

EP 88 - Dan Gray: Fostering Company Growth Through Effective Communication Flow

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.

It is probably the most competitive job market that we have ever experienced. In today's competitive job market, you must spend more time crafting a value proposition for your employees than you do for your customers. And then you must consciously create rituals to demonstrate your commitment to your employees and your unique culture.

On today's podcast, we speak to Dan Gray, General Manager for KOTN Supply, who shares with us the importance of prioritization, documentation, and rituals for intentional communication. Three of the most important cultural elements to attract and engage your employees as you Team Anywhere.

Hello and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host Mitch Simon on the West Coast. And on the East Coast, we have our amazing co-host, Dr. Virginia Bianco-Mathis. Hello.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yey! Hello.

Mitch Simon: You're loud today, Ginny, you might want to back up just a little bit.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh yeah? Okay.

Mitch Simon: But today on the podcast we introduce the amazing Dan Gray, the general manager for KOTN Supply. Dan has been a part of scaling three different startups over the last 10 years, and is an expert in fostering team culture and employee engagement. Welcome Dan. Always a pleasure to welcome on the program a fellow Canadian. How are you doing Dan?

Dan Gray: Yeah, thanks for having me. Try to keep warm, but excited to chat with you folks and yeah, again, thank you for having me on the podcast.

Mitch Simon: Great, great. We're great to have you here. So, we always like to start off with our first question is, what has life been like for you over the past two years? And what has surprised you the most?

Dan Gray: Oh man. It has been a challenge. I won't lie. Certainly as a leader, it's been a challenging, I'd say two years. But as an individual too, it's been super tough, just trying to figure out how to bring my best self to work.

But, you know, I've been really fortunate. KOTN has been an awesome place. I've spent a lot of time reflecting on if I could have spent the last two years working somewhere, I'm really happy it's at a company that, you know, really is purpose-driven and doing something to better the world. 'Cause I think the last few years for a lot of us have been a reflection on the decisions we make and how we spend our time, and how do we prioritize things in our life? So, you know, definitely not the easiest two years, but certainly, really appreciative of where I'm at.

Mitch Simon: Great. So, tell us a little bit about KOTN and why it is making such a difference in the world.

Dan Gray: Yeah. So, KOTN really started from a naive sort of purpose, which was go and make an amazing t-shirt. And so our founders went all the way to Egypt thinking that the only way to make a t-shirt is to start working with farmers, which most people don't do.

Usually they just go through some sort of outsource supply chain, you know, third-party distributor. In doing so, we actually ended up creating one of the most ethical and sustainable supply chains in the apparel industry. So, as a result we have what's called a hundred percent traceability, meaning we're one of 5% of the apparel industry that knows exactly who's making our product everywhere from farm to hanger, which allows us to ensure ethical wages and fair treatment throughout our supply chain.

And as part of that too, given we're so closely tied to Egypt and the communities that we manufacture products, and we've also been able to develop, build and maintain 13 different schools throughout Egypt as well, which we're really, really proud of. So, you know, there's no shortage of community outreach and, you know, engagement that we try and do. It really it's at the core of who we are as a business.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Wow, that's so impressive. That's incredible.

Mitch Simon: Dan, when you say Egyptian Cotton, you really mean Egyptian Cotton.

Dan Gray: Yeah. It's hard. The challenge, I think with a product like ours, especially since we sell online is you can't feel the difference, you know? You're just looking at a t-shirt and you're like, oh, that's just a white t-shirt.

But as I sit here in my incredibly comfy crew neck sweater, I will tell you, it's what some people refer to as Egyptian Gold. It's a hundred percent pure organic Egyptian Cotton. So, we're really lucky that we decided to build our supply chain on a material with such a rich history. And, as a result, we have some really awesome high quality clothing.

Mitch Simon: I'm feeling so bad wearing my hoodie over here with probably not Egyptian Cotton. And I don't know where the cotton came from.

Anyways, so Ginny and I, we both work with companies that are rapidly expanding their employee bases. A lot of companies we work with have just been, you know, really doing well over the last two years. I want to get an understanding of what are the three areas that companies don't focus enough on as they grow?

