

MAN ON FIRE PRESENTS
**THE COMBUSTION
CHRONICLES**

**EPISODE TWENTY-THREE
UNTEACHING**

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GUEST: NANCYE GREEN & JULIE ANIXTER

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Shawn: Welcome to "The Combustion Chronicles" podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for "The Combustion Chronicles." Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us. I'm here with my co-host Michael Harper.

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Shawn: On this episode, we're speaking with Nancye Green and Julie Anixter. Nancye Green is a designer and business leader and the co-founder and partner of Donovan & Green with a career spanning the complex communication and transformation challenges of enterprises. Julie is the enterprise design principal at Maga Design, a strategic communications firm based in Washington, D.C. that specializes in visual thinking and information design that leads to strategic action. Julie also co-founded Innovation Excellence, which is now known as Disruptor League. So, we would love to welcome Nancye and Julie to the podcast today.

Nancye: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Shawn: So, where do we even start this conversation with two powerhouses. I'd love to know where you two sit, what you're thinking about, what the new normal looked like for us when we talked about creative disruption. Nancye, you want to grab that one and then I'll have Julie do it?

Nancye: Sure. Well, it's so interesting that you asked that question because I think one of the things that in the last six years, I was chief design officer at The Medicines Company. I started working with them as a client, a biotech company, and ended up working with them full time as a client, and then ended up going in full time because that way I could lead a team. And one of the things that I know we had a lot of frustration with at The Medicines Company was how stuck Big Pharma was, and how misguided it seemed most of the activities of Big Pharma were. And I say that only to say that the guy that founded The Medicines Company was a head of drug development at Hoffmann-La Roche and left Big Pharma in order to disrupt Big Pharma and drug development.

And I think born of that frustration was the sense that everyone had their way of doing things. It was the same old, same old. You check the boxes, you do these things, and somehow you

would succeed. Big Pharma companies would print money. And that changed very much so probably through the '90s. We all know how dysfunctional the medical health system is. But what we don't realize is that so much of it is based on friction in the system, all of the protected interests of financial investors and such in Big Pharma so that logic no longer rules the day. And that's where I think we're going to see some big changes because so many industries, including Pharma, have been so disrupted first by forces in the marketplace and a lot of protesting around pricing, for example.

But now that COVID-19 has struck, I think we're seeing all of the leaky holes in the boat and people aren't going to put up with it. So, I think that one of the wonderful things, and probably one of the few wonderful things that COVID-19 has done, is really said to us that we really need to look at what's important. We need to look at how we can really save lives. We have to look what really matters in healthcare and forget the same old, same old, forget about how we did it before because we're going to have to find a new way to do it. So an example of the fact that I think this is a good moment for disruptors because the world is so disrupted that as we put it back together, let's put it back together in a healthier way.

Julie: I'll play yin to Nancy's yang. So she started talking about Big Pharma and industry. So maybe I'll take a different tack and start with individuals and employees and people who are also incredibly disrupted right now as we know. And I think that the thing that I'm most interested in right now is what gives people hope, what gives people courage, what gives people inspiration. And I think that there are going to be a lot of people who are stepping out and trying new things and doing things that are really powerful because they know they can right now. It's like the bonds have been loosened and some of the hesitation I think that people feel about bringing ideas to life is disappearing. Plus we're going to have to find all kinds of new ways for people to earn a living and make money.

There are tremendous amount of opportunities in the world and we've got to find new ways to fulfill them. And that's going to be an open green field for people. So I'm excited about seeing people like you, Shawn, and like Nancye, and like others take risks that they might not have taken before, feel a greater sense of urgency because why not? I mean, we are really in a crisis right now and this is when the best of us, our best selves should come out and can come out. So I'm excited to see this discretionary energy, this creative energy flower, and to see how you showcase that too on the Disruptor League.

Nancye: You know, you said something, Julie, that's so interesting. You can see the Himalayas from China now and that the air is crystal clear because of the lower pollution. And we have a record bloom in our backyard which someone was hypothesizing may come from less air

pollution in New York City. I think that the other thing that's happened is that as we've all slowed down and quieted down, I think our brains are a little bit defogged. And while there is a kind of malaise and a sadness about all of the death and all of the harm that's come to human beings, I think there's also a sense of what's important. And sitting at home thinking about the fact that, "Now I'm going to try something that really matters because why should I be toiling away at something that doesn't, when life is so ephemeral?" So I think there are a lot of things at work that are going to make the world a better place when this is over and when it resolves to a better place. I don't think it will ever be over.

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Shawn: Yeah. And I love both of you guys' answers there, and one of the things that I kind of put at stake in the ground as a company and as organizations in our ecosystem, but personally over the past several months is this whole concept of leaning into generosity and into disruptive giving and what that looks like. And you know, Julie, in 2016, you said that designers are extremely generous because they are creative. I'd love to have a little bit of a conversation with the two of you around, you know, what is it about creativity that you feel is resonant with generosity?

