



Breakthrough by Design podcast series

Breakthrough Beyond: Live with the Problem with Mike Bechtel

Host

Kim Christfort, Chief Innovation Leader, Deloitte Greenhouse®

Guest

Mike Bechtel, Chief Futurist, Deloitte

KIM CHRISTFORT: What if you could fast-forward 10 years and peek at the tech that will redefine work, play, and even what it means to be human. Sounds like a sci-fi plot twist, but for our guest, it's just another day at the office.

MIKE BECHTEL: *"One of the things I learned early on, in my work, first as an inventor and then as a VC investor, is that you have to lead with need. You really need to resist the temptation to run, you know, whiteboard markers in hand, straight to solutioning. You need to take a breath and realize that issues come first. Right? Problems worth solving, opportunities itches in need of scratching as, as I like to call 'em."*

KIM CHRISTFORT: That was Mike Bechtel, chief futurist at Deloitte, adjunct professor at Notre Dame, and let's be honest, a real lifetime traveler of ideas.

Mike's job helping leaders anticipate and

interpret emerging technology trends and guiding them through strategic decisions about the next big wave from his days as a sci-fi loving kid in the eighties to earn patents and now advising Fortune 500 companies. Mike's journey is a masterclass in curiosity, courage, and effective communication.

I'm Kim Christfort, Chief Innovation Leader for Executive accelerators in the Deloitte Greenhouse®. You are listening to Breakthrough by Design, where we chat with a diverse array of guests, from scientists to CEOs, academics to athletes, exploring what it takes to get to breakthrough. All right. Mike, this is gonna be all about you.

MIKE BECHTEL: Kim, now, I wanna meet that fella you mentioned in the intro. Cause he sounds considerably cooler than me. I'm, I'm just a guy.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I will say, Mike, I'm so

delighted to welcome you to Breakthrough by Design because, we've obviously known each other for a while, but reading through your profile officially, I had the same thought.

Who is this guy? He is amazing. I had only a small little glimpse into how cool your job is and your life actually more broadly.

MIKE BECHTEL: Oh, well, gosh I think aw shucks is the best practice response to that kind sentence. You know, Kim, I feel like, you know, the number one question that I get in my work is, what the heck's a futurist?

KIM CHRISTFORT: What the heck is a Chief Futurist?

MIKE BECHTEL: Well, right. Be because half of any, any counterparty, right? Is leaning in like, oh, I bet this is going to be quite interesting. And then, the other half is invariably leaning back, arms crossed,

scowl, and, and they don't say it, but, the expression is, I do believe this fellow might be full of bologna.

You know, Kim, futurist is really just a sizzly way to say sense maker, right? Like making sense of what's new and next, and the way you go about doing that.

I had a client in New York City, she's like, that was a good talk. What? You got a crystal ball or something? And I said, no, no, it it. And she goes, is it a time machine? Is it a DeLorean? You know, I hated to let her down, but I said, no. You know, the way you zoom in on the future is you actually kind of zoom out on the present.

There's this great geeky old quote, 1984, William Gibson. He says, "The future's already here, but it's not very evenly distributed." And I get geeky goosebumps every time I think about it because.

You know, it stands to reason there's stuff at NASA that would, you know, blow mines in a, you know, midmarket insurance carrier. But take it from a, a geek turning geezer like me, that that road goes both ways. You know, I've seen stuff in property casualty insurance that blows mines in Silicon Valley. I've seen AI innovations that would melt your brain from none other than the kingdom of Saudi Arabia tourism authority.

And, so I think in short, what's a futurist? It's someone who, who dares to project what's coming by maybe having the intellectual promiscuity to look far and wide at what's happening today.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Mike, we are very excited to explore the past, present, and future with you. Uh, and actually to take this sense-making, and really dive into some of our Breakthrough Manifesto principles and specifically live with a problem because I know that sometimes people are so eager to get to that future and just jump ahead to what is that crystal Ball telling us?

But actually, spending time exploring the problem we're trying to solve for, or the data that surrounds us can actually reveal new dimensions and perspectives and opportunities.

MIKE BECHTEL: Oh, I mean, you, you sort of had me at Hello. I think with that insight and that framing Kim, because one of the things I learned early on in my work, first as an inventor and then as a VC investor, is that you have to lead with need.

You really need to resist the temptation to run, you know, whiteboard markers in hand, straight to solutioning.

You need to take a breath and realize that issues come first. Right? Problems worth solving, opportunities – itches in need of scratching – as I like to call them. I was reading about a lot of the great inventors and innovators over human history, and there's a great biography about, Leonardo da Vinci and in it the author talks about how Leonardo believed that to really understand a problem, you had to look at it from at least three different perspectives. And it was one of the reasons he was not just an engineer, but an artist and a poet, and a biologist and all this stuff. And, and it got me thinking, maybe be a folksy telling of that, of that tale – my old business partner used to say, Mike, you can't read the label when you're sitting inside the jar. And so, I'd love to hear from you, Kim. Like would that resonate with you and your breakthrough manifesto mojo?

