Leading Through Crisis: Lessons from COVID and the Future of Work in the AI era with Chris March Transcript

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Introduction and guest background

Hey friends, I'm your host Dr. Elizabeth Samantha, the intuitive psychiatrist, and you're listening to Stepping Into Soul Power. Friends, friends you know that there are moments in history that we will never forget, where collectively we are affected on deep levels in one recent moment that I feel like doesn't get much press is the COVID pandemic.

There's a big question that when tough things happen collectively as leaders, what do we do? How can we lead from alignment during a global crisis? Our next guest has led many during the pandemic, continues to lead post pandemic is a global leadership advisor who has worked across 80 countries, led teams in Australia, UK, Canada, has this beautiful balance of heart-centered wisdom and strategic clarity.

Chris March, welcome to the show. Thank you for having me. Excited to be here today. Yes. Before we begin, I'd love to invite you to maybe take a breath and reflect on your journey, how you got to this point?

It's a great question. And I think the infliction point for me was early 2000s coming out of high school at that point, my whole life, My universe was centered around basketball.

I wanted to be a professional basketball player. Leading up to that point when I was going to school, everything was focused around basketball. I wasn't focused on school.

So, weekends, nights, playing basketball, running, training, all my discipline, I, was extremely, extremely disciplined towards making basketball so once, once that dream didn't happen, realize I wasn't going to be able to make a career out of it.

I decided to pivot into, into traveling and growing up in Australia, the British culture and Australian culture is very similar. So it is a rite of passage for Australians to live in the UK, London specifically.

myself and one of my best friends decided to, to move to London in 2005. I was 22 at that point, I think it was. And that was the, that, was a trajectory that changed my life where I went from someone who was chasing a different dream to then travel.

Basketball obsession and career pivot

had two glorious years in London, traveling throughout Europe. many different friends from high school joined me. And then once I came back from that glorious two years, that was really, everything was centered around where can I move to next.

Then I decided to book a one way to Vancouver, British Columbia. I'd started working in the travel industry on the back of that. That I found something else that I was very passionate about.

My journey continued from living in Vancouver for eight years, and then I lived in Toronto for another eight, another 8 years. And then finally, I just moved back to Australia after 16 years in, in Canada.

So long story short, it's, really been a guiding principle of travel that has really put me where I am today. I wouldn't be the person that I'm today if I didn't decide to make that move and move to London in 2005. Yes, it strikes me, kind of want to go back a little bit, because the way that you talk about basketball, even right now, I can feel the love that have for that activity.

It's basketball was life. It was everything to me. I was obsessed would be the right word for, for growing up. And in Australia in the eighties, no one really played basketball, right?

The basketball really took off when Michael Jordan was a phenomenon in early nineties. Yeah. And things kind of skyrocketed from there. So for me, basketball, once I first started playing it, I was obsessed and everything I played every single day, from the age of eight to when I 22. And everything was around getting better, getting, better every day.

That was my obsession. Even up to this day I think I've taken a lot of my discipline, focus, my mindset. and brought that into the professional landscape for myself.

I'm obsessed with self-development and becoming better. And also in the corporate space, that has been a guiding principle for me throughout my career.

They see, I see. So you were able to pivot. If you had to step back and think about it, what do you think is the sole lesson in that? It's a great question.

I think it's understanding who you are. In a lot of different ways, you try to understand what's part of your DNA and why you're here. It is a bit of those bigger questions, right?

When you think about your soul, what, makes you make the moves that you do and makes your the happiest. So I think for me, basketball was that first part of my life.

And once that part, of me was no longer being fulfilled, then I moved into travel. I don't think making those decisions, those micro changing moments, that really changed the trajectory of, my, life so I, think it's putting yourself in.

difficult positions, uncomfortable positions and understanding what is going to move you the most over the next chapter of your life. Okay. The ability to meet the challenge of whatever adverse situation that you place yourself in.

