Tavenner: Hey, Michael.

Horn: Hey, Diane. How are you doing?

Tavenner: Well, I'm thinking a lot about failure, Michael.

Horn: Whoa. Okay. I'm not going to give you an update on my end then, because I guess we're diving right into the deep end, as they say, and I won't get my normal warmup in. So I'll just ask what's up?

Tavenner: Well, first, thanks for going there. Two things really. One thing is that it just seems to me that there are times in life where you're dealing with the same hard thing over and over. People often talk about deaths coming in threes, in my case, in a few different parts of my life right now, I'm grappling with failure. So that's a lens I'm looking through a lot right now. And then second, and coupled with that, is a little ways back you asked me, after I shared that we had pivoted in one of our pilots, you asked me about that, and we talked briefly and we kind of even celebrated that pivot, which is interesting because pivoting is failure. I've been thinking about that conversation ever since, and I was hoping we would dig back into it today.

Horn: Well, as you know, that's the topic that I wanted to dig into today as well. I want to step back and also be candid with the audience because Diane and I have been going back and forth around this episode, which, that's something we often do as we sketch out what we're going to talk about. I had wanted to follow up on all the conversations we've been having around how you innovate or do continuous improvement in schools. We've talked about what is a pilot and how to set it up. We've talked about testing and learning. We've talked about getting the right team in place for the pilot. We've talked about how to choose the right pilots for your school, given your strategy.

The next question that I kept returning to is, Diane and I were thinking about what's the right topic for this episode, was, okay, so once the results from your round of tests are clear and you go into that checkpoint meeting and you see that your current pilot isn't working the way you hypothesized it would, what do you do? How do you have the conversation to pivot with your team? How do you redesign or design something new? What does that even look like? So as Diane started to work through her thinking, well, I'll just say we're in for a treat because I think there's some really interesting insights here. I'm excited to... Maybe excited is the wrong word, but I'm looking forward to sitting back a bit on this episode to ask questions and learn and I hope everyone listening will do the same. So Diane, I'll come back in now with you and where you just started on this topic of failure.

Tavenner: Thanks, Michael. Ooh, it's emotional. Let me start there. It presents such a dichotomy, and I'll start by saying, as you all know, I live in Silicon Valley, and honestly, if you're not careful living here, you will start to believe the mantras and literally billboards that we have here when you're driving around that tell you that failure is a great thing. There are so many tales of people who have "failed forward" and have gone from being a high school dropout to a billionaire, or have had multiple companies that have flopped and

then magically created a unicorn company. Everywhere you turn, there are stories about "failing" and how it just makes it seem like there's only upside to it.

Then Michael, there's the reality, and I don't know about you, but in my experience, and I'm fully in it right now in multiple places in my life, failure, it's embarrassing and it's scary, and it's something that I personally don't want to do or experience. When I am experiencing it, I'm struggling to figure out and convince myself that this is somehow going to serve me in the future. So calling back to those other stories, it just doesn't feel like that's real or true in the moment.

At the same time, I'm not sure how to innovate without experiencing failure. So I'm trying to figure out, as you know, I'm an innovator, that's what I do, that's what I like to do, that's what I believe in. So I'm trying to figure out how to hold these two conflicting ideas that seem to be in such tension and the emotions that go with them and hold that all at the same time.

Horn: Wow. Well, it's interesting because I come personally at this from a few directions. One is actually where you started, which is actually that venture capital investors, they like investing in individuals who have experienced a failure before and learned valuable lessons from it. And then I come at it from the personal standpoint and a lot of the self-help books and podcasts that I periodically devour on the topic, and a lot of these things I realized as I was listening to them, this was a few years ago actually, I was realizing while I was listening to a bunch of these that I couldn't actually name any failures I had had. So I stew on this topic all the time thinking, well, I must have had failures. The answer is, of course I do. There are tons of failures that I've had, Diane. Books not accepted by publishers, columns not accepted by media outlets.

More pernicious, I think, things I've said or written that were done in poor taste or with poor knowledge and offended people or maybe misled people I didn't mean to. Or you go back to your school days, like law student government elections, tennis matches, burning out as a pianist. I could list a ton. I guess in my head while I was struggling to think of these things, it's because I've constantly reframed them after the fact. They don't feel good during the time, but after the fact I try to reframe them as learnings and try to use them to help me be better. Or at least I've told myself or convinced myself of a narrative that maybe this failure, it's not about me. Maybe the outcomes aren't something that I can control. I can just control the process. I don't know what it is, but I think it's why I'm so drawn to this literature on testing and learning because it moves you first to a place of humility in reality. You can't know it all from the get-go, no one does.

