

Article 19 - Michael Mangos Tamman Check In Transcript

00:00:25

Marty:

Hello and welcome to Article 19. My name is Marty Molloy. President of Tamman and I am the host of our conversation today. I am joined by my co-host Kristen Witucki, author, teacher, mentor, and I am very happy to say colleague. And I'm also joined today by my former co-host Michael Mangos.

Michael:

Hello.

Marty:

Hello, Michael. He's ready to jump in right away. We're going to talk to Michael about what his executive journey has been, what's next for him, why he's my former co-host, and we'll talk about accessibility and maybe even some other technological things beyond that. But to set the stage for folks, last year or so, little over last year, Mike stepped back from his ownership and his CEO role at Tamman to focus on health, family, and to pursue some new startup opportunities. Mike still supports Tamman as a senior solutions architect and he will always have a place at Tamman as one of its cofounders and people we love the most. But we wanted to bring Mike on to talk about transitions and evolutions, making hard decisions, and what it means to go from 100 miles per hour to something a lot slower, especially as a leader, learning to rebalance life. So, we'll also be getting into some of the other things that I mentioned. If anyone who's ever listened to Article 19 knows, Mike and I have a tendency to diverge into who knows where paths, so it will not surprise me that this becomes a two-, three-, or four-part Article 19 series.

Michael:

I think Marty, we affectionally call that meandering.

Marty:

Lots of meandering. As was traditional on Article 19, I have a couple of fake facts about Mike. Fake fact number one, as CEO, he worked so late into the night that he's actually slept on the couch on the office an equivalent of six and a half years. Another fake fact about Mike is he is the person responsible for the hip trend of concert goers wearing big earplugs at concerts because he looked so damn cool in them at the Green Day concert in 2003. And finally, the last fake fact about Mike is he wanted to originally name Tamman Hyper Mega Global Enterprise Inc., but he felt it didn't convey the grandeur and scale he was really going for. As with all fake facts, these in particular have a lot of truth to them. Is there anything you wanted to add to any of those, Mike?

Michael:

No, no, but the company name was touch and go there for more than a hot minute.

Kristen:

Do you remember what some of the other original –

00:02:51

Michael:

I do, but I'm too embarrassed to speak them on air. The amount of either hubris or way too much aspiration or desperation in all of those names. It turned out that concatenating Jeff's name and my name into a single, simple name that is Google-able and didn't resolve into anything else was the smartest thing we could have done.

Marty:

I do have a Google alert for Tamman and what I often get when it's not anything of ours is some kind of Chromium mining company. I don't know if you've ever looked into that, I just always found that to be funny.

Michael:

So, remember, the company was founded in 2007. Not that the internet was in its infancy, but it certainly didn't have the breadth and reach of every piece of human knowledge ever created in one place. Not much came up. There was somebody, I won't name him because we tried to buy the domain name from him for a long time, but the tam man, he would sometimes come up, but he did not have a big internet presence, for what it's worth.

Marty:

As so many Canadians do not have still to this day.

Michael:

Don't rag on the Canadians.

Marty:

So, let's jump in and set the stage a little bit. You just mentioned you started Tamman with Jeff Tamburino in 2007 and you were really off and running from day one. You had been running previously.

Michael:

For context, for listeners, most of them would not know, Jeff and I each had our own businesses and I liked to refer to us as we were tech mercenaries. Out there doing jobs for companies, for individuals. Sometimes it was desktop support for a graphic designer working out of their house and sometimes it was going into a big enterprise with a large in-house agency and we had a lot of clients like that. And so, when we started the company, it's not like we started from absolute zero. It built truly cottage industry style to the point when Jeff and I started the company, we wanted to commit to ourselves let's actually make a run at growing a company. Not just running a small business where we're sole operators independently and sort of helping each other out, but can we hire people, grow it, and build a brand. And maybe even make something that is worth something someday to sell. It transitioned to that point from a way to make money each year to a way to build an investment in a business over time. Not quite serial entrepreneurship but like becoming a retirement business where you could potentially build it to sell it and retire from it. It's a different mindset, a different strategy. And so, we were ready for that at that point, having been in business for ourselves for many years prior to Tamman.

Marty:

So, in those early days, just from a standpoint of running a business, what's something that really surprised you? Especially from going from a solo operator, and you grew fairly quickly. You came in with an employee. What was that like then, in terms of the difference?

Michael:

You mean besides the scary factor where you just want to barf every day wondering how you're going to make it?

Marty:

No, tell me about the scary factor.

00:05:44

Michael:

Look, it's just I think this will make sense to anybody who has worked for themselves and have had to hustle for each dollar each week. A lot of people don't understand this if they've not worked for themselves. There's a freedom where you get to direct how you spend your day but there is the constant pressure of, I have to be finding more revenue. I have to find new clients. I have to deliver. You never know if you're going to have work tomorrow and so you take whatever jobs you can have today and then sometimes you go like I did prior to Tamman, three years of 80-hour weeks because I didn't know if the following week was going to have any money in it. It's hard to change the groove, so out of a 28-year long career, I've only spent cumulatively five years out of a 28-year long career, I was working for somebody else. That wasn't altogether all front either, that kind of was interspersed, so I really always had sort of from the very beginning an entrepreneurial bent on how I approached work and I think that has served me well but that has created some other trappings like never wanting to turn down a job. That's a thing I had to learn along the way, a little later in Tamman's history but early on wondering gosh, if we're going to start this company and we're going to start off with benefits and our first employee on day one, somebody that I hired who I met in Japan when I lived there, it adds to the pressure. It's not just I have to pay my own bills and manage my own money, now I have to manage the money to ensure that somebody else has consistent income. One of the things that my father always used to impress upon me is like the owner of the business eats last, they take the money last and so your employees have to get paid first. And so that created a pressure I didn't really have to deal with prior to starting Tamman with Jeff. And so that became a little nerve-wracking.

