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EPISODE
207

Jason Korman

Show Notes at: <http://www.aesnation.com/207>



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Best of success,



John Bowen
Co-founder, AES Nation

John Bowen: Well, I have a special treat for you. A very good friend, serial entrepreneur, CEO and founder of one of the most creative companies out there. Jason and I have been in a number of mastermind groups together, and there's really a bond that I think you're going to have too because he really makes a difference.

He's one of those rare individuals that's not only a great entrepreneur, but also can bring in something that most of us who are little linear, illogical, can't do as well. It's bringing in the culture. We're going to talk about the power of really culture in our organizations and making a huge difference, and how important it is when we screw it up along the way.

So, you don't want to miss this. If it's important to accelerate your success, and that's what we're all here about. I'm John Bowen, founder of AES Nation. It's all about accelerating your success. You want these lessons? Stay tuned.

Jason, I am so excited to have you here my friend. Thank you for taking some time out of your busy schedule.

Jason Korman: Thank you, John. It's a pleasure to be with you today.

John Bowen: Well, I always think of you as a renaissance man. I know this is a little scary and all that, but before we get into the culture, one of the things I always love to do is to get a little bit of background. You and I share a love of a lot of things, and some of it you've done in your background. Just give a little bit of how you got to where you are today.

Jason Korman: Well, a very long story but in my previous life, I was in the wine business, and I have a couple of wineries in California, sold them, wound up in with a company based in the UK where we did a lot of global sourcing and production for the large European grocery chains. Through that, wound up with a winery in South Africa.

It was the very early days of social media, so 2004, it was before Twitter, it was before Facebook, it was just for blogs, and everybody ... if you remember those days but everybody was very excited about how blogging was-

John Bowen: I'm old enough Jason that I do remember those days.

Jason Korman: Back then, the weird thing about the wine business is that you got these fabulous stories to tell. It's, very alluring, but for most brands, you don't have the budget to really promote. What winds up happening is that all of your promotion goes into doing things like wine making dinners, really small activities. When I saw blogs, I thought, wow, this is, just hugely valuable thing for a very story intensive business-like wine.

We started blogging from our South African winery, did some really interesting, and ground-breaking work. There's literally dozens and dozens of white papers and books and stuff that have been written or mentioned, what we've done. We really did the first case study on how you can use blogs, the beginning of social media to create a global brand.

Fast forward, one of the ways that we did that was really through this idea of making up more meaning and purpose around our product instead of just talking about wine is for us. It was kind of boring. We want to talk about not the wine itself but what people do with it. To make a very long story short, the folks who are watching blogs in beginning to social media back then were all tech. We developed a big following in the tech world.

We hooked up with a cartoonist at the time named Hugh MacLeod who had a website called Gaping Void. Part of what we did was a global promotion around sending prints to people in different parts of the world that they've sponsored dinners that used our wine.

To make a very long story short, what we wound up having happened was people in big companies would use these prints for dinners, but then the effect would go away past the dinner and they would start to use these things within their businesses in a way that was really disruptive and really allowed them to connect with their co-workers and colleagues around ideas change.

It sounds kind of crazy. If anybody's interested, you can Google Microsoft Blue Monster is great example of the sort of work we did. What we saw was that you could impact large organizations by connecting ideas to visual tools that really transcended any sort of form of training or traditional change that you'd see in organizations. That was the beginning of what became Gaping Void and our culture, design business.

John Bowen: I'll tell you Jason, I was blown away with it. The way I met you was through Joe Polish Genius Network. I'm forgetting he in his first book, or not first book it was I think, his second book that Joe gave everybody in his Genius Network. On the flight back from Phoenix to San Jose, I read it. It's a great read and it so much talked about the challenge for so many workers and so many businesses on what we're talking about today, the culture that you knew there had to be a better way of doing things, and what most people were doing.

One of the things I want to ask you because ... And then as we've gotten to know each other, this whole concept of culture matters. I know you've shared with me and I've seen great examples of how you actually have leveraged that using your marketing ability and Hugh's unbelievable talent as well. But let's go into the culture matters part. Why does it matter? We've got our fellow entrepreneurs here that you're hanging out with a cup of coffee, a glass of wine maybe or potentially even exercise.

