

Michael Horn: Hey Diane.

Diane Tavenner: Hey Michael.

Horn: Diane, it was so good to see you last week at a gathering to celebrate Summit's 20th anniversary, as well as your leadership of Summit, as folks who listen to this podcast know as you prepare to step down at the end of this year and Katie Chang takes over.

Tavenner: Michael, I feel so grateful to you and so many others who joined for such a unique and powerful gathering. Certainly to celebrate the 20 years, but also to really thoughtfully help build the social network and connections of Summit's next generation of leaders so they can carry forward.

Horn: And it was so thoughtful of you to do it. As you know, leadership isn't just what you do while you're in the chair, it's how you prepare for the next group to take over and keep that continuity and just the thought you had done around that. And then just assembling an incredible group of people with a really super thoughtful set of conversations. And of course, I had to miss part of it, so I was a little bit of jealous. But I wondered if it might be the jumping off point for today's conversation for our podcast, because as folks know, we started this in the months after COVID disrupted our schools, and we have remained hopeful that there will be a silver lining to the disruption that it caused.

And so I thought coming out of this week of there were so many people around you who have helped build Summit into what it is, and that you probably had a lot of opportunities to reflect and reminisce, maybe you would be open to sharing some of those reflections for us and in the hopes that they might inspire some educators and parents and policy makers in our audience to do more and be more for students. Are you game for that?

Tavenner: Absolutely, Michael. It was an incredible experience to have people gathered from all points in the history of Summit, which I would say tracks the charter movement, the ed reform movement, the personalized learning movement. And so there's so much to consider and I must say it's still running through my mind. So I would love to talk with you about it.

Horn: Perfect. Let's dive in. It really was a magical gathering. So let's start with this. You're a reflective person in general. Anyone listening to this podcast I think knows that by now. I'd love to hear some of the reflections you've had in thinking about the past 20 years and coming out of that week?

Tavenner: Well, I think the first one, and this showed up in the stories that were told while we're in person, and I got a beautiful box of letters from people from the whole history. And Michael, the thing that shows up the most is that we have always been focused on what's best for kids, that's the number one criteria we use to make every decision that we make. And we've talked about it here, it's come up a lot in our various conversations.

And what was clear to me is that that has been consistent for 20 years, and person after person told stories about the centering of students.

There's one story that I hadn't even remembered of early, early days when we were talking, we were in a conversation at Summit Prep about students, and one of the math teachers was like, "Well, these students aren't going to... Not all my students are going to pass my class." And apparently I went and printed out the class list and put it in front of the teacher and said, "All right, we'll circle which ones so we can call their parents right now and tell them they're not going to pass." And I guess I was a little jolt teen at the moment, but the concept being no, in October decide that some kids aren't going to pass, and yet we have an education system that really does that as a general rule. And maybe they don't intentionally do it, but through their actions they do. And so centering kids and committing to them really in everything we do was one of the biggest things that I think came out as something very consistent and unique that people don't experience other places.

I think the second thing was this combination of very high expectations for everyone, but combined with love and care, and again, through storytelling, this comes through over and over and over again is that you don't care for kids or people by lowering their expectations. You care for them by having really high expectations and then offering significant support to help them reach those high expectations, and that people are happiest when we have high expectations. And it really made me think about the last few years, Michael, and understandably so, I guess with COVID and whatnot, but I do think we've had a lowering of expectations just in general. And those stories were powerful reminders of none of us are going to be happy by not meeting a low bar.

And then the third one that is really present for me and was just so present and I think you experienced it, is we tend to, in our society, mythologize the single amazing leader, this superhero concept, and it's so not true. It's never been true at Summit. We have an incredible team of people who collectively lead together, who always have and will going forward. And I think you've got to see them all together in a place together and experience them, but a lot of people don't get to see that. You see the faith that's on the organization and just the idea that no single person can do these things alone or by themselves and they never do, and what it takes to invest in a group of leaders and their collaborative and collective nature to really move an organization forward. So that just felt like it was really profoundly on display as we spent the week together.

Horn: It really was, and it was so great to meet so many of the leaders because I knew a lot of your team a decade ago, I knew far less of them now, and it was great just to connect with them. They're a really diverse bunch and I mean that not just as surface level characteristics, but backgrounds, experiences, how they've come even into the country. It's just a really interesting collection of leaders with I think still an incredible amount of high expectations and care for kids like you talked about.

