

## The Fearless Thinkers Podcast | Season 2, Episode 13

Engaging the people side of your next transformation, with Kevin Bronk

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**Masami Cookson:** Welcome to Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson, and our host is Rick Cheatham, head of marketing at BTS. On today's show, Rick has a conversation with Kevin Bronk.

Kevin is a senior director at BTS. He focuses on accelerating strategic alignment and execution for high growth companies in tech, media, and more. He has extensive experience in facilitating targeted innovation, designing off sites and development experiences, and helping leaders test ideas. Prior to BTS, Kevin worked in communications and public education, helping open schools in underserved communities around the United States.

Hey, Rick. What's up?

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**Rick Cheatham:** Ah, Masami, I'm so happy these days because... I finally replaced my electric bike. I had one for years, but the battery died on it. To replace the battery is more expensive than replacing the bike, so I just got a new one.

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**Masami:** Wow, that's super exciting. I've never ridden an electric bike before.

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**Rick:** Oh, they're great. Actually, it's my primary form of transportation because it's still cycling. But when it's 104 here, and Austin's actually pretty hilly, what it does is it just flattens things out.

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**Masami:** Sounds like a great innovation.

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**Rick:** Exactly. They're a lot of fun. Well, hey, this one is actually really interesting, because what we talk about today is how change initiatives and preparing people [for how] change has shifted and how doing your enablement in the context of real work that needs to be done can be significantly more meaningful, especially when dealing with big changes. So let's just jump in.

Hey Kevin, welcome to the show.

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**Kevin Bronk:** Hey Rick, how're you doing?

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**Rick Cheatham:** I'm doing really, really well. What's going on in your world?

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**Kevin:** Things are good. Just got back from my, my son's first year checkup with our pediatrician and he's healthy, he's walking, he's squawking. So life is good.

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**Rick:** Yeah. I'm at a completely different stage of life. My second daughter just got engaged, so I'm doing. Two weddings in two years, which is going to be a bit of an adventure. I'm sure I'll be there before I know it. Life moves fast.

Hey, speaking of life milestones and all the changes happening in both of our lives right now, I'm wondering if you could ground us just a little bit in the BTS point of view around change.

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**Rick:** I'm wondering if you could ground us just a little bit in the BTS point of view around change.

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**Kevin:** Yeah. When we think about change, stepping back, the reality is that change has changed, right? We're seeing that product life cycles are shorter. We're seeing technology field disruptions are happening all around us.

And because of that, what we need to step back and do is look at change a little bit differently than maybe we have in the past in order to be an organization that's really able to change fast. That's where BTS [tries to] **look at change from both an individual perspective, but also an organizational perspective.** A change-ready organization is really engaged in inventing the future and authoring their change. Typically, that's done to fulfill the company's purpose, or direction, in the most powerful way.

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**Rick:** When most people think of significant changes happening in an organization, there's this moment of... A windowless conference room where all the executives get together and do their best – possibly with a consultant – to set direction. I know you think about that very differently though, correct?

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**Kevin:** What we know is that you can't really tell people about the future, especially if it's different than what they're doing now. When that happens, it's often really experienced in resistance. But if you can shift that, and you can think about... Not just the conversations that are happening in the room, but how you can create experiences to engage and bring your leaders [in]... That really helps them imagine the future, and experience it, and find those areas [for] some co-creation.

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**Rick:** That's really important, because I think too often people try to get things perfect before they start engaging multiple levels of the organization. **And frankly, without the folks that are doing the work all day, it's hard to be right in your assumptions.**

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**Kevin:**

Yeah. Not only is it that we want to really present a perfect picture, but often, the executives who are in that room, they know the picture isn't quite perfect, right? Because we have to figure some things out.

And people on the ground know that, whether we tell them or not. So people are going to start poking holes in the change that the executives might already be aware of, but if the executives are not acknowledging that and not bringing people into it, you lose credibility in the change.

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**Rick:**

I think it's human nature, unfortunately, to – when you don't have the information – tend to go to the worst case scenario. Fill in the blanks with the bad news.

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**Kevin:**

Yeah. We're very good at spotting threats; that's partially why humanity has made it so far.

[...] We hear a lot of our clients come to us and they're like, "Hey, there's a lot of change going on. Maybe there's a big change coming up... We really need to do a training to help people build resilience."