KIM CHRISTFORT: I definitely relate to that. And, and it's interesting because I hadn't made this connection until you just said it, but one of the stories and it's a story that's been around forever, but it's come up now in the context of how you live with a problem and why, and that is the parable of the elephant.

And you probably know this story, it's in so many cultures at times there's different versions of it, but, you know, the basics are the same. You essentially have, several blind men, and they hear that this magnificent creature is coming to their town, never before seen, and they wanna go and check this creature out.

And so they go and, you know, one of them. Touches a part of the animal and says, this is a snake. It's so flexible, and another touches a different part and says, oh, this is a fan, you know, it's wide and it can create air. And another one says, this is a wall. It's so solid

and, you know, robust, and it doesn't move at all.

And of course, they're all around an elephant and they're all-seeing different parts of an elephant. But I think it's a very apt comparison about the importance of different perspectives because, you know, even if we see a problem very accurately, we may be only seeing one side of it that leads us to conclusions that may or may not be the full picture.

MIKE BECHTEL: Well, you know, the reason that parable is so timeless is, I feel like that's always been true and always been good advice, right? Multiple perspectives and cross pollination between disciplines and silos is generally a beautiful thing.

But I have to tell you, throwing my future guy hat back on in this AI moment, I think multiple perspectives and, and breadth generally matters more than ever because definitionally AIs learn match and exceed our ability to do any known thing. And so to a machine, the difference between checkers and chess and quantum physics, it's just sort of like easy, medium, medium plus, right? It's common. It's common for the known. And so, to me it feels pretty clear that the province of people is gonna be in creating the news, right? In building progress against the unknowns. And where does that come from? It's exactly what you said. If it's a bunch of blind individuals who are stuck in silos, they're, they're gonna lose in a foot race to a robot.

But if it's people who are pulling off those sorts of blinders and ladder up, they're gonna have a better time. So I think it's never been more important to be kind of a polymath and a connector than it is in this, in this AI moment.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I agree. And actually, I'd like to take this, uh, opportunity to actually, go back to your early experiences because I think that your polymath nature actually came about through such a diverse range of things, from consultant to inventor to investor.

Can you talk about how those diverse perspectives really came together and how

they're serving you now as a futurist and professor?

MIKE BECHTEL: For sure. I'm blushing. It's not often you get to be on "radio" with someone who just says, "talk about yourself". So thank you. So to the chagrin of everyone, I'm gonna start this in eighth grade, but I promise it won't be long-winded. In our little eighth grade yearbook, it was more of a pamphlet, right? I grew up between a steel mill and a landfill in the southeast side of Chicago.

So, we made do with the pamphlet. But I remember I found the eighth-grade booklet, and I said I wanted to be either a computer engineer or an entertainer. And I just thought that it was so funny looking back. Cause I thought, who would've thought? I might've found the option to shoot the curl and do a little bit of both.

But the reason I opened with that story is I loved reading and writing and communicating and that sort of liberal artsy mojo from the jump. But I was coached and told by a guidance counselor, after guidance counselor that, those careers, you know, cost money and the STEM careers made money. So, you know, I passed go and collected that \$200 by learning enough to get by.

Now, granted, I was an anthropology major who had spent enough time in the computer lab building doom servers, you know, to pass as a geek. But what, I started to see Kim was over 20 years of serving on the advisory board at my university's business school. It felt like the number of employable majors kept shrinking like a game of musical chairs every year, right? It was like, "we'll take any kind of a smart kid" to "yeah, could you be business?" to "how about finance?", "how about quantitative finance?" At some point it felt like, "can you have a Nobel Prize? Could you?"

And what I think I recognized amidst that backdrop of narrower and narrower and narrower paths was that some of the most interesting, and I think pioneering, people were the ones who were mashing up unexpected adjacencies, right?

And so, in my twenties, I apologized

for being the liberal arts kid who was a developer and a techie. By my thirties, I realized that was a low-key superpower, right? So, I became a chief technology officer at a not-for-profit, in part because I spoke, you know, arts and humanities and education, but I came in techies clothing, right?

It was on the back of that that I co-founded a venture capital firm whose very thesis was, let's play matchmaker between unusual suspects, right? Let's find the real estate startup that unwittingly built the cure for the insurance giant. With a little bit of polish and, rhetoric, we could make supply and demand where none had been.