Why does culture matter? If I'm a CEO, I'm an owner of a business why is that that big a deal?

Jason Korman: Okay. It's a complex area. There's a number of answers and I'll go through them quickly. First off, operationally, what culture really is comprised of, is a set of beliefs, mindset, mental models around how people do their work. Those beliefs, which together creates a mindset, are what informs people's behaviors, moment to moment, day to day in their organizations. It's those behaviors that give you your operational.

For a lot of CEOs, because they don't really understand the dynamics, and think culture's super soft, it's foosball and pizza and just keeping people happy. No, the reality of it is that it is the operating system of your business. We think of it in terms of it being like the operating system of your phone. If it's working well, if it's up to date, if people are aligned around it, then everything works smoothly. But when an operating system, and I don't know if you didn't upgrade on your last upgrade on iOS, I did, and my phone hasn't worked properly sense. Because it wasn't designed properly, there isn't alignment, everything's much slower.

That is the equivalent to culture. When you are actually aligned around beliefs, mindset, you get the right behaviors, you get the right outputs. You can see that actually play out in many different ways, and in very public ways over the last couple of years now. I'll cite a couple of examples. But the other question around culture is why it matters to employees?

You've got your business outcome approach, and there's good data around it, which we might get to, but the question is why now is it mattering more to employees? That's actually a really interesting question. Because what we've seen over the years and what our research has shown is that people have always been very connected to the work they do. If you go back 100, 200, 300 years ago, work and home life were totally connected. It was all part of the same thing. If you think about the old cities of Europe, if you go to Italy, or France, or places like Sheffield, England. Sheffield, England, once upon a time was a place where they only made cutlery. And the people who worked in those cutlery factories, were the same people whose kids married each other, and they went to church together, and they socialized together.

There was this complete integration of work and home life. That's the way people always lived. The industrial revolution really tried to separate out, home and work because there was a clear definition between private time and work time. But what's happened over the years is that people have this desire for work to become more meaningful. You see that play out in terms of social entrepreneurship, and the way certain companies become far more popular. Because what they realized is that when you supply people with more meaning in their work, then amazing things can happen.

Our client and friends over at Zappos are great examples of that. They have a very straightforward kind of business where it's a website, call, center warehousing. But they've added a layer of meaning and purpose to that.

John Bowen: It's only shoes Jason. How can you make a strong culture there? Then we know the value of it too when Amazon purchased it. It's just unbelievable.

Jason Korman: If you look at the human condition, people crave meaning and purpose in their lives. They have to be aligned to some outcome which is bigger than them. Most business by nature is very transactional. The problem is that transactions, it's hard to find meaning in transactions. The default becomes about numbers, and metrics. But what people really want to understand is how they're helping others. They want to understand what impact they're having in the world. They want to feel that they are succeeding at their chosen endeavor. It's a complex web of a very emotional things that drive engagement at work.

When you reduce it, just to metrics, to just numbers, what winds up happening is that that people disengage. That's why you know, Gallup has been running an annual engagement surveys, global surveys since 1992. Since '92, the US numbers basically flat lined at 30% engagement, European engagement is at 19 and Japanese engagement, most of Asia is at 9%.

These are staggering numbers. No one's been able to really impact that because what they understand engagement to be is actually a broken model. What people need to have is emotional connection to their work, and when we go into companies, we're looking at, okay, how is it possible to connect emotion to the business outcomes that the organization needs to achieve? That is where you get magic, right? That's what at those-

John Bowen: Well, I want to touch on where the magic isn't to. My wife, unfortunately, is going through some health challenges and we're in healthcare. We're in Silicon Valley, and I even named Stanford. I went with her for one of the appointments and literally people were coming in crying because they couldn't get their records, they couldn't get their paperwork, the place was in disarray. They may have great doctors and all that, but if you don't have that, that's a real problem. It wasn't my responsibility. That person, I'll make sure they get it. We can't do it while you're here, we're going to do it the next day. Nobody is solving problems. The waiting room is unbelievable.

Compared to going to ... We can give a lot of great examples like airline. The difference between Virgin America or Alaska out here, and just about everybody else, they're people really want to serve you, and make it a great experience. You just see over and over again when that's not the culture. Let me put up this slide Jason that you gave me on ... Let's talk

about there are some great examples. Zappos being one but, and the best places to work best services and profitability. Tell us what we're looking at here.