And it's another thing that humans are actually very resilient, right? We change all the time. We're uniquely adaptive from other species. So, when we are thinking about change-ready organizations, it's thinking about, **"How do we use that resilience that we know our people have? How do we use the brilliance and the details that people know, [from] their day-to-day work, to really help us fuel the change in a meaningful way?"**

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**Rick:**

So, if I were to put myself in the mind of – possibly, a head of strategy or someone in talent development – given the current rate of change going on in the world and the uncertainty that exists in so many organizations, I would assume we'd want to upskill **as many people as possible** to get them change-ready **as fast as possible**.

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**Kevin:**

That's intuitive, right? A lot of that makes sense, but there's some uncommon sense there that there's a missed opportunity. The good news is, as you said, change is happening around us all the time. So, there is an opportunity to train people [so that they're] really engaged [in] change and [are] better change-leaders. But in training, you want to connect them to real change problems. You don't want to do those in silos, right? So, if you're shifting strategy, you want to bring in leadership experiences that help people think about what levers

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they need to pull differently, and how they need to show up as change leaders in the process.

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**Rick:** What you make me think of is the difference in a lecture and a lab. Being able to do something real with the knowledge that you're getting – it's going to be much more impactful.

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**Kevin:** Yeah. We can build really powerful experiences that get people to think about change differently, but if they're not actually thinking about it in the context of a real change, then the power is diminished. And so, you can shift a little bit from thinking about training to thinking about building capability and alignment at the same time.

Maybe you have a talent leader who says, "Hey, we want to do some change workshops." Maybe you have a strategy leader who's like, "Hey, we need to get people aligned on the change." Let's bring those two things together. Let's use those workshops and make them working sessions where we can test the strategy, where we can talk about where it might fail. [We can] use all of that to engage people while also building their capabilities, so that the next go-round, when the next inevitable change comes, they have the capabilities and mindsets to lead it effectively.

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**Rick:** You just said something that is a little confusing to me, because when we were talking about change in general, we were talking about making sure that we don't focus on worst-case scenario. But then, when you talk about "What does it look like to build an experience?", it sounds like you're talking about what could go wrong.

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**Kevin:** If we know that our brains are really wired for spotting threats, that's actually an opportunity, because leaders who are working in different functions (and may be more detailed in certain aspects of the work) are going to see threats that are not as clear at the executive level. If you give them the opportunity to really talk about those threats, then you have the opportunity to think about, "How do we need to show up differently to address those?" Now, they're engaged in the process, instead of saying, "Hey, this isn't going to work for these three reasons." We want to hear them say that, and then we want to say, "Great, let's explore those reasons, and let's figure out how we need to get over those."

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**Rick:** That makes sense to me from the perspective of people are going to be trying to figure out why it

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won't work in the first place. Why not get all that stuff on the table and figure out potentially how to mitigate those risks before they become realities?

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**Kevin:** Absolutely. There's one other kind of element to that: think about the mindsets around change readiness. We see this in organizations and in individuals – there's a mindset that, "Change is temporary – we're going to get through this change."

[Thinking] about the early days of COVID, we were all like, "All right, let's give this two weeks. Let's give this three weeks. Okay, let's give this three months. Okay, let's give this six months," until we realized that we just need to change a little bit as a society to adapt to this new reality. That was when we all got a little more comfortable.

**If you think change is temporary – if you think it has a distinct beginning, middle, and end – then, when the change persists, we get overwhelmed.** We get burnt out. So, you pace yourself very differently if you think the change has a beginning, middle, and end.

What we see in the most productive organizations is a mindset that change is constant. And it's a source of opportunity. Which means now we're training and **preparing ourselves for a marathon instead of a sprint.** We know that the only thing we know for sure is that, on the other side of uncertainty, [there] is more uncertainty. And now you have leaders who are able to scan, anticipate, and engage in that uncertainty instead of looking to you for all the answers.

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**Rick:** You mean, it's not all just going to stop, and I can't just go back to the way it used to be?

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**Kevin:** Rarely is that the case, especially in today's world.

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**Rick:** Might be the meanest thing you ever said to me.

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**Kevin:** I'm sorry, Rick – we gotta keep evolving together, my friend.

