

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE THIRTY
THE POWER OF NEURODIVERSITY**

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Shawn: Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us.

On this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*, Michael Brown and Tim Peace are joining us to discuss neurodiversity. Michael is a father of four and neurodiversity advocate who has spent the last 24 years leading customer and employee experience design for some of the world's largest omnichannel marketplace brands. Most recently serving as Chief Design Officer at Dick's Sporting Goods, he has led cross-functional organizations to scalable products, services, and cultures within retail, e-commerce, and SaaS leading design organizations at the likes of Amazon, SAP, Kodak, and more.

Tim is a family nurse practitioner practicing at Five Star Medical Service where he focuses on the total wellness approach to health throughout the lifespan. He is also currently studying factors impacting community stigma regarding the perception of mental health diagnosis.

Tim: Thank you.

Shawn: So, to level set in this episode, we're gonna talk about neurodiversity and so, for our guests who are unfamiliar, Michael, can you take the lead on this? Can you explain the concept of neurodiversity?

Michael: Neurodiversity simply put, it's just people who think differently than what we might consider like the neuro norms. Oftentimes, they have stigmas or labels like ADHD, autism, bipolar, depression. But simply put, it's just the collection of your organization or the people we surround ourselves to just have a different way of approaching the world. You know, what makes them really interesting and different than the rest of disabilities or diversity is that it's more hidden, right? Like, you can't approach someone and actually, very easily tell that maybe they have ADD.

Shawn: Are you really talking about neurodiversity here, Michael and Tim, or are you talking about disabilities?

Tim: I would say it's more neurodiversity than disability for the sake of incorporating it into society better. Like, we know that the disabilities exist. We've seen all the different movements that may be out there for them, or the monthly ribbon colors, or other advocacy groups that come out and talk about the disability, and we know that that's out there. What we're talking about here specifically is ways to incorporate those different ways of thinking and not view it necessarily as so much of a disability but more of the abilities that makes those people different.

Michael: That's absolutely right, Tim. You know, Shawn, we use this word "disability" quite frequently. I mean, look, just break down the word "dis-abled," "less-than-able." It automatically has this negative connotation whereas the group that we're talking about, the neurodiverse, actually have what Tim and I consider to be superpowers. They can actually outperform people in many ways that organizations especially as they're looking to disrupt are looking for. But, yeah, I mean, when we think about that word "disabled," it's almost sort of a little offensive for the group because they really aren't disabled.

Shawn: Let's be real, I was poking the bear a little bit there around using that terminology, and Michael and Tim, you and I have shared some... You know, I have a five-year-old son who would be in the neurodiverse category on the spectrum, and my wife and I have many conversations around, "What is he going to be?" Because when I watch him do certain things, like his ability to build is off the charts for a five-year-old.

And the way he can get things to balance and structure, it's powerful to watch it. But yet, we live in a society that says, "Well, you need to prepare that he may not ever be able to function in the real world." And I really wanna call bullshit on that. And that's what I love about this work when you started to talk to me about it, Michael. So, I'll address you first, Tim, how did you become interested in working in neurodiversity?

Tim: Well, it's an area that I saw that had a wide disparity as far as the attention paid to it and just the approach to it. When we talk about healthcare in general and as I was studying and learning how to care for different conditions and different age groups, you know, we spend so much time on high blood pressure, on diabetes, on sort of these very mainstream physical ailments.

And yet, when it comes to talking about neurodiverse conditions, we do talk about them almost, as you said, from like that disabled standpoint and instead of focusing on care that was

integrative, we were talking about just trying to mask, treat, or find places for those people to fit, where they would fit everyone else's mold.

And I thought that was unusual because if we're trying to make everybody else accommodated in some way so that they can actually be productive - we do that for amputees - we do that for people with stress conditions, then why can't we do that for autistic spectrum disorder? Why can't we do it for ADHD or dyslexia?

And I found it preposterous to think that somebody who perhaps like, say, is dyslexic might have brilliant ideas, might be an incredible asset to a creative workforce but because they had a grammatical error or forgot a period on their resume or maybe mistyped something, that they're automatically going to be thrown in the trash and discarded, and they might never get that interview. I found it unusual and preposterous. And the fact that one in five Americans has a diagnosable mental health condition and we're not spending time trying to figure out how best to utilize these people and integrate them, I thought it was alarming.