And then you said being able to make that move. I think about the travel industry, especially during the COVID pandemic. And I worked in the ER during COVID-19 pandemic, so I can relate to things being very tumultuous during that time.

Leading through the COVID travel crisis

But I wonder for you, what your experience was like and what are the lessons you learned as you were leading Albury's during What a time. I don't think there was an industry that was more affected than travel, I would say hospitality potentially as well.

The industry was absolutely decimated. You take yourself back to that time, 2020 to 2022, the whole world was in cascading shutdowns in different parts, right?

This is the gateway for travel. So outside of. necessary travel, there was no way to travel. So revenue was hit at an all time low and working in the travel industry at that point, we had to lay off 90% of our staff.

90% of our staff at that point. And at this point I was working for a large corporation flight center. I think we had close to 500 employees if I go across all of that different pillars at point, and it was a tumultuous time to say the least.

for the division that I was responsible for and this other senior leaders in the respective division, we were asked to call each of the people that were laying off and tell them one by one.

My heart aches when I hear that. And how did you reconcile? I still remember some of those calls, Elizabeth. I Still remember. Some of them were extremely quick.

People just yelling abuse at you, telling you to go get lost. And I remember one distinctive call where someone had just had a child and was begging me not to take her lifeline away, to her job away.

I think I, remember staying on the phone with her for probably close to an hour, an hours and a half, just trying to talk it through with. And just get her to a point where she would try and understand why this was happening, why we had to make the change and just so she could hear, she can be validated for her feelings, right?

It was such an incredible time to say the least. And when people are stripped away of their identity, that is huge. So. I commend Flight Center at that time, the way we approached that when we were letting people go, we made those calls and those call will stay with me forever.

Making those cause and that went on for a good couple of days before we got through every single person and we divvied them up and made the calls. And as the pandemic continued to prolong, We thought it was going to be three months, six months nine months.

It just became even, even harder to understand what was happening. What, when was this going to end? And for someone who was in a senior leader role at that point, I was wrestling with everything else.

I wrestling the questions that people were wrestling as well. And to give you an, an image of that, single at the time I living in Toronto in one bedroom condo.

in the middle of downtown Toronto and you weren't allowed to do anything. You weren' allowed go outside. you were pretty much confounded by your four walls at that point.

And I remember walking around Toronto. I'm not sure if anyone's been to Toronto, it's one of the most major cities in North America, most populated city in Canada.

I remember walking up Spadina Avenue and it felt like a scene out of Walking Dead. I could look to my right. There's no one there. If I look on my left, there's nobody there, if I looked up there was nobody.

So those times were. I'm going to write a book about it one day. I always said that because it was really hard to really remember it in a lot of different ways because I feel, and I am sure yourself and other listeners feel the same way when you think about those times.

Where did those two years go? Yeah, there are a lot of things you said that kind of stick out. There's a connotation of, you know, bad news is something that you're going to do if you are in a leadership position.

Like it just can't give great news all the time. But there is a way to deal with it, right? Yes. And I wonder, Having been through this experience, are there, is there practical advice you would give to other people about the delivery that the humanity of the person is made?

Yeah. Yeah, I think to your point, there was so many examples of poor leadership and great leadership during this time. I remember there a situation, There was a leader of a company in the US, I think he went onto Instagram and he was crying about letting people go, begging forgiveness or something along those lines.

I remember that coming out. And then there was other examples of organizations just getting everyone on a Zoom and those people who were on the Zoom were staying.

Anyone who wasn't was let go. So I, think to your point, there were many different examples of humanity versus inhumanity. And I think the practical takeaways is this, is that communication is always the centerpiece, which will help drive it.

A lot of times as a leader, you have to communicate well to deliver those types of news. When you're avoiding certain conversations, that is when things don't go well.

Two things to think about, which is really, really easy when you think of those conversations. If you were delivering in a forum where you may not be able to do it in person, how would you deliver something to a person that would come across respectful and clear and kind?