And so, I think it was on the back of that whole journey, kind of art of the possible as an inventor, and then art of the profitable as an investor where I said, oh my goodness, what am I really? I'm a guide on the side, who can help business leaders make heads or tails out of what has legs and what not so much.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love that positioning. And also, it's really interesting how your career journey, in many ways is a version of living with the problem. You know, you didn't just sort of say, oh, I gotta go be that finance focused person who's gonna get the Nobel Prize to get a job. You sort of, you know, took a moment to reflect on what is it you're actually bringing to the table and where could that create value?

And, you know, it's brought you then to a path that made you realize it wasn't just value for you, but value for others.

MIKE BECHTEL: Well, you know, at the time it all felt like a bit of a random walk. And, I don't wanna say that it was completely random, but I don't wanna pretend for a second that like, my life's journey has been strategic and filled with intentionality. For me, it was really – okay, I know I wanna do something that helps others and makes the world a better place. And it's the mother of all cliches, but it's true. I wanted to make a mark. Great, but I also didn't wanna be broke. You know?

KIM CHRISTFORT: I mean, I think that's a good goal.

MIKE BECHTEL: I mean, it is! But, but you know, think about it like, as kids and as students, you tend to get painted as I've come to learn it – I call them the four big dumb buckets of advice. One of them is heal the world. It's like, okay, got it. The other one is follow the money. The other one is following your dreams, your passions, as it were. And, then the fourth one is sort of do what differentiates you, right? Like follow your skills, follow your edge.

And you know, back to your question, Kim, about the journey to current. What I found was, I think I had an early hunch that I'd only ever sleep well at night if I could somehow get to four for four. But I also realized that that was the hardest work in the world, right?

But on the flip side, you know, good news, you have a lifetime.

And so each of those moves from liberal arts into technology, that was a way to check the "pay the rent" bucket and the "fun skills" bucket. And then from there into working as a professional inventor and innovator that itched more of the passion scratch but maybe left a couple bucks on the table relative to the more traditional consulting folks.

KIM CHRISTFORT: One of the other Breakthrough Manifesto principles is Make a Mess. Part of this process is trying different things and leaning into different aspects of what you're looking for, and that's why with live with the Problem, you don't need to know exactly your career journey from the beginning. In fact, you shouldn't. That's part of living with a problem. If you knew the path, it wouldn't really be a problem.

You're just in it for that moment, right? The fact that you don't know yet is why it's a problem. And you have to just sit there with it. And to your point, you know, what you're describing, I've always liked the concept of Ikigai, which is, you know, finding that perfect balance of things that you love, but somebody will pay you for, and there's a market for, and that is not always a constant imbalance. It's something that you do have to sort of live with and struggle with and experiment with overtime.

MIKE BECHTEL: You know, Kim, I feel like I landed on a sort of accidental ikigai where pivot after pivot, I would either augment a couple of the buckets that were feeling too lean or, or add an altogether new one. And then I think to your point, by living in that mess and ensuring that I just kept swimming, right? Just keep swimming in the direction of my own North Star. One day, people start asking you for advice and you know, there's that classic feeling right? When you, when you're 16, you just presume you wake up on your 18th birthday and you're an adult and you're wise, and then you're 18. You're like, oh no, it's a trap!

Just as adulthood is shades of gray, I think this professional self-actualization is similarly shades of gray because one day after, not just one, but five and then 50 people are saying like, "what's your secret?", "How'd you get there?", "Chief Futurist?", "Wow!"

You say, "Oh, wow. Yeah. Huh. I guess it came from embracing that mess" and you be a little more supple and a little less calcified and you'll find that you can maintain an open enough mind to use the wind like a sailor and not get blown over by every little thing.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I like that guidance and it actually is a very apt way of positioning somebody whose job it is to sail those winds of the future.

I am curious because, you know, as the chief futurist, you know, you're leading teams of researchers and data scientists and technologists and all these folks, and you are surrounded by things that could potentially become a narrative. It's all these little pops of data and signals happening out there. And I'm curious how you do become the sense maker in that. Are there some frameworks or mental models that you and your team rely on when you're evaluating these trends and these data points, and how do you figure out where you should put your focus?

MIKE BECHTEL: Man, that's, that's such a cool question and it's so, um, it's such a righteous Kim question and I'm here for it.

No, really I'm grateful for that because between the "egg header-y" at the front of

our funnel and the "jazz hands" at the end of the funnel wherein we tell said narratives there, there's a lot of work to be done. And, I think honestly, Kim, the biggest thing that I've seen, and I give our team and teams, plural, all the credit in the world, because there's classic Edison, right? There's a lot of perspiration along with the inspiration. But I think part of it comes down to identifying the subset of the torrent of novelty, that we're beat over the brow with every darn day and figuring out what subset of this is really new, versus, which of these movies have we seen before? And then figuring out of that stuff really seems to lend itself to being a solution to real needs in the world.

