, look at this change I dropped on the floor.

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So it just, it's all relative.

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It's all relative.

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We do a lot of work with Intuit, and for them, mid-market, I think, has different definitions within the company, but is a 10-person company.

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I mean, that's smaller than the small at Microsoft.

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But size doesn't, size isn't everything either.

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I mean, the SMB market is overall a much huger market opportunity.

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Incredible opportunity there.

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Yeah.

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And more and more as we see like MSPs, managed service providers, that business model growing, that market is exploding.

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We are getting so many inquiries from MSPs for me to speak at different MSP events and

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Yeah, it's growing quickly.

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And those are no longer, it used to be that they were very much smaller founder-led businesses, but many of these managed service providers now, they're hitting 10 million, 100 million in revenue, a billion dollars in revenue.

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I mean, there are some giants in the space these days.

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So I'm curious with these acquisitions of Veeam, you know, Googling around on the world wide web,

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or IPO.

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Do you think that Veeam is headed in that direction?

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What's the inside gossip?

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You know, it's funny.

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I'm just giggling because it's kind of been the story for a while that, you know, we're looking to go IPO any minute.

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And there's been a million, lots of indications and, you know, taking a lot of steps to shore up things, drive our ARR, you know, all these things.

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I don't know.

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Exactly.

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I'm pretty low on the totem pole there, so I'm not on the insider.

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And of course, if I was insider, I probably couldn't share anyway.

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But it's destined to happen, I'm sure.

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I do think there's a massive benefit to us being private, though.

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You know, private companies have a lot more agility, and often their culture is quite strong because they own the company, they have built the company, they work together, a lot of longevity at the company.

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So

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as much as my stock portfolio would maybe go public.

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I also am very much enjoying the kind of like freedom and decision-making and agility and the culture that the private company is providing right now.

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So when you joined Vivi, you said 2014, 800 people.

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It was founder-led at that point in time.

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Yes.

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Yeah.

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So what has that transition been like from a founder-led business to a company run by professional management, professional CEO?

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You know what is so funny is I have incredibly fond memories of, in particular, Ratmir Timashev.

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He was our co-founder.

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Right now, he still lives in Ohio, and he does a ton of philanthropic work.

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You know, he also did a lot of things like when the Ukraine war broke out.

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Veemers were moved from the Russian businesses and moved to safer places and the company made sure that happened for them.

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Same thing with everything that's happening in the Middle East.

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the company is very people first and that was a huge focus of Ratmare.

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We have our Veem like moral company morals and

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One of them was conversations of the heart.

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And we've changed it now to make it sound a little more corporate.

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But that was one of his big things, that we're going to talk to each other.

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We're going to have these conversations from the heart.

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And he was very, I remember having to present out to him one time because he was also like co-founder, acting CMO.

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He was everywhere.

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And it was super intimidating, but he was very gracious.

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And he really just wanted success.

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Obviously, he just wanted the company to thrive.

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I'm curious, what's that value call it, conversations of the heart?

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What is that called today?

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Now we call it, I think, like, act with accountability or every conversation matters.

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It's something similar, but just a little more...

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One of the things...

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Yeah, one of our values that transcends is conscious connection.

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And it was really important to me to have

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But I am the founder as well, to draw the parallel with the early years of Veeam, and we're nowhere near the size of Veeam.

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But it was really important to me to have a non-corporate value.

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And conscious connection for us is about that human connection.

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And whether that's internally in our team or with our clients or the communities that we operate within, it is about going beyond which would

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what might normally be considered kind of safer, kind of standard status quo within a corporate environment.

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We want to go that layer deeper and really care and have empathy and compassion.

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And that's something that's really important to me.

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But I will say, just like these AI companies are facing right now with all these challenges around ethics, you are putting yourself, and I'm happy to be in the hot seat on this because I'm passionate about it.

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But it does put you in a bit of a hot seat because it is hard to navigate something that is non-corporate in a corporate structure, corporate entity.

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Absolutely.

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Well, now we, I think now we call it like psychological safety.

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Yes.

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Which is the kind of the phrase for it.

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But the truth is like our personal lives and our work lives are so blended.

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And you know, you become close with the people you work with.

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And

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it also helps you do better business because conversations of the heart can be a challenging conversation around a business decision that somebody made, who you respect and care for, but the decision maybe wasn't the best.