That's the question you need to ask it is, is the way you're going to be delivering this clear, kind, and give the people opportunity to heard and to validated?

I love that. That's very, very clear. Yeah, you know, clear, kind, and give them the opportunity to speak their piece, right? I'm sure there's a lot going on in there.

And as a physician, I think we have to give people not great news a found out that, that there might be a terminal illness or something like that.

Lessons in delivering bad news with humanity

And, and a lot of times people that first time, sometimes people, um, they hear something and then they stop listening. Yeah. Everything just gets fuzzy, right?

What did you say? Why did he just say Elizabeth? Um, no, I, uh, was just saying yes. Yes. And so saying that's what people say when you deliver bad news, people just, yeah.

Yeah. They, they hear that one piece and it, and then like stop listening after you, you're you know, your, say that and, sometimes it takes more than one conversation.

I think to your point, it's about providing a platform. If I go back to those different times, Again, I think what we did well as an organization is we took upon ourselves to have those individual conversations.

So delivering bad news when dealing with hundreds of people, we could have just jumped on a zoom and said, in short, We're laying everyone off. But we didn't take that approach, we allowed the individual conversations.

We knew they were going to be hard conversations, I was not looking forward to delivering those conversations we had a script that we were given. And I looked at the script and I said, no, i'm just going be human.

I'm going just be grounded and try and listen to the people I am having conversations with and help them come to some resolution so they feel somewhat better.

joining that conversation versus them not. And that wasn't always achieved potentially, but I just wanted people to feel somewhat more collected by the time they finished that call.

I see. I say, as you look back at the pandemic, I'm sure that you, you see, um, sometimes I feel like it might illuminate some gaps that we have. Um, for me in healthcare, definitely see the gaps.

But I wonder for you whether in, in leadership or any other, uh, societal systems, are there things that at that time we couldn't see? that we might be able to see better now and do something about?

Great question. When I think about those times with the pandemic, so many different people, I In the travel industry, so many people had their identities taken away from them.

I'm talking 10, 15, 20 years career. And there was a lot of heartache in that. A lot a heart ache. And then I saw people, once they were able to reconcile that they lost their careers, they weren't able pivot into different careers that may never even considered.

There was so many silver linings through the pandemic that were forced through disruption and through to change of people losing their jobs. So I think the biggest thing is for people to really understand to have a secondary thing that they're always working on is really important and to understand if things were to change, I'm not saying there is

a pandemic coming up, understanding what truly aligns into your soul of what you want to do.

Because we've seen so many people pivot into more. alignment in their career. So what does that tell you is that you've been forced to do something that, you may not have ordinarily done.

so really understanding what's the alignment for yourself first versus waiting for something to happen. And I think that's, the hindsight of, of the pandemic.

and I also think, that understanding that. You are always the asset of the organizations that you work for as well, and you have the right to make decisions, what's best for you.

We feel, I think that's what most people felt really upset about is how can you, my employee, you're 15, 16, how many years, take this away from me? I, think, that the biggest blind side that we felt from so many people.

Yet we understood that at the end of the day, during the pandemic, we were a number on a sheet. And that brutal. That's true. But that's the reality. So the lesson is put yourself first always and understand to your point, what does your soul truly want alignment with?

And if that isn't what you're doing right now, where are you at? Where do you need to get to? Yes. You know, you said something. I kind of want to go back to, so you had mentioned that there was this heart ache.

and reconciliation that had to go through years, being a certain type of person, having a type job, and that identity is taken away. What are the steps in beginning the reconciliation process?

It's built upon that we I went through it myself coming, moving back to Australia. Let me give you an example. Moving back Australia, I had an identity as being, being successful and having a long career.

And then coming back. I, had some struggles to find, to fine work because I'm coming into a new market. So for me, what I always lent back on and how you, how do you overcome that heartbreak and the reconciliation is.