Marty:

I was only joking about that fake fact, about you sleeping on the couch six and a half years but as with all of those, there was a kernel of truth of where I was –

Michael:

Could have been a year.

Marty:

You were putting in some really hard hours for a long time for I'm sure that reason and wanting to deliver for your clients and everything else. I've heard you talk about and use this analogy before that I think is really apropos, of a burner mentality. You only have so much gas to light the burner. Can you describe what that means?

Michael:

Sure, many people know it but if people don't know it, this idea that you've got a stove, you've got four burners. There's only a fixed maximum amount of gas you can feed to these four gas burners right, coming through one pipe. So, if you turn them all on halfway, you're going to get what you expect heat-

wise out of each of those burners. But if you turn one all the way up, you have to turn something else down, right? You just don't have enough gas to turn them all on at 100 percent. Each burner represents one aspect of life. You've got health, family, friends, and work. If you turn work to 100 percent, you're going to have literally nothing left for the others. I went through many years, before and during Tamman, where I turned up the work burner to 90 or 95 percent. Before I was married, I was able to sacrifice friends and family and I would have five percent for health, maybe. And then once I got married, I'm like well I've got to turn family at least to 10 percent, so I guess health is going to zero, and work stays at 90. That was sustainable when I was in my 30s and when I hit my 40s, it was no longer sustainable. I had to start rebalancing. Part of the strategy to rebalance was to grow Tamman bigger, ironically. Because there's an inflection point in any size organization, right, and there's a few of them, there's not just one. But there's a point at which you go from being the person who's doing everything to the person who's maybe in charge of everything, to the person who's just in charge of other people who are in charge of things. And the further away you get from the doing all the things, the more you have control over how much you put into that work burner because you can distribute that load and all you need to do is be clever and or skilled at managing your time and managing delegation.

00:09:34

Marty:

Do you find in your travels, and I know you've been a member of many different peer groups before and other things, do you find that most business owners in your circles are able to effectively make that transition from being the technician, from being the person, doing that great thing, whatever that is for them, to managing people who are managing people to do that great thing?

Michael:

I don't know. I think without speaking for others –

Marty:

Even though that's exactly what I asked you to do.

Michael:

Well, I'm going to start by just speaking for myself. For me, I was very eager to learn those skills. They didn't come naturally. I had no muscle memory for any of them. And over a 14-year period of running Tamman from Jeff and me to our first employee, to 50 plus people, I gave myself an MBA. It just happened. I had to learn about all the things you'd think you'd have to learn about, right? Like finance, and legal, and righting contracts, and hiring and firing, and performance management. All I never had to do when I worked for myself as a solopreneur. But then I also did learn other things that people don't often think about, which was I had to learn how to manage my time very differently. Each stage of Tamman as it grew, put greater and greater demands on the techniques I used to do time management and then I had to figure out what are my alternatives, because this isn't sustainable or growable. Try new techniques, and that's not just hiring another person, that's changing the way that I thought about my own time and my own effort. How do I value my own time? I had to learn how to value my time. Just even that alone. And I think of all the people I've met, now speaking for others, I don't think it's a matter of people do it or don't do it, people are capable or not capable of it. Do you want to learn that and invest in it and it doesn't happen overnight and it can take a lot of failures. We've had a previous podcast, Marty, if they weren't public, they were couch conversations late at night, you and me, talking about failure and how many failures do you have to make before you finally learn the thing or find the path through. It doesn't always have to be like I tried seven things and none of them worked for me or

this business or this situation, but maybe this eight one will. It's persistence. It comes down to grit. Grit is required to grow yourself in the situation, or it was for me.

00:11:57

Marty:

So, you were someone who was so – your identity was Tamman. Quite literally, we have always said you are the man in Tamman, right?

Michael:

Yes, figuratively and literally.

Marty:

Figuratively and literally, right? So, can you talk to us and the listeners by extension, a little bit about how scary and just sort of what your thinking was around changing where you were leveling those burners and stepping away from this company that you built? And you weren't stepping away to sell it because you're retiring, you weren't stepping away because something bad happened, you weren't stepping away because the FCC forced you or some other thing.

Michael:

Unfortunately, there's not a neat answer to that question. It was that I was ready for a next chapter. I had grown a lot in my role at Tamman. My whole intention for the last I would say five or six years of the company was can I make this run without me? Not because I was trying to get out, I really wasn't. I just wanted to take the pressure off so I could get to balancing the burners. That was the next thing that I decided I wanted to learn how to do. I learned how to do all these things in running a business. Being successful in consulting for clients. Creating value for customers or for Tamman. I also love developing people and mentoring and coaching and those things I got to do all of that in Tamman. I'm not saying I got perfect but I definitely grew and I saw the fruit of that investment pay off over time where I could see it working but I also knew that I still wasn't turning down the work burner. All those things that I was growing in were all in the work burner and I wasn't really learning how to be a better dad. I wasn't really learning how to be a better husband. I wasn't really connecting with my friends any better. I lost friendships not because of problems or dramas, but because of atrophy.