But then it also allows you to move away from these spectacular crashes, if you will, from "big transformational innovations," and it moves you to this footing of fast failures that gets reframed as learning and stepping stones on a longer road to success. But at some level, Diane, I've also always gotten that failure in schools with students feels, well, really unacceptable at some level. It feels yucky. And it's something we hide from, whereas in say, those venture capital examples, or even me on the tennis court, if a business goes belly up or I lose a match, there's no two ways about it, the result is clear.

I guess that's where I want to land is I think one reason people have gotten so excited about pivots in business is it's the opportunity to change the business and try something new before you say, run out of money. But, yes, pivots can sometimes be small tweaks, but more often than not, they aren't simply a small change to what you're doing. They're really you now testing a fundamentally new hypothesis because the first one you had proved not to be true or not to be workable. Now of course, this new thing you're testing, it's informed from what you've learned, but Diane, it's still a fundamentally new set of hypotheses and that's difficult.

Tavenner: I'm so grateful that we have this space, Michael. I realize just starting to have a conversation with you, I'm feeling better. So thank you for that. Thank you for sharing, personally. I can imagine a lot of people don't think that you've ever failed at anything, and so I appreciate them.

Horn: Couldn't be further from the truth.

Tavenner: As you were talking and over the last couple weeks, I'm reflecting on what you're saying about schools and failing in schools. I'm realizing that some of the traits that I personally think define most Summit educators, and all the educators in the world that I know who are great, in many ways it's the traits that make us completely focused on the success of our students. In the case of Summit, from inception, our schools have always committed to 100% graduation and college readiness.

You know this, and most people know this, and before school starts every year, when we're getting ready for the year and reviewing our goals and our expectations, there is an inevitably and understandably a person who questions the possibility of 100% of students meeting these outcomes. In those moments, we, as a community and a culture, we get really concrete and we pull out a list of students and we ask ourselves, "Which student on this list are we ready and willing to call right now and their families and say, 'You know what? We only have a 90% goal this year and 10% of the kids aren't going to be graduating. And you're one of those.'"

As you might imagine, Michael, when we frame it that way and we ask ourselves that real question, no one is able or willing to make that call. So what happens in that moment is all of our energy and focus goes into figuring out how 100% of our students will graduate and be college ready. I think that's so important, and when I look back at my last 20 years, this is what has enabled us to hit that measure over and over and over again. So the challenge becomes, how do you get these same people to give up or "pivot" on something they're testing and trying because it isn't working? Giving up isn't in the DNA of people who are mission driven. This feels different to me from most businesses where innovation theory really derives from, I don't know, it just seems so much, I hate to say it, but colder and a little bit more, less high stakes. Maybe that's me, biased educator, but I'm just really curious about your take?

Horn: Yeah, well, first I'll say I think for the perspective of the entrepreneurs or innovators, venture capital firms, they assume failure to your point and don't realize the human cost of that. There is a human cost of time and livelihoods and so forth. That's a separate topic, perhaps, but I do think in any realm there is that human piece of it. Go back to

what I said earlier, in business compared to say, public schools, there are some big differences. Let's start with one. In business, there are certain forcing functions. Even then, to be clear, it's still hard to embrace this notion that we're just going to have to change everything to get the results we want. But at some fundamental level, businesses run out of money and they just can't keep going. In public education anyway, we don't really ever run out of money, and rarely do traditional public schools have to close, at least in this country.

Now, this is obviously different in schools of choice, if you will, independent schools for sure, but also public charter schools like the ones you operate. Of course, there are some public school district closures, places where consolidation is happening, or I'm thinking of Washington DC a few years ago, for example. But in the whole, if we're being honest, this is such a small number compared to the number of businesses where churn is frankly the name of the game. Just think about the restaurants that go in and out of business in your local community over a five-year period. And then I think there's another piece here, which is that businesses, for better or worse, they tend to be clearer about who their customer is and they listen to what they want.

That doesn't mean they always serve that customer well, but in education, it's much murkier and cloudier, I think. There's, of course, a constant debate about whether schools have even customers to begin with. If you say that they do, then there's a question of, well, who is your customer? And you have all these conversations around stakeholders and the like, but customer's often a dirty word in education. Perhaps unsurprisingly as a result, I think it's actually fair to say that many schools are pretty bad at listening to the families that they serve as a result. As you know, I was struck by this over and over again during COVID, and it's something you and I have discussed quite a bit, but families had legitimately very different sets of needs. Some needed food and schools to be open and more childcare and technology and the like, and other families just didn't. The time at home was a welcome respite, and they had what they needed.