And then I love that upfront one of you printing out the roster and saying, "Okay, which ones?" Because as you know, I've started calling it the big lie that we tell ourselves about our education system as we're trying to respond to, "Learning loss," that we have a system that builds a learning loss by design. So unless we're prepared to reckon with

that, I think we're just telling ourselves... We're fooling ourselves in this process. But I guess it goes where I wanted to go next, which is those are reflections. How about some insights that you've now had from leading Summit over the past 20 years as you start to step back?

Tavener: This is such a good one, and I will go back to the intention behind this event, which really came from me studying and watching a lot of other successions over the last few years in other organizations in education, I guess in other organizations as well, but really focused in education and many of them not going well. A new leader coming in and not lasting very long, a new leader coming in and then having the old leader come back to replace them again shortly thereafter, just organizations imploding or falling apart under new leadership.

And so we really set about to study that and not want to repeat that. And so we were looking for positive deviance, so people who were doing things well and not having that happen as well as lessons learned. So through that study, one of the things that I realized was, first of all, again, there's not these magical mythical unicorn leaders out there who you just go and hire and then they pop into your organization and presto, everything's lovely. What I really found was the people who are best positioned to run the organizations are the people who've helped build it, assuming that you have built their capacity to be leaders, which is something we do certainly at Summit.

But then when I started engaging with our team, the pieces where they felt like they weren't ready were in the external, the social networks and the connections to all of the other organizations, which not surprisingly, I as the leader get more access to than people who are working more internally. And so we just really spent a lot of time and energy thinking about how to build those connections and those networks across organizations and across leaders, and do a really methodical transfer of social capital. And I know you and others around you have written extensively about the importance of this for our students. It turns out it's not only important for students. It's important throughout our lives. Right?

And so that's one of my insights which runs counter to, I would argue my experience, which was steeped in our American rugged individualism. You pull yourself up by your bootstraps and I felt lucky along the way that people helped me, but it was certainly wasn't methodical. It certainly wasn't systematic, it was lucky. And so that's a little bit long-winded but that is really on my mind as something important. And if we're not doing it for adults, we're probably not doing it for our kids either.

I think the second one is, and Michael we've talked about this, this should not come as a surprise to anyone, but one of my insights, and it continues to be, the power of assessment as a lever for change, or quite frankly to stay the same. And no matter where I travel in my thinking and analysis, I keep coming back to assessment really does drive so many decisions and behaviors in schools. And this past week I was working with some of the folks who have been leading Summit Learning for the last couple of years. And one of the things they noticed is the one part of Summit Learning that people don't really use is the rubric that we built, the masterful, incredible rubric, which in my mind is the heart of it, to do their scoring.

And it's because it doesn't line up with district or state assessments that are the big global assessments. And I'm like, "Oh my gosh." Literally, assessment drives everything and our assessments aren't aligned with what we want or what we care about in my view, and as we've talked about. And so if we want something different, we're going to have to tackle assessment. And I know there's a number of people who have realized that and are starting work there, but it's a mammoth task.

And then my third is, and again this is a long time in coming, but in general, theory and practice do not intersect in our work, which is so crazy to me because as we've talked about, the science of learning has evolved so much in the last 50 years and it's just not getting applied in schools and that's not the blame anyone. That is to suggest we have collectively not figured out how. We don't just have researchers throwing things over the fence and expecting educators to catch them and educators not catching them or not having the time or the ability, or the thing that's coming at them is completely impractical and unimplementable and there's no collaboration around how to do that.

And this was brought home to me in the conversation we had this past week. There was this beautiful moment where one of our school leaders who is newer to the organization was describing her experience with the habits of success, which are based on the building blocks. And in the same conversation, Brooke Stafford-Brizard was there and was almost brought to tears by just this description of educators taking this work and making it their own and implementing it. And she said, "It's one dimensional on the page, but that's not what it's ever intended to be. It should be in full dimension but that has to be done in collaboration with educators and you have to take it and make it work." And just so much more of that is needed, and this moment in time, not even in the space that I work, but the science of reading is just... This feels like the most urgent thing we should be doing in the country right now. Certainly not passing absurd parent bills of rights. We should be focused on making sure every kid can read.

Horn: Maybe a topic for a future week.

Tavener: Yeah.

Horn: But if we really care about rights, that's where it would start, I think. But in terms of the intersection of theory and practice, it's interesting because I think theory often gets lumped in with theoretical, which is devoid of reality, whereas theory, they're supposed to be very practical.

Tavener: Yes.

