



Episode 29: Maya Leibman & Ross Clanton
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Mik Kersten (00:00):

Hello, and welcome to the Mik + One Podcast where I sit down with industry leaders to discuss the Project to Product movement. I'm Mik Kersten, founder and CEO of Tasktop and best-selling author of Project to Product: How to Survive and Thrive in the Age of Digital Disruption with the Flow Framework.

Mik Kersten (00:27):

I'm so excited to be joined by two incredible leaders, Maya Leibman and Ross Clanton. Maya is the Executive Vice President and Chief Information Officer at American Airlines. She is responsible for all technology efforts, including software development, infrastructure, operations and security, and also leads the organization's next generations' strategic initiatives, including transitioning to the cloud, advanced analytics, machine learning and the advancement of DevOps tools and principles.

Mik Kersten (00:51):

Ross Clanton is Chief Architect and Managing Director at American Airlines, and leads overall delivery transformation, technology strategy, and innovation, as well as core infrastructure that powers the airline. Ross and I have collaborated for years now on defining the principles driving successful moves from Project to Product, and he's one of the most experienced technology executives on mapping that journey. Together, they are a force to be reckoned with, and I hope you enjoy this episode as much as I did recording it. So with that, let's get started.

Mik Kersten (01:20):

Hello everyone, and welcome to the Project to Product podcast. I'm here with Maya Leibman, EVP and CIO of American Airlines, as well as Ross Clanton, longtime colleague and friend and Chief Architect of Technology Transformation at American Airlines. So welcome Maya, welcome Ross. Great to have you.

Ross Clanton (01:35):

Thanks.

Maya Leibman (01:35):

Thank you for having us. Super happy to be here Mik.

Mik Kersten (01:38):

So I was at DevOps Enterprise summit this year, the virtual event, and I just absolutely loved your talk. I watched it, I rewatched it, I sent it around to a number of people. I just noticed today that it is the number one viewed talk on the IT revolution portal from that conference, so I clearly wasn't the only one.

Mik Kersten (01:56):

So I'm just thrilled to have you here today, and I'd love for you to just dig into some of the key topics that you went over in that talk, the learnings of your transformation, the point that you got to, and how you got here. And I think you've been trail blazing on this front. A lot of organizations are looking to you and looking to emulate a lot of what you've done. So I'd just



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love for you to tell some of your story around this shift from the product to digital innovation, to how you brought finance on board, I think that's a key part of the story. So Maya, could you tell us a bit about how this journey started, how you got personally involved and how you got here?

Maya Leibman (02:32):

Sure, and thank you for the nice comments about the talk. I had gone to the DevOps Enterprise Summit about five years ago or something. And I saw the keynote speakers and I thought, "You know what, we're going to do that one day. We're going to have done enough good things that we're going to have a great story to tell." But we were nowhere close to that, so it was more aspirational.

Maya Leibman (02:54):

And really it was born out of the fact that IT at American (Airlines) was often the long tentpole in a lot of our initiatives. Like our business colleagues would want to do something really cool and innovative, and they'd say, "Ah, but we can't do it because it's going to take IT six months or nine months or something to deliver that." That was really frustrating for me.

Maya Leibman (03:15):

I had come from the business, I'm not a hardcore technologist, and I really appreciate what technology can do for the business. And so I wanted us to never be the long tentpole again. And that is really what started us on the journey. It was born around the same time I started seeing other people talk, like Ross and Gene and you and other folks, and really seeing that there was an alternative way of doing things that could allow us to deliver value faster. And that's been our mantra ever since.

Mik Kersten (03:46):

Okay, excellent. And Ross, a lot of your work at Target was inspirational to me, we collaborated on some DevOps Enterprise Summit white papers on the shift from project to product. If you could just give us a bit of your background, how you ended up here, maybe a little bit of actually what you learned at Target, because I think a lot of fellows follow that work and learn from it, including myself. So if you could give us a bit of context on that front, that'd be great.

Ross Clanton (04:10):

At this point, the last eight years of my career, I think I've been focused on this space now. And the last few years at Target, I had been all over the technology organization, but ultimately, I spent my last few years there leading technology transformation, which started largely as a DevOps focus and then over time it grew into bringing agile into the fold, and then we started to tackle product. And when we were tackling product, it was pretty obvious that there wasn't a lot of patterns out there for large enterprises yet on how they were doing it. And so we were able to set some patterns, I think, and it's been really cool that other companies in the industry have been pursuing that path and adopting those things.

