



Beyond the Spreadsheet with Joey Havens

Gretchen Lehman (00:01.509)

Have you ever noticed the biggest lessons about growth, leadership, and culture often are found in the smallest of moments? Joey Havens knows this well. He gleans wisdom from fishing for crappy outings with his grandchildren, even an overstuffed junk drawer. With over three decades in the accounting industry, Joey sees insights into our profession everywhere. And today he'll be sharing some stories and some wisdom with us. I'm Gretchen Lehman, and today we'll learn what's holding our industry back, what we need to move it forward, and why success really is as easy as ABC. Welcome to Beyond the Spreadsheet.

But before we officially welcome our guests, there's another important person in the studio with me. It's our own Bruce Johnson. Welcome, Bruce.

Bruce Johnson (00:46.664)

Thanks for that introduction there, Gretchen. That's a great way to get things kicked off because I'm really excited to be here with Joey Havens, I'm looking forward to reading his book, and really excited to get to know him a little bit more and have him share some of his knowledge. He's got 30 plus years in the industry, recently retired, although I personally like the word repurposed, repurposing his time and energy, because in that 30 years, he's done so many different things. He spent a whole lot of time at the CPA firm Horne there in the great state of Mississippi where he was the Executive Partner, and really putting in a people-first culture. And hopefully that's something that we kind of dig into a little bit more because I'm really curious about that.

And you've done a lot of different things, Joey, since then. You've got very active in speaking and doing podcasts, writing, as you said. You've got an Amazon bestseller. And with that, Joey, I just want to welcome you here with Gretchen and I and our audience and would like to start by hearing a little bit, you talk a little bit about yourself. I mean, I've done a little, tried to kind of elevate you a little bit here, but let's hear a little bit more about yourself.

Joey D Havens (02:17.852)

Well, first and foremost, thank you all for having me on. I really do appreciate this opportunity and certainly look forward to talking about our profession, something that's near and dear to my heart. You know, I'm introverted, so I hate talking about myself. I'll tell you this, I can sum it up in one word, and that's blessed. From the time I was born in rural Mississippi and raised by Christian parents. I've just been blessed and I'm grateful for all the opportunities that I've had in my career. I went to Ole Miss, I'm a raving Ole Miss fan. I love Ole Miss and college sports in general, I follow college sports extensively. When I first got out of school, I was hired by Arthur Anderson and moved to Houston, Texas.

And so I got a taste of the big eight -- which is the big four now -- and big city life and I decided I liked Mississippi and a little slower pace. After a few years, I moved back and went to work with a local firm that was just starting up in its very first year. And really scary, I was in charge of technology back then. And so that was real scary.

But then I hooked up with Horne and I spent 39 years of my career with Horne. Happily married, we've got four kids and eight grandkids. And my best buddy in the world is my little Yorkie Oliver, who I've got locked up in the closet right now because if anybody rings the doorbell, things are gonna go crazy.

Bruce Johnson (04:03.912)

That's great to hear all that, Joey. I think it's fascinating with the years of experience and wisdom that you've collected, you've seen a lot of different things. And you mentioned starting with technology. I can only imagine what it was at that stage compared to where we are today. It's this quantum leap, right? But so you've seen a lot of these changes.

And certainly, I think we can all agree that we're at a very important crossroads for the industry right now. And just curious, what are your thoughts on where we are now, from where you've gone in your career to where we are today?

Joey D Havens (04:53.532)

Well, I'll certainly say this. I think we're at a defining moment and it's a defining moment for the profession, but it's more for individual firms and individual leaders because there's going to be big, big winners and there's going to be losers. And so that's why it's a defining moment. I'm very upbeat about our profession and the role we're going to play going forward. But we're losing the talent battle.

It's, you know, it's in every headline. When you look at 70% of CPAs will retire in the next five years. We're a heavy, heavy baby boomer profession. And we're much wider than just a CPA cornerstone today. And we're not getting and keeping and retaining the best talent. And that's really our defining moment. Our defining moment is that we need to create and tell a better story. That's the way I would sum it up.

