

# THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE THIRTY-ONE  
THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS**

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GUEST: SHAWN ACHOR**

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**Shawn Nason:** Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Where bold leaders combine with big ideas to create game-changing disruption.

I'm Shawn Nason, 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, we have Shawn Achor founder and CEO of GoodThink Inc. After spending 12 years at Harvard University, Shawn has become one of the world's leading experts on the connection between happiness and success. His research on mindset made the cover of *Harvard Business Review*. His TED Talk is one of the most popular of all time with over 13 million views. And his lecture airing on PBS has been seen by millions. Shawn has lectured or worked with over a third of the Fortune 100 companies, as well as the NFL, the NBA, the Pentagon, and the White House.

Shawn is the author of two *New York Times* bestselling books; *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*. He has now lectured in more than 50 countries speaking to CEOs in China, doctors in Dubai, schoolchildren in South Africa, farmers in Zimbabwe, and his *Happiness Advantage Training* is one of the largest and most successful positive psychology corporate training programs in the world. Shawn, welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles*.

**Shawn Achor:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Shawn Nason:** Yes, so Shawn, happiness like really like, there needs to be this whole work around positive psychology and happiness. It's funny, I've heard people talk about it for years. And really to level set with our listeners here, I would really like for you who...for our listeners who are unfamiliar with you and your work, can you give us a little background on the field of positive psychology and your happiness research?

**Shawn Achor:** Sure, absolutely. So, I actually got started back at Harvard Divinity School, I was studying Christian and Buddhist ethics. So, I was looking at how your belief systems about the world change the way you decide to act in it. Why do you give? Why do you forgive? Why do you find happiness in the morning? What makes you wake up in the morning? And while I was

doing that some people in the psychology department specifically Dr. Tal Ben Shahar said they wanted to ask those same questions we were asking at the Divinity School, but they wanted to add in a scientific method along with it.

And in this field of positive psychology, what they decided to do was instead of focusing upon simply depression and disorder, which is what a lot of psychology focuses upon, it decided to study the positive side of the curve. It wanted to find out why does is some people growing up with very difficult backgrounds or with genes that predispose them towards a negative outlook of the world, that they might actually have their levels of compassion, or optimism, or meaning, or happiness rise over the course of their life, given their habits or things that happened to them in their environment.

And I got hooked because as soon as you can measure something to see if optimism was actually changing, you could see what actually really works within our life. But at first, I didn't think you could even study something like happiness, I was pretty sure you could study things like depression because it's the negative side of the curve, so it seems like a harder science. But the people in positive psychology pointed out something so crucial which is we're using the same metrics that we've been using to measure things like depression, we're just looking at the other side of the curve to find out why does some people have elevated rates of happiness or meaning?

**Shawn Nason:** Wow. So, Shawn, did you always know that this is the kind of work you wanted to be doing, or were you planning to do something else?

**Shawn Achor:** That's a great question. No, I had no idea that this field even existed. My father was a neuroscientist, so I grew up...He was at Baylor University in Texas. So, I grew up, you know, being hooked up to brainwave machines and going to my dad's classes. I saw a neuroscience vision of the world, and I saw what it's like to be a professor. But I had no idea that when I started at the Divinity School, that I would end up using science to sort of prove many of the things that we had been learning about, for literally thousands of years for major religious traditions, and how they mutually reinforce one another.

So, I fell backwards into it. But also, I went through two years of depression while I was at the Divinity School, while I was at Harvard and this incredible opportunity and surrounded by all these brilliant students and I started going through two years of work debilitating depression. And positive psychology came at the exact right time for me because it meant at the bottom, I

got to start trying out some of the things that we were testing in the laboratory. So not only was I doing research on this; I was getting to live it.

And once I saw the depression was not the end of the story and that radical change is possible in people's lives at any age, in any environment, given almost any genetic set point. What we were finding was, this is something that could literally transform people's lives if they knew about it.

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**Shawn Nason:** That whole transformation process is pretty powerful using., and again, I've watched your TED Talk, I've watched a couple of your interviews, and I loved your whole spin on, you know, how happiness and your research has shown better productivity, you know, better results within business.

