**RedZone Podcast Episode #93: How to Transform Your Business through Observational Learning and Design Thinking – with Neil Goodrich, Director of IT, M. Holland Company**

Bill: Well, Neil, I want to welcome you to the show today.

Neil: Thanks. Thanks for having me.

Bill: I was doing a little bit of checking on some of the stories and some of the interesting things that you brought to your organization, and maybe before we get started I'd love to ... one of the big things about this show is innovation and creativity, and how do we get [00:00:30] digital leaders to kind of break out. I often say well, everybody ... I was always, through the years ... I've been doing this for over 20 years, and everybody's wanted a seat at the table, but then once they're at the table, what are we going to say?

Bill: It was really interesting to read about you and how you sort of prime your whole team for that, and I've love if you could just start us off by just maybe telling a little bit of a story or maybe a little bit about your philosophy about how you feel IT can add value to the business.

Neil: [00:01:00] Yeah. I don't come from a technical background, so to me, I came from a problem solving background, and by the time I got into technology, that was sort of just one tool in the toolbox. That has sort of informed when we talk about building a team or looking for new team members. We played this game when I came to M. Holland with the existing team, and we had these little forms we filled out that said my job is, and [00:01:30] we let everybody sort of fill that out, and it was very informative about how people perceived what their role was.

Neil: At the end of that, we talked about really one of everybody's jobs is to be a student and to be an expert, is to be a guide, right? I mean, everybody has people in their lives who look to them for guidance about what computer should I buy. That's the curse of being in technology. Your neighbors, your uncle. And so [00:02:00] I think a technology team has a chance to be real leaders regardless of the role.

Neil: I mean, one of the things we always talk about is when the CFO shows up at an accounting clerk's desk, he's there generally to give direction. When the CFO shows up at the help desk, he's literally at the mercy of whoever's there. That's a person saying, "Oh, my gosh, I can't get this thing to work. Can you help me?" There's an opportunity there to really be more than a service provider, to be [00:02:30] engaging, to be comfortable with that conversation, and to spark what would otherwise be a non-existent relationship. What does that do for the team if they have these unusual relationships spread throughout the organization?

Neil: It means they're more connected to what's happening in the business. It means they hear ideas. They have people to talk to. I think that idea that regardless of your role, there's no sort of entry- [00:03:00] level roles. Everybody's jobs are just different and that everyone should sort of be an autonomous agent. They should be comfortable playing that role. It's certainly informed how we moved forward and picked new team members, that idea.

Neil: We actually moved from a double interview format to an in-office interview, and then the second interview is lunch. It used to be with the entire team. We've gotten too big for that. But we intentionally take people to lunch with [00:03:30] an intimidating number of people, six, seven, eight, nine people, to see what are they going to do in that circumstance, because there's lots of choices. There's lots of strategies. That's become part of what we assess when we look at new team members.

Bill: Interesting. One of the big things you ... in reading some of the interviews you've done, which I found really interesting, is the baseline of creativity would seem to be confidence, and that you were [00:04:00] trying to not only build confidence within the team, but it sounds like even before people ... when you're taking on new team members, you're looking for some of that from that unique interview approach.

Neil: Yeah. I mean, I think the ability to interface with other human beings is going to pay dividends regardless of your role, and I think if you hold that ... you've got technical skills, which are table [00:04:30] stakes in lots of ways. The ability to connect with other people and listen, or hear opportunities, or empathize, or all those things advance the ball.

Neil: And then the other part of that is if you take a creative software developer and a non-creative software developer, and you say, "Can you write me a customization to achieve this thing," the interplay with that creative person, they're going [00:05:00] to get engaged with their creative mind and say, "Oh, I see what you're trying to do, what if we did it like this instead? Ooh, or what if we added this extra thing you didn't think about?" And so you start riffing off one another, like a band or anything else that is in that sort of collaborative, iterative space.