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And that standard, that company moral was giving you permission and encouraging you

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to, we're gonna have this conversation at the heart because at the end of the day, the business will benefit if I feel open enough to disagree with you or I feel open enough to challenge, you know, this decision.

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And so many times that resulted in something better.

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And a lot of times we think, oh my gosh, I'm gonna challenge this person and they're gonna come unglued or whatever.

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But so many times they're like, wow, that might be a great idea.

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Maybe we should try that.

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Or I hadn't really thought about that.

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Or

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we tried that before, and it just still opens, a conversation.

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Do you remember any conversation of the heart that stood out to you, either when you led or a manager led with you?

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I mean, honestly, there's been so many.

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You know, Ratmir himself, I had this project, we called it the Cloud Coupon for some reason.

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I think we love alliteration in marketing.

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This was back when we were convincing a reseller that they should become a cloud provider, which at the time was a different business.

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And this Veeam started with, their only product was to back up virtual machines.

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And at the time, not everybody had a virtual machine.

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There were still a lot of on-premise

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storage apparatuses at a building, physical, physical, right, that contain their data.

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And so for us to launch in that way, and if you ever read the book, Crossing the Chasm, this is exactly how the path that Veam followed in many other successful companies, but it was challenging to overcome that.

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So here we are convincing these resellers, you're gonna get left behind if you do not get on this cloud boat, if you do not get

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on this business and start, backing up things to the cloud and having these cloud services.

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And it was really a hard sell in the beginning.

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And I had done this whole project to try to get, these resellers to get on board.

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And I think, I don't even remember what my goal was, but I failed abysmally.

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I mean, it was, and I had to present out to him.

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My gosh, that must have been nerve-wracking.

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Terrible, right?

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And I just thought, founder of the business, here's my failure.

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Exactly.

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And I'll hand in my resignation right after this.

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And I explained everything that we did.

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I explained the challenges that we faced, the feedback that we got from the resellers, the product issues that, you know, it's like calling somebody's baby ugly, like all these different things.

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And at the end of the conversation, he was like, well, it sounds like you did everything you could.

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And we need to go back and try to do better because we're not going to give up on this, but there were multiple facets here that we could probably improve upon to go be successful.

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And ultimately, we were.

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I mean, now we refer to them as hybrid partners.

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They make up the majority of our partners.

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They are both a reseller and a service provider.

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I mean, what a powerful demonstration of what, you know, I would say a candid conversation, crucial conversation can

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really be a turning point in something.

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it's often at this low point and you can't always see it, but just around the corner.

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Oh yeah.

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Well, I've had also, I mean, full transparency, right?

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I mean, just like everybody else, I've had a lot of personal development conversations with managers like, oh, you could do this better, you could do.

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And I hate them, frankly, because I'm very like sensitive, but always they are beneficial.

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And you know who else is incredible?

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I have to mention is Christine Baumgart.

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Her candid conversations

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She is not afraid to talk about anything.

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And she has definitely brought some ladies together to, and men too, especially Vince, obviously.

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So Erika and I are here in San Diego right now.

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And what brings us physically together is International Women's Day.

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Christine Bongard is the founder of the WIT Network.

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And her organization puts on this phenomenal event each year.

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The conference is called Igniting Excellence.

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And Erika and I will both be there on stage over the course of this week.

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And we thought we could just sneak in some private time this afternoon to get this podcast in.

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But that is a topic that we haven't covered yet, actually, Erika, is just your thoughts on women in the workplace.

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I know you and Christine have done a lot around it.

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And there was this McKinsey report, so 2025 women in the workplace report.

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And I was actually shocked in reading the notes that my wonderful team, we've got Rebecca in the background, prepared.

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And it said that for every 100 men promoted to a manager level, there are 93 women.

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which to be honest, wasn't as big as a gap as I thought it might be, but then even lower, and this did really surprise me, for women of color, it's only 74 promoted for every 100.

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So I'm curious how you think about women in the workplace.

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Are you optimistic, pessimistic about our role?

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There's lots happening in the macro environment right now.

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We're seeing things shift.

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I know to your point, Christine does talk about this a lot, but what are you seeing and maybe what advice do you have to women

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in their careers right now.

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Great question.

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I mean, that report definitely got a lot of people fired up, but, good for them for sharing that data.