And really specifically, in one of your interviews, you mentioned speaking at the Pentagon, and after your talk, you had a senior leader that came up to you and said that five years ago, we could not have had a talk about happiness at the Pentagon, something's changed. So, as it pertains to the happiness movement, why do you think it's changing?

**Shawn Achor:** I think it's changing for a couple of reasons. I think it's changing partly because we have science now. So, it's not just one person spouting good ideas and saying that other people should follow them. What we get to do is to test to see, you know, if we did what that person suggested, if we took on that behavioral change or that mindset change, we can actually watch not only what happens to your levels of happiness and optimism, but now that we have big data, we can actually find out, you know, if we're able to make a teacher happier in some of the schools I'm working with in Flint, Michigan, if we make that teacher happier, they're more likely to stay more than the two years that they stay on average.

But now we can measure whether or not that teacher when they become more positive, we can find out what happens to that teacher, students, parents, or guardians on the backside. And now you can start to map this incredible ripple effect showing us that our behavior actually matters. So, I think that having the scientific lens and the scientific rigor behind a movement that was focused on the positive, allows more people to get past some of the mental barriers, to starting or trying out these different ideas once they know that there's science behind it. Or once they can see that there's an effect that exists beyond what they normally see within their life, and we can quantify it, then I think it gets very exciting.

But we've also...positive psychology emerged in the midst of the tech boom, and the tech bubble, it emerged in the midst of the banking crisis, and now in the midst of a global pandemic. And what I think we've been seeing over the past 20 years, is this incredible shift that's occurred within our society where we can become more and more separate and individual in the world. We can exist with our iPhones and go travel anywhere to do work, we can do it virtually from one another, we can sit every night and watch Netflix if we wanted to.

But in the midst of all that independence and individuality, what we lost was a lot of the social connection. A lot of the meaning that was embedded within our relationships, as our villages became more fragile and then fragmented, and as politics has become so separate and polarizing.

And so, I think what we're seeing is a dual movement that's occurring there, where you're seeing this rise of a scientific method for analyzing whether or not the brain can become more positive. But also, this hunger at the same time, where people are really trying to figure out if you know, money, or an iPhone or a number of followers on Instagram, or my salary doesn't create happiness then what does?

**Shawn Nason:** I love that, Shawn. And in particular, this past year or so myself with two colleagues, Robin Glasgow, and Michael Harper, we've been actually studying what it takes to go from a mindset to a heartset. And so, I love how you're talking about these mindsets and how happiness takes courage and when that happiness comes in, what it can do when we go into these heartsets, because we talk a lot about radical relationships building that can help change the world. And that's what I hear coming and I think that's a change.

Do you see that change happening now as you go across and give talks, specifically in the business world, and in businesses and leaders? Do you see a significant change where people are focusing on happiness more than profitability, or you know, KPIs? What are you seeing in that space?

**Shawn Achor:** I've seen a massive change. When I first got started doing this at the beginning of the banking crisis back in 2007, I had to go in and use all of the research I possibly could to convince them why happiness mattered. But now when I go into an organization, they already believe it. They already believe that people are able to be more productive, and profitable, and successful, and they wanna stay on teams and stay with the company when they're happy and feel connected and when they're engaged. So, we actually don't have to convince them of that.

What we're looking for are what can we do in the messiness of life, to be able to raise levels of happiness and optimism.

So, we absolutely have seen a shift from just trying to argue for the priority of happiness within our lives to people recognizing that there's an interconnection that's occurring there. But I think something fascinating that's emerged and I've seen it within my own research. Is that when I first started doing this I was evaluating if I can raise or measure your levels of happiness. Then we'd test to see if we could create a habit for you. And then if you picked up that habit, we test your levels of happiness and see if your happiness rose, and then we'd see how your business or educational outcomes improve. It was all about you and that's all we really had the ability to do.

But now that we have big data, we're now able to have these datasets where we can actually analyze the interconnection that's occurring with the ecosystem around us. What we realized was, we were missing the biggest part of our pursuit of happiness and success. I wrote a book called *Big Potential* two years ago that was focused upon this whole idea about how when we pursue happiness, we think it's an individual sport. We think it's self-help that's where they put it in the bookstores, right?