Julie: So, one of the things that's happening is that creative people understand that life's a little messy. Okay? It's always messy, but we can use that mess. We can allow ourselves to try things and to experiment. Designers and creatives by nature see the world as a place to use their imagination. And imagination by definition is not limited. So when a designer or an artist comes into a situation, they can always imagine how it could be better, more interesting, more satisfying, more impactful. And I just feel blessed that I got raised in that discipline. So I think it comes with the DNA of creating. Generosity comes from the same root where it is generative, which means essentially to give birth, creativity's life force. And I wish that many other professions had the same...I wish that engineers had the same sense of what's possible. But I know that being with designers and creative people is a wonderful thing because it typically expands what you see as possible.

Nancye: I think that's brilliant. And I think another way to look at it, to take a slightly different tack is that creative people, like scientists, are good borrowers, you know, we borrow from the zeitgeist. We borrow from everything that's around us and we put it into our souls and we mash it around with our own sense of who we are and our vision is, and we push it back out again. Scientists build on the work of those who came before. We never start from nothing. And I think that what that gives you is the sense of valuing what people around you are doing. I became president of the AIGA when I was, I want to say in my late 30s or mid-30s. And I

remember my early AIGA days thinking to myself there was nothing more wonderful than being around other designers because we share more than...we're collaborating more than we're competing.

And it was certainly like that in the early days of my career. And I find that the best designers are the most generous because they understand that we're all doing this together, you know, we're all in this together. That we will get better when we each get better all together. I think also that designers have a tremendous sense of how important it is to be a part of the whole world, not just the design world. And that therefore you find a lot of attempts and efforts by designers to jump in and just help, just do things because it's the right thing to do.

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Shawn: You know, Julie, you and I have known each other, gosh, like 8, almost 10 years, I think. And actually, I'm honored to sit in the position I am today. You know, you are one of the cofounders of the long-running community, the blog, Innovation Excellence, actually, probably one of the leaders in crowdsourcing and how do you do it, a crowdsourcing community, and I was very honored in January to actually be passed that baton to bring under our brands. And we have been very intentional in how we were doing things and as I mentioned, it's now called The Disruptor League. To our group, to our team, to this audience, we've talked about disruption and disruption happening today. What are your hopes now for The Disruptor League and what it can do for the world and for people in, again, keeping and maintaining that personal experience?

Julie: Well, first of all, we're so thrilled, Shawn, that you are the next steward of Innovation Excellence, now The Disruptor League. And I think the change in name is really apt for this time. You know, what we've been talking about for the last 10 minutes or so is how disrupted the world is. And we need new courage, new permission, new models to go out into the world and work together and play together and learn together differently and to make impacts. And throughout my career, you know, I've spent my whole career working with people and I've loved it, but the hard part for me is that I feel like people have real issues with giving themselves permission to create. So that's what I've spent my time doing. I would love to see the platform become a place where people can work together.

You know, there was a lot of learning and sharing, there are a lot of very powerful people on that platform, and the world needs a lot of talent right now. And I think it's a wonderful time for new solutions to blossom. And, you know, what one person can do is so profound in terms of how many people they can impact. Another friend of ours, our mutual friend of all of us,

Craig Hatkoff and Rabbi Irwin Kula started The Disruptor Awards 10 years ago and have The Disruptor Foundation in the wake of Clay Christianson's work. They're really carrying it on. And every single person on that site is just an absolute hero in terms of what they've done going out into the world. I'd like to see more stories that are actionable and more ways for people to really connect on that platform. And knowing you, you are a man of action, you're a man on fire, I expect that to happen. I really do.

[00:13:19]

Shawn: Awesome. Love that advice and we will definitely take that. So I want to dive into the new venture, the reason we're having both of you on here together. We'd love for you guys to talk about the new exciting thing that you guys are doing together with another colleague of ours and what you're really wanting to do because I believe your new concept of what you're wanting to do is timely as well as much needed to an industry. So I don't know which one of you want to start, Nancye or Julie, but would love for you to share for this audience the new venture coming out with you guys.

Julie: Well, Nancy's the CEO, so she should definitely start. I'm on the board. She should start.

Nancye: Yes. Okay. It's called unteaching. And unteaching came from all the things we've been talking about, essentially, which is that what gets mostly in our way is what we think we know. And the fact is we need to be guided by what we don't know and by our curiosity and by breaking the boundaries of how we think we should do just about everything including learning. And I have to say, I have to throw this in because I'm on the board of trustees of a university. And one of the things that we're looking at very, very closely is how education is going to survive. I mean, talk about something that's being disrupted. There are so many factors at play here. One is that we need to be learning all of our lives because what we learn in school is useless a year after we graduate.

