

EP 76 - Carolene Méli - Make Memorable Team Events using Experience Design

Mitch Simon: Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere where CEOs, leaders, and experts at building teams,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: companies,

Mitch Simon: organizations,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and amazing cultures share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the east coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis.

Mitch Simon: And I'm your co-host on the west coast, Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

As team leaders, business owners and managers, we have a new responsibility when we bring our employees together and that's to make those gatherings effective, memorable, and frankly, worth the effort to drag our team members from their homes to the office. Yet there aren't any resources on how to create those gatherings until now.

On today's podcast, we interview a returning guest, Carolene Méli. Experience strategist from Cirque du Soleil who has created a tool to help anyone design a gathering that your employees will never stop talking about. The tool that will help you bring back the buzz.

Hello and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your cohost Mitch Simon on the west coast, and our amazing cohost on the east coast, Dr Virginia Bianco-Mathis. And on the podcast today, we bring back, Carolene Méli, an experience strategist, who worked for over a decade with Cirque du Soleil.

When we spoke to Carolyn over a year ago, no one was having live events. But as we sit here, I think things are starting to change. People are coming back to work maybe once a month, twice a month, sometimes a few days a week, and

they're having meetings and they're having greetings and they're having gatherings and they're having events.

And we want to explore with Carolene, how do you plan for these events? 'Cause they gotta be significant right, Carolene? Oh, welcome to the show. Welcome to the show, Carolene!

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: You're ready to get right into the-

Mitch Simon: I'm ready to go.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Nitty-gritty.

Carolene Méli: I can't believe you said that I was on this a year ago. It feels like it was just a couple months ago, but it is crazy to see how much has changed, albeit seeing the world in general. But as we discuss the new kind of dynamic in the workplace and all the potential that we have to create incredible experiences for our teams, it's just a very, very exciting time, but also a time that needs a lot of creativity and different kind of focus, right, and that's what we're going to chat about.

Mitch Simon: Right. And talking about creativity, you got to share with our listeners, where were you when we interviewed you the first time, and where are you now?

Carolene Méli: I was in Montenegro, I believe, if I remember that correctly. Yeah.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: It was exotic wherever it was.

Carolene Méli: Yeah, I was in Montenegro. The lockdowns, I started the lockdowns in the south of France because I was traveling there. I don't have a home necessarily. Ended up in Montenegro. And then now I've been in the Greek islands for the last couple of months or six months or so now.

Yeah, so I feel like every time we chat, I'm going to be in a different location. But I wouldn't have it any other way.

Mitch Simon: Sounds great.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah, you're the lucky one. And let me center something a second. Given your introduction, Mitch. Yes, people are now having more face to face events. Some folks going back into the office. Most likely some kind of hybrid. And yet when they are gathering, that gets to what I think you two spend a lot of time talking about, which is when we do get together four times a year, once a month, those have to be carefully planned more so than ever before.

So I just wanted to center that. It's not like, oh, we're now all back together, and everything is like it used to be.

Carolene Méli: I think one really interesting, I guess, angle at what you are saying is, you know, when I talk about the work that I do as an experience strategist, my mission is to redefine how we create experiences. And a lot of that comes down to, what is an experience?

So a lot of times we think of actual events, right? So if we're thinking about in the workplace or in a company, our brain automatically goes to, oh, the annual Christmas party, or the annual like retreat, or I don't know, some different events that happened within a company regularly. But the way that I'm trying to really redefine this idea of an experience is even as leaders, what is the experience that we're providing others? And if we are only with our teams in specific moments, like you mentioned, maybe it's once a week, maybe it's only once a year, how can we transform that, seemingly insignificant occasion, a gathering into an actual experience?

So I think that's the big difference. And that's why I try to steer clear of the word 'event' because then people think event planners and an actual event, like a Christmas party. And I really want to get away from that because I think there's so much power in creating experiences, even on a daily basis for our teams. And we don't really even have that forethought to go down that path. And so that's really where my focus is.

Mitch Simon: You know, we had on the show, Barry Winkless and a lot of articles that are basically saying when people come back to work, they're going to expect it to be like Disneyland or there they're not coming back.

Carolene, you're mentioning that, you know, it's important that meetings and I'll get togethers be carefully planned. And I want to know why is it so important right now, you know, more than ever.

Carolene Méli: I think in my opinion, because people are making more of an effort to meet, right? It's not a regular thing anymore that we just hang out all the time or that we're just in the office all the time. Now it's actually an effort to go physically to these places or to gather together. And because we're already putting so much emphasis on and attention on, okay, now I actually have to go to that place and meet with those people, there is almost a responsibility, I believe, of whoever has created that opportunity to make it impactful in some way. And it doesn't have to be anything crazy, but it does have to shift the needle in some aspect, you know?