Bruce Johnson (06:01.288)

It's interesting, Joey, from Capstan's perspective, we obviously aren't practicing tax, we're around it. But we've had some great experiences, been about 20 years now doing so. But from our perspective, we've seen the changes to the industry and how challenging it can be. I can tell you, if I was going into college, knowing what I know now about the profession, I would pause to think about it because it's evolved into a very challenging, but I can also say rewarding experience.

I mean, I kind of look at the profession as the tip of the spear for almost any business or taxpayer. It's a really important aspect of things.

We're really losing people, but people really are the secret weapon into the success of the industry.

Joey D Havens (07:17.18)

Yeah, I mean, that's really the defining moment. We have so many legacy things that the profession's been built on. The billable hour, the revenue model, realization, utilization, which doesn't lead to a lot of innovation and creativity. It's not exactly exciting to talk to somebody coming out of college and tell them they're going to need to track every 15 minutes of their time.

Technology itself is evolving so fast. It makes the billable hour kind of irrelevant in so many ways. And it has been for years. It's not even though it served our industry well for a hundred years, it's really gone way past what it's doing. It's holding us back from a people perspective. And really we have been focused on operating an efficient organization and incremental change and not putting the time and the resources into people development and leadership development. And that's really what the younger generation is looking for.

They're looking to be challenged. They're looking to grow. They want to know they're going to be part of something that's building something bigger than themselves. And we're not having enough, "What's possible conversations," both with our people and with our clients. And that's why I'm so excited about the future of the profession is that we're going to go from the black and white, wrong, correct, compliance-driven profession to an advisor profession where we'll be involved and should already be involved in every aspect of what is going on in business.

And when you are involved in business, you're impacting people's lives. And every business decision is made has an emotional tag tied to it. And so, you know, the role that the profession can step into and should step into and is being begged to step into starts with people.

Bruce Johnson (09:38.728)

What are you talking about with current leaders right now or the next generation of leaders? What's the one thing you're trying to impart on them today?

Joey D Havens (10:09.788)

I'm trying to give them the confidence to be intentional about people first, people before profitability, people before growth, to give them the confidence that if they get the people part right, I promise you, you will have exponential growth and you'll have plenty of profitability. But it's hard to turn loose of those things.

And so, as one group of leaders that I was with in just the last few weeks, I said, "Quit thinking like accountants and you are leaders and we need leaders and you need to think like leaders." What does it mean to be a leader? It means that you're focused on elevating people, that it's not about your own individual success anymore. It's about putting stars on other people.

Bruce Johnson (11:13.992)

Yeah, I think that's interesting. You mentioned the word, you use the word intentional. And from my experience, just working around the profession, it's very A to B to C. And for me, what I'm hearing you talk about is being able to deal with the ambiguity. So being intentional, being present and plugged in.

It's not just the CPA industry, what you're sharing. It crosses the whole spectrum of leadership. And, you know, we work a lot with CPAs. I don't want to sound like I'm soapboxing for them, but I really feel that they are one of the most important trusted advisors that people have.

And I just think it's fascinating to listen to you talk, you're kind of building the story that you had mentioned before, being good storytellers. And I want to get back to that in a moment, but something else that when we were talking earlier to prepare for our chat here, you had shared the experience that you put together at Horne of creating a **visible** practice, something that you can touch, that's tangible, that you could use in a discussion or just point to and use it kind of as an anchor. And I really want to like to hear you talk some more about the genesis of that idea, the Lego box, and how that really played into that "wise firm" concept that you built and instilled there at Horne.

Joey D Havens (13:32.188)

Sure. You know, one of the things that I talk about in the book and early in the book, leading with significance is the story about how we evolved into our culture. And "wise firm" is the name we gave our culture that we wanted people to be able to have a language. A language is important when you create a story and you tell a better story when you have a common language.

And so what's the language in your firm? What's the, what do you call your culture? What are you trying to achieve? What are you trying to build? And as we explored that and worked on that, we evolved into more and more physical things. We wanted people to see it, whether it was on a banner or a picture, or it was in the highlights of the stories we told internally on our intranet. So we were highlighting people that were helping build the wise firm. And that involved into Legos.

A set of Legos that had all the building blocks and they all have a big purpose. And in fact, one of the things that happened that was a lot of fun as I would visit different offices, I'd bring a bag of Legos and anybody that could put the model together in the right order in one minute, I would give them a hundred dollar bill.