Neil: So much of the software side of technology is sort of ideation, and it starts with this fuzzy idea, and you sort of build, and test, and try it, and you monkey with it, and so I think a creative [00:05:30] person is inherently going to produce results. And here, there's a direct line to me. If you're troubleshooting a network problem, and you have creativity skills, it's going to be a more effective ... you're going to find that unusual problem. You're not going to be stuck in the, "Now what do I do?" mode.

Neil: And I think those skills go hand in hand with the kinds of people we look for, who go out into the organization and [00:06:00] build their own networks of relationships that don't necessarily relate to their jobs. And because they have those unusual relationships, they learn about the business and are able to surface ideas that no one is bringing to us as technical issues, but we show up and say, "Oh, my gosh, you know that thing that you take for granted as just a really painful fact of life? Look, we could do this and eliminate it," and we're showing up with ideas for issues that haven't been presented [00:06:30] to us. That is a function of the robustness of that social network.

Bill: Are you trying to train a lot of your guys to be business analysts in the sense that they're really ... or more just relationship-driven folks that are just ... how do you codify it?

Neil: Yeah. It goes back. Yeah, yeah, no. Accidentally, in [00:07:00] the last year of my MBA program, I took a class called Business Improvement, and when I got there, within the first 15 minutes of class, I realized that that had not been a typo, that it had said Business Improv. It turned out to be an experimental class where they merged improv skills with business setting. You would show up for a class and the teacher would say, "Okay, 30 minutes, it's a cocktail party. I want you [00:07:30] to take a compliment, give a compliment, and move on. Talk to at least five people."

Neil: The idea that you got a chance to practice those really awkward skills in sort of a safe place had a profound effect on me, and that's really what I wanted to bring to the folks here, just good sort of social skills, small talk skills, the ability to think on your feet, to be comfortable, to be confident. I think if you do those things, lots of [00:08:00] other stuff just falls out.

Neil: We don't necessarily need everybody to be a business analyst, but if you're talking to someone, because you went to lunch with somebody that you don't ever work with, and then you guys get talking about something in that person's area, and as a technology person you're aware of something out there in the marketplace that could help with that, all of a sudden, just by having that relationship, you're able to put ideas on the table, and that's been something that's been transformational to our reputation here. [00:08:30] I think a lot of IT organizations are stuck being order takers. The organization says, "We want to do these things," and then the IT organization says, "Yeah, okay, here we go." We have this really cool thing at the end of the year. It's sort of like a dim sum, right? The organization says, "We want to achieve these seven or eight things." We serve up a menu of potential ideas. The organization and we pick a couple of those things. We look at where the organization is going, and we think these are all really good ideas. The plan [00:09:00] for the following year is always a marriage of those two columns.

Neil: I think you wouldn't have that if you don't have sort of eyes and ears and friends sort of all over the organization, and no one person can do that. That takes sort of a fabric. That's why we encourage everybody to go just make friends in the organization. There's no agenda there. It's just good stuff's going to happen.

Bill: Yeah. It seems like almost you have that ... do you [00:09:30] teach that? It sounds like you learned it in that environment at the MBA. How do you instill that across your team?

Neil: I think the first generation of folks that were here when I came five, almost six years ago, was probably the strangest thing, because you had to transform people that were already here. My predecessor had a much more traditional sort of approach. The idea that you say, " We don't need [00:10:00] to look at uptime because my assumption is uptime is good, unless we're talking about it, and if we're talking about it, then it's bad, so let's talk about something that moves the needle instead," that whole modern ... bring value. What are we doing to bring value?

Neil: We did a lot of workshops and talking and exercises like what is your job. Well, your job's actually to be a student. Your job's actually to be a leader. Now we have [00:10:30] enough of a cultural momentum that it's self-perpetuating. When we interview new team members, I don't necessarily have to be in the room.

Neil: If you take the two project managers we have here and you put them in a room, they're going to describe their experiences to that candidate in a way that represents how we operate and how we think about stuff. They do that through storytelling, and asking questions about what would you do in this situation. The group [00:11:00] sort of knows the right answer, like any kind of culture exercise. Whether you're talking about organizational culture or team culture, when it gets enough momentum, it's sort of socially codified, and then it's sort of self-enforcing.