We talk a lot about really looking at the outcome that you want to create. Like what do we like before and what do we want to come out this having happened so that we can make some kind of change as we step away from this. So we're already putting so much attention into actually now, oh gosh, I actually have to go to this thing. And if the thing is terrible or it's just so uneventful or boring or just mundane, then you've already lost that. You've lost some huge potential and a huge opportunity to create an experience.

Mitch Simon: I love that. I love what you said that, you know, it's an effort to go to work. It used to just be a bummer to go to work. Now it's an effort, you know. Giving a new paradigm.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes.

Mitch Simon: And then you mentioned it, now it's a new responsibility of the owner or the leader or the manager or the business to make sure it's interesting and fun. And that is what I think a lot of people aren't realizing that it's, you know, sorry, but it now is a new responsibility for those of you who Team Anywhere. When you're going to bring them back, it needs to be meaningful. It needs to have people have an experience. Like, you know, you're an experience strategist, and they must have an experience, whereas before they just used to go to work.

Carolene Méli: Well, it has to be worth it, right? Now, if they're very comfortable, we're all comfortable in our different work settings, whatever that means for each individual. But if we are now being asked like, oh, you have to show up at this time at this location, well, it better be damn good. It better be a great experience, you know? Otherwise, they're going to leave, going, oh my gosh, what a waste of time. So that's where we need to-

That's what I think like doing even just the mental focus, like this is what I want to create for the people that I'm inviting.

Mitch Simon: What do you think are the biggest challenges now for companies with this new responsibility as their people come back to work?

Carolene Méli: I think there's a lot of unknown still, right? Like were, what, a year and a half into this, but still there's so much going on. You know, I'm currently in Europe and for example, Austria has just gone back into a 20 day lockdown, which is crazy.

And we didn't think that at this stage of this time that we would be in that position. But imagine the organizations in Austria, like having to deal with this, kind of, unexpected now hurdles. So I still think there's a lot of unknown and I think we're still trying to figure things out. And I think one of the biggest challenges, I would say for these leaders, these CEOs, these managers of these groups is okay, how do I create something for them that is going to be actually impactful and meaningful?

And a lot of the strategy for looking from the strategy side actually lies, in having conversations with them. And I think that's something that is so over underrated and just not even thought about like, oh my gosh, let me actually have a conversation with my team and ask them what they want. It sounds so simple, but it is so not done.

And I think that's the number one. It's the biggest mistake that leaders, that CEOs, that managers make. And are making right now is there's so much is changing and you need to have such a good pulse on how your people are feeling and, you know, what they're going through so that you can create an experience for them that is highly relevant to them, right?

Mitch Simon: So, what have you done? What have you created, sitting on your little island in Greece? What have you been working on? How did you even get by this last year, on this tiny little island, and what have you been up to?

Carolene Méli: Yeah, so when we were thinking about, okay, what can we create and how can we support leaders and CEOs really looking at this from a whole new perspective and really not knowing how to go about creating these in-person experiences, because we've been digital right for a year and a half. It's been a hundred percent digital for the most part. So now we are in this hopeful stage of let's create some things where people can actually come back together.

And so the brands, the project is Bringing Back the Buzz, and it's very self-explanatory. It's how can we inject that energy and that enthusiasm that potentially existed before, or maybe didn't. Maybe we're at a whole different stage. And how can we bring our teams together and really incredible ways where it is going to add value, not only to them as the employee or a teammate, but also to the organization. How can this be fruitful and ROI positive for all parties involved in these kinds of in-person experiences?

So it's been a thought process of this is what ideally I would like to create in the world of experiences in a company. But of course, it's kind of going with the tides, right. Which is funny, 'cause I live right next to the sea. But it's going with the tides and really feeling out the environment. And now I think is a really great time to bring this to the world as those opportunities are starting to present themselves.

Mitch Simon: Okay, so you mentioned Bringing Back the Buzz. What is Bringing Back the Buzz?

Carolene Méli: So it starts with an in-depth ebook. And this ebook is 55 pages. It goes through four different stages of really deep strategy, that anyone can pick up. Anyone who has the thought of, okay, I want to create something for my team. They can go through these four steps and they can really start to develop a deep understanding of their people and what they need and want right now. And how can we then translate that into an event, into an experience. So it goes through those stages, you know.

So starting with the impact you want to create, what outcomes do you want to see at the end of your event, what is the story that you want to tell through this experience?