Kristen:

In fairness, I feel like we grew closer because I was not working with you and on that burner, but yeah.

Michael:

Well, that only happened until I put you in the work bucket. So, I felt like as some family members, my immediate family was now struggling with their own health issues and they were trying to learn how to navigate those things, I wasn't having my own health issues necessarily, I could easily dismiss my own healthcare concerns, but as my wife and my children are now experiencing things, nothing life threatening, but developing things, and they didn't quite know how to navigate them, and realizing that I've learned all these tools on how to manage stuff and I could actually apply some of that effort and that learning to managing my family, and I wanted to do that. That became a goal. And so, I spent years building up to that opportunity to focus on them and then I felt like I hit a point in 2021 where I'm like actually I think Tamman is running great. We've got great people in place. Operationally it was running well. I could have stayed and probably just let it continue to play out and I could have turned down the work burner a little bit and slowly pulled myself away, but I also know myself and I know that I love

working and it's not working that I love, I love solving problems. I love continuous learning. I love hunting and scoring the hunt. That's both from a sales perspective but also from a solutions perspective.

00:15:07

Marty:

I'd actually say you were always far more driven in the times that I've worked with you from the solutions end and when I came to Tamman, part of it was to take some of that load off among other people as well, and all I saw as you looking and going well, I now have some time, I'm going to fill it with the next solution that I can find for someone, and you really never were able to lower that burner because you were driven. You enjoyed aspects of it. So that's where I want to dig in a little deeper of did you come to that point where you just said if I'm going to be the dad I want to be, if I'm going to be the husband I want to be, then I have to step away?

Michael:

Yeah, totally. I think that was really what pushed me over the edge. And again, not like a cliff, but it pushed me over that line. Because it wasn't a freefall after that. Well, it felt a little freefall-y at first, but the idea that if I'm going to make a real change, sometimes, this goes back to Aristotelian philosophy, right, that –

Marty:

Go deep, brother. Go deep.

Michael:

That sometimes if your pendulum is off by a little bit, you can push it a little bit back. But when your pendulum's way off to one side, the only way to bring it to center is to go to the other extreme for a bit and let it settle in the middle. And I felt like I just had been incrementally trying to nudge it back to center but I was so far off to the left that I just couldn't push it back to middle. And so, I had to kind of take this more extreme approach and say maybe I need to step away, like really step away, and move it over. And maybe you could chalk it up to a failing of not figuring out how to balance those things, right, but that's what I did and I settled in the middle and I feel like I'm there.

Marty:

So, let's talk about those early days of you made this hard decision. You said it didn't feel like falling off a cliff, but then it sometimes kind of did. How long did that feeling oh God, oh God, I don't know what's happening, how long did that last for you?

Michael:

That's a good question. I don't know if I have an exact date but my gut tells me it was six months.

Marty:

Wow, that long. Really?

Michael:

Yeah. It wasn't like six months and then all of a sudden, I woke up one day and like I feel fine. But it was that feeling didn't really subside in a way where I wasn't noticing it anymore for a half a year.

Marty:

Were there strategies that you were employing though, like did you take the same approach as sort of like failing and trying different things or did you have a bit of a plan to say I'm going to create some discipline, I have to find this new path that doesn't include finding solutions for clients?

00:17:48

Michael:

Yeah, no, that's a great question. There were two things that I did. First, I established a set of parameters for work. There's things that I'm not going to get involved in unless somebody raises their hand, and I'll commit to myself that I will only do X amount for it. I'm happy to do meetings and conversations but specifically I don't want to step in to solve a thing personally. I need to see my role as coach or consultant and not a doer. That was always a problem at Tamman anyway, because like as much as I try to delegate things to managers, I also would just jump in and start doing things and that sometimes messes up the flow. It doesn't allow people to grow in their own role and their own professionalism or careers or skills, because I would sometimes come in and steal the opportunity and that wasn't fair. I look back, I feel back about all those times I did that. Because it wasn't intentional. I just loved making rain; you know. Having fun and solving problems and sometimes not realizing that me having fun and or creating a solution could inadvertently impact somebody else's opportunity and it was shown to me in the year before I sold Tamman that I was doing that, not all the time, might even have been you that showed me that Marty, but somebody helped me realize that – I wish I can remember who it was and –

Marty:

I'll take the credit. That's fine.

Michael:

But it made me reevaluate a lot of my interactions and kind of a pause a little more. But it still wasn't enough. I still needed to step out and then be a consultant back to the thing rather than be in the center of the thing.

Marty:

Redefine your role for yourself. Because in fairness, you didn't stop working at Tamman in your role as CEO and do nothing.

Michael:

No, I was almost full time. For the first three, four months, I was still full time at Tamman.

Marty:

Yeah, that's for sure. Yeah.