But what we're finding is that the greatest predictor of your long-term levels of happiness is your social connection score, which is other people. We're finding...and these large studies have been done, for example, as you know, *Google's Project Aristotle*, they found that the greatest predictor of the team's success rate at work was actually the social cohesion on the team. We're finding social connection is as predictive of how long we end up living as obesity, high blood pressure, or smoking.

So, what we're seeing is this massive shift away from this idea that you need to go create happiness on your own, get right so you can come in and work, to this recognition that there is an ecosystem that occurs, that includes not only the people at work but also includes our family members and our relationship to the community around us. So now as we're starting to see this, we're learning about how we can actually expand power out to other people. How we can enhance the ecosystem using praise and recognition. How we can celebrate the gains together so that we don't feel so fragmented.

**Shawn Nason:** That's great stuff, Shawn. In one of those interviews, I have to ask this question. You actually talked about where you were in the middle of memorizing Corinthians. And you actually talked about using the scripture "If I speak with the tongues of men and angels but

have not love." And that was so powerful. Most of the listeners here don't know but I spent 10 years as a pastor, before moving into the business world, as well.

And when I heard that it like gripped something inside of me. And what I'm wanting to know, is happiness and love as you read these things do you think it really is a mindset, or as we have been studying is it a heart set? Is it really at the core of who you are? And for some people, it's easier to be happy or live in happiness, or is it really something that can be taught and a mindset? I'm just really curious to know your take on that?

**Shawn Achor:** So, it's such a great question. And I love hearing that you've come from a pastoral background as well. I think you can hear it in my writing. I feel like so much of what we've been learning in positive psychology has just been confirming everything that I was studying back at the Divinity School. So, for me, I see this great connection between them.

What I find fascinating is that when we think about someone's levels of happiness or their success rates, we tell people that your entire potential as a human being is predicted based upon your genes and your environment. And for the average person, that's true. And science only cares about the average person. So, what we kept finding is what it is to be human is to be someone who doesn't fight their genes with their environment.

But when you look back into the data, which is what positive psychology attempted to do, you find these weirdos, these outliers in the data that change. They change their daily patterns. They change the people that they interact with. They change how they interact with them. They show love, they show connection. They create altruistic actions when they do one of those things it turns out that their levels of optimism and happiness rise above their genetic set point in almost any environment we've seen worldwide. From shanty towns in South Africa, to prisons, to rich bankers on Wall Street.

And what we were seeing was something incredible, which is change is radically possible, that we don't just have to be our genes. Which to come back to your question is, you know, for some people happiness is an easier choice than it is for other people given the environment that they've been in, or given their genes, or both.

But the hope in this message that we're finding out through this research and from the science is that if people were creating behavioral changes, and mindset changes, and pairing them together, we saw that they could break the tyranny of genes and environment over their levels

of happiness and optimism. And then every success rate rises for that person that we know how to test for, at least in the business or educational space.

So, what I think is amazing about this, and I think it aligns so well with your work is that we can't just create a mindset shift. We have to pair behavioral and social shifts along with it. It's why dieting doesn't oftentimes work because you try to create a behavioral change without a mindset change. Or if you try to change your mindset, but you're not changing the people you're interacting with, or your daily habits, or how you're interacting with people, you don't see long term change.

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So, for me, I think the way I would frame what you're saying there about being heartset, is that you need mindset change and behavioral change at the same time. If you're looking at what, you know, religions say about it, this is faith and works together, right? And when you see those things paired, that's when we see that heart really began to change and set in a different trajectory.

**Shawn Nason:** Great stuff. And so, another passion of mine and actually, probably a heartbreak of mine is, as well, over the last 18 months, you know, there's another what I would say, pandemic happening in this world and I've read a bunch of research around, you know, right now 70% to 75% are men...and I can only imagine it's getting higher in the pandemic we've been living in the past year, deal with loneliness.

And so, a very good friend of mine, Michael Harper, he and I started this group called *Truth Tellers*, where it says; "Living authentically in the land of bullshit". And, you know, there's not a lot of courage or authenticity in the world today. And this happiness thing just seems to ride along with authenticity for me and courage. What would your message be to men and women who are leaders around courage and authenticity, and how happiness plays a part in that?

