

# Arts Based Virtual Team Building Activities For An Innovative Remote Team

Team Anywhere Podcast Interview with:Fredd Mandel and Harvey Seifter

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, arts, teams, learning, leaders, ensemble, organization, ideas, futures, work, leadership, year, aha, harvey, question, talking, world, scaling, behavior, moments

## SPEAKERS

Ginny Bianco-Mathis, Mitch Simon

### **Mitch Simon** 00:10

Welcome to another episode of team anywhere where CEOs, leaders and experts at building teams, companies, organizations, and amazing cultures

### **Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 00:22

share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co host on the East Coast, Jim Bianco Mathis,

### **Mitch Simon** 00:28

and I'm your co host on the West Coast, Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us team anywhere. Can you teach collaboration, empathy, creativity and transparency in the virtual world? Sure, you can teach it but it won't change behavior. To change your behavior you and your team must immerse yourselves in creative experiences. On today's podcast, Dr. Fred Mandel and Harvey softer founders of futures that work, demonstrate how to build the competencies required to succeed in the two dimensional zoom world by engaging our team in the three dimensional worlds of art and science.

### **Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 01:15

Welcome to a another episode of team anywhere and I'm your co host, Ginni Bianco, Mathis on the east coast. And I am with my wonderful partner. Um, are you Simon.

### **Mitch Simon** 01:32

So for those listeners out there, this is one of our first recordings where we're not seeing each other so so genuinely knows me by seeing my face. Yeah, Tony West Coast. Who is unforgettable, Simon? Yes,

### **Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 01:49

man, Mitch, so welcome. And we are so happy today to be interviewing two wonderful people who have a, I believe, we believe a very interesting and meaningful twist on the whole concept of leadership and remote leadership. And that is Fred Mendell, and Harvey sifter. And we are together to discuss their

work, working with leaders, and a touch of how they're using art and learning in that field. Welcome, gentlemen. Very happy to be here. Thanks, Jimmy. Yes, so, so happy that you all are here. So to begin with, let's begin with an easy question. How have you all fared? What have you learned through your COVID? journey year?

02:50

So let me take a crack at that. Because with all due respect, Jenny, it's not an easy question. Let me just start by saying, think like many people who were hit by COVID, the initial reaction was, well, what am I losing? And kind of stepping back from that, and realizing that I had to develop a creative mindset and ask a different kind of question. Even though COVID is taking some things away, maybe, just maybe I'm gaining some things. So I tried to look at it from that angle. And when I did, I realized that there were two things that I was gaining. And that represented an opportunity for me. One was to deepen my relationship with people in a different way. And the other was time, I now had more time with my painting. One of the things that I realized in that process in reading the newspapers and listening to news on TV, there was a lot of attention being paid to essential workers. And they got their credit for the incredible work frontline efforts that they put in. And that made me realize, well, maybe the arts are essential. Just like there are essential workers, there are the essential arts. And I began to get tuned into the way in which people were really drawing on the arts as a source of understanding and empathy and pafos and resilience, to help them get through the COVID period. So for me, it was a way of getting reconnected with the arts in a very deeply personal way, as a kind of response to a major human challenge. And that represented a very different perspective for me, and it really reaffirmed in my own mind, the importance and centrality of the arts in our lives, especially during times of great talent. Right,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 05:00

that's fabulous. And we can talk more about that

05:04

in in a bit. I'll share a couple of quick thoughts about maybe the professional journey that we've been on during this period. So COVID caught us with with a lot of projects that were in process are about to be launched. And it became pretty clear pretty quickly, that it was going to be impossible to, for the foreseeable future impossible to work the way that we had been. So I'm looking at what might become possible. My own model for all of this was actually reading about Sir Isaac Newton and what he did in the play year in London 400 years ago, what do you do when he had no choice but to evacuate London and drop his his professorship and stop teaching and all the projects he was working on? And just think fresh about some big questions. And of course, what ultimately came out of that was a whole fundamental Renaissance and enlightenment in science. So for us, there were three kind of major questions, one, so much of our work, because art space learning is a very powerfully experiential kind of learning. It's a very human learning, it's things that bring people in very close and intimate connection with themselves and each other, the materials that they work with, and suddenly we're doing it on zoom and behind screens, and yeah, kind of have these these taboos that sort of believe, basically, that that wasn't going to work that that couldn't work. And so we kind of have no choice but to decide, well, it has to work. So how is it going to work, and ended up reinventing things that that are wonderful new ways that enrich the ways that we have been using an in person and will become part of our hybrid future.