Michael:

But I had to change my role. That was the first thing I did. Create parameters around a new role for myself and decide how the interaction was going to work. And by totally redefining the role and taking a new job within Tamman, is what I think started the process. But there's another key thing that I did, which I won't take full credit for it, I kind of stole it from Michael Michalowicz's book, Profit First, which I'm not subscribing to the profit first method entirely, but the point there is that he says in a business, you take the profit, say I need to get a 10 percent profit from the business, you remove that from the

revenues first and then the company has to operate on whatever is left. I don't know if I totally agree with him, but I took the strategy, the concept, and I said if the goal here is to turn up the family burner, then I'm going to decide what I'm carving out of my time for the family first. Work has to fit in with whatever is left, and if health becomes a thing, I don't steal that from the family time. I steal it from the work time. And so suddenly now I have a burner that I put a minimum limiter on family. It can't go below 30 percent. It can go above it but it can't go below that amount which meant that work can never go above 70 and if I have a commitment to my own health, that health is also going to get a certain amount so then work kind of can't go above a certain thing. It was really different. I don't think I could have done that in my old role as CEO of Tamman, but I could do it as a consultant at Tamman.

00:20:55

Marty:

You also jumped into a new opportunity, one in the startup world, and the way you had built Tamman, you'd certainly been around startups, you had helped startups, you consulted with startups, but now you were in a very different space with a limited role as you just described, in a startup world. Can you talk a little bit about some of your learnings and some of the big headline takeaways that you had from where you've been in this startup world?

Michael:

Yeah. First of all, I didn't really start in the startup world until almost six months after the paperwork was completed for my exit from Tamman. Maybe that's why I also started to feel different around six months, I don't know. It was about six months later and I was an early investor in a tech startup called Kith and Kin, still there by the way, we're still here doing our thing as of the recording of this podcast, we exist. Which I think is pretty good by the way. It's like three years in this tech startup in the consumer healthcare space still exists so we're already have lasted longer and done more with less money than 90 percent of the other entrants into our market. I feel great about that. But needless to say, early on before I sold Tamman, I was an early investor into the company and I kind of wanted to know how my investment was going so I invited the CEO out to dinner. We went out, caught up on what was happening, and they had just lost their chief technology officer. I was like well, I'm not sure I'm a CTO, but I can do some CTO-like things, but I also have a lot of knowledge on how to build stuff and products and run a company, do you need my help? And she was like yeah, actually, that would be great. So, I joined and then suddenly we started really solving problems and I got to jump back into it again.

Marty:

But with those parameters still very much in place, right?

Michael:

Correct. And that's what I was going to say was that starting with Tamman where there's 14 years of muscle memory on how to operate and all things that I did, it would have been really hard. Would have been impossible and I just proved it was impossible for me to correct my behavior. But now six months of practice at a new model where I had limits on how much work can take out of the gas on the stove, and now I'm going to go in on a part time capacity in a tech startup, it was easy to keep the limits in place and still continue to work with Tamman, by the way. I could kind of do all of it. But I knew that before a certain hour of the morning, I wouldn't be working, and I had to be done at a certain time and I had certain activities with the kids, sports, and healthcare appointments, and things like that, and school things that all became the thing that like work has to fit around these other things because they're all top billing. It was easier to slowly dial work back into a new model, this is the pendulum swing where I

swung the pendulum to the other side, to the far right, for six months, and then when I was ready for that next professional endeavor, it settled into the middle and I was actually able to create a balance.

Marty:

I saw that. I saw that balance that was created and there was a lot of times where we would meet and afterwards, someone would say how's Mike doing and I would say he's so happy, he's so relaxed, he looks better than I've seen him in so long. And then you shaved. We want the beard back.

00:24:02

Michael:

I shaved the beard. Many years I had a beard. Although Marty, I will say. I want to put a caveat to all of this, right. Because I do want to just acknowledge that I became incredibly lucky to be able to afford to do this. Not everyone can afford to walk away from a job and then rebalance their life around a part time work schedule. I would like to believe that that was a product of a lot of hard work and good decisions and a heck of a lot of luck over 14 years. I do really in full earnestness believe that the luck played a biggest part and I just had to sort of manage the luck the best I could into whatever stuff I could turn it into. Because people have asked me for advice in the past on how do I get what you have, Mike, and honestly, it's a lot of luck. It's like 20 percent is like really intelligent management. You've got to make good choices. And I do believe, also, just like you could call it karma, although my aunt likes to say you make your own luck, right. I'd like to believe that I made my own luck, but I didn't start with no luck. So, it's hard for me to say how you get to that work life balance if you don't have a substantial amount of money. It's life changing money but it's enough. I could focus on myself and my family and not worry about finding a job tomorrow.

Marty:

Do you feel guilty about that?

Michael:

Yeah. A lot.

Marty:

This is not a pre-prepared question but I'm just looking at you as we speak and –

Michael:

I'm crossing my arms and I'm sitting back in my chair.

