

Meghan M. Biro: [00:00](#) What's your perfect workday look like? Mine involves a clean desk most of the time, some sparkling water, and of course a lot of deep diving into the future of work. Let's face it, there are some workplaces where a sparkling water, well, it doesn't really solve your problems, right? So, crack open your LaCroix or pop the top off of your Topo Chico or fire up that SodaStream, or let's just figure this out.

Meghan M. Biro: [00:36](#) Welcome to the WorkTrends podcast from TalentCulture. I'm your host, Meghan M. Biro. Every week we interview interesting people who are re-imagining work. And join us on Twitter every Wednesday, 1:30 PM Eastern using the hashtag worktrends. I saw this great idea recently and I think it's a great way to make work just a little bit better. So, get this. A group of scientists recently did a study where they had 131 people act like an introvert one week and then an extrovert another week. They just published their results in the Journal of Experimental Psychology and they found that people were much happier during the week they had to act like extroverts. Turns out we crave that social interaction and even just faking it til we make it can go a long way towards making you happier. Even for you introverts out there. Now, that's the one way to make work suck less. We'll dig in deeper with today's guest.

Meghan M. Biro: [01:42](#) Our guest today is the one, the only Michael Brenner. He's a keynote speaker, a marketing consultant, and most importantly, he's a longtime buddy of mine. He and I met on Twitter many, many years ago and we've stayed in touch over the years, and I'm super excited to have him. He has this new book coming out this October whose title I absolutely love, Mean People Suck: How Empathy Leads to Bigger Profits and a Better Life. I mean, what's not to love about that? Come on. So, congratulations on the new book, my friend. Michael, welcome to WorkTrends.

Michael Brenner: [02:18](#) Meghan, thanks so much for having me.

Meghan M. Biro: [02:19](#) You got it. Where are you calling in from today?

Michael Brenner: [02:22](#) We're in sunny, beautiful Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It's one of those perfect fall days, although it's not quite fall yet. But yeah, it's beautiful here.

Meghan M. Biro: [02:30](#) Good old Philly. You've been there for a while.

Michael Brenner: [02:32](#) Yeah. Yeah. Kind of born and raised, but spent some time in Chicago. But this is home.

- Meghan M. Biro: [02:37](#) This is home. It's going to be home for a while?
- Michael Brenner: [02:39](#) I think we're not going anywhere.
- Meghan M. Biro: [02:41](#) You're not going anywhere. You and the fam, right?
- Michael Brenner: [02:43](#) That's right. That's right. The six of us, we would be tough to uproot.
- Meghan M. Biro: [02:47](#) Exactly. So, let's start by talking about Mean People Suck because I mean, it's not only just a title, I truly believe that mean people suck. I mean, we all have a story. What inspired you to write this book?
- Michael Brenner: [03:03](#) Yeah. I started because, and I talk about it in the last chapter, it was inspired by a question somebody asked me that totally took me back on my heels. They were like, "What was the secret to your success?" And I was thinking to myself, "Well, I don't think I'm successful." I didn't consider myself as being successful and I still don't. I'm still 19 steps behind where I want to be, but it did cause me to think. And I looked back and I'm like, "Well, where did this all start?" And I started and I was like, "Wait, I had this job and this job and ..." And I'm like, "Let me count them."
- Michael Brenner: [03:33](#) And I ended up counting 53 different job titles, and then I started thinking, "I haven't been happy in most of them." And every millennial that I know, every 20 year old that I know, they're all, they're miserable in their jobs. They don't like their boss, their companies, they complain about. And I just started thinking, "Why? Why do we see this?" This, I call it a crisis, really of have empathy and engagement in the world. We see it in our politics and our media. And so that was it. And the result, it's funny, every time I tell people, "Mean people suck," the most common reaction is, "They really do." So, I think we can all relate. We can all relate.
- Meghan M. Biro: [04:11](#) We can all relate. And I will say you are really a lifelong marketer, Michael. And I just find it interesting that I find in my work and in my life everyday marketers, they have a hard ... And I mean this in all due respect, but you guys just have a tough gig. It's always coming down to ROI and it just gets to be like this very black or white scenario. So, when I look back and I put myself in your shoes in your career, 53.
- Michael Brenner: [04:43](#) Yeah.
- Meghan M. Biro: [04:44](#) That number is correct, right?

Michael Brenner: [04:46](#) It's a real ... Well, the 53rd job is husband, boss, therapist, wife. It's-

Meghan M. Biro: [04:55](#) You're on 53 now.