And so people will practice in putting that together. And just by doing that, what do you do? You learn the different building blocks. So everything on there, starting with "we in service" instead of "me in self-interest," "honoring values," "sense of belonging," any organization that is going to be high performance has to have a strong sense of belonging, making hard decisions when people don't comply with the culture.

Our four client promises of deliver, care, collaborate, anticipate, flexibility, which is such a big issue today and one that our profession is not winning on. We've got too many leaders saying, "You've got to be back here. You got to be in the office Monday through Friday. We're going to have office hours, eight to five." Not that there's not some room for that, but again, we've got to think about how we allow people to integrate their careers and their lives more.

But all the Lego stuff resulted in empowered people and a lot of positive results. So that was one of the fun things that physically people could put their hands on and knew what we were doing.

Bruce Johnson (16:15.4)

I love that because I'm a big believer in being able to have a tangible anchor that you can touch and feel and then bring into the conversation. And the fact you talked about a common theme, a common culture, a common language, that's something that we've tried to emulate here as well at Capstan. I can see how that really can drive a highly effective team building for a firm. So we've talked a lot about people. I mean, really, that's the winning ingredient in all recipes. And we also talked about how difficult the profession is. And we know that it's not going to get any easier. It's much more challenging. And we alluded to the fact that the industry isn't exactly winning the battle for talent.

How can we speak to the next generation and really get them excited about the potential for them in the tax field?

Joey D Havens (17:31.58)

Yeah, I think it starts where we started our conversation, creating a better story, telling a better story. But flexibility and giving people the ability to, it's not work-life balance, by the way, it's integration, work-life integration. You're gonna always need to lean in sometimes, and you're always gonna be able to flex out sometimes. So it's important that you have the right messages around that and talk about how people can influence. They're not only where they work, but when they work and how they work. Everybody has different personal challenges. And so your story around flexibility that covers when, where, and how.

Creating a wow experience from the very first time that a recruit touches the firm and showing how important they are and they're starting to see part of that story. They're connecting to some leader, some team member and then taking that and making your onboarding and experience where they can see their value, appreciate it and recognizing that they're coming on as a new team member.

You know, part of creating a new story is our profession's very seniority-oriented. And we love to say, "It takes six years to get here" and "12 years to get there." People don't want to hear that. People want to know you're going to promote me. I'm getting the promotion. I'm getting the raise when I deserve it, when I earn it. I want to know that I can. It's like a rocket ship. And that's really we even had an image of a rocket ship taken off. So people that were coming to work at Horne would understand, you're not gonna be limited by seniority. You're gonna be limited about what you're willing to do and to commit to.

And so young people are looking for that. They're looking to be part, it's really part of the story is what are you building? What can they come and help you build that's bigger than just having a job, just being an accountant? Telling stories not only about people that are helping build a culture but telling stories about how it impacts the clients you're serving, how it's making a difference in their lives. Those are the kinds of things that really have got to be highlighted and really shared in a big way for people to have that interest and to really retain your existing team.

Bruce Johnson (20:17.736)

Yeah, I think it's a 360 degree challenge from attraction to retention. Like you said, and it's interesting. You've got many years of experience so you can speak to that that 1960s mentality of how firms are led to the new generation of how people the younger generation see things differently that.

You know, certainly working hard is important, but the culture and having that balance, but also being recognized that, hey, if I bring something to the table, that that should mean something as opposed to just waiting for the next rung of the ladder to free up. I mean, definitely, that's something we hear all around, but I think that the profession really needs to adapt to that. That makes a lot of sense.

Another thing that caught my ear was your concept of the "ABCs to Outstanding." I was wondering if you could kind of share a little bit more detail because I think that would be great to share with our audience.

Joey D Havens (21:30.492)

Yeah, I have actually taught this "ABCs to Outstanding" course, I guess for 30 years now. And by the way, in the 1960s, all I was worried about was Little League Baseball, Bruce. I'm not that old.

ABC's to Outstanding is something that I developed. I wanted to teach young professionals as they were coming in, how to really fast track that career. I was really blessed. I got a lot of opportunities early on. I got to do a lot of different things and that led to me doing more different things. And so there were three things that I thought contributed to that success, that I wanted to share. I wanted our team members to have, and I taught this, we had what we call college capstone. Any college student that we were recruiting, I would teach, spend an hour with them teaching this course.