Marty:

Let's explore that, Mr. Mangos. Why do you feel guilty about that? I would say that you shouldn't. And so let me put my cards out on the table. Yeah, sure, there's always some interesting benefits and privilege that you may or may not be born with. Both of your parents being in the advertising agency world and giving you that foundation and understanding entrepreneurship and giving you the confidence and the first steps, but you took advantage of all of those things. There's a lot of folks that would have squandered quite a bit of it and I can say that it's not like you were handed anything. You worked your way through Drexel. You earned your 4.0 at Drexel the hard way and through a lot of –

Michael:

And had to pay all the bills. I didn't have anybody funding my college education. But that's not the same. I mean, I still had very, very supportive family. I had a great set of supportive friends. My parents worked hard to make sure that I got to go to a top 10 school in the state, public school in the state. And so, they worked hard to make sure that I got all those foundational elements but I think you're asking me why I feel guilty. If I can unpack that for a second. I don't know if I'd say guilt but maybe it's I feel a little shameful because I feel like a part of it, I earned, but I know that I didn't earn it alone. It happens always on the backs of others. We hired a lot of people. I'd like to think that I made decent hiring choices over the years, decent firing choices over the years, and that decision needed to be made too. But ultimately, I brought people into the company to help me create that value. I'd like to think that I paid people fairly or sometimes more than fairly, tried to make an amazing set of benefits because I believed that people didn't need to be worrying about their healthcare or other things. So, there was a set of principles I ran the company on but then comes down to partly why I think I feel sheepish sometimes about this. Is that I'm a closeted socialist. I'm not really a socialist, but within me is a nonprofit social worker who just masquerades around as a capitalist.

00:27:30

Marty:

I have always said that about you.

Michael:

I know.

Marty:

Without a doubt.

Michael:

And so, I feel like I want to help create these kinds of opportunities for anybody who wants them, but it's hard. We live in a fundamentally unfair society and there are people who can work through it and there are people who struggle to work through it and there are people who don't care and don't try. I'm not saying that everybody is going to get the same things, but I think we still, even for people who want it and work for it, they often can't succeed at what I got because of those general sort of inequities. And that's maybe why I feel bad about it.

Marty:

And so, I think that's a perfect segue into the next set of questions I want to talk to you about, and that is you were the person who set the vision and made the decision that Tamman would dedicate itself to digital accessibility and so we talked about inequity. Let's talk about digital accessibility. You built Tamman up from really not having a basis in that, because frankly Tamman was started as an IT firm, it went through a lot of iterations which people can look up and find up more about that if they want, but I'm curious, now that you've stepped away from Tamman and saw the world from the other side of the fence, when we're in digital accessibility world and we're talking about it all the time and we're thinking about it constantly and talking to clients and helping them problem solve around ways in which they can be more accessible, what changed, if anything, in your view of the accessibility landscape? Pick your place, from the startup mentality, from just not being steeped in it day in and day out, I mean I really want to explore some of the things that you noticed and saw stepping away from accessibility at Tamman.

Michael:

Yeah, so I don't intersect with it as often as I think I should. Not because of me but because there still is a fundamental lack of commitment or awareness or appreciation –

Marty:

All of the above.

00:29:26

Michael:

All of the above. Just like for all the factors that have made digital accessibility something that wasn't focused on for the first 33 years of the ADA, right, those things still exist. And I guess when I was at Tamman, we knew there was a big gap, but because we were well-steeped in the people working on and in digital accessibility, I guess I maybe got to the belief that there were more people working on it than maybe actually are. And having stepped out and then worked in a startup as well as with other companies doing some small limited consulting engagements here and there, realizing that I think sort of two things, there is a greater percentage of awareness than before we started on this journey ourselves at Tamman. I think there's more general awareness that digital accessibility exists. It's a phrase or a label. So that's good, but not clearly sufficient. But then I'm also surprised by an even greater dearth of commitment or action in organizations toward digital accessibility. I think at Tamman, we ended up just getting clients or meeting people that knew that they had to do something and were eager to start to learn or needed to start working on it, but rather I'm just seeing so many companies that we wouldn't have gotten introduced to at Tamman because they're not working on it, and realizing oh, they're all not working on this. This is still a big problem.

Kristen:

Just like my life outside of Tamman. They're all still – I'm in Tamman and I'm like this is all extreme we're certainly moving and I'll go on someone else's website and find things labeled poorly or I'll email customer service and ask to help fix the problem and say well, the reason this doesn't work is blah, blah, blah and I know they completely ignored the whole second part and just put out the fire so it's definitely not as prevalent as we would like to think.

Michael:

Yeah, right. You said it perfectly. And it's not just websites, Kristen, it's that, but it's also literally everything else.

Kristen:

Yes, it is everything else.

Michael:

And I think websites being sort of the breakwater for where this could be worked on within companies, you get past the public facing website and you realize that's all they did, there's nothing in the company, they're not supporting employees, and often not because they don't care, often times they don't even know what they're supposed to do. They don't even know who should be picking up that mantle in the company, particularly if it's a company bigger than a few hundred people. There isn't really anyone who's really sure who's responsibility it is.

Marty:

So, I'm curious, specifically in the startup space, because you and I haven't really talked about this. You had the opportunity to engage with external investors and I know you were up in New York, and places like that, did accessibility ever even cross the mind of any of the many, many investors you've talked to within the startup community? Is that something that you found people even had awareness around specifically from that lens or not really?

Michael:

Yeah, I think that's where I was saying like when I would introduce myself to folks and of course the thing they're most interested in is not that I happen to also have expertise in digital accessibility, but they want to know about my tech startup chops, can I program, can I run a team, do I know finance, how do I run my small business, but I would also punctuate whatever I said about my background with and I'm also an expert in digital accessibility and I consult on it and that's where I was surprised by the number of people who are oh cool, yeah, and they would know something about it.

Marty:

That's great.

00:32:57

Michael:

That's where like that's cool, because that didn't used to happen, but then if the conversation went even past that at all, even one sentence past that, they're not doing anything about it, they don't really have a plan, they know what it is. Cool. And nobody's actually deciding we should do something about this. I'm not trying to be critical of any of these folks I've met, I just think that that's still where we are as a corporate community. We're still at that point.