Michael Brenner: [04:55](#) ... Yeah. I'm on 53 now, so it's really 52 I guess. But yeah, no, it's funny. I love to say in my keynotes to marketers that marketing has a marketing problem and because most people outside of marketing think marketing sucks. We think of it as ads. And the bottom line is we're all marketing ourselves no matter what profession we're in.

Michael Brenner: [05:14](#) I realize if you've got HR folks out there or anyone in the workplace kind of consideration function, role marketers may not have the best reputation. And so part of Mean People Suck is to try to address that, not just for marketers but for all of us because it doesn't work. The kind of propaganda that most people think marketing is is not working in today's world.

Meghan M. Biro: [05:38](#) Now you have empathy in the title. Why is empathy so important for you?

Michael Brenner: [05:43](#) Yeah, it's counterintuitive. The title of the book has two ironic twists in it. And the first one is the main title, Mean People Suck is ironic because while I think we can all relate, the problem I'm trying to solve is this lack of engagement and the fact that so many of us are not happy in our work. And so the irony in Mean People Suck is it's not the mean people's fault. It's our fault. If we're not happy in our jobs, we need to take accountability. But the secret to taking that accountability is not to ... I think this advice that we hear all the time, "Go after what you need and lean in and grab what you want. And let's push everyone out of the way and step on our mom and our wife and anyone that gets in the way of what we want."

Michael Brenner: [06:25](#) It's the opposite. And when I talk to people, when I highlighted people in the book that were successful, they had a purpose that was bigger than what they wanted. They were in service of others and they had true empathy. They started a business because they saw people struggling with something. They were inspired by a bad manager. They hated their company and they thought, "If I were serving customers in a better way, what would it be?" And so empathy is in the book. I know it's kind of a buzzword and you probably, you folks probably use it all the time.

Meghan M. Biro: [06:58](#) I'm rolling my eyes over here right now.

Michael Brenner: [07:00](#) Yeah. I started with the title was The Empathy Formula and so many people rolled their eyes that I decided I couldn't call it that.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:07](#) [inaudible 00:07:07] please don't. Don't do that to us, Michael.

Michael Brenner: [07:08](#) I didn't. I didn't. I didn't.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:09](#) Come on. You're better than that.

Michael Brenner: [07:12](#) It's the golden rule. It really comes down to just treat other ... It's like, "Hey, let's be kind." It's the most boring advice ever. And so I had to spice it up a little bit with Mean People Suck. But it really is the answer. It's the answer for, I think folks that are unhappy in their work. I think it's the answer for folks that are unhappy in their life.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:29](#) Yeah. Well, I mean, how many disengaged employees do we still have in the world? I mean, you know.

Michael Brenner: [07:37](#) The big headline from Gallup was Employee Engagement on the Rise. Now, the number, if you know, I'm sure you've seen the study a thousand times.

Meghan M. Biro: [07:44](#) I've never. What are you talking about? I don't know what you're talking about, Michael. I've been living under a rock for the last three years.

Michael Brenner: [07:50](#) Their press release was Employee Engagement on the Rise. It went from 32% to 33%. Should we celebrate that? Should we pop open the champagne?

Meghan M. Biro: [07:59](#) I know, really? I know. Yeah. I hear you.

Michael Brenner: [08:00](#) Big rise there.

Meghan M. Biro: [08:01](#) Yeah, but we're doing great. So yeah, that's why we're having this conversation.

Michael Brenner: [08:06](#) That's right.

Meghan M. Biro: [08:07](#) What can organizations do to make work suck just a little less? And yes, this is a culture topic and yes, our community loves this. So, let's just blow everything up right now, Michael, and get into it. What can we do? Because we're not doing things right right now, clearly.

- Michael Brenner: [08:23](#) Who's the villain of the story? that's the question. And in the 53 jobs that I found where I really was miserable and in the folks I talked to that are really miserable, it's the org chart. And so I point to the org chart as the villain of this story. But then the question is, well, if you're, if you're an HR leader who's not empowered to reorg, if you're an employee who's just unhappy in their job or you're just anyone who cares about engagement in our workforces, I think it's pretty easy to say that the org chart is a big part of the problem, if not the main culprit.
- Michael Brenner: [08:55](#) But what do you do if you're not empowered to change it? And what I offer up in the book is a new model, at least from a mindset perspective. And I call it the bullseye. And basically it's, I don't know that we can change boxes and lines as a representation of who we work for and what we're supposed to do and who's below us and above us. But the fact is that it's real people. Org charts are made up of real individuals with emotions and fears and goals. And they never reflect the most important person in the organization. And who's that? It's the customer.
- Michael Brenner: [09:26](#) And so my proposal is if we put customers at the center, it would look like a bullseye. Everybody around the organization is thinking, "Should I be ..." In marketing, "Is this ad really going to help a customer?" Probably not. If you're in HR, is the foosball table really going to help the customer? Maybe not. And so I think that there ... It's just a model that forces everyone in the organization to ask, "What's in it for the customer?" And that's true for frontline. It's true for back office. I often joke that lawyers don't care about customers, but even lawyers I think can ask, "Is this new policy and this new restriction really going to help our relationship with our customers? Or is it simply a risk averse reaction to trying to protect something in the business?"
- Meghan M. Biro: [10:12](#) Maybe just being a little less selfish, every single one of us. Instead of asking, "What's in it for me?" Put yourself in somebody else's shoes.
- Michael Brenner: [10:21](#) That's empathy at work right there.
- Meghan M. Biro: [10:22](#) It seems so simple, yet we're all, a lot of us are missing the mark here. And it's a big, big issue. I mean, what about us as individuals? What are actions we can take to make work or anything really suck a little less?