Dan Gray: Yeah. So I mean, KOTN at this point would be the third company in the last 10 years that I've started really around like employee 10 and seen grow pretty steadily. So I went, you know, at the last startup, was that employee 10. I think the company scaled up to 80 people by the time I was gone. Same with KOTN, joined around 10. And you know, now we're up to 60 or 70. So, you could say, I'm kind of addicted to the feeling of building from the ground up.

And I think when I take a step back and evaluate what companies aren't spending enough time on— this is directed towards companies, but also the employees that choose to work at high-growth companies.

The first thing I would say is there's so much that is going to evolve over time and so, I think what companies don't necessarily get right, as they invest so much time into process and structure with the assumption that it's going to last for a long time. And the truth is when you're at a scale, especially like ours, there's a lot of fluidity that needs to come out of the process you build.

So, if you're going to structure things, I think it's okay to structure them with the expectation and the communication to the team that, hey this is probably going to change in six months. This is probably gonna change in 12 months. And we're going to have to rethink this entire system. So, that's the first thing I would say.

The second is how does communication flow across an organization? That's one thing that organizations are designing their corporate structure, their hierarchy. It's what does communication look like? What are the leadership pillars going to look like? How do you make sure information flows properly and you're communicating your company values?

I think one of the challenges that I've seen at previous organizations is, early on you either create silos or there's too many people in leadership positions, or there's just not really a clear identity of how you're supposed to communicate what you're working on, how you're supposed to stay accountable. And ultimately, ensure that the entire organization is sort of transparent into what's being done in alignment across the entire organization.

So, starting to think about, what is our process for team all-hands meetings, for doing company demos, for having leadership meetings. Things like that. The more that you can sort of take a step back, get feedback from employees at all levels across the organization, that's really going to allow you to create that alignment to ensure that everyone's sort of tied in.

Mitch Simon: How are you supposed to communicate? Because you know, we've heard, Patrick Lencioni talks a lot about cascading communications. I know that a lot of the companies that I work with— it is a sore point where it's, you know, you're in a meeting. You get to the end of the meeting. And there just isn't enough time. So, what have you done, especially in being able to take a directive or an idea, and have it communicate across an organization, especially in a time when it's either virtual or hybrid?

Dan Gray: Love that question. I think there's a few things to sort of factor in here.

One is I think prioritization is important and I know that seem sort of like it doesn't necessarily fit in here, but the truth is, prioritizing allows you to ensure you're communicating the right things. 'Cause I think what often happens is there's meetings or, a whole bunch of ideas or action items that come out of meetings.

And the reason they don't get done is because there's just too many of them. And there's no sort of hierarchy of how important it is for each of those. So, I think prioritizing what's the most important and most vital when it comes to alignment with the company goal is really the starting point to have the right foundation for what gets communicated.

The next is accountability. So, the one thing I ensure when I'm meeting with my team or other teams is there's always going to be someone taking this away and responsible for getting it done. Because if there's a void in the room and sort of an awkward pause of like who is going to be following up on this, and no one raises their hand, I know that in a week's time, I'm going to have to ask that question again. So, ensuring that there's someone on the team that really has to take ownership here and it becomes their north star, their priority or project that falls on their to-do list, that is super important as well.

And then the last thing is documentation. So, I do not have the best memory. It is something that I have to remember when I go into meetings. And so for me at the forefront of my mind is where am I documenting this information and what we're discussing in meetings, so that if I need to refer back, I have some sort of source of reference that I can go to.

So, there is a hybrid of tools that I tend to use for that. We use a one-on-one tool called Fellow, which is an app for meeting notes, agendas, et cetera. So, that's really helpful. But as well, just following up in our communication tools, whether that's email, Slack, or putting it in my own Evernote. It doesn't really matter what system it is.