Bill: It sounds like you had almost two parts to it. One was when you landed, how do you essentially shift a culture that you inherited, and then there was probably an inflection point where then the team sort of [00:11:30] has its own DNA and its own nucleus about what it means to them, and it seems like that is the approach you're using now.

Neil: Yeah, absolutely. That makes it sounds so nice. It's funny, when you're describing stuff like that to other people, it always sounds so nice and tidy, but I can't tell you how many times ... as the number of people get bigger, the ability to get consensus about a candidate decreases. Someone always finds something they [00:12:00] don't like. What used to be 100% consensus when there were seven people on a team, we don't hire anybody unless everybody's on board. Now at 12, or 13, or 14, that's no longer viable.

Neil: Every time you compromise, you wonder, "Is this the moment that we're altering the culture? Is this the person that's going to alter the culture?" And so there's this constant reevaluation, which I suppose is how you sort of keep your eye on the ball. But we do a lot of talking about how does it feel right now. As [00:12:30] the group has evolved, our meetings have evolved. We've gone to a once-a-month what we call a monthly lunch, the munch, and we randomly select two team members to host the next one, so even the flavor of those is different.

Neil: The activities we do, we invariably end up playing some kind of a game, though it takes all kinds of shapes and formats. We do lunch and a game. I think that's another great way that you get [00:13:00] to teach the culture, because it's not just the one person running it every time to showcase this is how we behave. This is your peers and co-workers consistently doing that, regardless of who's up there.

Bill: An interesting story popped in my head. I have my managed services team ... my managed security services team was ... I meet with everybody [00:13:30] in the company for these really quick 10-minute meetings throughout the year, about once a quarter, and they're not HR interviews. I want to see who people are and just really look under the hood, ask just open questions. There's just no agenda at all.

Bill: One of the guys came in and asked me a question. He was on the help desk. Someone had called in on the help desk about a question, and he needed to do research, but he wasn't sure how to respond [00:14:00] to the person, because he thought the person needed an immediate, instant answer, so there was no gap. He thought that he had to have ... but he needed to do a little research to actually get an accurate answer. He needed to talk to someone. He needed to do some research. He needed to do several things.

Bill: He felt uncomfortable. He thought he wasn't doing a good job without an immediate response, and he wanted to solve the problem. I gave him my thought. I said, "Well, I think you need to just create a gap between [00:14:30] yourself and the person, saying I will get back to you within five minutes. I need to do some research." So it gave him some language for him, but it was a breath of fresh air to think that he could actually call someone back, he could actually think about it.

Bill: But I'm curious. That was just my response. What would you do? How do you coach your team, especially early on, to interact with folks that are calling in to [00:15:00] interact with the business people?

Neil: I think it's very similar to that, which is to say you're going to talk to this person again. The paramount piece, which is sort of funny ... this is actually an organizational value that comes all the way down. When we interact with the outside world, we're representing M. Holland, and Ed Holland, who's the president and the CEO and takes that very seriously. If the intent of the help desk is the person that's talking to you right now is probably going to talk to you at the Christmas party or next week, how do we establish a [00:15:30] level of credibility and trust there? And I think it's through communication.

Neil: In your shoes, I give not dissimilar advice, which would be, "Hey, I think it's this. Can you give me five minutes? I'll call you right back." And then you have to call that person back. There's no if, ands, or buts about that. You have to do whatever it is you said you were going to do, because that's where stuff falls off the truck. That's the quintessential terrible help desk experience, "I'll call you back," and then [00:16:00] there's no call back, whether you're talking about Comcast, or AT&T, or any of those.

Neil: I think it's about honoring the relationship, and when you make a commitment to somebody, you've got to own up to it and be clear about, "You know, I don't know the answer right now, but I'm going to go find the answer, and we'll figure it out."