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**Rick:** No, it actually, in all seriousness, it makes a lot of sense, and it helps me to understand even more why we need to focus on both how the organization responds to change and the individual [does, too]. Because [I'm thinking], isn't the organization just a bunch of individuals?

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**Kevin:** So organizational mindsets and the way we think about change impact individual mindsets and vice versa. They play together. If you have a culture

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where people are expecting answers and clarity from the top, then individually, they're going to show up with those dependencies.

If you have a culture that is [about] thinking and engaging and caring about where people are thinking and what they understand about their customers (or if they understand about their part of the business), and you truly are curious to incorporate their input – which doesn't mean you're saying, “Hey, Rick told us this, we're going to totally pivot and do something different” – we can at least listen and make sure that an individual's perspectives are taken into account. You can't go and ask everybody what they think, but you can [ask] thoughtful questions and [create] structures that really help bring out the best thinking and create alignment along the way.

Was that too ethereal?

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**Rick:**

No. As somebody that doesn't do this all day, it makes sense on many levels, but... I would love for you to walk me through an example of how this feels and looks in real life.

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**Kevin:**

A couple of years ago, we started working really closely with a commercial organization for a medical device company. They make this really amazing device that really does change people's lives, and it's really powerful.

But as is the case in the medical space, they're a little disconnected from the customer. They spend a lot of time with doctors in the US; they're spending a lot of time with the insurers and the payers and just the complex ecosystem we have in healthcare.

The leader of this organization realized there was a lot of pressure on her group to drive a lot of growth for the company overall because of this just incredible market opportunity they had, and she came to us and said, “Hey, we need to become more customer centric. If we don't have this customer centricity, we're going to lose and we're going to miss on growth opportunities.”

Customer centricity is a big shift, so we worked together with her leadership team to define what that vision [looks] like. We co-authored the vision across our leadership team, but the vision was really about where the organization was going. We then wanted to tap into the leaders across the entire organization to define the “how.”

So, we created a series of working sessions where we engaged with every single leader in the organization

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to unpack the vision, talk about the risks, talk about what success would look like, and really start to figure out what the organization needed to do to move forward. In the process, we equipped all those leaders to have very similar conversations with their teams.

We're now at a stage where we've identified the major blockers in the organization that need to be overcome, and we now have an entire group of leaders across every division really thinking about what they need to do in their organization to overcome those challenges.

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**Rick:**

Earlier, Kevin, we talked about how actually engaging people in development around change readiness is much better in the context of working through real change. Is that something that happened here as well?

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**Kevin:**

I have to give a lot of credit to my client and the work that they were able to do internally to create alignment between the incredible leaders they have on the talent side of the house with those on more of the strategy side really connecting together and looking at this as not just a training initiative.

Candidly, with this client, the amount of time that it was going to take wasn't consistent with the way that they would approach training. When we repositioned it and said, "Yeah, part of this is training, but this is really about understanding, creating alignment, and building a place for the entire organization to move together." Then it becomes a win, right?

Where the training organization is building change-readiness, and the business is actually getting insight and input and having thoughtful dialogues – that will move the organization forward.

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**Rick:**

This is that point in the conversation where I can't help but think about our listeners out there that don't have the positional power to make big decisions and shift their organizations on their own. If I were a talent leader that understands what you're saying today, and who wants to take steps in my organization with the individuals whom I'm responsible for, what's your best advice for me?

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**Kevin:**

Think about the conversations that you're having with your partners in the business.

The engagement I just [referred to] – that started with actual teaming for the leaders of this group, and they said, "Hey, we need to work together better." So we asked the question, "To what end?"

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And that's [how] we got to this customer centricity shift.

If you think about the conversations you're having with your business leaders, and they say, "We've got to get our leaders ready for this big change," lean into that change conversation a little bit more; lean into the context of that change and try to unpack. **What [aspects of the change are] leaders unclear about?** Position your talent approach in a way that will help the leader find answers from the organization.

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**Rick:** **Any time we have the opportunity to make someone better at what they've got to accomplish, we're going to get their attention.** That's great advice. As always, great chatting. You've given us some good insights to think about, and it was also just fun catching up. Appreciate your joining today.

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**Kevin:** Yeah, Rick, it was an absolute pleasure, and maybe I'll see you down in Austin soon.

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**Rick:** Please! It'd be great.

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