Marty:

Let me then ask you about your next steps, right. I mean with all of the different opportunities that you may have and the different hats that you may wear, you will not be the head of a digital accessibility consultancy or anything similar, but you will be building. Whether it's teams or products or whatever. Do you think in that role, you will be able to convince or continue to have a commitment to accessibility in a way that I know you want to, but do you think you'll be able to do that with some of these next steps, whatever they may be?

Michael:

That's a great question and I think the answer is I will be able to do in part but I will not be able to do it in full.

Marty:

That is fair and sad.

Michael:

Well, it is. I mean, what I can say is our current codebase at Kith and Kin, not that I want to put us in the hotseat, but I know we're not digitally accessible in the product. I did not design and build our current production version. We are about to begin a complete rebuild because I want to get to scalability and reachability, I want to be able to –

Marty:

You had other priorities that were more important for where you were –

Michael:

It's not that I did, it's just that the company didn't know how to do that stuff with the original members.

Marty:

And the investment coming in wanted certain things. They prioritized certain things as well.

Michael:

Well, first of all, given if everybody three years ago at Kith and Kin knew exactly what digital accessibility was and how to achieve it, I don't think they would have had the money to do it. Accessibility doesn't always have to cost more but it does cost something more. It's not zero, right? And so, when you're making choices between do, we do even basic analytics on our users or do we do digital accessibility? You're like well, we can't survive as a company if we don't have analytics to tell a story to an investor. We don't want to leave users behind, but how do we make that choice? Because if we choose digital accessibility, you're literally saying we're not going to get to stage two. And so, I'm not proud of that fact but it's kind of how do you do that? As I've been working on, we've been designing, writing requirements and designing for our version two for Kith and Kin for the better part of this year so far, since January, and in all of that, I've been working with our head of UX to make sure that everything is digitally accessible on the design layer, so shifting left. I've also been working with our tech partner to make sure that we get people who at least either know accessibility on the technical side or can be coached into doing it. And so, it's in the plan to build it into our version two, but there's no going back, otherwise there would be so much rewrite required for version one, it's really what we're doing for version two. It's exactly what I'm doing. I'm not only writing for accessibility, but it's one of the core tenets of what we're going to do. And that comes from a couple of reasons, right, one, I think it's the right thing to do, but beyond that, I know that when we try to sell to corporate partners, let's say we want a big insurance firm in Philadelphia to license this as a per employee per month benefit, or maybe they even want to offer it to their members who have insurance through them, if we want to get them as a partner, they're going to have some phrase or clause in their purchasing agreement that says we have to be a digitally accessible platform. We have to meet certain standards like the WCAG 2.1 AA and so because I know that's coming, I'm preparing for it. I wish other companies would see that that's a requirement and see it coming, but it's not universal yet that companies are only buying or licensing products or benefits that are accessible. That's still not universal but I know that there'll be key partners that we're going to want to penetrate or get in with that this will become a requirement for them if it's not now, in the next couple of years. Because I think that's how this is going to get in first. That's how digital accessibility is going to spread because companies are saying we don't want the liability, we're not going to require, not just to say accessibility is the responsibility of the vendor, but to actually say we can't license it until you can demonstrate that you've met this requirement. And I think that's what's going to drive things. I'm not seeing it as much as I thought I would but I think as a startup, people aren't asking that question, yet. They're asking are we HIPAA compliant? We just got to HIPAA compliance in the last month or two. What they don't tell you is they'll give you the first no, you don't know how many nos are behind the first no. The next no is going to be something else. The third or fourth no down the line is going to be you're not digitally accessible. I'm preparing for it.

00:37:32

Marty:

I have to ask the question that I'm pretty sure every podcast on every subject is asking in some form or another, how will AI affect all of this? Mike, talk to us about artificial intelligence or machine learning. What role does it play in your future endeavors? Again, solving, building, whatever they may be.

Michael:

Yeah, I mean gosh, what part is AI not going to play in that? There's been a complete ground shift, right? Chat GPT-4 sort of changed everything. It doesn't do everything, it's not universal, but it sort of opened up the possibility or it unlocked this potential for AI or people's impression of the potential of AI. Maybe that's the thing it shifted. It shifted people's opinions of what AI could really do. Because everything up until Chat GPT-4 was like horsing around. It's not that it was completely ineffective, but this idea of general machine intelligence felt like it might actually be a fantasy. And we had lots of specific machine intelligence that was amazing. We got really good at that over the last 20, 30 years, maybe longer, building point solutions that understood one narrow set of criteria really well and could sort of make decisions like a person would in a very, very narrow domain. But the idea of general AI intelligence felt like it probably exists but we don't know how far out it is. Kind of like cold fusion, right? Cold fusion's been 30 years away for 70 years. And so, people just go well, it's probably still 30 years out or whatever. And then Chat GPT-4 comes out and we're like maybe we need to rethink what we consider intelligence is. Because now it's communicating and operating at a level that it clearly has some understanding of what the general world is about and physical space and all kinds of things. It knows this. But it doesn't really know it. We know it. It knows it based on a pattern of words. What words normally come after other words. In order to figure that out more or less and researchers are trying to figure out how it did it, but somehow it figured out that it knows that you can't balance a bottle on top of a pin. It knows the pin has to go on top of the bottle. How does it know that? It doesn't exist as knowledge on the internet, but it knows that it's true.