Shawn: I love that example that you use there, Tim, around a resume not being perfect. I know that recently, you and Michael released a video, and I watched it, and when you were talking about that, that really resonated with me because I think we put these false sense of expectations, particularly in that space, in the corporate world of whatever, that neurodiverse humans cannot succeed there. But it's really just a false sense of, in me, again, a false sense of bullshit that we put on stuff. So, Michael, let's tie this back a little bit to corporate. How does your work with experienced design complement your neurodiversity advocacy?

Michael: Well, you know, the reality is that to be an experienced designer, what I found to be one of my strongest strengths is oftentimes the same characteristics that you find with someone with neurodiversity. We tend to be able to take a step back, look visionarily, like, kind of look at the whole vision at a macro level, juggle multiple objects simultaneously while moving down a different path.

And so, as it ties to it, I've been able to really kind of consider what changes are gonna happen to the workforce to support this. Now, you know what's interesting, Shawn, as we think about it from the experience design and as we redesign employee experiences, I started to reach out to a few organizations, well-known organizations, about how they were approaching neurodiversity.

And quite frankly, holistically across the board, they were all super proud of the programs they had in place. When we looked, when I actually dove in further to understand, like, what are you doing to help not just foster this because that's a real sympathetic approach, but let's kind of take it to a business sense, like, how are you leveraging this to grow your business?

How are you leveraging this to really make the transformation and change that you want? No one really had an answer. Oftentimes, the neurodiversity programs were trainings and special programs to help neurodiverse people be individual contributors. When I spoke to them about it from a leadership perspective, I couldn't find a case how they were enabling neurodiverse people to lead their teams.

Quite frankly, as we look back, and I went on and interviewed over 30 neurodiverse executives, all of which used the same terms that we heard like in the early '90s around homosexuality. They would say like, "I would love to come out of the closet." I kid you not. Like, they were using the same terms. Like, you know, "If they find out about me, I'm done. But so and so is coming out." And we're talking about their diversity here.

But, you know, quite frankly, most of them had like an 18-month tenure within an organization and were typically laid off due to the exact characteristics of their diversity, right? They would be laid off because maybe they were disruptive in the meetings, maybe they seemed fidgety. Maybe they didn't have, as Tim said, their grammar was incorrect, but they all had excellent performance reviews in terms of like delivering huge amounts of value.

So, as we think about it from the employee experience and experience design perspective, I think we're really gonna have to rethink, how do we empower and enable a new way of leadership within organizations that takes advantage of these superpowers?

Shawn: I liked where you touched about that tenure, 18 months, right? It's like 18 months to 2 years, you can keep it hidden. But why do we have to keep it in the closet anymore?

Michael: Well, you know what's crazy, Shawn, I think I was telling you this earlier today. I was going online and looking at some online applications, right, and 100% of the tech jobs, 100% of the leadership tech jobs, all have a section that say, "Do you have a disability?" Horrible word, but let's just get over that. And they list on it bipolar, depression, autism, and they say that they need to maintain or move towards a 7% of their workforce having a disability. Now, I've never not applied to a job, so every job I've applied to in the last 10 years have asked this question.

However, the more HR execs I speak to, they don't even look at it. Like, it's almost just a generic question. It's a feel-good question.

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Shawn: The one thing we like to do on *The Combustion Chronicles* is blow shit up, and I love to do it in my life. Let's be real. It's nothing but a freaking check box. We're doing this to check a box. It's my whole thing. This year, our team worked on blowing up inclusion and diversity. I'm sick of checkbox stuff within corporate America. And that's what I was hearing from you, even with the neurodiversity programs in companies. All it is is a training. It's checking the box to say, "We do it, we're really proud of it. We're one of, you know..."

Michael: Well, it's like you wanna blow some stuff up. What if I went around to women in the workplace, in your office, and I said, "Hey, I have this great new training. It's gonna teach you how to fit in with men." Or I go to your Latinos or your African-Americans and say, "Hey, I have this training that's gonna make you seem more white." How could you... No effing way. No effing way. But that's what we do to people with neurodiversity. And then we ask them a question and then we lay them off for the exact reason that we asked them the question for. It's total BS.

Tim: I agree with you. It's complete garbage. The checkboxes, honestly, I mean, and I know, Shawn, that you have said in other podcasts that you're a recovering healthcare executive so you know what the checkboxes are for. This is to say, "We did it and so that you can't sue us for it," right?

Shawn: Yeah.

Tim: "We asked you, and we got it, and we checked it down, and we're gonna say that we're doing things to help you, but we're not actually doing them or we're doing what's minimum required to keep us in the clear legally." And that's not good enough. That's a disservice to these people and honestly, it's wasted opportunity. And that's what we're trying to highlight, is that there's a lot of creativity and a lot of productivity that's being left out there because we're separating these people or we're just underutilizing. We're trying to make them fit a square peg into a round hole.