Rebuilding identity and finding alignment

Understand your proof points. And what I mean by that is for me, I would look at Google reviews or people that I've worked with or some of the relationships that are formed and have a look that the work that you've done and what you, what, you're done to achieve those results and how to look those success metrics or those conversations of what have done recently to remind yourself of who you are.

You're not lost. you just finding your way. And that's the most important thing. You've got to remind yourself of where you come from sometimes. And what you do by that is looking at certain data points throughout and having conversations with people that you've worked with as well.

So it's not always easy, but you have got be kind to the person who you hold most of the conversations, which is yourself, and remind your self of how you got this point.

Then you can move forward to get what do you need to do. Yeah. Yeah, I think that's really important, keeping in mind that your history of overcoming things.

And that something that really feel like it sticks. It's you're not lost. You're just finding your way. There's something I love to say is the journey is that destination.

I love that as well. I can't remember if it was Phil Jackson that said that. The journey is the reward, the journey. And if you think about the, journey, I think, about my own personal journey I wouldn't be sitting here today if I didn't take that trip to London and move overseas.

could have stayed in Australia, probably would have been married, multiple kids, happy life, all that, but I decided to

take a different path and the has been the reward and it's been absolutely incredible and built me into the person that I am today.

Yes. And so now that we are post pandemic, there's this new thing in the world. Well, it is not new. It's becoming more and more prominent and is called AI.

AI, yes. It's a trend right now. Yeah, it is changing things and changing the job landscape. Yes. And so I wonder whether there are parallels that you can make between COVID pandemic and this situation that we're in right where AI is really taking hold over multiple aspects of our life.

Yeah, I think that's a good comparison. I'd take it a step further and compare it to the dot.com bubble era in early 2000s for those old enough I should say.

Remember when the internet first came around early two thousands, everyone was in an uproar about the Internet and this is the robots are coming at this point.

Yet today we wouldn't be able to have this conversation or people wouldn'd be to listen. to this conversation without the internet. I believe AI will get, will, get to that same level as well.

There's a lot of work that needs to be done. there's, a, lot, of governance and regulation around the use of AI. However, the best way that I look at AI is AI as an amplifier of brilliance.

Hmm. It allows you to do the best work. So whatever your, your best, work is Elizabeth, let's say, what do you enjoy doing the most? Or I'll ask your listeners that what are the mundane tasks that you don't enjoy?

Is it accounting? All the admin type tasks, right? That's the things that, you can delegate to AI so you, can do more of the work that. That the way I look at AI.

I see. So, implications for how you spend your time. Yes. Yeah. And where is your time best focused on? If you're a business owner or a solopreneur, where do you want to be spending the most amount of your?

Look at your day, look at where you are spending too much time on manual tasks. Can AI take care of this? if so, delegate it so you can focus on high revenue tasks or having conversations like this where Yes, yes.

You brought up a couple of important points. So there's governance because there is a lot of different AI out there.

AI, leadership ethics, and future skills

Yes. There are ethical issues that you really like at least I mean I know in medicine people are using AI in some aspects almost as like a therapist or So there are serious ethical issues.

I wonder for leaders, could you work with the leaders? If you could speak to some of the ethical principles that they should maybe think about as they go into this landscape.

So the first thing, as I mentioned earlier, is understanding the use case for implementing AI. Let's use the travel industry. For an example, if you're in a travel agency, can you implement a AI chatbot within your website?

Or can your implement someone who can answer the phone, an AI Chatbot? that can answer email inquiry and phones potentially as well. You need to understand firstly, the user case.

What is the cost of doing that internally? What needs to be right in terms of the metrics in order to make this change and how you're going to measure it moving forward.

So it's first identifying where you can use AI within an organization. layout a use case, layout the roadmap of implementation, and then making sure that you have some success metrics around it.

A lot of people are just using AI purely from a chat GBT prompting type scenario. Right now with that, it's not an end-to-end solution. You have to have a human in the loop to ensure that the data is accurate.

So there's a couple of things you need to be comfortable with is ensuring that any of the company information is that you're sharing is not going to shared.