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And we should be sharing more data like that and really, putting these stark numbers.

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And there's a lot of, there was a lot in there about, women's perceived lack of motivation.

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But then when we really unpeel the onion on why they have that lack of motivation, you know, there's a lot of reasons, valid reasons.

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And,

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I look at companies who, and I don't want to delve into politics, but the whole, DNI uproar has really damaged us in a lot of ways.

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And I think what's unfortunate is that some issues that really aren't the center of things have gotten all this attention because it deflects from things that are important.

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If we really take a step back, I think the importance of diversity is really around diversity of thought.

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It is not necessarily that we just need to hire someone because they're a different race or we need to have that token woman in the room or things like that.

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It's not a check the box.

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And we have to be mindful that we could have a bunch of people in a room that looked different, but if they all thought the same, we have defeated the purpose of what we're trying to do here.

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The reason that we include diversity of thought is because it makes the business better and more successful.

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And that has just been proven again and again because it helps you expand your customer base.

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Just to get down to the nitty-gritty of it.

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I couldn't agree with you more, by the way, on the diversity of thought.

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And I think what it demonstrates, the way that you're speaking about it, is lived experience.

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You've been there.

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You've been leading teams for a long time.

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You know what good and what great looks like.

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You've worked for organizations who

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seek to be #1 market leading in their category in those kind of fiercely competitive environments, when something is working and a team is sprinting and being successful and when it's just a flop.

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And I'm sure you've had experience being part of both those types of teams.

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I've been very blessed.

01:15:28

I mean, I think I've had incredible teams and I hope that my own leading by example has helped to make those teams incredible because I've had a lot of incredible leaders that

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did that for me, and he talked about, what can companies do to be better?

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I mean, I think about companies that still have existing mentoring programs or employee resource groups that are targeted to women or targeted to people of color or targeted to military folks or, targeted to a certain group because they have unique and incredible and fascinating

01:16:08

qualities, why would we not want to create these things that brings them out?

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And we talked about AI earlier, and women have natural situational awareness and discernment and all these qualities, empathy, and I'm making generalizations, of course, a lot of men have that too, that AI does not have.

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And if we want to be successful, we have to ensure that humanistic quality remains.

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And that is, boom, one reason to make sure that there's those folks that embody those, you know, at the table.

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And I think it's in that same McKinsey report, 22% of workers in AI.

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So the people creating AI, which is very important, the people creating AI, only 22% are women.

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And one of the topics that got me really fascinated was just the inherent bias in, or the bias in the training data that many of these models train on.

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I mean, it's shocking really when you dig into it.

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Well, we've seen this before, right, with healthcare.

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So all of these recommendations and like medication amounts and different, you know, surgeries and all these things are based on data from men.

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And only in recent years, like right now, you cannot, if you're a man or a woman, cannot look at your phone without a menopause commercial, like popping up.

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But you know what?

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Fantastic.

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And now it's like finally be like becoming this thing.

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And you actually see a lot of men who are suddenly like, oh my God, I know what this is.

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I want to help you.

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How can I help?

01:17:43

I know why this is happening.

01:17:44

Let's go to the doctor.

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Let's make sure you have this.

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Let's, you know, my husband included.

01:17:48

He's like, holy bananas.

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I want to live a happy life too.

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Let's get you what you need, you know.

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But before it was kind of like brushed under the rug or there wasn't like data because everything was based on, what like a male body.

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And so here we are again.

01:18:05

And if we're not careful to ensure that, again, the diversity of thought, a woman's voice, a person of color's voice, all these different voices are heard, the AI will only have limited knowledge.

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It will only have knowledge of one group.

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and therefore it will not benefit us and in some cases could damage us.

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Yeah, absolutely.

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I mean, it's been really interesting going to this program at Oxford and I'm there in England and

01:18:37

One of the things I've really enjoyed about the program is so far about half of our faculty and instructors have worked or currently live in China.

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And we're learning a lot about how AI is operating in the Chinese market, which is a really different perspective living in North AmErika than we get exposed to.

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And one of my takeaways has definitely been, again, in this training data, never mind West versus East or however historically this was characterized, really AI is AmErikan, quite dominantly.

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And it's been interesting to look at different countries and many really small countries who are actually building their own training data sets and their own AI models, because what we're learning is that there is even linguists,

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Even linguists are surprised at how much cultural encoding exists inside language.