Right. Back, back to your key principle of kind of that, that starting with the problem, leading with the need. Because what you'll find is technologies that don't quite pass muster. They tend to be very supply side in nature, right? It's like, "introducing an even shinier hammer!" and you're like, well, but what's it good for?

Like, it'll out hammer any hammer, but you're like, "what if I don't have nails?" And so these solutions looking for problems, they don't tend to do that. Well, I used to have a client who used to say, "you can't push a rope", which was his way of saying like, you could have the coolest thing in the world, but people gotta pull it. You can't push it to them.

On the flip side, consider something like AI. I remember being at my Aunt Teresa's house on the southeast side of Chicago. She was a retired ceramicist and my uncle Larry, her husband, was a retired forest reserve worker. So. It was with their backgrounds and to me that you could imagine my surprise when as she's putting sweet potatoes on my plate, and she goes, "did you hear robots can like paint pictures and write poems now? It's nuts." And I'm thinking, well, as a professional, yes, I'm aware, thank you Aunt Teresa. But my inner dialogue was, "whoa, this thing has escaped containment and it's live in gen pop."

Why? Because Aunt Teresa, as an artist could see the value of having the augmentation of her art. Uncle Larry, is a forest reserve worker. Even he could imagine how he could use algorithms

and AIs to speed up his life. And so I think the work in the middle is having enough of a sense of demands socially, globally, politically, economically, to be able to play connect the dot with the never-ending supply surge.

Because without that, it's just a never-ending tool parade. And, that's where I think so many techies get a bad rap.

KIM CHRISTFORT: It seems also though, in that funnel, you are perhaps advancing the ability for these things to have relevance in the human world. I think your AI example is a great one. I think a lot of people had heard about AI, and it was a bit of "robots are coming, robots are coming"

And then you started having applications that people saw value in, but you also had storytellers, like you, telling us how those things could have value in our lives and as importantly, where we as human beings still brought value to those things.

Can you talk a little bit more about how, how you keep telling that story of how humans stay relevant and innovative in this time where we're more and more reliant on technology and AI.

MIKE BECHTEL: I mean, Kim, it's, it's my, I wouldn't just say soapbox du jour. It's my soapbox du decade. As the AI wave has intensified over the last couple years, one of the things that I really believe having had a front row seat to the future for over 25 years is that – Thing one: It's always been AI, right? Like AI is the marketing term the quick cognitive handle we're putting on this moment. But the idea of machine intelligence ain't new. We've had a reasonably straightforward evolution of machines getting smarter for 50 years. When you look at the long lens, when you look at the 50 year, a hundred year, 5,000 year frame, go back to the first written language. There was a time when calligraphy was an important and valued skill, and then it wasn't. And it wasn't the end of humankind. Why? Because as the waterline rose past pretty writing, we found that our cycles were free for higher order pursuits. We got to better writing and as we got past better writing, we got into synthetic writing

and think your thoughts and on and on and on. And so as you think about wrestling with the problem, every time we automate is a Trojan horse to elevate and to take that pause and say, “whoa, for the first time in my business, I have somebody with free cycles who can think about what are the deeper problems, the more human problems we’re solving and better still go redeploy him or her against those.”

And so, AI is not only not a diet pill, it’s rocket fuel for elevated ambitions. And, I think some of our more pioneering clients are, are starting to figure that out.

MIKE BECHTEL: Even when you’re up to speed on some of these concepts we’re discussing, Kim, it doesn’t mean it’s not hard. One of my favorite quotes I heard this last year, and it’s stuck with me, is that “you’re never in traffic. You are traffic.” And, like it totally reframes my frustration when I’m on the highway. I am like, “wait a minute, I’m a small part of this problem.” And, and so what are we doing to try to rise above, to try to stay ahead of that AI waterline as our team calls it?

I think one is realizing that we need to lose our obsession with activities and redirect that passion towards an obsession with outcomes and better still, we call it North Stars, but the goal behind the goal behind the goal of those outcomes. And so let’s say you’re an organization that, that makes widgets and then you hear that these AI folks have found a way to out widget us. I mean, you know, that’s like the end of the movie. Like, well, existential, dread seen, right?

Well, if that company says “no, we make widgets to improve human health.” Okay. Well, when AI comes along and automates the widget making, you’re able to say, “okay, in what other ways might we improve human health?”

And we call that that moment of stepping outside one’s activities – we call that laddering up. And I think getting really simple and prescriptive. What we do on our team is almost like six-year-olds. We incessantly ask each other “why?”

“So we’re using this tool to create executive

summaries of our meetings.”

“Why?”