Ross Clanton (04:53):

Shortly after I left Target in 2016, I think American Airlines started collaborating with Target a lot. And I know a lot of my counterparts here now are doing trips up there and spending time



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learning the approaches they had done there. I went off to Verizon for a few years, played a similar role there, and was reflecting on what did I want to do with my career here, about a year ago. Do I want to keep being a transformation guy and continue to go down that path that I have a lot of passion around?

Ross Clanton (05:23):

Maya and I had been talking for the better part of the year. She had me in to speak actually in early 2019 before I worked here, me and Jez Humble actually were the two external speakers she brought in for an internal DevOps conference they had run. And so I met her and the leadership team here and it was just cool to see how leaned in leaders were to actually sponsoring the change. And I had a lot of side conversations with both her and some of her direct reports that day, where it was pretty obvious to me how committed leadership here was to change and that they're really trying figure it out. And that resonated with me a lot.

Ross Clanton (06:00):

So, as I was thinking about what was next for my career, that kind of sat with me. And as Maya and I started talking about a role, we landed on something that made a lot of sense and I moved down to Texas. So I've been here really since the beginning of 2020, obviously through a lot of change and a year of a pandemic is a tough year for airlines. I've loved it here and really excited to be here helping lead and drive this transformation journey forward. And for us to be able to contribute to the direction this stuff even goes in the industry as well, I think we're innovating and trying different approaches to make these things work while on an airline.

Mik Kersten (06:36):

Okay, excellent. I just do want to send some appreciation. I know when I've talked to Gene and to others, the fact that both of you have actually been communicating on your journey, participating in the thought leadership in the community, and sharing your learnings is just invaluable. And it's great to hear that some of that germinated from your work at Target, and American Airlines and Target actually connecting on those things. So yeah, thank you for being here and thank you for prioritizing this. I think this is how we all get better together. So it's great to see it taking such a key role in this, what Gene calls the [inaudible], that he has created.

Mik Kersten (07:10):

Maya, you said such a key thing to me, the fact that IT being the long pole in the tent, the bottleneck, because you've got all of these business strategies, these business initiatives, and then so often, in so many organizations, the frustration is, "Well, if we could just execute. If we could just execute on the digital side, on the software side, on the IT side."

Mik Kersten (07:29):

And Ross, you said something so key as well. I remember when you were actually contemplating your next move in your career, how important you thought leadership leaning in was. And so often I've seen leadership leaning into digital transformation because the board, the CEO, everyone recognizes how critical this is to success, whether you're in finance and manufacturing and travel and aerospace.



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Mik Kersten (07:54):

So Maya, if you could just give us a little bit of context? Because my sense is, so often there's a lot of executive and leadership focus on transforming, but somehow IT stays as the long pole in the tent, right? IT remains the bottlenecks. So, something different happened here, and I think it has a lot to do with your approach to leadership.

Mik Kersten (08:14):

And maybe we should just jump straight into the fact that you bring in finance on board, treating them as a friend, not a foe. That actually is a success that I have seen elsewhere. But how did you unblock the leadership team at American Airlines to think the right way about IT, about innovation, about software? Because so often I think that in many other organizations, again, the desire is there, the strategy is there, but there's no ability to execute, because they haven't taken that right set of steps that you started a few years ago.

Maya Leibman (08:42):

Yeah, that's a great question. It's true that to stop being the long pole in the tent, the answer couldn't be just, "Okay, everybody work harder," or "Pedal faster," because everybody was already peddling as best as they could. So we really had to do things differently and we'd all read about stuff like DevOps and product journeys and cloud and MVP concepts and things like that. But we'd all read about it in the context of companies like Spotify and Google and things like that. And we thought, "Well, of course they should be doing it. They were born in the cloud." But then we started seeing names and logos that looked a lot more like ours, like Capital One and Target. And suddenly it was like, "Oh, I bet they have a few legacy mainframes hanging around."

Maya Leibman (09:30):

We had to stop making excuses for why we couldn't do it. But I knew for sure that we couldn't do it under our old funding model. We had something that was straight out of a Dilbert cartoon where nothing happened without finance approval, everything got the same scrutiny, whether it was one of our top corporate priorities, we had projects that were approved but no head count to do them. We literally had projects that were completed before they were approved. So, it was so ludicrous that even finance knew that this model needed to change.

Maya Leibman (10:11):

And so we actually went up and visited Target, and we brought our finance colleagues with us. And that I think was really a real turning point for them. You can read all of the articles you want, but once you see another company is doing it, and doing it successfully, and you see your colleagues at another company who have been willing to make the change and haven't lost the security and control that I think finance organizations often fear that they will lose, and in some ways they're actually gaining more control through this process or more certainty, I think once they saw that they really took over and ran with it. We didn't really have to tell them anything, and they came up with this new model, essentially a product funding approach, that we're utilizing today.