I just know I need some sort of form of electronic communication that I can search, so that if I need a reference back, hey, what did we talk about there? Who was responsible? You know, what was on my plate? There is some sort of paper trail and not a physical paper trail. 'Cause I know I'm going to lose that.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And so, do the others in the organization, especially with virtual and hybrid, they have access to those same things. They can go in and look at those notes, comment, checkup?

Dan Gray: I would say we can get better at that. When I talk about sort of company communication needing to be streamlined and consistent across departments, certainly there's an area for us to improve there. One thing that we're trying to do is, in early days, a lot of communication was documented in direct messages, via communication system like Slack.

The problem like that is the two people that are discussing it, they're the only ones privy to that conversation. So, as we've scaled, there's sort of been a mandate that, hey, if there's any sort of formal communication, let's put that in an email. Not because emails' necessarily the most efficient form of communication, but at least there's a way in a forum for us to go back and look at it. And a broader group is sort of included on that.

So, that's one piece of that. For some of the other communication though, for sure, you know, on that app Fellow, which I'd recommend taking a look at, and there's a whole bunch of apps like that for streamlining one-on-ones with employees or keeping agendas. Anyone who's part of that meeting does have access to the notes from that meeting, which makes it a really easy tool to ensure there's visibility across that entire group.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Fabulous. Just hooking into one of those and making sure everyone follows. There you go. That's marvelous. We are now at a place of looking at the other tips that you have for the communications, the prioritization, the accountability and the documentation.

Dan Gray: So, I'll give you one more. I think the last one, this comes down to sort of running a results-driven organization, which is top-down and bottom-up metric alignment when it comes to individuals, roles and responsibilities, as it pertains to the company's goals.

To put that in simpler terms, it's how do I employ X that sits in department Y feel like, I have any impact on revenue or have any impact on our sustainability mission or have any impact on our corporate social responsibility.

And so, I think as a leader and as an organization, what you need to do and spend a lot of time on is leaders should be doing this before they even hire the role. I don't know if it's necessarily the best thing to hire someone without that understanding, but it's when you're hiring this person or when you're filling this role, how does that job ultimately map to revenue?

Because even if it's not a sales job, or if it's not a marketing job, you know, I've been fortunate enough coming up through the ranks that I've had jobs that have

very clear lines of accountability towards revenue, but roles that are not necessarily directly tied to, but do tasks that enable others or create infrastructure to unlock efficiency, making sure they understand how does it impact the organization and the why behind why their role exists. Because that why is ultimately what's going to motivate them as well.

In an organization like KOTN, that why is very strong because we are not only sort of selling a good that we believe in but there also is a community and social aspect to it as well. So, we want all of our employees to not only see the impact that they have from a financial health standpoint, but also how are they bettering the world through our mission.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: So, expanding then on the communication component, the prioritization, and who's going to be accountable for what? And, oh, by the way, here's your role. Here's how you're connected. That in of itself answers part of my question.

How do you all communicate? What kinds of things do you all do to make a person feel, hey, I like working for this company. I like this culture. Or if I called one of your employees up and say, what is your culture? What kind of answer would I get?

Dan Gray: So there's two things that it goes into that. I think one is clarity and the second is repetition. So clarity being, what is it we're trying to achieve. And again, that comes back to mission, value declaration, defining our culture. And those are all exercises that we've gone through and continue to go through.

So when it comes to, okay, what is our culture look like? Or what are the values that ultimately we hold ourselves to and hold our employees to when it comes to job performance? How do we make sure that there's clarity on those? And we're also spending the time to improve those over time. Because as I said earlier, at an organization of our scale, the values that we necessarily hold true or that we reward now might not be the same in 12 months when our business has to evolve. So making sure that, our team is involved in that process. That's the clarity piece for me.

And then the repetition part, that comes in through those various meetings and different forums for communication. So again, you know, having monthly leadership meetings so there's an alignment between our leadership team, ensuring that our CEO and our founders are leading all-hands regularly so that we are making sure that employees have those reminders in place that, this is what we do.

And so, it's staying top of mind of this is why we're doing things. Whenever we have a milestone, whether it's a financial milestone or we've been able to unlock a win in our community programs, we always take that as an opportunity to link back to the why.