I think that's one of biggest hesitations for organizations, right? I can see you. Yes. Yeah. So making sure whatever large language model or whatever tool that you're doing, what is the data and the privacy that are you going to be protected from?

So that's probably the biggest step is starting with self-awareness around what exactly you are going do. Is it a safe environment that your going be working with?

And how does the AI stack up with your current technology that already have? Do they work side by side? What does that look like? what will break? Put some metrics and then make sure that your user case will stand up.

So start small and short. Start small, figure out where you can get the biggest lift and, then build from there. Very good, very good. So it sounds like AI has the potential to really help businesses scale.

I wonder, are there other things that businesses should keep in mind if they're having this dream of scale while staying aligned? It's really important that everyone's aligned on AI across the organization and you want to blend the opportunity with, with humans as well.

Right now you still require humans in the loop. So where is there opportunity to bring AI and where can you bring it to compliment the skills you already have?

I see a lot of organizations that are just using it for the admin side of tasks. As I said, people answering phones, emails, website support. So it's just really important to understand what is the value of bringing that in versus potentially if you have someone sitting in that seat already as in a human or.

If you are to bring in that role, what is the cost of bringing someone into that seat versus bringing AI? What are the risks? And what does the upside and what has the implementation look like and one of the metrics that you're going to look at to ensure that it's successful.

So what I'm saying in short is that, you need to balance the human side of things versus the AI and the risk for your organization. to your point around healthcare, there's a lot of risk around data and privacy.

So each industry has a certain risk element that they want to look at. It's very industry specific, but the main thing is to utilize AI with a human. Okay.

Important point. You know, and as we go into this new era, what do you think the next generation of leadership will look like? How can the people that are coming up, you know start preparing themselves on teams for what we have in store?

Great question. And I think one of the things that we're seeing with AI is a lot of positives. However, there's also limitations. One of things we are losing throughout this is the ability for critical thinking.

Instead of thinking about something, we just go to chat GBT right now. So, if you're a new and upcoming leader, Think about how are you flexing those muscles, right?

How are your flex in critical thinking? And also think about all the things that AI can't take away from you. Tone of voice, your story, you journey, emotional intelligence, ability to turn up on time, the way you communicate.

These are the thing that the market right now is transforming the value around. So we're seeing a shift. Think about all the things that AI can't take away from you and lean into those things, starting with critical thinking and

communication.

If you were to focus on those two things. I'll add a third emotional intelligence, those three things you focus. You're going to be very good 10, 20, 30 years from now.

Oh, thank you for saying that because I, I see a lot of people and I'm not I think AI can be incredibly helpful, but don't give your power away. You've got to exercise your intellect.

These are tools that are there to help amplify you, right? I'm sure you see this a lot in your work, we go to the path of least resistance or where it's comfortable.

And I'll say it again, you have to go into an uncomfortable place in order for you to grow. And that seems so simplistic and it's shared in so many different variations, but it is so true.

Where to find Chris March and closing remarks

The best growth will happen when you put yourself in an comfortable position. So make sure that you're doing that and reminding yourself of that regulation.

Otherwise you are going to get extremely comfortable and you may stall and not grow without even realizing it. Very good, very good. Yeah, I loved all the things you said.

Critical thinking, remembering just your presence, your story, you journey, and your emotional intelligence, the way you communicate that. It is important and really leaning into that, yes.

I wonder for our listeners, because I'm sure they'll want to connect with you, how can they find you? Two ways to connect with me, I share regular insights on LinkedIn.

So you can find me there. Chris March on linkedin. I also have a website, one word, chrismarchcoaching.com. Very good. Well, Chris, March, it was a pleasure to have you on the show.

Thank you so much for having me. If you haven't heard it yet today, I appreciate you. The soul in me honors the soul and you." If you'd like to see more episodes like this, please subscribe or click here.

And friends, if this spoke to you, leave a comment below. We would love to hear from you!