Mik Kersten (10:58):



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Okay, that's fascinating. So you actually literally brought finance on board by putting them on a plane and taking them with you to Target?

Maya Leibman (11:05):

Yeah, we took, I want to say it was like 25 people to Target. And we went multiple times. And we brought our business colleagues, we brought our design people... It wasn't just IT people, and our finance colleagues came with us as well. And I think that was a really eye-opening experience for them.

Ross Clanton (11:23):

Well, what was cool to see the outcome of that too, Maya hit on this briefly, but they led creating the model then. It wasn't IT trying to design the model and giving finance to buy off on it, they took ownership and they created the model.

Maya Leibman (11:41):

And what was really cool is that once they created it, other companies started calling them. They became the poster children for modern finance practices in an agile world. And that was really gratifying for them. And I was really proud of them.

Mik Kersten (11:58):

That's amazing. It reminds me of the stories... I actually do relate to the story in the Project to Product book when Boeing was making a shift. This was the 777, and the 777 was the first plane that was all fly by wire, it was just a software experience. So they did the opposite. The leaders of the 777 decided that all software engineers should be on board for the meeting flight of the plane. And that completely changed the game, because everyone was part of the same team, literally in their case, on the same plane, and in your case, I guess, on the same plane.

Maya Leibman (12:29):

Good metaphor.

Mik Kersten (12:30):

Yeah, and it just completely changed the dynamic. But yeah, that part of the story, that's just fascinating. So they actually, they were celebrated as leaders in their industry. That absolutely reminds me too, in the lean manufacturing era, when finance adapted to how to understand and measure value in manufacturing, that completely changed things. They became part of the journey and I didn't realize the degree to which they actually supported your journey here.

Mik Kersten (12:55):

So if we could dig a bit more into that, because again, I think that it's so key to the conditions that you set up to make this successful. In the end finance wants visibility, the PMO wants visibility. They want to know if something's off track. They want to know if for whatever reason the technical debt is too high in this part of your software architecture that does still have mainframe, we see these things regularly, or some infrastructure that's still dated. They want to know that more investment is needed there.



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Mik Kersten (13:27):

So fundamentally I think what you notice is that they're aligned in supporting you on the journey. A lot of finance organizations have not adapted to understanding software products and these IT value streams. So, just how did you kick it off with them? How did you actually catalyze this?

Maya Leibman (13:48):

Yeah, I think their initial going in assumption is that IT was like drunk and disorderly. Like, we spent too much time at the bar, we were throwing money around and we needed some adult supervision. And that was the attitude at first, which obviously didn't get us off to a great start. But what it led to was them saying, "Hey, listen, we have a lot of visibility into that 30 or 40% of your spend that you would classify as grow because you need our approval for all these projects. But that 60 or 70% that you're calling run, that's a black box. How much do these capabilities that we have, how much are they costing us?"

Maya Leibman (14:34):

For example, one of our products is the gate and boarding experience so, all of the technology and all of the effort and processes that go into making boarding the plane a good process. And they said, "Well, let's figure out all of the systems that are involved in that and put a cost to that and understand really what that's costing us, and how much should we be investing there? Is that an area where we should continue to invest or not?"

Maya Leibman (15:00):

And so, I think, whether they wanted the visibility because they felt like we weren't being good stewards of the company's money or whether they wanted it, for whatever reason, it was a good thing, because what it exposed is a lot of really interesting questions about where we should be investing. And that's what really led to this idea of creating our product taxonomy and really assigning self-contained and self-sustaining teams to these products that had the autonomy to have a set of funding and basically utilize their backlog to determine what is the effort that's the next greatest value that will make that product awesome?

Mik Kersten (15:45):

Okay, excellent. And did they get any quick wins out of it? Were they happy that there were shorter approval cycles, that they had to do fewer reallocations? I've seen that one as something that finance, when they shift from this product tracking to more product model... Were there any key ones that they were celebrating or that you were celebrating?

Maya Leibman (16:03):

I think they realized that the model was broken. It was in large part a rubber stamp. Like what I used to call it is, it's a model designed to make you give up. But ultimately if you were willing to take the journey, if you were willing to climb that mountain, and then the next mountain that was put up after that mountain, then you would get approval. Essentially everything was just an endurance test, but if you endured, it got approved. And that made them feel like, well, this is just like a rubber stamp process. And so, because they didn't say no to anything, it was more just a self-selecting out of the process that led some things not to be funded. And nobody wants



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to feel like that's my job. And so I think they recognized that there was a greater calling for their profession, for their expertise.