Horn: You do this, it causes that and therefore, like statements of gravity. It's a theory of what causes what and why and we don't connect those nearly enough to your point in practice. And I think the assessment point is really interesting as well to hear you reflect on that, Diane. And I think you're right. When I go around districts, and I... Less so these days, but I used to go around and see Summit Learning put into a lot of districts, and you're right, they were often putting the artifacts in frankly, but not the actual intention behind the bigger shift. And so it could get stripped, I think of its bigger value, which

frankly in my mind can't be put into place in just a very narrow... We're going to keep our schedules the same, we're going to keep our assessments the same and not tinker or not transform, really practice.

So I guess if those are the insights, maybe let's switch to lessons learned, things you thought you knew but you found out otherwise or something that you wish you had learned earlier. I guess it's a bit of a choose your own adventure here, how you want to answer it. But I'm curious, I think people would be curious, things you thought you knew or lessons that you've learned along the way?

Tavenner: Yeah, I think a big one for me Michael, is as I was reading through this box of letters and notes from people for over the 20 years, if I were doing one of those word bubbles, I think the biggest word that would pop out would be fierce. And that's a descriptor of me and fierce in a lot of different ways. And I think most people who know me know that I certainly am willing to fight for what I believe is right and most often fight for what I think is right for kids, but it was interesting to just read the word over and over and over again. And I think a lesson that I am learning, and I'm learning it with a lot of people, but certainly led by my good friend Antonio Saunders, is the cost of that, the cost of the fighting.

And what I mean by that is, as he says, if we're becoming expert in the thing that we don't want the world to be, it makes it really hard to be dreaming and designing the world that we want. And by that I mean if I'm becoming expert or am expert in fighting for kids, won't I just perpetuate a world that will be about fighting versus dreaming and designing for the world that I want? And there's just a lot of reflection. I would argue that we are dreaming and designing as well, and there's a lot of fight in what we do and a lot of time and energy. And I've thought a lot about that over the last several years of why is it that when you sign up to do good work for kids, that you also have to sign up to be personally attacked and in these nasty brawls, if you will? That just doesn't make a lot of sense.

Yeah. So I wonder. I guess my lesson learned is how might I play a role in just changing that dynamic? And this is certainly easier said than done, but I'm grappling with that one for sure.

Horn: Makes a lot of sense.

Tavenner: And then the other one will not come as any surprise because we talked about it very recently, but I just think we're so bad in education at the stopping of doing things that aren't working. We just hold onto things forever, no matter what. And you and I have talked about, is that because of nostalgia? Is that because of it's what's comfortable? I was thinking this past week over this... I think in general we think that career teachers are really beneficial, and I wonder what the downside of that is. You get into your career, you learn a way to do something and then you're expert at it and you do it for the next 20 or 30 years regardless of what might be best for kids.

And so I'm sure I just offended a whole bunch of people right there, because certainly not all teachers do that. They have all been changed, but they're... Again, I'm just going to point back to where we seem to be so stuck on reading right now. It's irrational to me. We have so many teachers in this country teaching reading in a way that we know does not work for kids. We have all the evidence we need and yet they keep doing it. I don't understand. So that. How do we get good at... And I'll be even more controversial. Some schools need to close and we're horrible at closing schools in America. We have no ability to do that, and so we got to figure out how to stop.

Horn: No, that all resonates for me. I think it's even worse when I see superintendents in the news defending the way that they're teaching reading, which is frankly not teaching reading. It's under this flawed idea of trying to get kids to love reading without teaching them how to read, and as you know, we tend to enjoy things that we're good at in life. So if you build the skill, enjoyment may come. But I guess the second piece of that, just in terms of how to stop doing things that occurs to me is, I think you're right, just the country trying to figure out what we're being nostalgic for is a really difficult piece of this that we just haven't cracked.

And maybe I'll tone down the controversy part of your statement about teachers just to say, I think the other piece of that is that teachers are speaking with their feet, if you will, which is they're saying, a lot of them are saying, "I'm not going to be a lifelong teacher. This is going to be a 10-year phase of my career. Maybe I'll come back to it in another 10 years." But I think we as a country as a result, are going to get forced into grappling with how do we reinvent a profession that we can't count on the same labor for a 30, 40 year career? And what happens if it's more fluid and how do you onboard and bring teachers up the curve quicker, leverage their expertise, but then acknowledge they may not be there for several decades? That might force us to grapple with this. So I guess that's the last piece is that I think educators may bring us into this reality as well.

Last question for me as we start to wrap up, which is, I'm curious. This is the opposite of the last question, which is something that you've had conviction around when you began leading Summit, when you got tapped. And it was so nice to sit with members of your board and hear the stories for how they found you and stuff, but what's something that you had conviction around when you began leading Summit and now you actually feel even stronger about than before?