00:39:49

Marty:

And is it really that different than this conversation right now?

Michael:

I'm sure Chat GPT-4 could be having an almost equally compelling conversation with you. I think where this is going to change things, let me take it from a few angles, like with Kith and Kin, we've had trouble teaching users how to manage and or just even document effectively their health journeys. People don't know what to do. And we've tried a bunch of different things in our version one app to guide people and it hasn't been sufficient. So, our version two, one of the main things we designed was turn our model upside down and say don't try to organize it. We're going to give you options to organize it if that's what you want, but organization becomes optional, rather than required. And so just get it in. Turn it into a health wallet. It could be a messy wallet, and then we're going to give you great search tools to be able to surface the things that you need. It's kind of more along the lines of the Google Gmail model where you just get a bunch of emails, don't delete them, don't archive them, don't file them, just search for whatever you need whenever you need it. I didn't love starting there, that's not what our early user research told us, but we also found out is that the broad populace doesn't know how to organize it. And that's what we found when we got people into the app. And so, we have to take a different approach. Where I think AI fits in is that instead of guiding people on how to manage their health better, meaning we create guidance, I think we create machine learning models where we teach it what good healthcare looks like or what good healthcare organization looks like, and let people interact with the AI in more of a bespoke consultative or coaching mechanism to get them into the point where they feel confident that

they can get their arms around their healthcare. Because we have a fundamentally broken healthcare system in America. Gosh, talk about meandering, sorry.

Marty:

Oh, yeah, no, this is a great meandering.

00:41:28

Michael:

But the weird part about the American healthcare system is that we expect the patient to be the center of the journey. There's nobody taking care of your health or helping you take care of your health. There are very limited pilots or circumstances where you might have a care navigator assisting you, but that's not the norm. We expect a patient to be the one to take the thing from one doctor to another. And even though those doctors technically can share information electronically, they often don't. And even when they do, doctor number two doesn't want to see anything that doctor number one has, they want to order the tests over again. They're not really interested in collaborating on your health. You as the patient are the only one at the center of your own health journeys and that's a problem. Like in the UK, I was just talking to a guy this morning running a tech startup in the United Kingdom, it's amazing. I'd love to get into it sometime, not at this podcast, but he said in there in the UK, they have one payer and one provider and so when you go, the system is set up to try to help you. Now, it has faults, it's got problems, you sometimes have to wait long times to get your care, but you don't also have to be a healthcare manager or a care navigator for yourself. It guides you through it and everybody's there to work on your health. Whereas in America, in a for profit model, which is fundamentally disjointed, where there is not single payer, not single provider, you're the only connective tissue between all these things. And we have not empowered people with teaching them how to do it. But there aren't enough care navigators to go around. So could AI be a thing that solves the healthcare gap in the United States, or at least starts to chip away at the problem by helping coach people, being their care navigator? I'm not sure that AI is quite there today, but I think that it will be there tomorrow, sometime in the very near future, this is going to be a way that this happens. Interestingly, where it intersects with digital accessibility, is that you have people that might need even greater accessibility needs or even greater compatibility with the system technologies because we're trying to get healthcare for folks and you're likely to be consuming more healthcare or need more support in this model if you're starting off with either disabilities or things that you're struggling with. It could be cognitive or whatever. But we know that the population that will benefit the most from care navigation are the people that are also well-served by digital accessibility.

Marty:

That's really, really interesting, that intersection. Just listening to you talk, it makes me think that I want my own personal Baymax from Big Hero 6. Do you see robots in our future for all of us to embrace and be cared for by?

Michael:

Before I give you my doom and gloom scenario of robots, I noticed that Kristen came off of mute and she wants to contribute or ask a question.

Kristen:

I was thinking of a similar vein. You in the early episode of Article 19 where Amanda asked what keeps you up at night and you said the one-word answer was robots. And I feel like you were an oracle, then,

as you kind of are now that you've taken a backseat role at Tamman. That was a similar question that I had.

Amanda:

What is something that keeps you up at night?

Michael:

Robots. I'm not kidding. I'm being a little bit cheeky about it but artificial intelligence taking over human activities. The idea that there won't be enough jobs to go around because we're going to program computers, software, and robots to do all of it and that we're going to have to find a new way to think about economy and taking care of people in the world and giving them meaningful things to contribute to, not just living sort of these radically indulgent lifestyles. Or if not, you're just doomed to poverty and homelessness. Robots, full stop.

00:45:09

Marty:

The question that Kristen poses, oracle. Tell us, what is our future, should we be afraid?

Kristen:

Should we still be up at night for the same reasons that you thought before or different reasons?