Bill: Yeah. I love that. I think what struck me is that you're transforming your people into being [00:16:30] really powerful business consultants in some respects. It seems to me you've made quite a shift. I guess why I'm making that statement is that I run an Innovation Insider lunch series that's in the Washington, DC and North Carolina area, and I've said to people in the past, I've said, "You should go out with your sales people. You should really have your team go out with your sales people."

Bill: And it was really interesting to read about your story about that, and I was [00:17:00] wondering if you could share that with my audience about how you taught your team to really get deeply involved with the business that way.

Neil: Yeah. I mean, I think if I had life to do all over again, I would have ended up with one of those user experience degrees, like human computer interaction degrees, because I think I'm extremely passionate about the observational learning stuff.

Neil: When I came into the organization, they wanted to implement a CRM, [00:17:30] and CRMs can do tons and tons and tons of different things in different ways, and different features, and so the way I had to get oriented was to go do those ride-alongs with account managers. Everyone here really didn't know what to make of that, including the account managers.

Neil: Today, that observational learning piece ... don't draw it on the whiteboard. Get out. Watch. Observe. Today, that's [00:18:00] transcended not only the tool that that gave birth to, but that's just become the way we do things. The executive leadership team, when we talk about adding in features to the customer platform, they'll say, "Who do we talk to? What was the UX research like? How did we do?"

Neil: That's become something that was at one point alien. Now that's sort of accepted as part of good product building, which is you can't trust what you think is the right answer. [00:18:30] You could take a swag at it, but you should probably have a conversation to begin with. Then that process of sort of ... again, it's collaborative, creative engagement. "Hey, what do you think about this?" "Oh, it'd be cool if we move the button over here." "Oh, yeah, that is really cool. What about ..." And so the idea that you get people excited, in my experience, everybody wants to be part of the cool thing.

Neil: They want to have a tool that looks cool, and it's sort of not [00:19:00] appropriate to say that in the work setting. We're grown-ups, and everyone's very serious. But I think if you make a tool or you make a process where people get to create, a lot of people are stuck in their regular, everyday, on-rails job, and the idea that you could say, "Hey, come over here. Help us imagine what this customer platform could be like," that's been something that our organization is ... it's firmly entrenched now, that observational learning, the UX research, the go out and talk to the people who are really going to use the product.

Neil: [00:19:30] I think if you pull the camera way back, that comes down to sort of design thinking, and human-centered design, which came out of products but is directly applicable, I think, a lot in the software space.

Bill: I mean, 100%, that empathy building, and what's really interesting also is I think what you've done is you've taken essentially a really strong right-brained-oriented team by just kind of natural DNA more technically oriented, and instead of trying to force them through kind [00:20:00] of an academic approach, you're essentially exposing them to the real experience of being in a real-life setting and seeing the issues.

Bill: Then they can sit back and learn experientially that way, versus kind of an academic PowerPoint presentation. They can see, "Oh, the customer asked three or four questions that the account manager couldn't get an answer to." That automatically puts their brain into problem solving mode, which is their strength anyway.

Neil: Yeah, absolutely. Right, yeah. [00:20:30] You're right on the money. I think the other piece ... I come full circle back to the human sort of relationship piece because my predecessor, I think, didn't have a lot of respect for the guys doing sales jobs, right, because they tend to not be procedurally focused, and they don't adapt well, and they don't read all their ... all those questions, all those things that you complain about or you look at elements of sales teams.

Neil: I [00:21:00] remember early on in the ride-alongs, one of the account managers looked at me and said, "Oh, man, you have a crazy job. Your job terrifies me. I would never do your job." And I looked at him, and I was like, "If I had your job, I would throw up in a bucket every morning, the level of risk and uncertainty and rejection that you have to potentially deal with at any moment during the day."