**Shawn Achor:** It's such a massive question. And there are better people to ask that's their specific focus, but I can say for myself that when I went through two years of depression, back at Harvard, I kept thinking that I could solve this myself. I was exactly like we assume the average male response is to the world you're talking about with that lonely response. Where I thought, you know, if I have a problem, I can fix it, I can do this, I can do it on my own, I don't need anyone's help. And I don't want to burden anyone else. So, I kept doing that and kept going deeper and deeper into depression.

The turning point for me was at the bottom, I had to turn to my eight closest friends and family and tell them, you know, for more than two years now, I've been going through depression. I've no idea how to get out of this or if I can, but I really need your help. It was such a departure from what I've been doing up to that point. Where I was actually putting a sheen on my life so that everyone thought my life was great, and that I was always positive. But behind that, I was extraordinarily lonely and going through depression. As soon as I let those eight people in, everything changed.

There's a fantastic study I used it at the beginning of *Big Potential* because I think it set the tone for everything I wanted to be doing in my research. Where these two researchers out in Virginia found that if you're looking at a hill, you need to climb in front of you. If you look at that hill by yourself, your brain shows you a picture of a hill, your brain architects an image of a hill that is 20% steeper when you're looking at that hill alone, compared to when you look at that hill standing next to someone who's gonna climb the hill with you.

The inclusion of someone else going to overcome a challenge with you changes your perception of how steep that challenge looks. Which means that the geometry of the challenges in our life are in constant flux based upon whether or not we think we're alone or with others overcoming these challenges. So, what I would hope for people is that as they're going through what can be a very lonely time, a lonely time in our history, as we become more socially fragmented, and now with some physical distancing along with it, extraordinarily challenging period for us to experience this.

What we're finding is the more that we open up, that we reach out, that we send out two-minute positive emails praising or thanking people in our life, that we create a smile with a stranger and a neighborhood, as we try to lead with optimism. All of these things garner deeper levels of social connection. And when we feel that those hills in front of us whether it's overcoming depression, anxiety, and loneliness, we're overcoming that next obstacle at work or hitting that target, or finding a way of getting a vaccine out, or finding a way of being able to care for your family in the midst of a changing economy, or caring for aging parents while you're doing virtual school with your kids. In the midst of those, the more we're with one another, the less those challenges loom in front of us.

**Shawn Nason:** That whole concept...and thank you for sharing your personal journey and your personal story there. We talk about that, that the mindset is radical relationships, but really the heart set is...and you did it, it's this whole concept. We've done some studying around dragons,

because that's the title of the book, that it's finding your swarm. So, dragons hang together in swarms.

And really, that space...I love that advice that once you opened up, and you shared with that swarm, and your group of eight, it started to radically change and start to allow that whole concept and your whole mind shift to happen. So, Shawn, where do you still find and continue to find your inspiration or guidance from?

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**Shawn Achor:** Inspiration and guidance still comes from my faith, that's still coming from the Divinity School. So that underlies all the research that I do and the work that I'm trying to bring to the world. Where we're finding the most excitement in applying that research is within the hospital systems and the schools right now. That started actually, even before the pandemic occurred, we started working with some of the poorest school districts in the entire country.

And what we brought in was not more funding or incredible resources. What we brought in was free gratitude exercises. Or getting people to write two-minute positive emails. Something very simple that took less than two minutes a day, that could be taught to a teacher to a superintendent. And then what we found was that their standardized test scores rose dramatically.

And one of the schools in Iowa, the very first one we work at they had the fastest literacy score change they had had of any of the schools in the entire state, upon applying these gratitude interventions within the school. And that was just with the teachers and the administrators, we actually hadn't done anything with the students. Then with some of the schools we've been working with outside of Chicago up in Schaumburg, we've been finding that we've been able to drop depression rates by nearly 30% or calls to 9-1-1 centers by 50%. We're seeing test scores rise, and we're seeing people's lives move towards the positive, which is why we're doing all the work out in Flint, Michigan right now.