Michael:

You should still be kept up at night by robots, in your nightmares. That said, I think what I've come to and I don't remember my full answer from that podcast, but I think we have an opportunity, kind of like parents, birthing children and raising them before they're ready to go out into the world and make their own messes. We have an opportunity to give values to this child, to this new intelligence. We can't necessarily say we can control it forever but if you start off by sticking the kid in front of a device all day and you don't really teach it any values and you expect it to just learn it by watching the worst behaviors of humans, you're just going to be asking for robot domination. I don't think there's any way around it. But if we put clear guardrails in place and we create goals for AI that are in line with human goals, if we give it initiatives to pursue, and this is universally, I don't mean like the one AI, because I don't think there's going to be a singularity, I think what we're going to have is lots of competing AIs, but you can't raise an entire society of artificial intelligences to all have competing goals all the time. I don't think that humanity has demonstrated its benevolence. We have tons of inequities and people get smushed down to the bottom all the time and ruined. And some people get lifted up and we just accept that as a fundamental truth of nature. Well, if you're going to create a bunch of artificial intelligences and you allow them to compete like humans, if we don't create a different, more utopian model, they will be competing with each other and humans will get sort of crushed under the weight of this artificial competition. I think that's the biggest thing we have to worry about. And so, if we stay up at night worrying about that, maybe we'll actually solve it. Ignoring it doesn't make it better.

Marty:

Well, Mr. Karl Marx, I appreciate you spending time with us, but before I let you go – I'm just teasing. Your utopian model of not getting crushed by the larger entities. I want to end by giving you a chance to talk a little bit about advice you give based on experiences gained to anyone who's going through big transitions, focusing on the burner of health and family, of taking leaps into scary places. There's a lot of things that we've covered today, take your pick. But I'd love for you to give just sort of a little bit of a

chance to summarize to employees of Tamman who might be listening to this, employees of companies, other leaders, other executives who are thinking you know, I'm feeling like I need to change the way that my burners are set right now. What's some advice you would give to those folks?

00:47:57

Michael:

There's so many things I could say, you'd get a different answer from me each hour of the day, each day of the week, if you ask that question over and over. Because it's really hard. But what I would say is I watched something, I guess it was a commencement speech or a graduation speech that Jim Carrey gave, I don't know when –

Kristen:

The great philosopher. We went from Aristotle to Jim Carrey. The decline of the American civilization. Go ahead.

Michael:

It sounds so petty and bizarre but at the same time, I really liked what he said. I've been ruminating on this, he's like, without going into the whole thing, I would encourage people to go find it and listen to it on YouTube, but one of the things that he gets into is fear will always be a component of your life. You shouldn't let fear drive all of your decisions. It has to be considered but don't pursue fear. Don't let fear drive you. Let love be the thing that you pursue. Let love be the thing that drives you. And so, when I stepped away from Tamman and focused on family, I was trying to let love be the thing that drove me, not fear of failing or fear of too little finance. I try not to let fear drive me at Tamman either. It was always there. It's persistent. It's scary. It's demanding of attention. But if we can find a way to contain that fear and deal with it appropriately, then love could possibly be the thing that we use as our guiding light. It's the thing that drives us. That's what I would encourage people to do. I was able to do it because I have sort of a ridiculously large amount of self-confidence and I never quite let fear take root. But that doesn't mean I don't have fears. I'm just insanely self-confident and so I feel like I don't know, whatever it is, I'll figure it out and just go for it. I don't expect everybody to have that but if fear is holding a person back, I would encourage them to find a way to manage it. To find their self-confidence. To find where they see their self-worth and then put love in front of everything else.

Marty:

Michael, we've been talking for over an hour now, so this may end up being two podcasts. I just so appreciate your willingness to share, your wisdom, everything else. It's so valuable. This will not be the last time you're on Article 19, after all, you started Article 19, so thank you for being the original host and co-host. I encourage folks to go back and listen to Article 19 in our catalogue and everywhere else, and to follow Mike. You can follow Mike on LinkedIn, see what he might be up to. Not that you're a social media guy, cause you're really not.

Michael:

I actually don't use social media.

Marty:

But could probably connect with you there if they wanted to kind of keep tabs and see what you might be up to and your future endeavors.

Michael:

I exist on LinkedIn, I just don't Tweet or post on Facebook and I don't post on LinkedIn, but I exist there.

Marty:

Michael, thank you so much and we look forward to bringing you on again and talking about your next amazing endeavor. Maybe it's with Tamman. Maybe it's beyond Tamman. And maybe it's just a time to check in, because we miss you and haven't seen you in a while.

Michael:

Thank you, Marty, thank you Kristen, thank you Mark. Really appreciate you guys and it was fun.

00:51:00

Kristen:

Yay.

Marty:

Well, with that, thank you to all the listeners of Article 19 and we will see you.

Kristen:

Thank you so much Mike for joining us and for sharing about your life and the necessity of pause and what those pauses really mean and how they can rejuvenate you and move you to try other things and expand into other roles as well as taking time for family and health and friendship. It is a struggle that everyone has to think about and comes to terms with and it's great to talk about it here on the pod. And thanks Marty for the insightful questions and digging in and doing that wonderful journalistic hosting that you always do and thanks for Marcus for bringing us all together and connecting us and making us our best on and off the mic. If you like what you heard today and want to explore more about digital accessibility, technology, our company culture or anything else, schedule a time to meet with us. You can find the whole Tamman team at tammaninc.com. That's t-a-m-m-a-n-i-n-c-.com. Don't forget to sign up for our newsletter too so you never miss an event or an insight from us. Be sure to rate our podcast five stars on Spotify, Apple Podcast, or wherever you listen to us. It really helps our podcast grow and reach new audiences. Also make sure to follow us, hit the bell icon so you never miss an episode. If social media is more your style, you can also follow us at Tamman, Inc., on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, and share our podcast on your favorite platform. Until next time, thanks for listening and being part of Article 19. Take care.