I think it's districts struggled to serve either, I think it's fair to say, because at some level, they couldn't think about how to serve different constituencies within their district that might have different priorities and be sitting in vastly different circumstances and need, frankly, tailored and unique solutions to best serve them rather than a blanket one-size-fits-all set of offerings. Where I see it right now in my local school district is they try to change bell times for different schools and assume it's a one-size-fits-all solution and that all families should just fall in line with what they say, forget the fact that families have legitimately different working schedules.

Or our friend John Bailey, who we've had on the podcast a few times, recently had, I think a very stunning piece in the 74 where he suggested that the real reason, perhaps, that student performance slid so much wasn't actually traceable necessarily to whether a school district or state was open in person or not, but instead whether there was a live learning option for a child when they had to stay at home in quarantine. And that most schools just hadn't thought about what kids and families would need when they stayed at home. But I think this is all reflective of a lack of thinking about the job to be done, in my parlance, of how different families and children sit in very different circumstances needing to make progress in different ways at different times, Diane.

Tavenner: Michael, that is all really compelling to me, and I'm thinking just sitting in the seat of someone who has been in schools and lead schools for so long about this idea, I imagine at first a few people will have a little bit of a visceral reaction to the idea that we don't listen to our families and our students, because I think if you're in schools, you feel like you're listening all day long to families and students. But there's a difference between listening and then hearing what they're saying and then acting on it.

So I think that's where you're actually going here, and I just think about, I think we're probably, even in our schools, we regularly survey families and students and figuring out how to take all of that feedback and input and then incorporate it back into the model, and very importantly what you touched on, to meet the individual needs of so many different people in a system is extraordinarily challenging. As parents and families, I'm not sure we feel heard, even if the school thinks that it's trying to do that. So I think that all resonates with me.

The other thing that's coming up for me is, one of the things I think we do in schools very often is something you've alluded to throughout, which is we sort of narrate and explain after the fact what we learned from something and we don't do what we would call is validated learning. So I think this idea of validated learning has been so profound for us because when you do it, when you're really disciplined about actually making a hypothesis a thing, if we do this, we think this will happen, and then, if it does happen or it doesn't happen, you actually know that what you thought was going to make it happen is true or not. That process seems to be really absent and really critical and an important part of what we need to do in schools, because otherwise we're just explaining away over and over and over again what's already happened. I don't think that moves us forward.

Horn: It's interesting, Diane, and I think it gets to what I want to ask you, which is that in some ways we're explaining why education perhaps struggles to try things out, learn from the tests and then make changes. But just because we're explaining it, I don't think means we're excusing it. So I'm curious how we move forward from this reality that's different from the business contexts and some of these other contexts we've talked about, to doing this validated learning and then, yes, pivoting, that you're talking about?

Tavenner: Yeah, I'm so glad we're going this direction because this is who I like to be, who you like to be, who we like to be, which is solutions oriented. I've been thinking a lot about, all right, if this is our natural DNA to not really be innovators, but we want to innovate, how do we actually go about that? I have some thoughts about things that we can do in schools, and so I thought we could just talk through them. The first one being, I think start small. I think one of the things we do in schools is we pick off this big, giant, huge initiative, an entire new math curriculum, or a whole new way of doing things. One of the things I was thinking about is some of the places we've been successful in building the skills and practicing these innovative approaches is in smaller places that feel less high stakes.

So for example, what kicked this all off a few weeks ago is the pilot we're doing around how we actually meet, the leaders of our organizations meet, and how we share information and collaborate. It feels to me like that's a really good example of starting in

a place that's not right affecting kids. It's a place where it's important how we meet. As we talked about, those are expensive meetings, but it's maybe less, quite frankly, emotional. It's a meeting and so people are probably less tied to it. If it's not working, it's probably easier to move away and do something different. So that's my first idea, is start small, practice the behaviors that we've been talking about on something that feels less high stakes so you can actually build the muscle and the skill around doing this work.

I think the next thing that goes along with that then is to test real hypotheses. Again, we've talked about this a few times now, Michael, but you really, really have to start by saying, "If we do this, then we think this will happen," and then you have to do it. Of course, the next piece is you've got to measure it, and then you've got to come back at a set date and you've got to look at that data that you've measured to see if what you expected to happen will happen or did happen. If you set that date and that timeframe, then you have a moment where it's defined and decided that you're going to actually make this choice about pivoting or persevering. I think just knowing that that's coming and making a time for it is a big move here. I think if you don't do that, I suspect people will avoid it. They don't want to have to be the person who calls the meeting that says, "Oh, this isn't working."