What is useful is figuring out how to be a learner, how to keep bringing the new in, how to keep breaking down the barriers of what we think is the way things should be, and find a new way to do it. And one of the ways that we can do that and that we do it well is by listening to people, by learning from people who've really done something extraordinary. And what I find often, I mean, being a TED Conference person since the very beginning when TED started, I was on the board of TED, one of those things that I was always frustrated by was that I would sit in a TED for three to five days, a TED Conference, and I would be so inspired because the speakers were incredible, the environment was extraordinary, you know, just the energy in that place, you just wanted to sing and dance every minute. And then by the time you got to the third, fourth, and

fifth days, you couldn't remember anything because it all became a wash of great experiences and by the time you took that six-hour plane ride home, it was all gone.

And I think one of the things that Julie and I connected over was not only doing things differently, disruption, providing the opportunity to learn to people who really want to learn all their lives and want to make big moves and big changes, but we wanted to do it in a way that really was sticky. That we could bring people to bear, experts to bear, people who'd done something extraordinary to bear, and that they could actually sit for some number of hours over a period of time and really help bring people along and help them understand how they too could become a creator, a disruptor, an innovator, even if what they thought they were doing wasn't creative. And that's where the unteaching series was born. It was born out of saying there is a way to unlearn the way we've always learned and to learn in new and more powerful ways and that we think we can bring something to that. And that we could create a whole culture of people who are disruptive. And that's our dream, is to provide the opportunity for creativity and disruption to anybody who has a heart for it.

Shawn: I love it. Julie, you want to add anything to that?

Julie: I do. I think that, you know, there's a wonderful line from a Rumi poem, "Out beyond ideas of right and wrong, there is a field. I'll meet you there." A slight paraphrase. But we're living in a time in history when old frameworks, old answers, old hierarchies clearly no longer work. I mean, all we have to do is look around at who's been affected by COVID-19, you know, the social structure of this country and around the world. And there are a lot of people who want to make fundamental change right now which is thrilling to us. We want to provide examples of people who are actually disrupting whole industries in a way that is really vivid, not academic, vivid, real, and practical so that people can get what, I think, the Buddhist referred to as direct transmission.

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I mean, I think, you know, I worked with Tom Peters for five years and I stood in the back of numerous ballrooms and hotel rooms and meeting rooms when Tom would get up on stage basically and inspire people to do things with greater excellence, to inspire people to make their lives more technicolor. And people would stream out and say things to me like, "Tom's changed my life. I changed my business, I quit my job." I watched one man affect millions of people through his books, his speaking, his writing, his passion. Gregg Breinberg, who's the choir director who is maybe one of my greatest heroes at PS22 in Staten Island started as a math teacher with a guitar on his back and said, "Why is there no music here?" And that was 12

or 15 years ago. And if you haven't heard his choir or his chorus, PS22 Chorus, just dial in on Facebook and your mind will be blown.

They tried to shut him down. But one of the television shows had shown up the night before and his principal basically said, "No, we're not shutting his chorus down." He was making home videos and posting them everywhere. And then, you know, long story short, they sang at the second Obama administration, they were on the Oscars, and every kid who's been through that course, his life was changed. Jamie Diamond said in a really interesting interview at the beginning of 2019 to the New York Economic Club that the problem with America, and the reason our recession had been so anemic, was his word, is that we'd lost our imagination. And then he went on to say, without even missing a beat, "And high schools are broken, and if we don't fix them, we're ensuring generations of poverty to come."

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Well, I'm from Chicago, and just like Gregg Breinberg is a hero, I have another hero there named Vernon Lockhart, who for 20 years has been teaching design thinking and design to high school kids on the Southside of Chicago. He's probably personally responsible for lowering the murder rate by 50%. And I'm not kidding. And so there are people like you, like Vernon, like Gregg Breinberg, who are out in the world impacting people because they are not afraid to follow their hearts, and to give and to be generous and to create opportunities where people's talent can be nurtured. We need that, but we can't get it through MBAs. We can't get it through the old normal ways. We don't have time. So we gotta find a way to dig deeper into things that we really care about that are in our own backyard or in our hearts where we could make an impact and unleash people's discretionary energy. And that does take unlearning. So that's...sorry for the rant, but you got me going on there.

Nancye: It's good. It's good really, thank you.

Shawn: But yeah, you guys, you know, this will make Michael cringe here, but kind of got this "I don't give a fuck" attitude anymore. I don't want to go back to the same old, same old pre-COVID-19, right? I think this was a sign from whatever you believe in, God, Mother Nature, some higher Supreme that needed to rattle the human race and we've gotta figure out how we need to come out of this.