“Because then we’ll have executive summaries of our meetings.”

“Why?”

“Because then we could go back to them and refer to them later.”

“Why?”

“Well, because it turns out we’re making promises to each other in our overscheduled days, but our follow-through rates abysmal. And so going back to seeing what we’re doing can help us make less false promises.”

“Why?”

“So we can focus on work that matters more and maybe even work less.”

And so, I think Kim, in short, this relentless willingness to back away from process. Keep asking why. It might sound a little too simple, but I’m telling you, we’re nowhere near it being overdone or even easily done.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Well, I’m laughing because you said we’re acting like six-year-olds, but we actually use a technique like that in the Deloitte Greenhouse®.

We call it the toddler challenge. So, we gave it an even lower age bar, and it is powerful and it can be potentially annoying to people. We get that, but it’s very effective.

MIKE BECHTEL: I’m here for it. Sign me up!

KIM CHRISTFORT: You know, particularly in the early days of change, when there’s a lot of uncertainty, you’re sort of in the midst of living that problem. It’s really important to get a lot of ideas on the table quickly without shutting them down.

And, having a process like that gives you essentially permission to keep going in a line of thinking without having that skeptical side of us come in and really stop the trajectory of thought. “Because it’s important to have an executive summary. You shouldn’t need

to ask any more than that.”

MIKE BECHTEL: When I was a VC, one of our primary investors was an innovation consultancy. And I got to learn a lot about innovation management and theory. A lot of that informs my work as a college prof at Notre Dame.

But that’s all to say, there’s that idea, like a bronze medal organization is afraid of failure, doesn’t tolerate failure, and so needs to be told, you know, elementary school truisms, like all ideas could be good ideas at this stage. And you’re like, “yeah, sure, sure.”

I think the 201 there and you sort of foreshadowed it really nicely, Kim.

I think the 201 is all ideas are good ideas, if they’re in service of problems worth solving, itches worth scratching, of real needs. And, one of the most eye-opening things I ever saw was back when I was a CTO of an early childhood education, not-for-profit.

It’s around 2010 when I joined, and I saw we had an idea suggestion box, and that’s healthy. I’d rather have one than not have one. But what we learned was that the likelihood of any of those ideas being within the sphere of influencing control of our technology team was practically nil.

We replaced that thing with an issue box. We just called it the complaint box. It had another nickname that iterates, but I can’t say it on this show. And it was gold for two reasons. One, it was cathartic. We were giving people a chance to express their needs.

All we asked was that they used a tripartite sentence statement: I, because, but. “I wanna log into our email from home because it can save me time on my commute, but the VPN won’t let me.” Okay. What we could do was, and prepare for seventh grade laughter, we could collect the “buts” because those were the tensions in need of resolution.

And then we could redeploy those for brainstorming. And people across the organization were like, “we could solve this with that.” And all those ideas were good ideas because they were in service of a real

need.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Now, I wanna pivot a little bit here, just to, to going back to you, because I love the blush moments.

So, we're gonna talk about you again. In terms of how you manage this incredible schedule that I know you have – you are in very high demand. I think you do more than a hundred keynote events a year. I also saw your amazing musical ability on YouTube. I was quite impressed with that.

So somehow you're managing to, you know, be on the road, be with clients, be doing music, and I'm sure spending time with your family. I'd love to just know more about how you live with that problem and actually balance all these things in your life.

MIKE BECHTEL: Well, this story starts in 2007, actually 2006. I was rocking my newborn Brady to sleep one night. And I see like a fire in the electrical outlet in his bedroom, and I freak out. And then I like, don't wanna wake the baby though. It's like this competing parental instinct, like, don't get burned and don't wake the kid. And I look over, and I realize that the outlet's not on fire. It's something in my field of view, and it's not the room, it's me.

And, you know, like a movie montage where I'll save you 10 years of exposition, a series of medical tests resulted in me learning that I had multiple sclerosis.

And Kim, the reason I bring this up is I didn't catch multiple sclerosis right when I was diagnosed. It put language to something that had always been part of me and or at least my adult life. And one of those things that had always been part of me was I realized that for medical reasons, that are hard to explain completely but I'll give you the Cliffs notes, when you have MS, you tucker out more quickly. Your body has to run the electrical signals harder than it should to kind of get the stuff from stem to stern. And what I learned, Kim, from that was there was this like really profound feeling of self-awareness where I realized I needed to find a way to be more efficient with the time I do have, where I have energy, because the universe hasn't built me in a way where I can check email after dinner

or log on for calls at silly o'clock at night or the morning. And so that sent me down this road, Kim, because that. And that was the need right back to embracing the mess. That was my mess.