So, I'll give you an example. One of the awesome initiatives that KOTN runs is every Black Friday, Cyber Monday, we donate a hundred percent of profits towards building those schools in Egypt. So, given that's the biggest retail time of the year for e-com businesses, and brick and mortar businesses, for us, we see that as an opportunity to take our social responsibility and put that on an even larger scale. It's a four or five day period.

Once the dust is settled and we talked to the team about the results. Sure, we usually have a really nice, financial win at the end of that. But we also make sure the team understands that hey, building those schools allows us to improve the literacy rate in children throughout Egypt and better the communities that we work in so that, as the company scales and as we grow, we continue to reinvest with the people in the community that we want to support and leverage as partners to ensure that we have a circular ecosystem across our business.

So, there's always moments for that. And I think of a business is just always heads down and it's just thinking about profit, profit, profit. Let's keep working. It's easy to miss the other things and, perhaps some of the anecdotal benefits that your business is allowing for your employees. And so, just making sure you take the time to communicate that and let your employees feel good about that. At least for us, that's a differentiator when it comes to recruiting—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Totally, it is a differentiator—

Dan Gray: and retaining talent.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah. Today's population, that's what they're going for. And as you said, they feel more fulfilled. You know, the job is more than this just one role. That's fabulous.

Mitch Simon: What's great, Dan, is I was going to ask you this question about two minutes ago. But you answered it already. It was, what is your culture look like?

Dan Gray: And what hit me was that, what would it look like matches, you know, on the Black Fridays, we are basically working towards supporting our communities and schools in Egypt. That is something that is so tactile. And so,

you know, no, one's going to forget that as an employee. I was just wondering if there's any other ways.

Mitch Simon: 'Cause it's a huge question right now, especially since a lot of growing companies have employees who've never been to headquarters. So, I was just wondering if you had any more insight on how can you do things to answer the question, what is your culture look like when there is no headquarters that people are going to on a regular basis.

Dan Gray: It is certainly a challenge. This is a question I've asked myself a lot about in the last couple of years. And quite honestly, I'm still searching for answers, not just for my team, but for myself too. It's like, how do I get back some of that tangibility that comes from an employee-employer relationship that I had before?

'Cause I personally am someone who really values being in the office and engaging with the company and the brand in a physical way, so it has been challenging. I think some of the ways that we've tried to solve that is through team events. Making sure that when we do team events, it's true to who we are.

Every year the KOTN team celebrates Ramadan altogether. In the last couple of years, we've done that via Zoom call, where the company delivers food to everyone's house, and we celebrate Ramadan. And personally, it's not a holiday that I would traditionally celebrate, but because it's so closely tied to the cultures that KOTN is a part of, it makes a ton of sense. And really just sort of enriches you and in the work we're doing.

So, we try and offer as much of an authentic experience as possible. I wish I had a better answer in terms of some other events we've done, you know, we still do. Fortunately, most of the team is based here in Toronto. So, in terms of physical proximity, we are able to get together when things are nicer out. We went skating as a team last week, which is a very Toronto-Canadian team event as well. Things like that just allows the team to get together and have fun and remember you're working with actual human beings.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Totally. Oh, I'm glad to hear you had some of that face to face. I love what you said about having the food delivered when you're celebrating Ramadan. Engaging folks in whatever way you can, even if it's not face-to-face. That's wonderful. So, you have described the ways that you all have built engagement. How would you recommend then, here are ideas for building engagement that maybe you all even haven't done there yet. But you've seen in other organizations that you have helped to grow?

Dan Gray: If I were looking inward at another organization, I'd first say, okay, does your company have a strong why? Have you defined that for your employees? And if that why is just to make a ton of money, that's totally fine. But let's be clear on it and truly lay that out for the employees. And also make sure that your employees are incentivized to make a ton of money. Because that's what the name of the game is there, having that alignment is what you need.

So, the first thing I do is really help them define that why and understand why does this organization exist? And what is the value proposition for your employees when working there? Value proposition being a very marketing and in product-centric, words. Something that I constantly work on in terms of how we position our offering to customers.