But if you think about it...and you're talking about authenticity and courage around happiness. I think a lot of people when they think of happiness, they actually think of superficiality, right? They think that that person is being fake, because look how much suffering is going on in the world how can you talk about happiness now?

And that's the challenge we face when we go into a place like Flint, Michigan, because it's very easy to say, we'll start talking about happiness once you bring back the jobs. We'll start talking

about happiness once you get the lead out of the water, once we don't have a water crisis, right? Once we don't have cyclical poverty, then we can start talking about happiness. And I understand the rationale behind that.

But what we're finding in the research is that in the midst of a water crisis, and cyclical poverty, if you get a student or a teacher to raise their levels of optimism and to create these positive habits, it builds their emotional immune system. It raises their levels of resilience, their test scores rise dramatically, their social connection scores rise, their happiness levels rise, and we see a flourishing in a life that we had assumed would just be their genes and their environment.

And that's what we're doing with the hospital systems right now. We're finding the departments that pick up the mantle and start talking about the positive and creating these positive habits, in a study, we just published out in *Harvard Business Review* in May, in the middle of the pandemic, we found that we were able to drop burnout rates at the hospital system in half simply by getting teams to link together and to create positive habits with one another. And when they did that their patient safety rose to the top 1% in the nation. So, what we're seeing in these hospitals and these schools, I think is encouraging to us across the board.

I got the opportunity to work with NASA earlier this year briefly talking to them about how do you create happiness when you're physically distanced several miles from the earth. And what we found was even at the height of scientific technology, and exploration, they said the only way we could keep our astronauts happy, is we had to create a schedule and on that schedule, we had to put positive habits. Like while they brush their teeth, they think of three things that they're grateful for.

So, we're finding, you know, from all over the earth, and even in outer space, we're finding these very simple things that we've heard from every major religious tradition, are having a resurgence as we start to apply science to show how powerful they actually are.

**Shawn Nason:** There's so much to unpack there. And hopefully, at some time, off of the podcast Shawn we can have a whole other discussion. I spent the last 10 years working in the healthcare space building experiences. So would love to have your mindset and your thoughts around that because I firmly believe that, that if you create the right experience, the right atmosphere, the right attitude, no matter what a patient is going through, it can be as positive as it can be.

Shawn, we've talked a lot about happiness so far. And as an expert on happiness, and the keys of happiness. Is it fair to think that you are always happy?

**Shawn Achor:** I wish. Actually, I don't wish that. It's funny I don't get to study people that are happy all the time that's actually a disorder. People that are happy all the time are divorced from reality. I also think that it's so crucial for us to experience unhappiness. For me, the opposite of happiness isn't unhappiness, it's not what I fight against. Unhappiness it can be incredibly valuable. It tells us when we're doing something that's unethical. Unhappiness tells us when we're in the wrong job, or in the wrong relationship. Unhappiness tells us when the society is being unjust or racist. Unhappiness can fuel great change.

What I fight so hard against is apathy, and that's the loss of the belief that your behavior matters, or any joy as you move towards your potential. So, I'm not happy all the time, I go through periods of unhappiness, especially, you know, in the midst of this year. I also went through...I had to have back surgery this year, so I've experienced, you know, chronic pain in the midst of a pandemic. And in the midst of working with these schools and hospitals, in the midst of the challenges, they're experiencing, we see great unhappiness.

But in the middle of that, I feel like having applied this research for so long and getting the privilege of getting to talk about it on a daily basis, is that I'm finding that my troughs as I go lower, are rare, and they don't go as deep, and I'm able to come back out of them faster. And I'm able to stay in that positive zone where I feel higher levels of well-being, higher levels of optimism, happiness, and joy, even when life isn't pleasurable, which 2020 has not been.

**Shawn Nason:** Well, sorry to hear Shawn that you had to have back surgery. I can only imagine, I know that that's a painful process, but again, thank you for sharing your vulnerability in that. So, we've touched on the connection between happiness and success, but at the end of the day, what does success look like to you and how do you personally define it?

**Shawn Achor:** You know, it's interesting, because we have a definition for happiness that we use, but we actually allow people to define success for themselves. Given the fact that, you know, I'm mostly speaking to large organizations, so their outcomes are so different. It's how many patients they cared for, or how many people in the community a nonprofit was able to take care of. Or bankers trying to hit their numbers, or a salesperson that's trying to hit their numbers.