And then of course, the event design process, which is where most people tend to go first, right? Where's the event going to be held? What's the venue? Who's the caterer? Who's the guest speaker? And most people will gravitate naturally to that stage.

Yet there is many different considerations that need to happen and work that needs to be done before you even get to the event design stage. And that is what Bringing Back the Buzz is all about.

Mitch Simon: Great. So you mentioned one of the things you want to do before you do event design. I understand event design itself is a beast. You want to

look at impact and outcome. What's the difference between the impact you want to have and the outcome you want to have?

Carolene Méli: Yeah, so I think impact is really where you want to start, right? So I spoke before about that A to B journey. So what is happening right now in the organization? What is happening right now within my team? Whether if this question is very micro for your team of 10 people, or whether you're speaking more company-wide. And once I put on this experience, where do I want to get them to at the end of this experience? So what is that journey that I want to see? What is that transition from A to B?

And then the outcomes are really tactical, right? So what are the set outcomes that I want to achieve at the end of this event? And this really takes a lot of forethought as well, because what is those future actions that we want to come together and create for our organization, you know. And these experiences could be, you want to come together to maybe increase sales in generally. Maybe you're feeling that the company coaches a little bit off, so you really want to focus on connection. Maybe bringing together new employees that started already, but it's all been virtual. So they haven't actually met anybody else face to face in the organization. Maybe it's very deep strategy. You want to develop something new within the organization, a program or a specific strategy.

And so that's where we start, right? So the impact and the outcome. The outcome is very, very tactical. It's like, what can you grab onto? And you should be able to, after the experience, tick them off, like, yep, yep, yep. Did achieve those. That is the goal. And that is deeply explained in that section to make sure that you have all the tools that you need to really execute on that.

Mitch Simon: That's great. And then you mentioned story. I'm planning an event. Why do I need to think about a story?

Carolene Méli: I know a lot of time in leadership, we talk about, you know, great leaders are the best storytellers, right? And I think this often goes for an experience as well. When I think of Cirque du Soleil, you know, I spent 10 years on tour with Cirque du Soleil, I believe they're some of the best storytellers in the entire world. And what is really interesting about the storytelling at Cirque du Soleil is that there isn't actually a very set story. If anyone listening has ever watched a show, you will concur, it is really a journey that happens that, it's a little bit vague, but at the same time, you feel like you're going on this journey together.

And even when you buy something as simple as the program, it doesn't lay out, okay, this is the situation. This is what happens. This is the end. Because there's a lot of room for interpretation. And so I saw that for 10 years on the stage and watching guests reaction to that. And it just changed how I completely thought about experiences.

And so when we are thinking about, okay, let's create something, for me, when we're talking about storytelling is what is that journey that we can take our participants, attendees, employees or our teammates to, and how can we really inspire them and engage them and really help them align with our mission, right?

And to me, that is what storytelling is all about and why it is so crucial in an experience. And again, an area that not a lot of people think about. I don't think a lot of people think, oh, I want to put on an event. What is the story that I want to tell? And if you're able to actually go through that step and again, in the ebook, it just breaks it down so beautifully, you are almost at a whole different level of experience design. And it is a crucial part of creating an incredible experience that is highly ROI positive, for again, not only the participants, your employees, but also for the company as well.

Mitch Simon: So if I'm a manager, and I've never thought about these concepts, like impact and story and event design, how will I be able to do this? How will the tools help me create that event?

Carolene Méli: So in the ebook itself, it goes to the different sections. And then at the end of each section, there is some activities for you to do. And there is also, we have provided a really in-depth spreadsheet that just really allows you to map out this entire process. So you can actually input your answers to all the questions that we ask you.

And so you are able to do this, whether it's just you or maybe a small group within your organization, you're able to do this step-by-step. And if you get to the end of this ebook and you're like, ah, I really want, I really love this and I want to keep going, but I feel like I want something more, then we have a couple of options of consulting with me as an experience strategist, and I can actually help you. I co-create the experience with you.

So there's different stages based on the kind of support that you would like, as a result of the experience that you've gone through with the ebook. So yeah. We've tried to cater to many different levels of experience in creating events,

but also really passion for really putting on an experience that's got really going to make some impact.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: All right, well, I'm here. Hold on.

Mitch Simon: Alright, go for it Ginny.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I'm here saying I love it. I need an example. You gave a few, like maybe I'm trying to get people to put some in-depth strategy together. Maybe I am trying to recapture what we want as the culture here. What would be the story? What would the event look like?

And I realized, this is an art. Not like a lock step 1, 2, 3, 4. But I would love to hear if you follow these steps, here is a, what would be considered a really good event? No, wait. Wrong. Experience.