Shawn: Well, isn't that what's fucking wrong with our education system today?

Tim: Yes. Oh, goodness.

Shawn: That's a whole another thing the three of us could talk about, but right? So, I have a daughter who's 12 who has ADHD. I have a son who's five who has autism, so two very different neurodiverse children who are being forced into a system that says, "All you can do is go to college."

And we live, and I'll call it up, I live in a white privileged suburbia neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio, in a school district that touts their college rankings and numbers, and that's all that they do in the high school system. And I really hope they listen to this episode because it's bullshit because what you are doing, just like you said, Tim, is we are calling and separating my two children out.

Tim: And how many people do we see that are in construction or in some sort of building or technical field like machining or otherwise that have a neurodiverse condition and they're excellent at doing it, like they're very good at it, but instead, we're trying to emphasize the box that everyone has to fit into and it doesn't work that way? Now, on the other side of the coin, there are some neurodiverse conditions that work exceptionally well in that college atmosphere, but they're limited, and they usually need support to get there.

It doesn't mean that there's a problem with it, it just means that we need to find a way to actually use it appropriately. It's no surprise that Silicon Valley has a huge, huge disparity as far as children on the autism spectrum disorder compared to other parts of the country. It's because it's inheritable, we know this, and those technical jobs and the mathematics involved tend to draw in people with certain neurodiverse conditions like, i.e, autism spectrum disorders.

So, it makes sense then if everyone's settling there, that's the Mecca where they work, that they're gonna have children, they'd have autism as well. But those people are wildly successful. Silicon Valley, there's a lot of money there. There's a lot of opportunity and creativity there, and it's because those people with those traits do well in that field.

Michael: Well, I'm gonna kind of challenge that a little bit, Tim, and I do enjoy this, is that we see it from the founders' perspective, especially in Silicon Valley, and that's where I grew up. We see it from the founders' perspective, it's celebrated. I think you and I have talked about this.

Tim: Yeah.

Michael: Everyone's looking up to Steve Jobs, Bernie Lee. They're looking up to Bill Gates with autism, you know, Branson with his dyslexia, and now the latest, Elon Musk, with his bipolar. They're looking up to them. But as these companies get bigger and they need management and leadership, that same mindset is being discarded.

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Tim: Oh, no, you're right. They don't want them there. They want them to do groundwork.

Michael: Yeah. Once you get it started, come up with the idea, and then, "I don't want you here no more."

Shawn: That's right. So, let's talk about this, and Michael, you know, we talk a lot about disruption. So, when it comes to neurodiversity, what is the disruption that you wanna see in the world around it?

Michael: Well, it starts with this idea first off of what would it look like for folks to actually be aware and supportive of working for someone with a neurodiversity? We have to really ask that. Most folks are saying, "Man, my boss has autism and I'm really excited about it," right? Or, "My boss has ADD," or whatever the case might be. And so, when we take this into account, I think we start to realize that the disruption that happens is maybe our leadership isn't like the academia world where it's about consistency.

Maybe leadership goes almost to the military perspective where we have leaders who establish a vision and a direction, they inspire the troops, and they get out. That they go relax and detox because honestly, someone with neurodiversity needs that because they have higher highs and lower lows. And I think that is the disruption, is we need to really rethink what are office place dynamics when you have someone of these abilities.

Tim: And I'd say, for me, it actually extends a little beyond that as well. As far as disruption goes, this is something that I wanna blow up. Like, this whole entire topic, I want to blow it up big time. We saw, and I know this is a very different thing, but we did see, you know, the attention from movements like Black Lives Matter, right, where we focused on diversity and we saw disparities and that hashtag became an entire movement.

So, I would love to see something, maybe not, of course, it has a different beginning but with a similar like fervor and zeal for neurodiversity. I wanna see that nationally. And not something

where people look at it and say, "Oh, you have something," and they cock their head to the side and sort of secretly are going, "Aww, isn't that sad?"

So that's what I wanna blow up. I wanna get it out there. Because I'm telling you right now, and I tell my patients this all the time, I see so many patients that come in and they're nervous and they don't wanna tell me about these things that they're feeling or thoughts that they're having or activities or things that they're doing that they don't feel was right because it doesn't fit with everyone.