Nancye: Shawn, I couldn't agree with you more and I think there is a spiritual component to this. I mean we're on earth to do something and I'm certainly not going to waste my time not doing something that matters. And I think one of the things that is the cause of this pandemic,

it's very interesting, the current situation we're in is the lack of belief in science. And I think what this pandemic is teaching us is that there is a price to pay for the damage that we've done. And I really believe that. And I really believe that if we're going to make a contribution to the Earth as a whole, not just to human beings, but to everything that this planet is about, we have to think holistically, we have to learn to think systematically, we have to learn how to think of the whole and not just the parts, we need to become less selfish, more generous. And there's only one way to do it, is to lead by example and to continue to push for that. And to spend every day pushing for that.

Julie: And if I may, I'd just love to build on that Nancye, because I think the other big difference from here on out is that by definition one person cannot do it. One person cannot fix everything. And so, to me, the fundamental move is co-creation. And that's where I think we...you know, it's a different way of working. There's not one person who has the answer, the CEO doesn't have the answer. People have the answer and somebody's got to help shape it and bring it to the fore. But the old ways of top-down creativity and forming the big idea and then having everybody else execute it, I think those days are over. I think that's why human-centered design has swept the planet.

Shawn: Yeah. We could go on for hours here but we're gonna wrap this up. And as I mentioned to you guys before we started this, you know, we have a new tradition on "The Combustion Chronicles" and we have three questions that randomly get selected by scientific experiment, which is getting into Michael's head. And there are three questions that are going to get asked of you guys. And I'll have Michael ask them and which one you guys want to answer. But have some fun with this. So, Michael.

Michael: All right, Julie and Nancye, here are your combustion questions. What's something you think everyone should do at least once in their lives? Julie, you get to start. Something that you think everyone should do at least once in their lives.

Julie: Gosh, there are so many things, but I think go help people who need help, whether it's feeding people who are hungry or caring for people who are homeless, you know, go help the people that need help.

Michael: Fantastic. What about you Nancy?

Nancye: I think everybody should at least once in their life do something that's profoundly dangerous. And I think the reason I say that has to do with the fact that we have so many fears that hold us back. I think when you face down a fear, you face down all fear. And I think it's courage that makes great things happen.

Michael: Amen. Yeah. All right, here we go. Question number two. What's the best single day on the calendar? The best single day on the calendar? Nancye, you get to go first on this one.

Nancye: Oh, there's no doubt in my mind. My favorite day of the year is Thanksgiving. And it is special for so many reasons. One, it's not religious, it is all about gratitude, and in my life, it's always a lot of people coming together who I love. Not all family, some family, some friends, and it's a very eclectic group of people and it feels just so good to be grateful. And to be grateful as a group, to sit around the table and say, "We are so lucky that we are alive and that we're sitting here with each other eating this delicious food that all comes from farmers who we know," and like that. So I think for me it's always Thanksgiving.

Michael: There you go. What about you, Julie?

Julie: Well, I'm going to say it's any day of the week that you take a day off to rest and reflect. I think we've gotten into kind of a frenzied always-on mode and that's not a recipe for living a profoundly great life or being profoundly creative.

Michael: Beautiful. Beautiful. Okay, final question. Julie, you get to go first. Are you ready?

Julie: Yes, I am.

Michael: Okay. What do you think about disco?

Julie: Well, I love to dance, and I think that any time anyone is dancing, whether it's disco or flamenco or ballet, they are living life to the fullest.

Michael: Right? Especially disco too, right? What about you, Nancy? What do you think about disco?

Nancye: Well, can I give you a divergent answer?

Michael: Please.

Nancye: Okay. So I do like to dance too, but what I have discovered that I really love is every night at 7:00, everybody in New York, in Manhattan, it feels like everybody in Manhattan is on their back porches and at their windows clapping, howling, banging pots, and singing for first responders. And I have discovered how much I love to scream at the top of my lungs. My husband was the first one who did it because we went out and he started screaming. He said, "This feels so good. Oh, my gosh. It's just coming from my toes all the way up to my eyelids," right? And I have discovered that making sound at the top of your lungs can be an extremely liberating experience along with dancing.

Michael: It is and its' music, right?

Nancye: It is.

Michael: It's the sound that fuels that movement, that dancing.

Nancye: Yes. Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Shawn: Awesome. Well, Julie and Nancye, thank you guys for this time and setting it aside for us, and I can't wait to be able to see both of you again in New York City (**Nancy:** Oh Yes!) and give you kisses and hugs. But until then, you know, stay safe, stay well, and we'll talk again soon. So thank you.

Nancye: We'll talk really soon. Thank you, guys. Great work. Great preparation.

Julie: Thank you, Shawn. Thank you, Michael. Thanks, Nancye. Thank so much.

Nancye: Bye.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of "The Combustion Chronicles." None of this is possible without you the listener. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, look up Man on Fire on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and at manonfire.co. Give us a shout. Let us know what you think. And please, subscribe, rate, and review if you like what we're doing and if you don't do it anyways. And remember, always stay safe and be well.