The second is that our model for scaling before was all in working with more and more and larger groups of people. And we'll continue to do that. But we began to think that maybe what we ought to be doing is working with people who work with other people. And we began a whole coaching program with coaching certification, and ways of working with our, with our learning tools and our measurement instrument, and bringing them to more people that way, the final thing was, had this wonderful measurement instrument that it invented six or seven years ago, growing out of the research that I did with the National Science Foundation, and that it was an analog instrument, and we used it with several 1000 people. But that was kind of the outer limit. And we took this year to take it apart to first principles and rebuild it as a digital instrument, and one which she is very scalable, in which actually launches later this month. So maybe I'll start with just a little bit about some of the elements of connection between art leadership and learning. So I spent a number of years directing a series of National Science Foundation funded research projects that really dug into exactly that question. How do the arts help leaders learn? How do they and can they in fact, help them to surface creativity, foster collaboration, emotionally intelligent behavior, innovation, resilience, and in fact, what we've learned through experimental research, and then through incubators that we set up that actually tested this at scale in the field, is that the arts have very powerful, unique impacts in those areas. And that really a relatively small amount of work with artspace learning can transform the way that leaders view their leadership, the way the team's view, their collaboration, and how people are able to, to create an innovative function effectively in these kinds of environments. And, in fact, it we found that as little as nine hours of work with artspace, learning for, for a team or for a leader can lead to very significant, measurable changes. And it works across lots of different art forms. I sort of think of artspace learning as a kind of tapping into a universal alphabet of creative expression, which is available to everybody. And that, in a sense, you can teach almost anyone, almost anything with almost any art. If you do it right.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 09:24

Well, let's let me push you How? What are the changes that happened to people?

09:32

Yeah, so one set of changes is around creative thinking skills. And what we find is that people begin to find so if you think of creative thinking as having a couple of different dimensions, one is that there's a divergent phase and a convergent phase. So the divergent phases, we think of that as outside the box thinking and lots of different possibilities, right divergent phase which is critical to actually getting results and outcomes and moving to the next level is all about the application of criteria making good choices. And we find that both of those things happen better when people are spending some time doing art space learning. We also found that when teams spend a little bit of time doing art space learning, they began to change the way they collaborate, we found that out, because we actually set up teams in a laboratory environment. And we measured their behaviors every single behavior we could possibly track over a five week period. And what we discovered is the teams that spent a few hours working with our space learning exhibited dramatically more emotionally intelligent behaviors like trust, mutual respect, transparency, openness to new ideas, all of these kind of key elements for collaboration. Finally, the actual results in the innovation. Again, we saw dramatic differences as much as two points in a five point scale between teams that were working on innovation projects, and teams that were working on innovation projects, but added them this dimension of our space learning. So we have lots

of evidence, which backs up what many of us know anecdotally from our own lives, which is that the arts are very powerful and wonderful things, and they change us and they change us in ways that are enormously helpful. And that resonate in, in unexpected but very consequent consequential ways.

11:29

Let me jump in here for a minute Janine, because I really appreciate the connection you're making between art leadership and, and learning and Harvey's response. I was a senior executive for American Express for a number of years. And I can tell you that as a leader in a organization, I did not wake up every morning and ask myself, Well, gee, how can the arts helped me be a better leader? How can the arts help my organization? My considerations were a lot more practical. They were well, how can I make my team's work more collaboratively together? How can I get them to think more innovatively? How can I create a high performing team? Those are the way ways organization leaders formulate the challenges that they're facing. What we've been able to do, though, is to respond to those questions, be able to deliver highly practical, compelling, and impactful arts based learning interventions, exercises, workshops, that drive the outcomes that leaders are looking for in their, in their organizations.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 12:43

Well, let me let me jump in right now. can't bring this alive for us. Share with us an art space learning experience, that you may take a leader and the leaders team through and then what happens.

12:59

So there are many. And one of the things that I want to mention is, when we talk about arts based learning, we are talking about the full range of the arts, not just the visual arts, not just music, or jazz, or classical music, we're talking about poetry, we're talking about theater, we're talking about movement and dance. We're even talking about an ancient Japanese form of painting called suminagashi painting. So we pull in and integrate all of the different arts. But we recently were working with a large organization. And they wanted to drive collaboration. It was interesting, it was a matrix organization, which means they had different reporting relationships. And we brought in a chamber quartet lab, and we have them perform in front of about 125 of their leaders. Yeah. First we had them practice what they were going to perform. They did a live practice in front of the audience. They then took what they practiced, and they actually performed that and it was breathtakingly beautiful was in person, it was very dynamic.