And I tell them the same thing every time, I say, "If someone came in with diabetes, I would never say, "You didn't eat correctly or you didn't exercise enough, I'm not giving you insulin. You should fix it yourself." And the same is true for these things. You come in here, it's brain, it's physiology, right? This is brain chemistry. You're not going to correct it with behavior. So, it's okay to treat these things, and it's okay to recognize them and to make everyone aware in a way that is supportive and productive.

Shawn: So, I'm a 48-year-old man. I'm a father. I'm a husband. I own a business. I can't admit that I struggle with being lonely or that my highs are really high or my lows are really low, like, what is that gonna do? So, I'm tired of hearing that in society. And this is now cheering you on saying there needs to be a systemic change happening, that it's okay to give us space to feel that and to be that and to, I guess, lean into it. But do you really think, Michael or Tim, that we as a society are ready to do that?

Tim: Why not? That's what I would ask, why not? When it's been here for like centuries. I mean, we're just now recognizing and talking about it that's why people say, "Well, there's diagnosis now more than ever." Yeah, because we started to categorize and do it. You know, I mean, we didn't have DSM-III until Bob Mesker changed criteria in the 1980s.

So now we finally had a way to organize these behaviors and identify them appropriately, so yeah, there's gonna be more of them we've seen, but it doesn't mean they've never been there. These are part of the human population. This is part of our dynamic, our genetics, our dichotomy, more so, not even a dichotomy. There's so many different flavors of the human being. So why in the world can't we fix it and accept that now? We're accepting everything else. This is part of who we are. This is our genetic makeup. This is us as human beings.

Michael: To go on to that, Shawn, I think it's absolutely the right time. I think we are seeing more and more companies embrace and seek out diversity. This conversation around diversity,

as you know, the door is open. If neurodiversity doesn't seize its opportunity now, I don't know when would be a better time. I think, though, where I was gonna go a little bit earlier, I think there's just a very simple first step. I think companies can actually report back anonymously what percentage of their leadership and what percentage of their individual contributors are neurodiverse. Like, just first embrace it and accept it rather than keep hiding it. It's just a huge thing we need to overcome.

[00:20:07]

Shawn: Yeah. And I love that, Michael, totally. I think companies should do that. My concern is are people even self-reporting it? I'm obese. I know I don't need to eat a cheeseburger. I don't need to go to the doctor or to come see you, Tim, for you to tell me, "Hey, Shawn, you're obese. You need to quit eating a cheeseburger and eat carrots and celery." I have to be the one to first admit it, own it, and live it and I don't know that society is giving that space yet.

Michael: It has to be safe, and it has to be socially acceptable. And that's the problem, is that it's not safe. I can tell you firsthand, the leaders that I spoke to would only speak to me on private message. They did not wanna be found out. Like, I grew up in the Bay Area, it felt very much like the pre-homosexual renaissance. We have to make it safe and we have to just make it like, "Hey, this is part of life," so that we can actually talk about it and deal with it and make change, but people are afraid of getting fired. They're afraid of losing their jobs. They're afraid of not being able to provide for their family.

Shawn: What's been the biggest challenge on this journey as you guys have been working, and I know this is new research and a new way of thinking, what's been the biggest challenge?

Michael: I'm not gonna lie, it's probably my passion. You know, the more you find out about it and the more you see and the bigger the problem reveals itself, the more you want to see change happen. And that tends to be one of the hardest places. Another is just, as I mentioned earlier, changing mindsets.

It feels like a lot of organizations see and accept that they have solutions for individual contributors and not leadership, but they don't have any motivation to make any changes either. And so that is one of the things that we're constantly trying to overcome of saying, "Well, how are you going to change that?" Because they don't have an answer and we're still working to come up with ours.

Shawn: This year, we released our book called "Kiss your Dragons," and it's about mindsets to heartsets, and I think it's more than even a mindset. This truly have to be an internal heartset change to say that it is okay for you who deal with neurodiversity to talk about it but also for organizations to talk about it and to have it. So then, you know, I asked Michael, Tim around what's the biggest challenge, I'm gonna ask you, Tim, on successes. So, as it pertains to society and neurodiversity, what does success look like to you in the future?

Tim: To me, success, depending on the realm you're looking at, if I'm looking at it globally overall, it's going to be full integration and acknowledgment of neurodiverse conditions without exclusions and without stigma attached. I say realistically the way to do that, it's going to be...it's two-pronged. So, it needs to happen from one of two or both at the same time, and that's society and at the professional and corporate level.

So, I think societally especially, I would really like to see more education out there, more awareness, more understanding and acceptance. And then, as far as the corporate side, what I would really like to see to know that it's there is that people are being utilized and that we see the rates of unemployment for people with neurodiverse conditions go down, we see productivity increase, and we see programs that are not necessarily, "How can you fit our mold?" But, "Alright, how can we use everybody and really make them shine?"