Tavener: Such a good question, and I'll use the language I use now because I don't think it's the language I used then, but it's certainly the intent that I had then. I am more convicted than ever about focusing on students' ability to self-direct and drive their own learning, and here's the piece that goes with it. I think that has to be paired with personalization because you can't self-direct through a monolithic one-size-fits-all world and set of schools. And I would add in community, because I think sometimes what gets lost with self-direction and personalization is people think it's a solo act that you're just by yourself, and learning really is a team sport and a group experience. And so it's the combination of those three things in my mind. But at the end of the day, what's so clear to me is no one will care more about a student's experience in school and their achievements and what they learn than the student themselves, it's their life.

It's interesting, there's this funny story I have that I always turned back to when I got pregnant and I went to the doctor. I had been charting, and so I knew the exact day that I got pregnant. And for a variety of medical reasons, I had a different cycle and whatnot. So the doctors said, "Oh no, they calculated two weeks different from what..." And I tried to explain to them, "No, I know that I didn't get pregnant that day. I know it's this day." And they're like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, nice," but in the chart it was two weeks different. So I go through my entire pregnancy knowing that I... And sure enough, I deliver exactly when I think that I'm going to deliver, but not according to their two weeks off. And it occurred to me during that time, I was like, "Wow, I really have to be in charge of my own pregnancy here because these people are here to help me and they're well-intentioned and I think they care, but no one will ever care as much as I do. No one will know as much as I do about myself."

So I really started to see them in a different light in that way. And this is what I believe in and want for students and kids, is that they own their learning, they control their learning and we are there to help guide them and support them and give them what they need, but they are really driving it and it's a system that believes that they can do that and trust them to do that.

Horn: Yeah, it's a really, I think, awesome place to leave the conversation because it goes back honestly to the high versus low expectations for kids also, and the world isn't getting any simpler right now. And so maintaining those high expectations, and I love your book, Prepared, because that's what we're trying to ultimately do, is prepare kids to be able to enter that complex world and they're going to have to own not just their learning, but their health, their well-being, everything in that context.

So I think it's a great place to leave it. Maybe as we always do, something you're reading outside of the work or watching or whatever is going on right now that you'd like to share?

Tavener: Well, I might surprise you on this one, Michael. I don't know what's gotten into me, but this is my second economics book of the year, which is a little out of character for me. I've been reading Principles For Dealing With The Changing World Order: Why Nations Succeed and Fail by Ray Dalio. And I know he's very familiar to lots of people and lots of people have read a lot of the Principles book. This is my first one. I am fascinated by this book. It just feels like it's making a lot of sense of our world to me. I am constantly struggling because it's definitely... All the research in it is based on averages, which I have been turned away from averages by our good friend Todd Rose. But in this particular case, it seems to be appropriate.

What I do like about it is it approaches the way you should be learning history, which is these big themes and trends and you establish a knowledge of that and then hang the details on it, which is not the way we generally teach history. And so I like that approach to it and I just am seeing... making so many connections and it really is useful and helpful for me to think about just where we are in the economic cycles right now in our country, in our world, and how that impacts our daily experiences and where we might be going. So fascinating. So curious for me to be doing that, but I am. How about you?

Horn:

Well, maybe I'm surprising you too because I'm staying on my fiction kick. So maybe we've just flipped [inaudible 00:26:55] Yeah, exactly. So I just finished reading V.V. Ganeshananthan's book, *Brotherless Night* a few weeks ago. And the author is known by her friends actually as Sugi, not V.V. And she happens to be one of my best friends dating back to middle and high school, Diane, and Sugi wrote a... It's a work of historical fiction. It chronicles some of the really complicated storylines from the Sri Lankan Civil War. She's Tamil and part of the diaspora that grew up in the United States, but it's situated around a main female character who's Tamil in the part of the country where Sugi is from.

And I will say this, I really enjoyed her first book, *Love Marriage*, but I thought this one far exceeded it and was just an absolute masterpiece. It is incredibly intense. I had to put it down many times and just step away from it because there's... and there's a lot of depth to it in cause for reflection. But I will say the *New York Times Book Review* agreed because they actually put it on the cover of their print issue a couple months back, which was really cool to see. So highly recommend that, but I will also say just I thank you Diane throughout this conversation for sharing so much as you've had a chance to reflect over 20 years of lessons learned, and I look forward to hearing from listeners their thoughts as well on this one. And just thanks to all of you for once again listening to this episode of *Class Disrupted*.