14:21

For a second, one of the things that's really powerful in that kind of work, is we actually try to take people and put them inside the musical ensemble, so that they are looking over the shoulders of the musicians. So they're seeing things through the eyes. And from the perspective of the different Museum, the different musicians in the rehearsal. They have moments of conflict. They work through dozens of different ideas. They work through it in real time. They give each other feedback, and then they find ways to move forward incredibly quickly and incredibly effectively. And that's the there are so many lessons for teams for leaders, right everyone

15:00

What are the outcomes of that particular engagement was that these, this organization was organized, as I mentioned around teams, and those teams would form for projects that would last six weeks, or six months or 18 months. And as I said, they want to be more collaborative, when we returned after the ensemble performed for them. And as Harvey mentioned, we debriefed the practice. What they took us aside and he said, you know, we are no longer going to be calling our teams teams, we're not going to be calling them ensembles, haha. And the reason for that is we want to incorporate into the way we behave the same way in which the ensembles practiced, and perform. So that is an example where artspace learning not only has resonance, but it can change a culture and an organization and the language that people use,

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to give you a sense of some of the other take you inside a few of the other types of experiences and the kind of aha moments that that can lead to Fred mentioned a moment ago, suminagashi. So we work with suminagashi, because this is this is a really remarkable art form. And you can create really beautiful things, but you do it working with the surface of water as your canvas, and paints have to float on the surface of the water. And then you put some rice paper in any print some remarkable things. But the thing that's really, incredibly unique and different and powerful about this for leaders, is that you can't actually control a single element that you use in the office, you can't control water, you can't really control where paint goes, much of anything except yourself. But what you can do is you can in different ways influence the outcome shaping, maybe additive events. And in that kind of, of challenge and working through that leaders see a very powerful experience a very powerful metaphor for the way that so much leadership has to take place today, which is in situations where leaders have no formal authority for the middle, where they have no choice but to lead through influence, because they don't really have the control to do command and control. Right. We work with, we work with theater, on a process that we call rehearsing ideas, which takes kind of the basics of how you rehearse both music and theatre, and turns it into an experience where participants end up doing four prototypes in two or three hours, and learning. Excuse me, learning from, from the rehearsal process, how you actually take hundreds of new ideas, work through them quickly and productively. And don't avoid controversy. But also don't get derailed by controversy and find the best possible choices with real time feedback. And there are very powerful tools that grow out of that, that shape, things in the real world pretty profoundly. The first steps in rehearsing ideas is something that we call thinking with hands. And what it is, is building idea models with different kinds of, of objects. And we're the whole idea is you don't describe what you want to build and discuss it, you actually build and the discussion takes place with it through in Wall building, and you learn it as you do it. So you're actually making these things to learn about your to give them shape, which which works wonderfully in practice. And then we hit zoom. Yeah. Okay. So it took some thought. And what we discovered is that if you set people up to succeed with that, teams can find some remarkable ways of working in zoom on on that kind of a hands on collaborative project. And the the leadership and collaborative learnings are even deeper, because, yes, so they all had to have their own boards. And they all had to have their own materials, we set up some so that they would be the same and others they supply. And then they had to discuss among themselves as they were building and pointing then they had to appoint somebody who was going to build the actual model and agree on collaborative rules in to do this. But again, they had to do all that pretty much in real time not sitting down and discussing Okay, now we're going to figure out this and that but just as a mash up all

doing, and all in an hour. Now in the in person, we do this 20 minutes over zoom, it takes more like 45 to 60 minutes, but as you can imagine, what they learn is incredible.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 19:57

And as you said deeper

19:59

yes

20:01

The other thing I've mentioned, Jenny, is that for a long time, people were waiting to get to the other side of this pandemic, yeah, the virtual world would kind of melt away, and we get back to, quote, normal. But the reality is, we're not going to get back to that ever get. And therefore, there is a premium in developing the kinds of skills and communication to be effective. In a virtual world. Because we're moving toward a hybrid world, we don't exactly know what the balance is going to be. And we have found that the arts continue to be a incredibly engaging, three dimensional experience in a two dimensional medium,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 20:47

right.