So, in the midst of those things, we haven't actually defined success for people. We find that however they define success, we find that happiness defined as the joy you feel moving towards your potential has an impact upon that, a dramatic one. An incredible advantage to feeling greater levels of happiness within our life.

I think that the success metric is flawed as we all know, so I'm not saying anything new here, but as soon as I link up success to number of books sold, or to a number of followers or, you know, number of pieces of praise that I get after a talk, or an amount in, you know, a bank. As soon as I do that, and have that as my peg for success, I find that my happiness drops significantly. Because immediately I'm able to then compare with other people. I'm finding...and this I believe links up with your work.

I'm finding that the most successful people are the ones who love the most. Love is much harder for us to define than happiness and success. Maybe that quote from Corinthians that you described earlier, like if I go and speak, and lots of people like hearing me, and I can go out and speak a lot of places, that doesn't mean anything to me long term if I don't do it for love, right? And if I, you know, make money \$1 on a book, and I sell lots of books, that doesn't mean anything, if I don't love writing, and love the people I'm writing for, and love the life that that money creates.

So, I'm finding that it comes back to love, which is actually radically freeing., because somebody then could be extraordinarily successful at the lower end of a socio-economic spectrum, if they were loving, it actually wouldn't matter where they were on the socio-economic spectrum. They could be successful if they were finding a way of being able to love and be loved.

**Shawn Nason:** I love that you said that most successful people are those that love the most. That kind of just went right to my heart, so thank you for that. So at the end of these episodes, Shawn, we are doing a call to action, so what is the one thing you would want our listeners to take away from your story, or from what you've shared today that they could go do immediately?

**Shawn Achor:** I think we keep thinking I will be happy when. I'll be happy when a pandemic is over. I'll be happy when I have this amount of money. I'll be happy when I get that promotion. I'll be happy when I get into that school. What we're finding is that never works for the brain because success is a moving target for the brain. So, if happiness is on the opposite side of it, we don't get it.

So, what I would hope somebody would do is they would walk away from listening to any of this research and start prioritizing happiness now. Which isn't just a mindset of I choose happiness. What they have to do is they have to have a mindset of happiness is important even in the midst of a challenge and then here's the behavior I'm gonna do to actually create that.

We're finding that the greatest habit in short form is to simply take two minutes right now, and write a two-minute positive email or text message praising or thanking one person you don't normally thank or praise. If you do that, for 21 days in a row, your social connection score, the greatest predictor of your long-term levels of happiness, rises to the top quartile of people worldwide, which is incredible.

And you've created a ripple effect impacting 21 people's lives that are all in your ecosystem creating this virtuous cycle of positive change around you. So, what I would say is I would prioritize happiness now and do so by writing a two-minute positive email to someone else.

**Shawn Nason:** Thank you for that. Powerful. Love it. So, we've come to that point at the end of this podcast, where we do what we call our Combustion Questions, so let's have some fun here. Real short answers to three questions. So, here's your first combustion question. Would you rather be a bird or a fish?

**Shawn Achor:** Definitely a bird because you can go anywhere, right even over the water but as a fish are stuck in the water.

**Shawn Nason:** Love it. So, when you were a kid what was your favorite thing to do on a playground?

**Shawn Achor:** I wanted to be like a Ghostbuster for eight years of my life, so every time I would go everyone else was a superhero running around and I was a Ghostbuster, so that's probably what I'd still be doing today if I could.

**Shawn Nason:** Have the slime and everything. See slime is coming back. And your third question what do you think about sidewalk chalk?

**Shawn Achor:** I have to love it. I have a two-year-old daughter and our entire back driveway is completely filled up with her chalk drawing, so I love it because of my daughter.

**Shawn Nason:** I have a 5-year-old and a 12-year-old and it's the same thing, so love that too. Well, Shawn, thank you so much for sharing today, sharing your story, sharing your research. Stay safe and be well and we will talk soon.

**Shawn Achor:** Thank you very much.

**Shawn Nason:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*.

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