And this was my need. How to be a reasonably high performer when I know I've only got about eight hours and change a day to do it. And so what I realized was I needed a system. I got really practical and tactical with, "okay, I need three and a half hours a day for thoughtful, deep, think solo work. No more than three and a half hours a day for collaborative jibber jabber work."

Every time I'm on an airplane and doing stuff like that, I need to offset it with health and wellness and workout time and all that. And, I think what it created for me, Kim, was a scaffolding that maybe paradoxically, it shows up in the world as like, "man, that guy is busy. He's got it together."

In truth, this is me up to my neck in the mess of what does it mean to be a professional when you've really only got 40 hours of battery a week. And so TLDR because I burn briefly, I make sure that that time burns a little extra brightly.

KIM CHRISTFORT: But it's an incredible story and, and great inspiration actually to seek a forcing function for yourself. So, you had it put upon you, you made a structure and a framework that worked for you, but yeah, there's no reason others couldn't take inspiration from that and manage your day in a way that lets you spend it doing the things that are most important.

MIKE BECHTEL: That's it. You know, I love your use of the word forcing function. I'm giving you like a, like a nerdy high five because from one creator to another, there's clichés of plenty here, right? "Lemon into lemonade" and those are true. But innovation loves constraints. And that design constraint for me of "okay, bucko be the best you can be with really hard guardrails around time and energy." I was like, whew. Well, that takes a good 80% of the mess off the table. I'll be that guy.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I'd love to explore whether you have a specific example. Cause I think part of having a very well-managed

schedule is that you wanna make the best use of the time. And so it could be tempting to maybe not live with a problem, rush to that solution. Cause I only allocated two hours for this. So how do you balance this, very healthy management of your time with the need perhaps let things take the time they need to take.

MIKE BECHTEL: Yeah. That's big. So for starters, I have made a recurring appointment in my calendar that runs from 5:00 PM my time, central time to 8:00 AM central time every day for the next 50 years. And it's called life. And does that mean that I won't ever work late? Like, no, of course not.

The second thing I do is from about 08:00 to about 08:30, I have a 30-minute window that it's just called sort of strategy and prioritization. Cause one of the things that I've learned, Kim, for me, and again, I don't pretend this is some galactic truth, anybody else needs to tell you, but for me, if I go to email right away, I become a reactive servant to other people's urgencies.

And the likelihood of that overlapping with my priorities is pretty low. And so I try not to get to email until after then I have a 90 minute set of beautiful, beautiful white space that's open for meetings. That's the Oklahoma gold rush, right? That's the land rush.

And so it little heuristics like that, which have sort of evolved over the last 15 years, end up in a day where I think what I strive for is this balance between what I call making promises and keeping promises. What I find is if I have half as many meetings, but I follow through with that space to do the stuff I say I'm gonna do, everybody has a better time.

KIM CHRISTFORT: You are speaking my language. I am a big believer in tightly managing your time because it's all you have really.

MIKE BECHTEL: There's an entrepreneur by the name of Jason Free. He's always calling things into question that other people take as orthodoxy. But I'll never forget about 10 years ago, I read one of his articles that was simply titled, "Wait, other people can steal your time? And granted, he's coming from Entrepreneur Land where the idea of an

enterprise shared calendar was Martian to him.

But because he was filled with so much autonomy and agency and solopreneur mojo, he just, he just couldn't conceive of it. He's like, "but you are a grown-up. They can't do that to you on a Tuesday!" And, and it just really hit me in a place. It hit me right in the feels, because Kim, I was just like, "Yeah." So, my compromise is – "yeah, there's about four hours a day where you can do that to me, but not the rest."

KIM CHRISTFORT: You got to draw the lines, got to draw somewhere. Well, Mike, listening to you, I'm sure our listeners have probably remarked on the unique way you turn a phrase and your storytelling ability.

And I do think it's one of the superpowers you have to take very complex ideas and translate that into something that's accessible and very human. I'd love to understand more about how you go through that process of taking these complex things and making them relatable and dramatic.

MIKE BECHTEL: Right. There is something to be said for appropriately seasoning a narrative with drama.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Right. Well you mentioned jazz hands earlier. I think this is the jazz hands portion of the agenda.

MIKE BECHTEL: Right. Okay. We've checked the box on steak. Sizzle time! Let's go.

One of the things that I think I've always lived with, experientially, is the behavioral chasm between the theater kids and the math club. Because as one of the few, the proud, the dual citizens, it occurred to me that that engineers, financiers, anyone who butters their bread with precision and fact, and not persuasion and jazz hands, not only do they resist narrative flare, but they sometimes perceive it as disingenuous and the enemy.