Mitch Simon: Experience. Experience.

Carolene Méli: So I'll give you one really very simple example that I think everybody can jump on board with. And that is recently I worked with somebody who was relatively new to their team. It was a very high, high level team within the organization. They were relatively new and they wanted to create a brainstorming session for a particular topic. She had noticed a particular topic was a little bit lacking in their marketing strategy, right?

So she had the idea of putting together a very simple 30 minutes to one hour brainstorming session, bringing all these kind of high-level leaders. Almost C-suite. Not quite C-suite. But almost C-suite leaders together to really discuss this. So she came to me with this idea and through Bringing Back the Buzz and through the strategy, I helped her through this entire process. And it was amazing.

And the first thing I'll say is it's highly collaborative, right? The great thing about creating-

I mean, I guess for me, as an experience strategist is I get the opportunity to help people create all sorts of experiences, you know. This one in particular is a virtual brainstorming session. But then I come from Cirque du Soleil, which is arguably one of the best experiences in the world.

So it's a really, really interesting dynamic to work on many different experiences and no matter who I'm working with, it's highly collaborative. So I'm asking a lot of questions. I'm trying to get to a deeper level of understanding of what are you trying to achieve in this event.

So we threw a number of different strategy calls. We looked really at okay-

Simplified, it's a brainstorming session, right? That's pretty standard. We all do that in our business, right. Everybody can say that they do a cause like this. What was interesting about her situation was that it was half virtual. There was like three quarters of the people were actually in the room, and then I think two or three people were virtual and she was virtual as well. So it was this interesting dynamic of her hosting from afar, if you will, yet an entire group being together in a room.

And so we really broke down the idea that she had into these stages that we've talked about. So really what is the impact that you want to create from this very one standalone event, what are the outcomes? What is those tactical points that are really going to get you to that place? What is the story that we're trying to tell throughout this entire brainstorming? And then of course, the event design process. So what are really the logistics behind putting on this experience?

And it was really interesting because, you know, a number of times she said, oh my gosh, I never would have thought of this. And I've never thought about, okay, where do I want them to be at the beginning of the meeting and at the end of the meeting? And again, I think we glazed over that very, very often. Oh, it's a 30 minute meeting. I'm just going to ask a bunch of questions. But we actually created a really magical experience.

And at the end of the experience, she came back to me and she'd screenshotted some, you know, WhatsApp messages and some emails, and the feedback was just incredible. Like, that was such an incredible event. I've never thought about this particular topic in that way. I can't wait for the next one. She's like, oh my gosh, I have to do another one. So it can create-

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: You created an experience monster.

Carolene Méli: Yeah, so it can be as simple as a 30 minute brainstorming meeting, or it can be your annual corporate retreat. So there is a large range and you can actually, the way that this was created, Bringing Back the Buzz, is you

can apply this, if you understand the concepts, you can apply this to the entire spectrum of experiences.

Mitch Simon: That's great. That's exciting. You know, It's exciting to think about how you can change a brainstorming session to be just, okay, come up with some ideas and actually have it be very, very meaningful. And I think that's exactly, you know, what we've been promoting on this podcast is creating experiences that are meaningful, especially when you're going to get your team physically together. And perhaps using this as a resource, when you're going to, let's say, you're in Austria and you can't get your team together, then in fact, you could use this as a resource as well.

You know, I'd like to know is what are some of the common mistakes that people make? Like for instance, if that person would have just done a brainstorming session, what are the common mistakes that people make such that their meetings or their experiences just don't really knock it out of the ballpark?

Carolene Méli: I think the first one, and we did touch on this earlier, was really not understanding where your team is at, right? So what are their current obstacles? What are their current struggles? If you're talking about a very specific topic, as this client of mine was that I just mentioned, you know, I asked her to ask them a series of questions before the event even happens.

And she hadn't thought about potentially doing that, right? So a lot of times, we like to create things, and I fall into this trap all the time, we create things because we think it is what everyone's going to love and wants, and also what we really like to do, right?

But when we're talking about creating experiences, and the fact that right now, those moments are far and few in between, right, and so they have to be very impactful, really having that pulse on whoever is showing up for this experience. Like what do they actually want? So that's the first one is really asking your team or, we refer to team a lot. It could be the three people that report to you. It could be the a hundred people in your organization.

But if you don't even have those conversations with them, and again, in actually in the ebook, we list out a whole bunch of questions that you can ask them. And so I think that's the first mistake, number one, is really getting to know your team in a different way. And it's a really interesting way to start kind of bridge a

gap of communication that you may not have had necessarily before, right? So that would be the first one.