Neil: And I think that underpinning, where you fundamentally empathize and respect the other person's experience, their shoes, you can be frustrated [00:21:30] with behavior stuff, but ultimately do you really care about what's happening to the other person? If the answer isn't yes, you're not going to make good stuff. If you don't really care about the other person, there's no way that you could extend beyond the bullet point of a feature, to really think about, "What is that person doing right now," or, "How could I make that better?"

Neil: And that comes down to empathy, and that comes down to about being able to build relationships, and being curious, and being interested in other people.

Bill: [00:22:00] You mentioned design thinking with this human-centered approach. Did you have any particular mentors in this area during your MBA program or after that you sort of latched onto as a part of more iterative learning? Or was it something that just came kind of naturally for you?

Neil: I have been sort of upside down, where at some point it was definitely not trendy to do those observational learnings, and I [00:22:30] definitely, at that point in my career, got a lot of weird looks at the organization where I was. I didn't have the right vocabulary to express the value of that, and it wasn't a topic that had a label at that point. So I sort of found it as a way to explain the thing that I had always felt, and then obviously I went on to read a bunch of stuff so that I wasn't misusing the term.

Neil: It [00:23:00] was really born out of way I operated, and then I was relieved to find a whole community that had already done all the work of methodology and naming, and so I was able to connect with other people by finding the right verbiage.

Bill: Was there a book that people could turn to, or a group online that you found that you can remember or that was useful for you during this process as you developed kind of a language and a vocabulary around it?

Neil: Yeah, [00:23:30] I feel like I'm failing your listeners. I was fortunate to see some speakers, and now that's all sort of blended away into the education process, but a speaker here, a speaker there, an article connecting the dots. I had some mentors. But I can't really point to a thing. It was more about reading enough and seeing enough from enough varied sources that it sort of all came [00:24:00] together for me, and I was able to put that together with the thoughts that were already in my head.

Bill: Yeah. There's definitely plenty of material out there for listeners. I think you've done it very organically.

Neil: Yeah, and I feel bad that I can't point to that trail for someone else.

Bill: But I think there's plenty to know, though. I mean, for example, I'm involved with Singularity University, and [00:24:30] there's a whole design thinking staff that has published books. There's Eric Reese. There's quite a bit of design thinking approach to building empathy. But I still feel that the CIO just needs to ... they don't know if they necessarily know how to deploy that in a real practical way.

Bill: What I really enjoy about talking with you is that you've actually made it very, very practical, where you can execute on it with your team. You had to fix it first. [00:25:00] There was two steps. It was never easy. You can't just walk in and launch into the ideas. You actually kind of took it step by step. You had to kind of reconstitute your team early on, and you made a very practical ... I mean, going on a ride-along for one person is one thing, but then you scaling that into your team, and developing relationships, that's a whole different level.

Neil: If you really think about prototyping, right, [00:25:30] where everyone says, "Listen, you've got to do a mock-up. You've got to do a prototype. People have to see it," that's the same thing with anything. For me, because I came to the technology concepts as sort of an outsider, I had to learn those things. I learned doing and watching. I learned practicality first. I think I had a little bit of an advantage because the way I think is more pragmatic, like how are we going to really do this. I think that's [00:26:00] a lot realer for ... I think I just made that word up. That's a lot more real for people on a team when you're explaining something. If you're on a PowerPoint slide, and you're explaining this sort of big picture, cloud, hand-wavy thing, and they're like, "Yeah, I want to participate, but I don't get it. I don't know how," I think we've had the advantage that we sort of do first, and then the organization will say, "Wow, we really like that." And then we're able to say, "Well, and this is what we did."

Neil: [00:26:30] For us, the sort of articulating that into a methodology or a philosophy has come behind the actual sort of piloting of the thing, whatever that was. Was it UX research? When we stood up the project management office, we hired a project manager for a year, and that person just helped other people run their projects. Rather than try to explain what does a PMO do, we put a project manager in play, and then [00:27:00] we got feedback from all those people whose projects had been impacted, and the organization said, "Yeah, that really made a difference. And you're like, "Great. That's what a PMO does." Then now we have a PMO.