ABC's to Outstanding. So A is for attitude. Attitude is big. We control our attitude and it'll determine how fast we go and where we go. So attitude is number one.

B is for better focus. We interrupt ourselves, our phones, we can't put our phone down. We've always got it laying on the desk. There's all kinds of scientific studies that show how much that impacts our subconscious. But when we focus, we can do things in half the time and do them so much higher quality. But focus is fast tracking, because most people can't focus for 25 minutes. And in fact, that's how I challenge young professionals, start practicing 25 minutes at a time and reward yourself when you do 25 minutes, then reward yourself. And people build up the discipline to learn how to really focus.

And then C is, I had no idea 30 years ago that C would be so important, but Constant learning because today, think about it, we're in an exponential world. I mean, we're being transformed both in business and in our personal lives. If you stop learning today, I mean, you have about 12 months and everybody passes you by. And so constant learning, being a lifelong learner, having curiosity is so important. So those three things, I promise you, if you do those three things, you'll have a tremendous career.

Bruce Johnson (24:19.176)

No doubt. A lot of that resonates with me as well, and particularly the phones. I mean, it's amazing how distracting they can become. And that focus you talk about, being able to be laser-like focused on a task, and so easy, particularly in the world of tax and audit, you've got to be really, really zoned in on something. And if you're distracted, next thing you know, you've lost a lot of time because of them and you have to re-engage and build that momentum on. So that makes a lot of sense for me as a person, but I could see as people in the profession.

So another thing that I've heard you talk about is a mantra that you've used. And I'm just kind of curious where this came from and how maybe even that's evolved over time for you. And that's the #beBetter.

Joey D Havens (25:19.74)

We actually built a logo around Be Better. It's in one of the first pages in the book. I share that. It really came about in 2012. It was my first full year as Executive Partner. We were in our strategic planning. I was preparing to meet with the partner group at leading different areas and with the board. And we had made the commitment to the firm that culture was gonna be number one, that we were gonna be people first. And really everything we needed to do and drive was about a daily challenge of being better. That we needed to quit camping. We needed to really get upset about being average and really think about how to be better every day, that it's a great personal challenge and it became our rally cry. And so a couple of years later, we came up with the logo.

We even had, here's another one for you. We even had stickers. And so if somebody in the firm was creative, innovative, did something that changed our course, people would go and give them a Be Better sticker. And people were proud of those stickers.

Bruce Johnson (26:43.816)

That's an awesome challenge, not just in business, but in our personal lives. I mean, I think that's, that is a great mantra. And thank you for giving us the better understanding of this. It really, it helps us to kind of put a bow on, on our discussion here. Cause I think Joey, you and I could sit here and talk a whole bunch more, but I need to be respectful of your time. I really have enjoyed the opportunity to talk with you more in depth on some of these things that we just glossed over earlier in preparing for our discussion. And I just can't wait to hear some of the feedback that we get from our audience. We're sharing this with our team as well, because these little words of wisdom, these things that can help us all in our daily lives are just, they're powerful, powerful stuff. So I'm excited again to share this with everybody.

I know Gretchen and the marketing team are going to be posting this, but also pointing people in the direction where they can get to your podcast and some of your writings and such. I see your book behind you there and I know I'm going to be collecting that myself. But again, I just wanted to thank you personally for your time and I really have enjoyed the opportunity to chat with you here this morning.

Joey D Havens (28:06.204)

Well, Bruce and Gretchen, I want to say how much I appreciate it. It's been an absolute joy. Always remember where wisdom and experience comes from is from making mistakes. And I've made lots and lots of mistakes. And so I just want to share in ways that help people track faster and be better. And it's just an awesome thing to give back to a profession that's given so much to me and my family.

Bruce Johnson (28:36.328)

Fantastic. Be better, my friend. Thank you.

Gretchen Lehman (28:43.013)

Well, that does it for another episode of Beyond the Spreadsheet. Thanks so much to Joey Havens for joining us. Visit joeyhavens.com to learn more about Joey, subscribe to his blog, and order his recent Amazon bestseller *Leading with Significance*. You can also reach out to Joey directly at joey@joeyhavens.com.

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