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And when there is just one culture that is represented in worldwide models that has really real circumstances that we don't know what those are yet.

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Yeah, the repercussions.

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I mean, we've seen the repercussions, again, to that healthcare example,

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Women have suffered needlessly in many cases.

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menopause is just one example, but even things like heart disease and stroke and cancers, and if it wasn't for differently, Susan G.

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Komen and other folks that have really amplified around, like breast cancer and ovarian cancer and

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I mean, even like the HPV vaccine was like a massive push forward because of how it helps with cervical cancer and ovarian and different cancers like that.

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But we know that there's repercussions of excluding groups.

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And I mean, part of it too is how can we get more women invested?

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What are opportunities for them to learn and grow and contribute and be a part of those teams?

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I think what's actually really fascinating is that the folks that are really building out AI, they're probably smaller groups than we even realize, which is also- Very small.

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Terrifying.

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There is maybe five major companies right now that are controlling the entire AI market.

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I think I read a stat the other day that globally there's 30,000 people working in AI research.

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which is really not that many, considering the power and influence that's at play.

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It's, and you know what else is interesting too?

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I mean, as time goes on, and I mean, the average person can create an agent and copilot.

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And I think I want to give a shout out to an old boss of mine.

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His name is Ben Weeder.

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He's starting a, he has started an AI task force with the Pinellas Education Foundation to help

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create a framework for how we're going to teach and leverage AI in our schools.

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And this is a huge step forward.

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And of course, many countries are actually ahead of us and already have, implemented these things.

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But right now, there's a lot of schools that still think, you know, well, you're using AI, you're cheating, you know, to write your history research paper and blah, blah.

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But if we do not teach our children to leverage AI, one, they will

01:22:07

be left behind in some way because they can't keep up.

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There's also a fear that they will be out of a job because, AI will take over and they'll, need to find something else.

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And we need to change the mindset that it's a tool that we should all be adopting to make us smarter and better and more efficient.

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And, even for teachers, it could be an incredible tool to help them with,

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grading and different aspects of their job that they would love to, maybe have some assistance with.

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I think it also shines the light on the criticality of non-AI jobs, like, being a welder or a plumber or an electrician or a mechanic or an HVAC repairman.

01:23:00

I mean, there are, or woman, sorry, I don't know why I said that, but

01:23:04

There are so many jobs out there that AI may have some teeny component to, but that skill is so critical.

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And it's a perfect time for us to educate all the way around on what we really need to be teaching our kids.

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I really agree with that.

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And on this side of how do we inspire the leaders of tomorrow and

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hopefully there's a good dose of women in that mix.

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And I think one of the things that we can do is showcase people who have been there and done it.

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And it's so much easier to imagine yourself, that painted picture, to see a painted picture of yourself in the future if there's someone else that's there that you can reference.

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And

01:23:48

I do really appreciate you being on the show, Erika, because you do epitomize that.

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And I wanted to ask you, with all that you've accomplished so far in your career, what does success look like for you?

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Know, that's a great question.

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And I think it's so funny, because I've talked to you about this on a personal level.

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I also would like to have a podcast.

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I would want to sit where you are sitting and ask you questions.

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It's going to be fantastic.

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I cannot wait.

01:24:17

So I have two of my very close girlfriends that I, it's our idea together.

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Michelle Curtis, Steph Barden, if you guys are watching this, it's them.

01:24:25

I don't want to tell our secret too big, but now it's real.

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Now we're going to have to manifest it.

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But I think that success looks like, to me, I can't believe I'm like,

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in a group of these other women that I think are so incredible, that are, Michelle's the CRO and Steph's the senior director.

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And so to me, success is when you suddenly look around and I think you have these opportunities.

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I mean, I'm gonna be on stage on Thursday.

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I am like no one.

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I'm like a regular person.

01:25:00

Christine's like, you've got to be here, you've got to be on stage.

01:25:02

I'm like, okay.

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I mean, so I think success is when you find yourself in these

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situations that looking back you've actually worked really hard for and you've taken all these steps to get you there and suddenly you're surprised.

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But you're so pleasantly surprised.

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I love this.

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You're so happy.

01:25:21

You're like, oh my gosh.

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The company that surrounds you.