Neil: I think it's about the same concept you use in software development when you talk about organizational change. Find something that's real. Do a prototype. Show the value. Then people get excited. And once they're excited and they're engaged, then you don't have to try to explain the theory about this thing. [00:27:30] Then it all sort of makes sense to them. Now, that has worked for me. I run into trouble on the other side when people say, "Well, can you explain to me big picture," right, because that comes last to me. That's not how my brain is wired.

Neil: I've had to do a lot of work on the flip side of that, which is sort of running those high-level depictions of things is something that I have to work on, as opposed to figuring out the way to implement it.

Bill: [00:28:00] I see. But as far as the big picture, do you mean like a road map, like the bigger orientation, like kind of the trajectory and arc of how you're guiding IT to support the business? Is that what you mean by big picture, or different than that?

Neil: No, I inherently find myself drawn to explaining how we're going to do it, and not all audiences ... When you think about [00:28:30] talking to the executive level of an organization, they're looking for the thing that I shy away from, because most practitioners ... that up-in-the-clouds view, where there's not a lot of how, but there's a lot of vision, and there's a lot of ... sort of the details fall away, and because of my background, having been a practitioner for so long, and coming up and learning that stuff and doing it as a way to implement it, and bring change, I have [00:29:00] a hard time letting go of the details and just talking in concepts.

Neil: I invariably end up doing a lot of storytelling, so I've supplemented that in different ways. That piece, the big picture, the low-detail, the sort of directionally correct, I always feel like why would anyone want to listen to this, there's no meat here. But that's exactly what that audience wants, so I have to fight my nature sometimes when I do those [00:29:30] presentations.

Bill: Interesting. Yeah, and it sounds like, though, that you have a lot of the grounding which, as you develop that kind of higher-level storytelling and the vision at the board and the upper level, it sounds like yours will be grounded in some real functional reality, which I think is always going to be refreshing because there's a transparency you're getting from your team, because you sort of have a lot of bird dogs out there looking for dead bodies. They're looking for opportunities. They're looking for pieces [00:30:00] to help change the business, which gives you, I think, a different perspective on the vision when that does come together for you.

Neil: I think that's the only way I could ever be comfortable in that high-level role, which is I can't imagine a place where you become so disconnected from the products and the how and the ... That would be a real bummer for me. I'm not sure that [00:30:30] I would want to have a role that was totally separated from that. I don't know that that's everybody's preference, but that's definitely my preference.

Neil: I would never want to ... The stuff we make here as digital products and the expressions, really, the idea that someone comes and says, "I have this really cool idea," and then three months later or 75 days later, they're using this tool, or this screen, or the form, [00:31:00] the emotion when they're amped that this thing didn't go into a black hole, that it's ... The idea to make those people's ideas real and change the business is sort of what gets me up in the morning, and to be divorced from that, I would never want to be so far away I couldn't see that.

Bill: Well, I think that's interesting, because we talk about leadership quite a bit, and it's like how do you be a leader and not have an appreciation for kind of what's really happening, and the feeling and [00:31:30] the experience of the end customer internally and the customer externally.
Bill: I'm always drawn to the book that was written about Abraham Lincoln. I think it's called Team of Rivals, I think Doris ... I forget their last name, the author, but Lincoln went down into the front lines many times, just to get a heartbeat of ... he wasn't sure himself, and especially when he was trying to figure out how to turn the tide of [00:32:00] the war, so I always remember that, is that even some of the most respected leaders of all time actually went and had a firm grounding in the reality of what was happening. I thought it's interesting. Your method reminds me quite a bit of that.

Neil: I think that's not dissimilar from yours. You said you had 10-minute meetings with everybody sort of throughout the year. I think not only is that a huge connector, I think [00:32:30] it has a disproportionate impact on the other person's relationship. The idea that you are interested enough and genuine enough to sit down and have those conversations, yes, you get value from that from a understanding perspective, but the idea that all those people, that's a culture touch. That's so powerful.