Jason Korman: John, I want to just address a couple of your points about the healthcare experience just before we get to this. Because it's very inclined to it.

John Bowen: Sure.

Jason Korman: You can skip the part if you want. Here's what happens over generations of cultural alignment around industries. In healthcare, what is valued is clinical excellence. What's valued is professionalism in delivering care from a clinical perspective. Doctors and nurses for generations were taught that all that matters is you're treating a system, that you need to be objective, you need to be unemotional, you need to just deal with the facts and you need to do your work.

What winds up happening over time is that the idea of patient as customer goes away. What you're treating is a body and not a person. We see that play out in the healthcare world, over and over and over again, where people feel that as patients that they don't get the care that they really need because the caregiver actually doesn't care about them. They care about fixing their problem, but they don't care about them as a human. They don't care about the emotional challenges that they're going through.

That's what you just described is these organizations they're set up to be transactional and not to really care about the holistic wellbeing of an individual. You mentioned the airline industry and that's a great example. There was the huge ... United Airlines difficult because you're going to have to go now a year ago where they dragged that poor fellow off a plane in order to make a seat available to a United employee. We look at that as a cultural lapse.

Why do we say that? Because in the airline world one of the key questions is who is your customer? Do you value your customers? Are we just running planes as efficiently as possible? Do we value rules and regulations over customer wellbeing? Well, United demonstrated they actually don't care about their customers. They dragged the guy off the plane effectively for no good reason. They created a huge PR problem for themselves. But see, that's why culture matters more than ever in this day and age because everything is transparent, and things don't happen very often behind a curtain anymore.

We see that with, Michigan State disaster recently, Wells Fargo, Theranos Starbucks incident a few weeks ago in Philadelphia. Apple's iPhone slowed down on their operating system. Where something like that was deliberate and orchestrate.

John Bowen: Right. I brought my battery to take care of it. But the ... The thing that is so amazing and that's the point I think that's so important for all of us as business owners to really recognize is that you know what, you can't get away with anything anymore. The whole media part is so quick with Twitter and Instagram and on and on and on. That we have a distribution you cannot control distribution. You can't control PR but what you can do and that's what I want to touch on, I'm going to pull that slide back up on Best Places. What you can do and some of the best firms in the world are doing is they're influencing culture and they're creating this dynamic culture in their business. This is something all of us should be doing. Jason, tell me a little about this here.

Jason Korman: Sure. So, this slide was actually created by who's a professor at Harvard Business School, an old friend and client of ours. He used to be President at Babson College, and we did work in the Babson. Before that, he was a COO and Co-Chairman of the Limited, which of course includes Victoria's Secret, and lots of other big retail brands.

Lenard had done some research and shared this with us and basically said, "Look, that creating a wonderful place to work, and actually isn't just about making employees happy. It's actually about operational excellence." He particularly looked at service industries and said, Essentially, when you create a great place to work and when you're really focused on the service piece of it, what you wind up creating is a more profitable business with dramatic differentiation from the marketplace."

If you look at these companies that are listed on the right side of the slide, whether it's Nordstrom, Publix, Quicken, Southwest, these are all industries that really stand out in their field because they do things differently. They have a different set of values than their competitors do. While no company, no large business can operate without a problem, you would never imagine Southwest dragging a customer off of a plane and bleeding their nose. It just would happen.

John Bowen: I started laughing as you say that because I just can't imagine it. Where United it's not that hard.

Jason Korman: Exactly. We talk about ... I'll go back to this idea of culture as an operating system. We have a phrase we've borrowed from our friend, Seth Godin, which is this idea of people like us do things like this. This is how we do things in our organization. These are the boundaries of what's acceptable. When you have a real sense of who you are, and how you do what you do, then you need fewer rules and regulations, and you can allow people to do their best work without the kinds of restrictions that you must have in organizations for people to understand these things.