Ross Clanton (16:57):

Yeah, and I think Maya hit on this, but I think the financial transparency was a big win for them too, and that they did get full visibility into all of the costs in IT and not just what we were calling our grow costs, which is what we're getting the previous project investment model of being applied to, whereas run costs were that hidden black box. That was all now fully transparent for each product, so you could see it.

Mik Kersten (17:25):

Yeah, that seems like a really big deal from a lot of organizations listening, which is transparency into the run box, that's pretty compelling.

Ross Clanton (17:34):

It's most of the spend for a technology organization, so it's good to have transparency into that.

Mik Kersten (17:39):

Yeah, exactly. Very smart, I think, in how you approach them taking a leadership position in that. And so, Maya, you hit on a couple of key things in terms of the taxonomy and the roles. And Ross, I'd like to point people to the white paper that we collaborated on the foreign paper of the Project to Product transformation, where you actually outlined a lot of that taxonomy, a lot of how to think conceptually about these roles, and then you've actually got this all running in practice and validated it again.

Mik Kersten (18:11):

I find that so many organizations try to boil the ocean in terms of the product taxonomy. You and I did have a long discussion about how you had ideal conditions in Target to be able to move really quickly. Maya and you recreated these ideal conditions to move American Airlines so quickly. But tell us what needs to align in terms of these things, the financial support, nailing enough of the taxonomy without boiling the entire ocean, and then having the right kind of organizational structure without, let's say, needing to do an entire full reorg to get there? Or just what things had to align in these sort of spheres of taxonomy of workforce of funding and the roles?

Ross Clanton (18:52):

Yeah. Well, first referencing one of the papers you and I collaborated on, I think the stages I tend to think about transformation like this is this incubate stage scaling and optimizing, and I'm a big fan of start small and test small. And I think the incubate stage is usually where you do that. And in American Airlines, we did that here even before I joined.

Ross Clanton (19:15):

We had a handful of product teams and early adopter organizations that were out tip of the spear figuring this stuff out. And they were doing some of the more heavy collaboration with



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Target and going a little bit further down the path of restructuring themselves around products. When I joined here, we were largely in the scaling stage, that's the conversation Maya and I was having, which is, "all right, we've got a lot of good momentum. Everyone's bought in where this isn't coming in and do a sales job, this is, we got to execute at that scale, so let's figure out how we're going to do that." That's a fun stage. That's where I like to spend my time.

Ross Clanton (19:55):

And at that stage, it does start to get bigger. You do need to figure out your taxonomy, you do have to start making broader, sweeping changes like a funding model. And you've got to get teams restructured around the new roles and team structures and ways of working to even deliver in this model. And that's the stage we've been in, probably a little bit before I joined, and then definitely the last year I've been here.

Ross Clanton (20:19):

The other thing I would say in terms of the conditions and what conditions have to be there, you're right, you and I did have an interesting side conversation a year or so ago on all these interesting conditions that seem to be in place for a large retailer back six, seven years ago; the competitive situation, the security breach situation, the changing leadership, there was just a lot of things that happened all at once that created an environment that I think change happened quickly. And different industry, airlines is different, but we've got our own set of conditions. I think the pandemic is a tough thing for an airline, it's tough for a lot of companies, but it's definitely created an environment where I think you can be more bold about change and experimenting on things.

Ross Clanton (21:07):

I think the most important thing that you have to have is leadership that's totally bought in all the way up and down. And the fact that Doug, our CEO talks about this stuff and is in tune with what we're doing with delivery transformation and is a champion for it, I think says a lot about where we're at as a company. But I think having leadership bought in and I think getting the business really connected in addition to the technology organization, these are things I see here that have been really, really awesome to me. And as much as we're still driving a change and there's challenges associated with driving change in any company, I feel like we're well down a path that I think a lot of other companies struggle with because they don't have some of these things in place.

Mik Kersten (21:51):

Now, I actually wanted to make that one concrete because one of the things that really struck me from your talk is the story, and this is a pandemic story right, of delivering touchless kiosk in six weeks. If you could just touch on that because the OKRs and the fact that you were then able to report this really significant boarding pass scan to kiosk session, and MVP, which you've redefined, I think as, was it a maximum viable product?

Maya Leibman (22:16):

Yeah.



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Mik Kersten (22:17):

I think clearly this, can you take us through that touchless kiosk story? Because again, you clearly had a lot of the right product mindset and structure in place and way to experiment really quickly. But all that matters in the end is this result, right? The fact that IT was able to deliver an entirely new solution in six weeks, which for a lot of organizations at the time, that's not what happened.

Ross Clanton (22:38):

Yeah.

Mik Kersten (22:38):

So how did you pull this off?