Bill: Yeah. I think when you learn ... It's funny, because if you can convey ... I learned [00:33:00] it from someone who was obsessed ... Oh, it was someone I listened to on a ... I think it was maybe even Gary Vaynerchuk. He has a 200-person ... it's just a silly amount of people, no, it's 800 people, 900 people, just a crazy amount of people, and his goal was to meet with everybody for 10 minutes, and he was obsessed with finding a way to scale his relationships.

Bill: Nobody wants to talk about the human impact of being a leader, but if you can understand who someone is ... I found it really quite interesting because [00:33:30] I find out who's a black belt, who's doing sword fighting competitions, and all of a sudden you're like, "Gosh, I got a really interesting group of people."

Neil: Yeah. Yeah. Right?

Bill: I mean, really much more interesting than I thought. And then when you're out there in the field with the sales guys, you can say, "I just want you to know who you're going to be calling in the help desk. You're going to be calling a black belt." And it's interesting, because I never would have made that connection otherwise.

Neil: But I think that's what we're talking about. This whole conversation has been about the idea [00:34:00] that you appreciate the person, that you're curious, that you're engaged, that that interest transcends the transactional nature of your role, and I think that's the thing that we try to inspire and recruit for.

Neil: You can't train someone to be interested in other people. And I think we're fortunate. The guy at the end of the hall here from me, Ed Holland, every [00:34:30] Christmastime he goes away for two weeks with his family, but before he does that, he literally walks down the hall and does exactly what you're doing. He stops and he visits every single cube and every single office for a couple of minutes and just chit chats about nothing in particular, no agenda. It's just sort of this thing that ... It doesn't happen in a lot of places that the CEO wanders around and sort of makes a day of just connecting with people.

Bill: It's interesting, we talked a little bit about innovation. I don't [00:35:00] know if this is true. I can't prove it empirically. I'm not even sure I ever will try. But someone said that the relationship building within the organization actually builds speed, and I thought that's a really interesting point. It builds the ability to be more mobile, more adaptive. That's a belief of mine. I have zero evidence for that. But what do you think?

Neil: No, no, I think there's a book called, [00:35:30] what is it, The Speed of Trust?

Bill: Oh, interesting.

Neil: I think you're in the clear. I don't think you have to prove it. I think somebody else has done the math. You're good. You can just point and be like, "Yeah, I knew that. I was on board with that." Yeah.

Neil: I mean, if you think about any kind of project you've ever been on where the person says they're going to do it, and you're like, "Well, I know their track record," and then you spend a lot of time babysitting them to make sure that they deliver, versus [00:36:00] the person you know where you have that good relationship, where you can ... like if you have a good relationship, you could text that other person and be like, "Hey, you're going to get your thing done tomorrow, right?"

Neil: And that just changes the way that you can communicate. It changes the options. It changes the robustness of the conversation. And if you have a relationship, that other person doesn't want to let you down. I just think the power of the relationship is so multifaceted for so many of the ... [00:36:30] today's competitive advantage is about all the products are commoditized, all the services are commoditized. What's not commoditized? Why should your organization not ship your entire IT services out somewhere? What can you do? What is the value?

Neil: And the value is the human piece. The value is the idea finding, the brainstorming, the ideation, the let me help you get this over the finish line, all those sort of non-standard technology [00:37:00] pieces. The technology skills have become commoditized. Those are table stakes. Yeah, you've got to have those. But I think the how do you make digital or technology a competitive advantage, and all that's buried in the human skills.

Bill: Yeah. That's amazing. Yeah, this is a powerful conversation. I'm really looking forward to my audience listening to it, because it's taken on a very grounded, real approach to leadership, [00:37:30] which I believe is inextricably linked to innovation and transformation and speed, which is really the human being. It's interesting. We're going through a lot of changes, of course, digitally.