There's that old line on the flip side, on the far extreme, imagine the most dubious, persuasive storyteller. You know, they'll use that famous line, "never let truth get in the way of a good story". And you're like, never take advice from that person. But, what I

would tell you is both extremes are wrong. I think the highest performers that I've come to admire in my career are the people who can braid information with inspiration, and who can sort of marry up the really heady intellectual stuff with the really visceral lived experience, shared experience stuff. And so, what I always think I shoot for, and you know, Kim, I've never really been asked it quite this directly, so, watch me, create new neural pathways in real time.

As I'm putting together a message, I'm imagining characters from each archetype in the room at the same time. And I know I'll never fully charm Dr. Serious on the left, and I'll never fully deliver the quantum mechanical equation to his antithesis on the right, but my goal going into it is, is something for everyone because there's that old trope, right? You can't please all the people all the time. But what I found is if you can engage a single counterparty, or five people, or 50 people, or 5,000 people with a balanced plate, Something for everyone and by the way, do so with just a little bit of self-deprecation, but I think a little bit of that balance plate cut with a twitch of self-deprecation, people come away from that thinking he was there for us, not for him. She was there for our purposes, not for herself, aggrandizement. And I think that demonstration, no matter how explicit or just implied of here to meet you where you are, makes all the difference.

KIM CHRISTFORT: That also just comes across as so much more authentic. You know, you're a true human being and you're gonna joke about yourself, but you're gonna make it around around them. I think it's fascinating – your words – something for everyone because as you know, I'm a huge believer in business chemistry. That's our working style system. You know, everybody has something different that they're looking for in a business chemistry lens on this, we are very much trying to recognize that different people need different things. Just like you did. This guy's gonna need data, that guy's gonna need proof, this person's gonna need to be entertained. But if we don't have a foundation, what will appeal to all of them on a deeply human level. The rest doesn't even matter. We sort of lost permission to even get there in the first place.

And so, you know, this idea of what is that common ground and coming back to that common ground is gonna be that they're human beings. They wanna see you as a real person who is humble and able to share. And you are going to talk to them in a way that storytellers for generations have talked to human beings, which is in words that are real words and not these acronyms and blown up language that we've managed to invent over the centuries.

MIKE BECHTEL: Well, You know, there's this old trope that if you really wanna understand something, try to teach it. And I used to think that it was noble, but I don't know that I really got it until I found myself in my current role, is effectively like a sort of science communicator of sorts, but the bronze metal communicator, can't handle complexity. What I tend to find is that silver metal communicators, they relish in their command of the complex, they will jargon your face off and they will go all in on, you know, frequency hopping, spread spectrum analysis framework.

You're like, okay, we get it lady, you super smart. Yeah. You went to college twice. The gold medal communicator receives that and then dares to simplify and humanize. And so think about it, your favorite people we've ever worked with, they extract simplicity from the jaws of complexity. The people we'd rather not be stuck in airports with are the people who find a way to extract complexity from simplicity. That plain language is almost always best.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love that, and I wish I could quickly query a gen AI tool to have the most complex response to what you just said in non-human language. Sadly, I've been training myself on the human side, so that's, that's harder.

MIKE BECHTEL: Just when in doubt, just remember frequency hopping, spread spectrum analysis. That'll stagger everybody the most.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Frequency hopping spread spectrum analysis. Okay. I'm also one of those dual citizens. I was science and theater and arts. And I appreciate a good scientific turn of phrase when it, when it fits.

MIKE BECHTEL: Here's our business opportunity. Here's our startup idea. Are you ready, Kim?

KIM CHRISTFORT: I'm so ready.

MIKE BECHTEL: Alright. What Lin Manuel did for politics and hip hop, we're gonna do for science and some other genre, but we're gonna make a bestselling show that's about science as a musical. I think we have it in us.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Hey, I'm for it. You're obviously a singer, writer, you play guitar. I'm a vocalist. So we've got the start of a band. We could do this.

MIKE BECHTEL: That's right. Leave it in the comments, folks. Tell us what, what to play is.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Exactly. Put in your suggestions. It won't quite be the B box, but a different kind of box that we're looking for input on.

MIKE BECHTEL: I love it.

KIM CHRISTFORT: So, Mike, we have covered a lot of ground today. You've talked about the importance of diverse perspectives, having this orientation around needs as a way of living with the problem because you really know what needs you're solving for then, being able to tolerate the mess on that journey and the unique role you actually play as a chief futurist of translating all of this data, all of this input into something that has meaning, has direction and maybe a little jazz hands to the narration around that. The point about being a human and communicating like a human, and of course managing and owning your time. It is yours to own.

MIKE BECHTEL: It is. It is. And, we have covered a lot!

KIM CHRISTFORT: And I don't wanna stop yet because I have one more fun thing that, I would love your reaction to because you are a chief futurist and deal so much with technology. This discussion would not be complete without actually having our Gen AI assistant take part in the conversation.