20:48

So the virtual world is basically two dimensional, the art experience is three dimensional. And we've been able to design experiences that give them the retain the three dimension, even though the communication amongst the participants is two dimensional. And that's very, very powerful, because it begins to shift the paradigm and help people appreciate that the world that we're entering into, is going to be an interplay between three dimensions in two dimensions.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 21:20

Oh, absolutely. And I know your your company is called creating futures that work. And I am sure you're aware of a lot of the futurists and we have interviewed a few of them, have been talking about leaders and teams and the virtual way, almost like theater, and having to incorporate, as one person said, incorporate everything that Disney does that that we're now might have new job descriptions for people on leadership staffs, who can put together these very creative happenings, events.

22:10

It's all about engagement. And how do you engage people in not only getting work done, but how you learn? And learning we believe, happens through experience? Exactly. most traditional learning has been okay, here's your concept. Now let's practice the concept. Here's how it works and apply it. We turn that upside down. Yes. And we immerse people in the experience, then, what happens is they discover the concept, through the experience ends up being less, much more durable, because they discovered it themselves.

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It's more durable, and it's more resonant. But to really do it, you have to be ready to do it, which means you have to be ready to do things very differently than the way you're used to doing.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 23:02

Yes. Which which brings me to my next question about what kind of challenges would leaders have in thinking about doing this, which I believe they're going to have to do?

23:15

Yeah. So I think there, there are a few. One of them is that, as Fred said, People aren't necessarily thinking about how am I going to learn and grow? They're also not necessarily thinking about, how can I engage art in that learning it the idea of may be nowhere near their consciousness on the radar. And so it's important that leaders be open to that. And what we do to help them be open to that is we we give them some resources that can serve as kind of permission both in their own minds and with peers and colleagues, and a lot of the work that we've done with science and the evidence and the data about impact and the neuroscience behind it. That's why we do that, because it helps people to understand why this really matters. So the second thing is that the connections still aren't always obvious. And so we need people to be ready to suspend their disbelief. Yeah, we need that. But they need that. And they need that not only for work in this kind of way. But if we think about this era, if we think about the the era that we're coming out of is a vuca era. I don't know what you want to call this one. vuca 2.0. Yeah. What whatever we call it, it's not going away. It's getting more and more intense. And so leaders to succeed in this have to be able to go beyond the obvious connections, they have to be able to suspend their disbelief and be willing to try and experiment. They have to be willing to get comfortable with being uncomfortable and recognize their own responsibility in on their teams. In other organizations, with helping people to get comfortable with being uncomfortable and right, we've saved

25:07

the old organizational model used to place a premium on scaling efficiency. When you had a fixed structure, efficiency became the coin of the realm. What we're talking about now is a major shift from scaling efficiency to scaling, learning. How do you scale learning in an organization? And as Harvey mentioned, we firmly believe that the a platform for doing that is the arts, and especially wrestling for the world that we're living in today. Yeah. So I just want to get that in.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 25:47

No, no, that's excellent. And what I'm, so I'm thinking I'm a leader. For them to get intrigued about this. I would suspect the best way is just to take them through one of the exercises. Sure, yeah. And and say, What? how might this be beneficial to you and your team, especially as you're looking forward to the future in this environment? Um,

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and we have a lot of resources that could that could help people to get inside this to understand firsthand, we do Devon's little demonstration workshops, we have videos, we can take people through all kinds of short activities, where they'll they'll get the point of it, because it being arts based experiential learning, the best way to get to know is to experience it.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis 26:43**

Exactly. Exactly. All right. Well, and you also, I heard you mentioned, the neuroscience behind a lot of this, which is very pertinent, you know, like, just, for example, one neuroscience fact is, if you can get the person to have an aha moment, it triggers in their brain, it becomes a learning, and it makes them interested in embracing it. Absolutely. What happens with virtual.

27:15

Yes, yeah. And another one that that I think is pretty important is that when you experience art, when you work with it, when you do this kind of artspace experiential learning, you trigger the same neural circuitry that triggers empathy.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis 27:29**

Yes. Yeah. Which is, which is exactly what we're going for with a lot of these people who don't lot of these people, a lot of leaders don't want to go there. Right? Yeah.