Shawn: Michael, I'll ask you this along, you know, that same role, but what does it mean if we don't get this right as a society?

Michael: My personal opinion, and I say it with a sigh of exhaustion, we missed out on a huge opportunity to further mankind.

Shawn: Amen. So, you know, one of the things we do on *The Combustion Chronicles* is bring a call-to-action to the listeners. So, I'll ask you first, Michael, what is the one thing you would want our listeners to take away from this story and what you've shared with us today?

Michael: That we do not treat neurodiversity in the same way we treat other diversity characteristics in our workplace. We still use offensive terminology, you know, folks are still using offensive terminology by calling it a disability. And my call-to-action would be super simple. I would love to see organizations just report the percentage of their leadership that have neurodiversity.

Shawn: Awesome. And, Tim, the same question to you, what is the one thing you would want our listeners to take away from this story and what you've shared today?

[00:24:55]

Tim: That neurodiverse conditions are part of what makes us human beings. They've been here since the beginning and now, we're starting to categorize them, but it doesn't mean they're new. As such, we need to accept this as part of who we are and look at it as a different flavor of ice cream, right? This is what we are, who we are, and we need to embrace that. And if you are someone with a neurodiverse condition, be proud of who you are and know that there is a place for you out there.

Shawn: Love it. Perfect. All right, gentlemen. So, we've come to the point now where we do this thing called the "Combustion Questions". So, they are three randomly selected questions that I'll ask both of you to answer in short and precise answers. So, Michael, I will start with you first. Would you rather travel into the future or the past, and why?

Michael: I would love to travel into the past. There is sort of this harmony and calm, I mean, I'm thinking like hundreds of years back. My background is, you know, my family was all farmers and that agricultural kind of uproot is something that I do enjoy. So, I would love to get back to a place where that is possible.

Shawn: And Tim, would you rather travel on to the future or the past, and why?

Tim: I'm gonna go into the future, and I'm gonna do it because technology is crazy. It's so wild. And even when I reflect back and how much it's changed and what we know now compared to when I was a child, it's shocking. I can't wait to see what advances there are in medicine and what advances there are in society, and I think it'd be really cool to get a snapshot of that.

Shawn: Very cool. All right, Tim, we're gonna start with you on the second one. So, if you are to join a circus, what would your circus act be?

Tim: Oh man, I think that I would probably do... I'd probably swing from the trapeze because it's really cool. And it looks super dangerous, and I'm a comic book nerd and that's what Robin's family did in the *Batman* series. They were the "Flying Graysons." So yeah, I would do trapeze.

Shawn: Awesome. Awesome. And Michael, if you were to join a circus, what would your circus act be?

Michael: I'm playing with the tigers and lions.

Shawn: And why?

Michael: Oh, I just, number one, love animals. Number two, I love a little bit of danger and being extreme so that just seems really cool.

Tim: He just wants to pet the cats, that's all.

Shawn: That's right. He just wants to do that.

Michael: Yes.

Shawn: All right. Here's the last "Combustion Question", and this one might take a little bit of thought, but Michael, I'll start with you on this. So, tell me, Michael, what do you think about bowling alleys?

Michael: What I think about bowling alleys? Well, you know, this goes back to whether I'd like to go to the past or the future. Like, bowling alleys were such an amazing place of American history, a place where actually teenagers would get together and hang out and people had fun and then, you know, we kind of transitioned them into bars. I mean, it was amazing. And now, they're just relics. Like, no one gathers anymore.

Shawn: And Tim, what do you think about bowling alleys?

Tim: I love bowling alleys. I don't know what you're talking about, Mike. They're not relics, they're awesome. Bowling alleys, honestly, if I'm gonna be really totally honest with you, when you said bowling alley, my very first thought was *The Big Lebowski*. That was the first thing that popped into my head. Second would be, man, I miss bowling. I can't wait to go bowling again.

Shawn: No doubt. We have a skating rink next to our house, and I'm like, "I might go to that," and I don't even skate but just to be able to go do it, right?

Tim: Right.

Shawn: Well, Tim, Michael, thank you so much for sharing this journey and this new research around neurodiversity and I'm really excited to see it come to life. I'm really excited that you guys shared it with us and our listeners today. And until we see each other at a bowling alley, maybe that'll be our next meeting, you know, stay safe and be well and we'll talk real soon.

Tim: Thank you so much. We appreciate it.

Shawn: Thanks, too, guys.