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know, I would never have guessed that answer and it's refreshing.

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One of the people that we're going to see tonight at the event is Gabriella Schuster.

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And I remember it was either 2018 or 2019 where at the Microsoft Ignite

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Exactly.

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Talk about fangirling.

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So she is there on stage.

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It's the T-Mobile arena.

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The arena fits 10s of thousands of people.

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It is absolutely packed.

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And out walks Gabriella onto the stage.

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And she's the celebrity of Microsoft at this time.

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I mean, she's the face of the business.

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She's who everybody knows, particularly in the channel.

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And yeah, we're going to be at this event with her tonight.

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And I'm introducing her on stage tomorrow.

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I mean, what?

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I think that is so awesome to really think about that.

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Back then, you're looking at her like, wow, this, oh my gosh.

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And now you're sharing a stage with her.

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I'm really looking forward to the conversation.

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That's so awesome.

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That's so awesome.

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Yeah, it feels really like truly an honor.

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It's like surreal, yeah.

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And that is your moment of success, right?

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Just that little moment.

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I mean, you have a million moments, but I mean, that is so poignant.

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It's such a poignant moment.

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So to kind of wrap us up, I'd like to end on some rapid fire questions.

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And yeah, so the first one is, if your younger self could sit here right now with you, what advice would you give her?

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I think I would tell her to, again, maybe just the universe will provide honesty, like everything will work out.

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And also that you don't have to know everything.

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I think I felt at many times like, what am I going to do?

01:27:02

What am I going to be?

01:27:04

What, gosh, I was a teacher and I didn't work out.

01:27:07

I wanted to be a writer and it didn't work out.

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And like I sort of had these like moments where I felt like I had like failed myself.

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But then in reality, I absolutely did not.

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I mean, I'm exactly where, you know, I should be and I would not be here if it weren't for all these, you know, challenges and learnings and things I had done.

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to get here.

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So I would just be like, relax, it's all gonna work out.

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I love that.

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What is the tagline for this season of your life?

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So again, with the woo-woo, it is the year of the fire horse.

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It started February 17th.

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I also, because my birth year, am a horse.

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So I think for me, I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna do it.

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I am just, I am on fire.

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I am a match on a line of gasoline.

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And it's just gonna be a flaming, incredible, hot, amazing year.

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And it's gonna end with a podcast announcement, I think.

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That's right.

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Can't wait.

01:28:14

What's one value that you've held on to even when it was really hard to do so?

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Something on a personal level, I'm a big fan of spilling the tea and chit-chatting and get together with my girlfriends and talking about stuff and ruminating and things like that.

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But I'm also like a loyal friend.

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And I had a moment where a friend of mine was, she just wanted to vent, but she started talking about another friend.

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And I found myself feeling like this, let's not do this.

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I mean, we've all been there.

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We've all been there.

01:28:52

It's a very tough situation.

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And I have been on the other side of that 1000 times.

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And I told her, I was like, let's not talk about her in this way.

01:29:01

Let's talk about how you feel.

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But you know, she's our friend.

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And at the time I really felt, I was like, dang, am I not being a friend to my friend also?

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Because I'm not like listening to her, you know?

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And it's okay sometimes to have, you know, these conversations and stuff.

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And she's like, you're right, you're right.

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And we ended up talking

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later on.

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like months or even years later, she actually brought it up to somebody else.

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And she's like, I knew in that moment that you would defend me.

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And I was like, you are right.

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I do feel like, you know, that is a hard value to stand by, but

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I think it's important, be the voice for somebody who's not there if it's something that you really feel like you need to stand up for.

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I think that's beautiful.

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And the last question is just one word.

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How would you, one word close, how would you sum up how you're thinking, feeling about AI right now?

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Oh my gosh, I want to be careful because I work in IT.

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There's a lot of people who work in IT who are very afraid right now.

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I know.

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A word I think about is potential.

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There's an incredible amount of potential.

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I think it's just how we harness that.

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I think that that's a great way to end is the potential.

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And I think the potential of new things in our relationship as well.

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It's been really a joy to spend this time with you, Erika.

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This is so awesome.

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Thank you so much.

01:30:39

Thank you.

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This has been another episode of Transcending Tech.

01:30:43

Please like and follow.

01:30:44

You can find us on YouTube.

01:30:46

Thanks so much.