You see it play out over and over and over again. Because of this transparency, there is significant business risk, especially for large companies, where they do not have well defined cultures. It's a huge area of concern for us as we go into clients-

John Bowen: I think large companies they can explode and be billions of dollars, but for small companies, oftentimes it's a missed opportunity. So, I want to start going into the solution, Jason. Let's go into your culture change model here. How do we-

Jason Korman: How do we fix this?

John Bowen: None of us are perfect as we both know, type thing.

Jason Korman: Yeah, of course. We developed this actually early this year, but it was out of some work we did with fellow man, B.J. Fogg, who runs the Stanford Behavior Design Lab. B.J. has become a famous guy over the last few years, especially because a lot of his students have gone on to found things like Instagram and Snapchat. They did it based upon some of his behavior models.

This came out. We had collaborated with B.J. last year because I was ... My approach was okay, when it comes to culture, culture ultimately, as I described earlier, is about behavior. So, what can we learn from what he's done in behavior design? We came up with this model and the reason why, I personally love it is because it really simplifies the whole idea of what you need to do to execute around culture. It simplifies, and it makes it all understandable.

Basically, there's three components to how you affect the culture change. It's not just changing culture, it's reinforcing great culture or fixing the bad culture. This is how you do it. Essentially, the first, if you look at the Y axis, you have this FMS method. F stands for future motivated state. That's the idea of why should people care? It's the motivation that you want to bring to the workplace, famously in the past, it would be the equivalent of Bill Gates' a computer on every desk, personal computer on every desk or Elon Musk talking about going to Mars, or in a more social political sense, you could think about Martin Luther King and a lot of great leader's past.

But the idea is how do you motivate people about some big outcome that that makes them get out of bed in the morning, comes to work and go, "Yes, I'm part of something larger, and making a difference." You need to articulate that, and it and make it clear for people.

The next step is, and this is the X axis, is what we call AB, which is articulated beliefs. The thing about articulated beliefs is, we're all familiar with this idea of core values. Core values are usually a list of five or 10 things that maybe live on a poster somewhere that live in a

website, possibly, but are a list of nice things to have, but oftentimes, and most often, live somewhere that nobody can even remember what they are.

The idea is that we said, a core value is part of a belief system. But what you want to do is develop a really robust system around, what do you believe in as a business? That includes how we treat each other, how we treat customers, how we deal with things like the environment, what happens when there's a problem, what do we think of being curious? What are the competencies, and mental miles we use in the work that we do?

Eventually, you might wind up with 50, or 100, or even 150 different ideas. We're not suggesting that everybody needs to understand or to even memorize these things. But they together form the beliefs under which you do business. Then finally, you have this, motivational piece, you have this belief system, which is you can think about as an extended version of core values. And then you have the S on the on this model. The S represents socialization.

This is the thing that most people don't understand, which is, whatever your beliefs are, and whatever the motivations are, none of it matters unless you're heavily socializing. We say socializing, what we mean is, have people interact with it every day as many times as possible. Or just internally but externally. We mentioned Zappos earlier, if you think about their core values, one of them is delivering, wow. Delivering wow is all about customer experience, and the customers know it. So, the customers have an expectation before they interact with an employee. And so, the employees hold themselves to a higher standard because they know what the expectation is.

So, all culture, every bit of culture hinges on the socialization of these ideas. If you don't socialize it, nothing happens. The key question then becomes, how do you socialize? Because it's not just an email, it's not just maybe a video or something that a CEO might do once in a while. It has to embed itself in the daily lives of employees and hopefully customers as well. Does that make sense John?

John Bowen: Yeah, it really does. One of the things that I see as a missed opportunity that we all have is that we let things happen. Some of us focus on profitability, some of us focus on great client experience, generating that profitability, some work on our team. We saw that sweet spot earlier on, in the best companies. I always think of it as vision, but having that compelling process, going back to your example. Let me just pull it up here. Your formula is what we have, the FMS, that future motivational state. Something that is inspiring.

I think of Elon Musk with the Mars, the electric car. We go on and on and creating those beliefs and then having really a part of their social fabric that they want to accomplish this, and share star, the ideal. This is where it really to me gets very exciting and. Most of us aren't

thinking through it. This is so important because ... I'm going to pull up the cultural brand map that you gave us Jason because when we look at the intersection of how many different things it affects as we're getting our messages out, and really internally as well, it's huge.