Ross Clanton (22:40):

And Maya can jump in as well if she wants, but I think what was interesting here is, a touchless kiosk experience becomes even more important in a pandemic. Your customers don't want to have to touch devices. And we already had a touchless check-in experience except when you needed to check bags, that required you to then now have to interact with the kiosk.

Ross Clanton (23:02):

And I think what was cool was that the leaders around that product space set the goal, they set the outcome on what they were trying to achieve, and they set a key result around it. And really that's where they focused, is making it clear to the team what we needed to get accomplished. And the team was able to mobilize very quickly. They started doing some design sessions, had MVP solution identified very, very quickly, and getting to a point where you could start to roll that out across a large scale organization like this, and we have kiosks in a lot of airports.

Ross Clanton (23:39):

It was really cool to see us do it in six weeks. And they actually blew the OKR out of the water too. I think the key result was that we wanted to see a 25% increase in boarding pass scans and 25% increase in pre-paid bag functionality. And we actually in six weeks saw 145% increase in boarding pass scans to start the kiosk session. So we actually blew the OKR out of the water, and we actually had a 57% increase in the use of pre-paid bag functionality too.

Ross Clanton (24:07):

The other thing is that it actually reduced the session time, which when you think about the customer experience, that's one thing that you're really always trying to do is simplify that engagement point. And so reducing the session time that you have to spend in the kiosk was a really big one with that as well.

Mik Kersten (24:22):

Okay. And Maya, I'm going to switch to you right now, because you said something I think is so important it was that, and I've seen this over and over, someone looks at the Spotify model, they look at how some tech giant is doing things on stage, and then they try to emulate that. And I



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think one of the common threads I see with these successful transformations is your approach to actually measuring and managing to value. And I think what we just heard Ross say is how clear value was to everybody in terms of what they were delivering with those touchless kiosks, how origin it was and their ability to actually over-perform on that.

Mik Kersten (24:56):

So you talked a bit about your approach of inputs, outputs, and outcome, and fundamentally everything I've been doing around measuring flow around the Flow Framework, it's really fundamentally about that. Tell us how you think about that, how you think about actually making sure that in the end, all delivery, IT delivery, is connected to that business outcome and you create that much more rapid feedback loop.

Maya Leibman (25:17):

Yeah, one thing that's been really beneficial about the pandemic is it's given us a real clarity of vision. And so when you have that, when it's super clear about what you need to go and do, that's very helpful. And I think that was the guiding principle around touchless kiosks, we had to do this, we had to do it quickly. And as a result, the team really lived all of the fundamentals around the product models; small MVP, leaders weren't getting in the way of the team, they were attending playbacks, if they wanted a status, the team really wasn't powered to do it. So it was a really lovely story all around.

Maya Leibman (25:53):

As far as incomes inputs, outputs and outcomes, that's been the story of our maturity. I would say early on in our journey, one of the things that we were measuring was how many people went to agile training. That was like a real, I would put that in the input classification where, of course people have to be trained in agile. The next year it was how many teams actually improved the maturity. We had this scale in which we were measuring agile maturity by one step. And so that fell more into the outputs. Okay. It wasn't just that we were doing the work, we were actually getting better at the work. And then by the third year we had thrown out an agile metric per se, completely. And now we were saying, what is the key result for this product team? What is the outcomes that we want to see? Because that's really what we need to be measuring against.

Maya Leibman (26:58):

The inputs are still important and people still need training. The outputs are still important. We still need to measure our deployment frequency, our delivery cycle time, our MTTR, but at the end of the day, what we need to measure ourselves on and whether we're getting better and how to make decisions about what we do next has to be outcomes related to our objectives and our key results.

Mik Kersten (27:19):

Yeah, I just could not agree more. I think that this pattern of success that I see that you've put in place here, it's basically connecting flow of value to objectives and key results.

Maya Leibman (27:28):



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Yeah.

Mik Kersten (27:29):

And it doesn't have to be OKRs necessarily, I personally use them and a lot of organizations like yours have adopted them, because it's well enough to find and it has been successful technology and provides that cascading that works well for product models and programs. But yeah, whatever it is, in the end, it's about making sure that investment in technology actually drives those outcomes.

Mik Kersten (27:49):

So, you successfully did this. You reorganized around products, which actually, that's some effort in the finance, how you do that. The interesting of it is that you actually mentioned some failures, Maya, where things did not go as planned. I think it seems like someone, a story I remember is, someone misunderstood the concept of two-pizza teams, and I think you were pursuing 12 pizza teams for a while. So can you just tell us a little bit about some of the missteps, because again, your sharing of those learnings I think is just so valuable.