**Mitch Simon 27:43**

I was interested in what types of aha moments are the participants in your workshops, having if you could share those frames, you want to talk about,

27:54

that they're all over the place. I mean, one of the things that Jenny experienced, for instance, in the mini workshop that we did, was we had, we handed out a an image of something, and we asked people to draw exactly what they saw. And of course, everyone was a little bit nervous, because they didn't think they could draw at all. So they follow the lines, and they drew it, and then we asked them to turn the image upside down. And lo and behold, what emerged was a horse. But when they saw it upside down, it was just a bunch of lines. When they turned it upside down, or right side up, they realized that they had actually drawn a horse, and they had rendered it in fairly accurate terms. And people who had never taken an art class never taken a drawing class. Oh, my God,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis 28:49**

amazing draw. It was amazing.

28:52

So that's a small example of an aha. And what that does is it reveals that so many of us are subject to self constraining beliefs, and that we need to break through those in order to tap into the creativity that we all actually possess.

29:12

And whether we had when we translate that, whether that's at the moment that somebody pulls the rice paper out of the water and realizes that by giving up control, but by exerting influence, they've painted this incredibly beautiful painting, whether it's some of the work that we do with with sculpture, where they realize that, that if they try to move their sculptures from a pose to an actual action of leadership, the sculptures tend to fall over, unless they first address how they relate to the ground, they're standing

up. And the power of that connection. There. There are literally hundreds of these moments, aha moments that people experience and stick with them.

29:52

That's what what's also amazing about about this is, you know, we've been focusing on what the individual aha is, but when we do this with teams, Aha is are also extremely powerful. So I gave the example earlier of the ensemble coming in, and we went away. And when we return Two weeks later, they had, as an organization arrived at this huge Aha, that what is constraining us is that we're not acting as ensembles. So by changing our name, we'll then adopt the same behaviors. And that was, that was a major major pivot in the organization, and it tangibly changed the way they performed.

30:36

And one of the things that that that helps do that very powerfully is the assessment instrument that I was talking about earlier. Because in the moment, you have the aha, the ensemble and you realize just what this kind of collaboration can do, and and how powerful it can be. But then if you're also generating some data that shows you how your teams are beginning to perform the things that are changing the ways that the team is going from, essentially strangling some of the best ideas, before ever getting to the point of action through groupthink, and by operating as an ensemble surfacing those best ideas, yes, but that can be measured. That too, leads to some real changes on the organizational level.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 31:23

All right, because you're taking on a very creative process. And you're showing some tangible results, which some people may need. Yes. So you are closing that gap is exciting. share with us what your tips are for leaders going forward in 2021, and 22.

31:48

Three very quick ones. One is this is a time of remarkable opportunity, and more extreme change than any that we've seen up until now. And so being ready for that, what does that mean? It means being ready to learn, being showing cognitive agility. So this is agility with a small a, the agility with a big a is good, too. But, but the individual and group cultural behaviors of an agile mind, are so incredibly important. And one of the keys to that is working with the arts because then that's how we exercise, cognitive agility, being comfortable, being uncomfortable, and a bubble, whatever it is, you thought as a leader about the importance of empathy, resilience, collaboration, creativity, innovation before, that was absolutely nothing compared to how important those things are today, and how much more important they're going to be. Exactly.

32:51

I've got 10 recommendations for individuals. Very, very quickly for 2021. There's still time left in the year. Yes, number one, visit a museum. Number two, compose a poem. Number three, draw a self portrait. Number four, walk in the woods without your cell phone and breathe deeply. Number five, ask yourself, What is different about today? And why does that matter? Number six, every morning, ask yourself, What am I grateful for today? In the evening before going to bed, repeat and reflect? Number

eight, listen to a different kind of music. Number nine, observe a child 18 months or younger playing. And number 10. Eat a slice of pizza beginning with the crust and working toward the tip. Love that.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 33:55

Hey, guys, how can folks get in touch with you?

33:59

Check out our website. It's futures that work.com www futures that work.com there's a contact button. You can certainly use that. And there's also a chat button. And we'll respond very quickly to any any questions. We'll get back to almost immediately.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis** 34:20

Fabulous. Thank you so much. Well, I want to listen to this whole thing again, a very exciting, a lot of of pertinent tips and ideas for all leaders and teams going forward. And I'm everybody, Harvey and Fred on touch base with them. There's a lot more there that you can get into. And this ends another episode of team anywhere and see you next time.