Why don't you touch on this as well? This is a big one. I look at it, and I go, "This is a lot of work."

Jason Korman: Yeah, and it is a lot of work. We don't suggest that for any entrepreneur, that you even have the capacity to execute on this whole career map. The idea is, and if we think ... Everyone ... When they talk about culture, it talks about Zappos. We generally don't like to, but they're just such a great execution of what culture can be I, it's worth talking about.

If you look at this culture, brand map, really what you think about is this idea of employment experience as brand, all right? Really, well defined, what do we believe in? What are we doing here? Why do we do what we do? This whole rich belief system around what it means to be here, people like us do things like this.

Once you get that implemented and executed broadly enough within your business, and it doesn't matter whether you've got five people or 50000 people. Then what you're able to do is to view the world and what you do through that lens. So, you've got the beliefs that inform all those behaviors, which has a direct impact on performance. You've got people aligned around the execution, then the question is, how do you communicate it to the world?

You've got these opportunities to then tell your story in a really unique way through blogs, through Instagram, through all the social media platforms, which we all know. You've got a lens through which you could look at doing social good. You don't have to spend a ton of money, but there's little things you can do that have impact locally or on a bigger scale.

You then have the ability to really recruit employees who are aligned to your beliefs. I think that's one of the really interesting things about culture, is because when you really articulate it well, and it's really clear for people, you attract people who are aligned to it, and you repel people aren't. One of our perspectives is that actually repelling the wrong people is more valuable than attracting the right people. Because we all know that some of our biggest timestamps, and some of our biggest problems are actually caused by having the wrong people in the organization.

But then the question is, how do you tell the stories? Because now you have a basis for telling stories because you've got this belief system. Then you can do earned media, you can do you know all your PR publicity embedded in your website. But the point is that through culture, you can actually take care of a huge burden of marketing, and execution in other areas the business has got nothing to do with HR. It's got nothing to do with how people usually think

about culture. It's a really powerful way to really drive and manage your business forward, and to really create a place that's differentiated from all your...

I always botch this quote, but Tony's Zappos always talks about this idea of culture being one of the only things that your competitors can't steal or copy from you, and it's really true.

John Bowen: It really is. One of the things Jason I want to go to, and it's a resource that you do. I've been with a number of firms where you've really put this in play internally. I want to bring up your website on culture wall, because this has been a while. Tell me what this or tell our fellow entrepreneurs what this is, because most places don't have this, and it's a missed opportunity, or they got a poster or two type things versus really something thoughtful.

Jason Korman: Okay, so here's what happens. Juts to B.J. Fogg for a minute, one of his premises is this idea of how context shifts behavior. Context is really the physical environment in which you're living or you're working. Think about it in the most dramatic sense, you walk into an old Cathedral in Europe and you are surrounded with ideas that remind you of religion, of behavior, whether it's the love, whether it's the hate, whether it's the fear. It doesn't matter whether you're a religious person or not, you have to feel something, right?

So, what is that all about? That's clearly about beliefs. If you think about it, if you borrow a few things from that, you say, "Look, if you're creating belief system for your business, for your organization, it doesn't matter because we do a lot of work in higher end. Do a lot of executions around beliefs and career centers and places like that, and healthcare. But once you're able to articulate it and you visualize it, then what you have is an ability to connect people on a regular basis to the work.

We talked about socialization earlier. The idea is that, the way that you get to socialize ideas is through language, and through visual tools. We call it social objects, and people call it cultural artifacts, but the idea is that you can visualize a set of beliefs that then inform people's behavior. What we do, is we turn these into these little 12-inch square pieces of artwork that live on a wall in a place, it's usually 20 or 30 of them. Sometimes people go crazy with 40 or 50, but basically, the idea is each one represents one of those beliefs that really drive your organization. Then they live in a place, and then you have a way of having those conversations where you can have group meetings around it. You get actually digital versions of those pieces so that you can put it on screens, or onboarding materials or spread it through social media.

But what you then have is a system through which you can then spread your ideas, connect with customers, connect people internally, and it's all in a nice, neat tight package where it gives you a way of having these conversations and spreading these ideas which ordinarily is

actually super hard to do. We call it culture walls, but what it is, is really a management tool to help you spread the beliefs that drive your business.