Maya Leibman (28:15):

Yeah, we had so many setbacks. And even still today, you make it sound like we've totally arrived, which we absolutely haven't. This is definitely, and we still have the steps, and we still have things that aren't going perfectly that we aren't proud of. So it's by no means, have we cracked the nut. But like early on, we said, okay, there's going to be one product owner per product. And then we put the list together, and there was like four product owners per product, because there was so many teams that felt invested in that product, and they felt like they were the owner and they didn't want to give up any control, and they wanted to be called the owner.

Maya Leibman (28:52):

We had issues where yeah, we wanted to be in these small two-pizza teams, but there were so many people involved that I joke around that at our first two-pizza team meeting, we ate 12 pizzas because that's how many people. We were unable to get it down any smaller. We had a really important meeting early on and we invited all of these stakeholders to come, and we invited like 25 people and six people showed up and three of them were from my organization.

Maya Leibman (29:23):

You mentioned the thing about MVP, early on we were to get, "Oh, there's this great new concept. We're going to do this really small sliver of work, it's called the MVP." And our business partner said, "What? We don't want the minimum. You can say the words, the letters MVP, the acronym is okay, but the M has to stand for maximum because we want the most that you can deliver, not the least." And so there were a lot of setbacks along the way, and we learned a lot, we all learned a lot, and it's just a journey of continual improvement. We want to be the best at getting better.

Mik Kersten (29:54):



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Yeah, and I think that is such a key point. Because one of the things that I worry about the most is when someone's got basically a project plan for a transformation journey that's got a very clear ending. There's nothing more worrying than that. Brian Solis, he's a futurist, an anthropologist actually that studies digital transformation, and he's just a fascinating person.

Mik Kersten (30:14):

And yeah, he says the key thing that now has to happen is that this year has to be the end of the two-year or a three-year transformation. This is a continuous journey. And it's exactly, I think, the mindset that you approach it with that we're never done, this is never done. This is just ... And I think in your case, and a lot of good cases, it's just that data-driven and leadership supported continuous improvement. Technologies will change, the market will change, organizations change, and I think you've put in place this learning organization that's able to adapt to this, even though I realize you think you still have ... There's just always a long way to go.

Maya Leibman (30:46):

Yeah.

Mik Kersten (30:47):

So, I guess then tell us what I think in terms of, for 2021, are there specific things that you're focused on in terms of the next steps in your journey? Maya you go first and then Ross you can follow.

Maya Leibman (31:00):

It's just a continuum of maturity. We have teams that I would say are really knocking it out of the park and are just really amazing themselves at what they're able to accomplish. And for those teams they need to get better. And then I'm sure that there are teams that are still saying like, "Okay, what is DevOps?" And so we've got a lot of people that they're still at the very beginning of this journey. It's a big organization and there's a lot of different areas and a lot of different types of systems that we're dealing with. And everybody's adapting to where they are in that journey and what their needs are.

Maya Leibman (31:37):

This is going to be a really fascinating year in terms of, if you look in the crystal ball, all of the changes that have happened over the last year as a result of COVID, which are the ones that are going to stick and which are the ones that are going to snap back to the way they were pre-pandemic? And so, we would spend a lot of time thinking about that and how we should prepare ourselves.

Mik Kersten (31:59):

Okay, great. And Ross, anything that's top of mind for you?

Ross Clanton (32:02):



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I think Maya hit it well that when you've got a company this large and you've got literally 100s of product teams, people are at very different stages on the journey. So there's a lot of focus on enablement this year and enabling leaders and teams based on where they're at in their journey and how we can get more focused on how they continue to improve.

Ross Clanton (32:24):

But I would say, to me there's two themes that we're focused on with our transformation program right now. One, I would say is how we're driving product mindset across our business. This is, I would say last year, and starting last year when we switched the funding model, it really was a big step in terms of bringing more of the business more into this. And with that, it just increases the net that you have to cast in terms of getting out and helping people understand what product model is and what product mindset is and how do you plan and prioritize in this way, and how do you empower your teams differently in this way? And so there's, that's a big focus for us.

Ross Clanton (33:04):

And then another one, which we actually didn't talk about a lot in our summit talk, but it's really cool stuff, and it's probably something that we'll share a little bit more on moving forward, but what we're doing to really focus on our developer experience within the technology organization as well.

Ross Clanton (33:19):

Obviously with DevOps and cloud and a lot of the different technical aspects of our transformation, those are really critical enablers to not only improving the cost and efficiency of IT, but improving the developer experience, the people that are building software. And we've actually been building out a platform that we call Runway, airline-themed, of course, and it's based off of Spotify's backstage open-source product. But we've been collaborating a lot on that project and building that platform out. We've got pretty big plans for that platform this year, in terms of getting more functionality there and getting more of our building and delivering of our different technology here, going through that platform moving forward.