So it will just continue to roll forward and it can continue to go as it is in the absence of that discipline around calling a meeting, deciding what you're going to do and knowing that it's going to happen on that day one way or the other. Then I just think in that meeting, having really good data and multiple perspectives is really important.

Then finally, I think leaving space for the emotion and the human part of this and being able to acknowledge that it feels really hard to fail, and grappling with those emotions, as we are today, so that you can hold them at the same time you're making a good decision about what to do next.

Horn: Let me ask you this last question as we wrap up here, which is, when you, and I don't like this word I guess, so I'm still having this aversion even though we've been talking about it, but when you failed in your pilot, if you will, around flattening the org structure and the expensive, as you were talking about, weekly standup meeting that you were trying with your leadership team, what did you do next? How did you pick up the pieces and not just say, "Okay, that didn't work, we're done?" You still had this challenge of making sure that information was more symmetrical across the organization and flattening the leadership and so forth. How did you go build something to go test next? Because it's not exactly easy. Maybe it's fun to be generative again, but it's not exactly easy to just come up with a new idea and a new set of hypotheses.

I'm curious what you all did. Was it in that meeting itself? Did you have a period of reflection and create something new? How do you create that next idea and those next set of hypotheses that you're going to go test if you agree you're not just shelving the pilot completely?

Tavenner: This is the most important question and moment, I think. I think the answer is something that we talk about all the time and in the moment, I don't think it's obvious

and I don't think what most people do. What we ended up doing was going back all the way back to what is the purpose of us meeting, literally? Why does this group meet? Should this group even meet? What are we trying to accomplish in these meetings? We had stated those objectives with our previous hypothesis and then we weren't hitting them, which is what the data was showing us. So going back to the original purpose was key, because I think what a lot of people do in that moment, and I saw it in our team, the natural instinct is to take what you've been doing and just tweak it. So instead of going back to the purpose, people just try to just evolve the thing that you've been doing without anchoring it in, no, what were you really trying to accomplish?

So instead of asking that question, people will just be like, "Well, the meeting was too short or too long, or on the right, wrong day, and so let's just tweak the thing we were doing, versus really asking ourselves, no, what do we believe will get us to meet that purpose that we originally set out?" That's what we ultimately did, Michael. But honestly, we had to give ourselves three meetings for that conversation. I think we all wanted it to be done in the one meeting. We came together, we decided that we needed to pivot, and then everyone thought, oh great, we've got 20 minutes left. Let's think of the next thing. No chance. So we really tried to come back the next week and do it. We didn't finish it. So we came back another week to do that, to get the next hypothesis. I think just giving ourselves that space and time and grounding in the purpose was really key.

Horn: It's an incredibly helpful place, I think, to leave it, which is really what just happens, you almost go back into that brainstorm process first principles and that time and space. I think you're right, incredibly important. Give you both individual time to generate ideas, but then as a group to coalesce around something that you're going to commit to and give a shot at and test and learn again. So I think we'll leave it there, a very raw conversation, but I think a very insightful one, and I would love to hear from listeners after this one, what they think. But before we leave completely, let's switch tacts, Diane. I'm just curious what you're reading or listening or watching right now?

Tavenner: Yeah, well, that brings warmth to my heart and a smile because over the holidays, one of the best parts of the holidays for me was reading the book, Thinking in Systems: A Primer, by Donella H. Meadows. The best part of reading it was getting to discuss it with my son and one of his classmates, who was staying with us over the holidays. As you know, and pretty much anyone who listens to us probably has figured out, I love systems, well, at least education and school systems. I love them. I'm a nerd and a geek about them. And this book was just so incredibly clear and it really advanced my thinking about systems. I found it to be invaluable and what a joy to be in a learning community and talking on about a book with some really inspiring young people. So that's on my list for this week. How about you, Michael?

Horn: Well, I'm going to add that to mine, but I'm midway through a bunch of books right now, so I feel like I'm not able to say much. But the one that I did finish was a forthcoming book on wellness for educators that I read in advance. I'll just say as we leave this conversation, the care of educators, the self-care, is an incredibly important topic, not just in the current circumstances, but also because it helps prepare educators to be at their best for our kids. I think it's an incredibly important one. The book did a lot on the

importance of the topic, the evidence for it, but also the importance of the systems aligning around this, not just an individual, like putting it on them, but there was also a lot on the practices that can help around yoga and meditation and much more. I've incorporated a few of the practices myself in my own daily routine, which has been fun. With that, we'll leave it there and just thank you all for joining us once again on Class Disrupted.