John Bowen: Well, Jason, one of the things ... I'm going to pull up your website. I'm going to go down a bit and you have one with the best side of Joe Polish is back here. Let's see, I got it there. He's got a cultural wall in his office, it's pretty amazing. One of the things I love about it is he does a lot of his filming with speakers up against that wall.

There isn't a day that everyone in their organization isn't looking at this. It's personalized to his messages, really the whole team's, not only on their culture, it's that magic of entrepreneurs who are nailing a great client experience what that is to them. Also, really developing some great, great value to the consumers, the teammates, and then obviously profitable.

I might just flip through here really quick, but the headlines, I'd encourage people to read this. However, you do it, this is something that I think just makes such a difference is, putting together what makes a difference for the team. It's a big part of that socialization. It's a reminder, it comes together well. Jason let's go to resources. Tell me a little bit about if somebody wanted to follow up with you and, work with you on the cultural side, how would they do that?

Jason Korman: You can just reach me at jason@gapingvoid.com. J-A-S-O-N@gapingvoid.com. But we do everything from small set of cultural projects to large scale change projects. We typically ... Most of our clients are companies like Microsoft, I mentioned Zappos earlier. I've done a ton of work at companies like Rackspace and in San Antonio Beers, AT&T. While we're not a large consultancy, most of our clients tend to be enterprise. More and more often lately, some mi-market firms are coming to us saying, "Can you help us design our culture?"

I think one of the things that differentiates what we do is this idea that we're very clear that that culture is designable, and there's a process around execution, we always start at the beginning, which is understanding what the current state is, and then overlaying it through our frameworks and really getting insights as to what needs to shift to get the organization more functional?

We do that, we run assessments that are relatively low cost, and then execute based upon the needs of the organization. But our approach is always is get it, create the tools, create the system, make sure you train people so they understand how to do it, and then we let them get to it. We're always ready to help but we're very aligned to getting in, getting work delivered, and getting out.

It's all about building tools that make this sustainable. If somebody just wants to do a cultural wall for example, we do a little facilitation. Usually it's virtual. We then create language, we then visualize it and deliberate and that can be done as quickly as a month. It's worth pointing out on that web page that you were showing earlier. You could see a culture wall that we did for Amazon. But also, we do a lot of work in higher education. One is for Babson College. Yeah, that one right there was for Babson College. The woman, Susan Brennan who's pictured there is the head of career services. She's just actually left to go to MIT Sloan, where I think we'll be doing a project there.

Her whole thing was, how do I align students, and employers, and parents, and all these other people around what we believe in? We delivered that wall last year. She called me towards the ... Well, it was in January this year. The best thing should last year was the wall because it's helping her have conversations that she would never otherwise be able to have with all of our stakeholders.

That's the sort of power that we give people just to be able to have ... To really spread ideas around what's meaningful, which is ordinarily pretty hard to do.

John Bowen: No, it really is. Well, let me go over kind of key takeaways that I'm walking away with. It's very clear that culture matters, number one. We tell a whole bunch of disasters, we can tell a whole bunch of success stories. We all know that as fellow entrepreneurs. Second is we've got to have a model. I really do like the model that Jason shared with us. Again, you can go to at aesnation.com. We'll have show notes on everything, all the links that we talked about.

Recognize that, there is a process we can use to, once we get clear on what is our culture, how we can bring it out and just really go through. Let me just fly this slide very quick. Again, this is the culture brand map and we just have so much of building on our own employee experience as a brand, beliefs, performance, and then getting it out there. The power. What I really like that Jason made a very clear point is, one of the things in fast growing businesses like yours, like mine, Jason's, we need really good talent.

One of the best ways of having talent is having a clear culture that excites them about working with us. Then I love, I've seen in place these walls and just the inspiring action that does. So, Jason, thank you again for spending the great time and sharing with us exactly how companies can make a huge difference. I'd go to our website at aesnation.com, look at the show notes. We'll have the ability for you to see each of these steps, and most importantly, your teammates, your clients, your future clients are counting on you. Go implement, we wish you the best of success.

A Second Opinion on Your Finances

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Best of success,



John Bowen
Founder and CEO
Financial Advisor Select