Ross Clanton (34:05):

It's pretty cool. It's an inner source model. We've got a lot of different teams internally contributing to it. It's not just one team. It creates a marketplace approach so that teams can share their own templates for how you're going to use their products and services to deliver technology, which has been a lot of fun. But that gets deeper into the engineering side of the transformation, which wasn't necessarily what we were focused on in the summit last fall.

Mik Kersten (34:30):

Yeah. Well, that's great to hear. I absolutely see that as a key path on that journey. Which is that the development platforms themselves, they are a key product, they're what makes every one of your teams more productive. You've got the patterns of the teams who are moving faster, for all of us, it's a continuum, right? And it's just about elevating the work of all the teams, and making the dev platforms themselves a first class product is I think it's just a key step to that.



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Mik Kersten (34:54):

And can you tell me a little bit more, we haven't talked about this yet, but again, the leader talk aspect, and how things as you go through this year, you're looking at influencing more of the business, more leaders and leaders throughout the organization, how do you approach this, celebrating these victories? Because I think, and this is, Maya, the interesting thing about these continuums, I think you've got this, there's something about your approach to celebrating the successes that you've created, because that's the way that we scale these successes, to see how well, how successful are those kiosks were as an example. And you're able, you're doing that internally and externally, which is amazing.

Mik Kersten (35:29):

And then there is, I think a key thing here, you can touch on as well, which is that you've brought very senior leadership to help you celebrate those successes. You've got Doug Parker who's actually, you said the chairman of the company cheerleading this effort, how have you done that? And how has it changed the way that leadership approaches technology?

Maya Leibman (35:49):

Wow, that's a big question. I think that we've been fortunate to have sponsorship and support from Doug and from other senior leaders, because they see the results, they see that it's not just me who's standing up there saying, "Hey, look, how much faster we delivered touchless kiosk." Our business partners are standing up and saying, "I want more of that." And so that's what really drives the enthusiasm and the support is, seeing the impact of it. So that's been really instrumental in terms of ensuring that we have the support and that we can celebrate the successes.

Maya Leibman (36:30):

Yeah, we do a ton of celebrating and making sure that people recognize that even improvements of, we had teams that were delivering maybe three times a year because it was an old product or we didn't want to have too many changes for our business partners at any one time, and when they moved to six times a year, that was a huge celebration. That's, they've doubled their deployment frequency. So, it's really those kinds of things; recognizing them, pulling them out and having an opportunity to celebrate them and make them visible and then engender the kind of support that that kind of success breeds.

Mik Kersten (37:09):

And the interesting thing I've noticed with both of you is that in your approach to the celebration and to success, it just always seems to me like whenever I hear you speak is that you're actually having fun. And this is, I've noticed it obviously on this podcast as well, but I think there's something to that. I just remember when it was, I think it was five years ago when I added 'have fun' to the core values of Tasktop. I just tacked on this really short value at the end. And it actually is one of the things that drove me to add happiness as a metric, as one of the metrics of happiness in engagement of staff. How do you do it? Because, we've just been through some incredibly difficult times for the airline industry, you've been, the kind of complexity that you work with, the size of the transformation, now I've seen the organizations just buckle under the



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change management, well, how do you keep having fun throughout this, given how challenging and complex what you're doing is?

Maya Leibman (37:59):

Yeah, I totally agree with you. Fun has to be one of your guiding principles, we all spend way too much time at work to not have it be fun. We're doing an all-hands meeting, virtual meeting next week, and we're looking for memes and other things to insert, because you can't ask people to sit there for 90 minutes and just download information from you one way as you talk at them on a screen. It's got to be engaging and we got to dig deep and figure out how to be engaging in this environment.

Maya Leibman (38:32):

Ross and his team, we developed this delivery transformation steering committee, and that sounds awful, and nobody wants to be on a steering committee. And so they went back and they thought about it and they came up with a couple of cool names. And the one that they selected ultimately was the snow removal team. So these are the guys that are going around removing all the snow so that the cars can get through without a lot of friction. And it's lovely.

Maya Leibman (38:58):

And in the last meeting, in the last team meeting, the last page was these pictures of snowballs. And inside the snowball was a problem that the team was having that they wanted the group to help them solve. For example, "Hey, listen, your team members are coming and they're submitting these really weak OKRs because they're afraid that if they do a really challenging OKR and they don't meet it, that somehow that's going to impact their funding or their performance review or something like that. So you as leaders need to go out there and explain that that's not, what's going to happen." And it was inside the snowball and it was really, really cute. And so just little things like that just make it way more fun.

Mik Kersten (39:37):

That's awesome.