The second one is, and I also touched on this, is creating the event or kind of conceptually coming up with, okay, what do I want this event to be like, without even considering your employees. And again, they are similar in the regard that okay, now, I've like I said before, oh, I want to get this guest speaker to come and talk about this one particular thing. Oh, I would love to have this. I'd love to have it at this venue. I'd love to have it at this time. Before actually doing any of that legwork.

And for both of those mistakes, the result is always the same. The event becomes very irrelevant. There's this lack of relevance into actually what is happening right now. And as we've touched on it before what's happening right now always changes. So these conversations need to be continuing. So that would be the second one.

And then the third one is really determining what is the actual ROI? What is the return on investment? Or we joke, saying, return on the event, that you're aiming for here. This is not just an event out of the blue, because probably you're putting money into this, right?

You're asking people to give up time for this. We're talking about in-person events here. So they're going to have to travel somewhere. So, if we are asking them to do all of these things, we're putting a whole bunch of money into it, then we need to have a very clear ROI. And I think, again, we focus too much on, you know, I often I say like, we focus on logistics instead of people.

And I think across those three mistakes that is very, very apparent. And that is something that if you really truly want to create an exceptionalist experience that is highly relevant to the current wants and needs of your people and what is going on around you, then those need to be very top of mind considerations.

Mitch Simon: Great. So thank you for those three mistakes. Now, are there any resources that we can get online to help us? I know you mentioned there's the book. Are there any other things we could look at just to get a better understanding of what we need to think about as we create our next experience?

Carolene Méli: Yeah. So the really quick go-to resource is a free guide, "The 3 Mistakes Leaders Make when Planning these In-person Events and Company Gatherings and Meetings." And they discuss more in-depth those three mistakes

that I've just mentioned. So that is a great place to start. It is about 15 pages, I believe, so it's a really great quick read. There's a bunch of activities there as well to really get those brain cells thinking, right, in terms of experience strategy. So that would be the first place. And then the ebook would be the next step after that, if you're a leader, you're a CEO and you're sitting there going, yep, I'm all in. I'm all into this experience design process, and I really want to go for it and create something truly exceptional.

Mitch Simon: Great. And that's at BringingBackTheBuzz.com.

Carolene Méli: Correct.

Mitch Simon: Not bringbackthebuzz.com, but BringingBackTheBuzz.com.

Carolene Méli: BringingBackTheBuzz.com. That's what we're doing, present tense, right? We're bringing back the buzz.

Mitch Simon: And I also understand that you have re-engaged in your podcast and work. What is that podcast and how can we find that?

Carolene Méli: Yeah, so the Experience Creators has gone on quite the journey. And I started with interviewing different experience creators from all over the world in different fields. And I've recently started to do some solo episodes where I actually discuss experiences that I go through, that happened to me on a daily basis, or that I work through with my clients.

So you can get a really good, I guess, idea or vibe, feel about the kind of work that I do, and how I can actually help create an incredible experience. And it will be very interesting. The next couple of episodes are going to really focus on historical experiences that are, for example, the Olympic games. How are the Olympic Games still in existence today after thousands-

I mean, I don't know the actual dates. I haven't done the research yet. But after all this time, how is it become such a legacy? I'm going to break it down into kind of an experience design process. I'm trying to do some unique experiences to design discovery. And so that is the Experience Creators.

And actually, if you just go to my website, which is my full name, CaroleneMeli.com, you can find everything there.

Mitch Simon: Wow.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: You know what I love about this, Carolene and Mitch, is you can take that mindset and apply it to your life every day, historically. And you begin to experience it all in a different way. A higher level. A spark that may not have been there before.

Carolene Méli: Yeah. I often like to think of it as, you know, myself as pretty much a full time traveler. At the time of this recording, I have three more days left in the Greek islands and then I will be actually going to, I think, four or five different countries, as I just kind of gallivant around Europe and see people.

But again, when I think about experiences, it's not only what am I experiencing? But it's because a lot of what I'm going to experience in the next month, I've done this many times before. 'Cause I'm revisiting people and places and friends and family. But what is the experience that I'm giving to those around me, whether it's my friends and family at Christmas, whether it's the lovely couple around the corner from me on this Greek island at the supermarket that I see every couple of days.

And I think it's a really interesting mindset shift to think about experience design. And like you said, is how can we think about the experience that we create for others in our everyday lives.

Mitch Simon: Wow. That's a great topic of our next podcast.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah

Mitch Simon: Thank you so much. It's coming out, free ebook? And for those of you who will be traveling around Europe and bumping into Carolene, say hello. And for the rest of us, who are stuck here in the United States, we look forward to seeing you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.