But I think as an organization, you also have to define that value proposition for your employees as to why they should work here. Because truly, it is one of the most competitive job markets that I've ever been in where employees have a lot more leverage than they have potentially in the past.

And then I think once you have that definition, it's okay, what are the different touch points that you're going to put in place to ensure that your team members understand that why? And they're also rewarded when they serve the company's purpose and are achieving those goals and visions that you put out for them.

So one way that we do that is through our performance reviews. We take a look at those cultural pillars. We take a look at those values that we've defined and say, okay, how are you performing against those? Where are areas for improvement? What examples have you done in the last three to six months to really be a community member and a strong stakeholder for KOTN?

For other organizations if I'm working with them, okay, say the why. How have you done? Or what have you done? And how can we celebrate you for the work you've done in terms of pushing that forward and progressing that?

So, I think that's where I'd start. And then again, tying back to our conversation earlier about metrics and clarity on how your performance is ultimately aiding the business. If that's not clear, I think you're going to have a lot of disgruntled employees very quickly. So, making sure that people feel that connection to the business' success.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Totally.

Mitch Simon: Great, Dan. A plethora of ideas here. It really comes down to in this time with a hybrid and virtual is to just get really clear on why you're working for the company. I love the fact, you know, creating a value proposition for your employees as opposed to just for your customers. And then you just have to be clear and communicate what your priorities are, document things, maintain accountability. This has been really great.

And, okay, so this last question is, what have companies done with your products to really build engagement among their dispersed employees.

Dan Gray: Yeah. That's an awesome question. I think it ties really nicely into what we were discussing earlier, which is like, how do you create a tangible relationship with your employees and with your company when perhaps you're not even in the same room and you won't be for the next 6 to 12 months.

So, that's where KOTN Supply comes in. So we've talked a lot today, you know, KOTN as an organization. But the division that I run is KOTN Supply, which essentially takes our Egyptian Cotton basics like this gray sweatshirt I'm wearing. And it allows companies to create high quality merchandise that their teams will wear from our ethical, sustainable supply chain.

When you buy your team a t-shirt that's \$5 and it's really uncomfortable and it feels like it's made of cardboard, they're not gonna wear it. You get out what you end up putting in. And so, what we found is when you buy your team really comfy merchandise, like KOTN Supply's, your teams will end up wearing it.

And why wouldn't you want your teams and your employees being your biggest brand ambassador? So we've worked on a lot of cool projects. We've made custom sweatsuits for teams. We have tote bags with company branding on it. T-shirts, long sleeves, sweater, sweatpants. You name it, we can do it.

And the benefit for companies too is not only do they turn their employees into their brand ambassadors, but you also get the seal of approval of using our supply chain. You don't have to go and build anything yourself. You're able to work with a B-Corp certified organization and feel good about where your product is coming from and the materials that are put into it.

And hopefully that aligns with company values out there. 'Cause I know a lot of companies say they want to do good and they want to source from better suppliers. We give them an opportunity to put their money where their mouth is.

Mitch Simon: Wow. That's great. All right. So —

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh yeah love it—

Mitch Simon: How can we find you, Dan?

Dan Gray: Yeah. Easiest way to find me is on Twitter. My handle is GrowingGray. That's Gray. G-R-A-Y. Feel free to check out KOTN Supply at KOTN.supply. That's K-O-T-N. We'd be happy to work on any sort of merch project. We love working with different teams and organizations. We also work with communities and if there's any influencers listening or soccer teams, we'll work with anyone. We just want to allow teams to make their community members their biggest ambassadors.

Mitch Simon: Great. Well, thank you Dan so much. This has been very educational and entertaining and interesting. And I'm gonna go check out KOTN 'cause—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I know, me too!

Mitch Simon: I am so ashamed of my clothes right now. We've loved having you on the podcast. So, thank you, Dan. Thank you, Ginny. And thank you to all of our audience. Could you please share this podcast with your friends and colleagues? And we'll see you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.