Bill: I just shared this on another show, but the horse-drawn carriages, the people that owned the buggies and owned the horses were seriously probably pissed that the car was invented, but they had to transform. They had to retool. I mean, the guy that was picking up all [00:38:00] of the excrement from the horses walking around New York City, there was just so much garbage. It was like everybody had a job to take care of these horses and the buggies, but it all had to change.

Bill: It's funny. As we go along, it's like what are those skills that are helping people learn and adapt and change within organizations, and are creating an environment which basically embraces that, embraces the learning. You've basically hedged your bet. You have your troops right down on the edge to kind of sense what's happening [00:38:30] with the business, almost instantaneously.

Neil: Yeah. I mean, I'd love to say it was that fast, but I think we have a good feel. I think we did that because we're a privately held company. In much the same way ... We don't formally announce stuff. You just start to see behavior surface across the organization. And I'll tell you what's been really cool, when you'll find [00:39:00] the commercial team and the executive team and us, everyone will start talking about the same kind of thematics.

Neil: We're talking about capacity planning, and other people are talking about getting return on investment and managing whether we're really getting our ROI on the investments, but what happens is the organization sort of comes to these themes together, and I think it's been fascinating for me to wonder how does that happen. It happens through the social network. It happens because people are talking about, " [00:39:30] Well, I'm really thinking about this." "Oh, I'm thinking about that, too." "Oh, that's sort of like ..." And the idea that you're able to move the organization.

Neil: When we go into the room to talk about projects or ideas or the road map for three years from now, we're not selling anything. We're articulating something that the people in the room generally are already like, "Yep, yep, totally feel that. That's exactly where my mind was." I feel like part of our success has been we're in an organization that welcomed that, [00:40:00] that wanted that from a technology team, because I think there's probably lots of places where the organization would say, "What are you guys doing? Knock it off. Just go back. I'll call you when the copier's broken. That's what I want from you."

Neil: So I think you have to be in the right organization, too. I don't think you can magically make your organization want that different kind of technology team.

Bill: No. No, possibly not, and I think it's incrementally step by step, but if someone has a personal vision ... we would talk about this as the ... to [00:40:30] be a leader, you've got to have a personal vision first. You can't inherit it, necessarily, from the company. You've got to walk in ... And then you had some other experiences before you even got to this organization, so I hope people listen to this and they start to develop their own vision, "Yes, hell yeah, that's what I want to do." And if their organization's not right, good. I mean, some organization wants that, and go find a different spot.

Bill: But now they sound different. And that's the big thing I love about this show [00:41:00] and the innovation group I'm in, is that we need people to sound differently in their interviews, so they don't sound like everybody else. You want to sound like you're actually up for this innovation game, you want to help a business at a big level, and so I think it's important to hear your message.

Neil: Yeah. When they interviewed for this role, the organization wanted something different, but they didn't know what it was. [00:41:30] There was sort of a magical moment where I wanted to do something different with a technology team that hadn't existed at my last place, and they wanted something different. We rolled the dice together, and today I think we have a really ... The interplay between the business and the technology team ... I hesitate to even make those two separate things, because we're not, really. We just all seamlessly blend [00:42:00] together at this point. It's been a really cool marriage.

Bill: Well, Neil, I really appreciate you for your time. I know we're at the top of the hour, and I only asked you for an hour, but this has been a very ... I think powerful ideas and concepts that you've executed on. Is there any way that someone, if they had a question for you, could reach out to you on either Twitter or LinkedIn if anybody wanted to ask you a question or two?

Neil: Yeah. I'm definitely on LinkedIn. My Twitter's out there. It's not very active. I would be afraid their request would languish for some [00:42:30] pronounced period of time. I think LinkedIn's probably a for sure way to get a hold of me, for sure.

Bill: That would be fantastic.

Neil: Thank you for having me. This has been a lot of fun.

Bill: Well, cool. Hopefully, we can do this round two in the future. This has been great. I kind of have a gut instinct that you had some really powerful perspectives that I think a lot of people need to hear, so I thank you for taking the time with my [00:43:00] audience.

Neil: Sure. Thank you.

Bill: All right.