We did ask our assistant Sidekick to come

up with a few closing questions for you. Oh. I have to say the team tried several different prompts, but ultimately we went with the following:

Based on what you know about Mike Bechtel from publicly available information, generate rapid fire closing questions we could ask that, bring levity and humor to the end of the podcast, but are still relevant to Mike and leverage what you know about his background.

So, are you ready?

MIKE BECHTEL: Alright, bring it bot!

KIM CHRISTFORT: Okay, so here we go. Question one, one Tech buzzword must be banished to the island of misfit jargon. Metaverse, synergy or digital transformation. Which one do you exile and why?

MIKE BECHTEL: I think digital transformation.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Okay. Why?

MIKE BECHTEL: Because synergy is already banished for business buzzwords, so it would just be a double banish.

KIM CHRISTFORT: It's kind of zombie though. We keep banishing it and it keeps rising back from the, from the dead zone.

MIKE BECHTEL: Metaverse. Hot take. I believe that the twin terms of Metaverse and blockchain, they're both going to be coming back in a meaningful way.

There's that famous hype cycle, right? Where the peak of inflated expectations, the trough of disillusionment, blockchain and Metaverse have been there for the last 18 months, but virtual worlds and decentralized truth and trust, they're both coming back. So I'm gonna keep that one. But yeah, digital transformation bumps me out because I just feel like anything anybody has done with tech since 1957 is that, and so it's hard for me to get excited about that when it's everything.

KIM CHRISTFORT: That makes sense. All right. I'm gonna give you one more. What is one piece of quote unquote old technology

that you secretly wish would make a comeback and why?

MIKE BECHTEL: This is fun.

Old tech. This is like super nostalgic and just like personal but we had a Commodore 64 computer.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Nice.

MIKE BECHTEL: It was wild. My band, we wrote a song about Commodore 64, 10 years later. That's not important right now, but what I loved about it was back to design and constraints, right? Because that thing could do so little. You were able to dream so big. So, I remember like making like text adventure video games and then having my dad play them and he's like, what do I do know? Like, you're in a dark room and there's a sword. What do you think you should do? He's like, I don't know. Pick up the sword. And so, I think that idea of like the super limited, the old school computer palette of just like you and the command line, that would be a wild thing to see come back.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Well, you know, there's a lot more room for your imagination, and I think we're now in the age of the masterful prompt, which in some ways is just that open-ended command line.

MIKE BECHTEL: I mean, I probably could build a Commodore 64 emulator with a thought after this righteous discussion. Kim, how about you? I feel compelled to ask you that same question. Do you like any old school effect that would put a smile on your face?

KIM CHRISTFORT: I have to admit, I always liked the flip phone just because it looked cool to sort of flip open your phone and they still exist. I know. I just don't have one of them. But I used to have a very early printer that was a special kind of like laser style printer. But the reason it was cool is it actually faded over time. And so my friends and I would use it to send secret messages to one another.

MIKE BECHTEL: You had the OG Snapchat.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Yes! But it was fabulous because I actually discovered it in a bad way.

I wrote an essay, which then disappeared two weeks later. And it was an odd excuse, you know, it wasn't, "the dog ate my homework", it was my printer didn't actually hold the print. But once we knew that was the situation, we'd use it to write messages and they'd disappear. So, passing notes in class. What note? It's just a blank piece of paper.

MIKE BECHTEL: Right. There is something to be said for appropriately seasoning a narrative with drama.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Right. Well you mentioned jazz hands earlier. I think this is the jazz hands portion of the agenda.

MIKE BECHTEL: Oh, man. That's a beautiful answer.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I wanna ask a last question because we ask this of everyone on the show, and I'd love to hear your take. What does breakthrough mean to you?

MIKE BECHTEL: Oh man, that's good. To me, a breakthrough is anything, that moves beyond the sort of calcified bounds of continuous improvement that rejects inertial success in favor of a radical rethink.

And so, you know, there's that old cheese ball quote. It's a great quote actually. All respect to Oren Harari, a Stanford prof. He said the electric light did not come from the continuous improvement of candles. There were a lot of people working improve candles in until they weren't.

There are a lot of people continuing to

optimize the internal combustion engine. Probably not for long. And so to me, a breakthrough is something that rethinks the problem, on route to radically rethinking the solution.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Such an appropriate response for an episode really digging into living with a problem. So, thank you. Thank you for that, Mike. It was such a pleasure. We loved having you on the show, and, I wish you much luck in managing that beautiful calendar of yours, and in helping to shape the future.

MIKE BECHTEL: Kim, thanks for having me. And, white space is always yours. Exceptions knows no bounds when it comes to jamming with you, my friend.



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