Ross Clanton (39:38):

Yeah, one thing I would add, I think Maya does a really good job of creating a fun environment here. And before I joined, one thing that I observed, even when I was thinking about joining was the leadership team, Maya's leadership team and how closely they all worked and how much they support each other. And they were, sometimes two of them were interviewing me and they were like poking fun at each other during the interview, and I'm like, "Oh, this is interesting, and it's cool to see senior leaders at that level not taking themselves too seriously and creating a fun and engaging environment." And so I saw that from the outside looking at it and I was like, "Oh, that's really cool. I want to join that." And since I've been here, that is how the leadership team here operates.

Ross Clanton (40:26):

And there are so many, if you want to talk about making things fun, like when we do these all hands, these random weird things will show up. Like someone wearing a rooster costume



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showing up in the all-hands content, that one of the leaders clearly has photos about all of the rest of us that goes back years and can pull those out whenever he wants just to mix things up with us. But there's a lot of videos and a lot of different activities that have happened over the years where you see this leadership team supporting each other and having self-deprecating fun so that their team sees that they're having fun. And I think it helps our teams loosen up and have a lot of fun too.

Ross Clanton (41:06):

By the way, there's one other shift, not shift, but one other thing I wanted to highlight, while fun isn't called out directly as one of our values, one thing we've worked a lot or is realigning what we think our culture and our values are here in IT, and we really simplified it this year down to three core things; passion, accountability, and selflessness. When I think about things like passion and selflessness, I can definitely see how fun permeates through those things. And I think by us living those values, we do end up having a lot of fun in our environment.

Mik Kersten (41:46):

Yeah, and that's just amazing. I think those values are ... I think in my mind, they're bang on. And it is amazing how much it changes the narrative and the context for the team, that the snowballs are ... This was happening in our organization a month ago where some of our teams were ... The work that our teams do is just so complex, and there's always something that can make their work a lot easier.

Mik Kersten (42:09):

So one of our executives created this initiatives called the 'F It Day', and I said, "Well, we're going to call ... We can't use swear words in our company initiatives." But it was spelled E-F-F. And then everyone, they would just, it was like this, they would do something that they would automate some piece of frustration they had out of their day. So that you get an hour back from their day or their colleague's day. That selflessness, I think is such a great point, Ross. And it was just such a great thing because they all tackle different things. It was a bit like a hackathon type day, but it was strictly around getting that friction out, and so that we'd have more joy in. And yeah, we now have an Eff Day.

Maya Leibman (42:44):

I love that, and that's awesome. I think we need to adopt that.

Mik Kersten (42:48):

Right. Yeah, HR did wonderful. We had a really quick discussion whether we should go with that, calling it that, maybe you'll come up with something, but I think if we're having fun, we can do [crosstalk 00:42:58]

Maya Leibman (42:58):

Yeah, go ahead. Go for it.

Mik Kersten (43:00):



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But okay. That was just so inspirational. Thank you both so much. Anything else you want to leave us with, but I think, your approach, your philosophy, your leadership is exactly what we need to see more of. So, anything else you want to leave our listeners with?

Maya Leibman (43:14):

I'll just give a huge shout out to my entire organization. I just have the greatest team and the greatest leaders, and they've all been willing to embrace this. And it hasn't been easy, and they've really persevered in a way that sometimes even when I had some doubts about whether this was really the right direction to go, they stayed the course and they brought me along, and I just owe them an enormous amount of appreciation and thanks, and I'm just so proud to get to work with them.

Ross Clanton (43:45):

And I'll just add the shameless hiring plug that we always need more awesome talent-

Maya Leibman (43:51):

Yes.

Ross Clanton (43:51):

... to help us out of duty. So, for all of you that are listening to Mik's podcast, we're happy to talk to you.

Maya Leibman (43:57):

Yeah, it's really fun.

Mik Kersten (43:58):

Clearly an amazing and fun place to work. Exactly.

Maya Leibman (44:00):

Yeah, and we won't put you in a rooster costume.

Mik Kersten (44:05):

Okay. Excellent. Thank you both so much. That was amazing. We'll point people to the American Airlines hiring page, so [crosstalk 00:44:11]

Maya Leibman (44:11):

Awesome. Thank you.

Mik Kersten (44:18):

A huge thank you to both Maya and Ross for joining me on this episode. For more, follow me in my journey on LinkedIn, Twitter, or using the hashtag #MikPlusOne or #ProjectToProduct. You can reach out to Maya and Ross on LinkedIn. I have a new episode every two weeks, so hit subscribe to join us again. You can also search for Project to Product to get the book, and



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remember that all of our proceeds go to supporting women and minorities in technology.
Thanks, stay safe, and until next time.