Michael Brenner: [10:37](#) Yeah. And again, I think I alluded to it, but I'm really trying to talk to that individual who feels, who maybe isn't the leader. And while there's certainly leadership principles presented, I actually call it the champion leader. A champion leader in the book is someone who champions their employee's ideas and drives innovations by championing those ideas up the chain of command, if you will. But what if you're not that leader? What if you're the person underneath a manager who really sucks? That was why I kind of changed the title and spiced it up a little bit to sort of say, "Yeah, we can all agree that it sucks to work for a boss who's a jerk and who doesn't, who just tells us what to do." I think it was Steve Jobs who said, "Why do we hire smart people and then tell them what to do?"

Michael Brenner: [11:22](#) But if you're the employee, I think it's on us to take accountability. When I talk to marketers, I love to point out that 60 to 70% of the content created by organizations goes completely unused. It's not created and used and it doesn't really work really well, no, it actually gets created, funded. It was requested by somebody and then created by someone that never gets to see the light of day. The reason that happens is because we have too many of us are saying yes. And I challenge the role of the manager employee relationship to say, "Your job is not to say yes to your boss. Your job is to challenge the things that you're asked to do." And so that's the accountability that I allude to in the ironic title I think is yeah, mean bosses suck, but it's our job to stick up to them and not in a rebellious way.

Michael Brenner: [12:10](#) I offer a couple of questions that every employee should be asking their boss to say, "Why does this request really matter? What's the ultimate goal? How is it going to be measured?" Just some really simple questions that I didn't, as a younger professional, didn't think I could ask. And as a more experienced professional, I started wishing I was asking, and then I started asking. And that's the, I think, the maturity that we all need to go through.

Meghan M. Biro: [12:33](#) And if you're out there in the community, ask yourself, "Why am I saying yes to stupid shit?" Question mark, right?

Michael Brenner: [12:41](#) That's right. That's right.

Meghan M. Biro: [12:42](#) I love it. I think it's refreshing and I think it's something that we can all ask ourselves and take away in a way that doesn't feel overwhelming or like, "I'm going to lose my job over." But just getting real and taking chances, I think that's what this is about as well. Let's shift this conversation over here to HR. Our

audience has a lot of HR pros and talent acquisition pros and all that jazz. I've heard you say that HR is the new marketing. And I think you and I, we go way back and I think we've always kind of been on that wavelength together, that you can't have one without the other really. And now it's just more apparent than ever. What exactly though do you mean by that?

Michael Brenner: [13:23](#) Well, ads don't work. So if I'm talking to marketers, I'm saying, "Ads don't work, but what does?" And what does is people. It's engaged employees that create amazing customer experience. Empathy might be an overused word. It has nothing next to the word experience. We talk about employee experience and customer experience and the onboarding experience. You guys in HR love that word as well.

Michael Brenner: [13:47](#) What drives the most amazing experiences for customers is engaged employees. What attracts talent to a brand? It's engaged employees. It's people that are engaged. The talent that's engaged. That is going to attract the right customers, the right employees, the right investors, the right partners. And so, I'm getting worked up over here, aren't I?

Meghan M. Biro: [14:05](#) I know you are. Are you in a ball of sweat over there, or what? Oh my goodness.

Michael Brenner: [14:08](#) It's fun. It's-

Meghan M. Biro: [14:08](#) Take it easy.

Michael Brenner: [14:11](#) ... Yeah, I know. Sorry, I can't work out. I can't work out.

Meghan M. Biro: [14:13](#) I mean, really. You can't expire on us now.

Michael Brenner: [14:18](#) I just, I think it's so important. I wrote an article for Thrive Global on Monday about performance reviews suck. Why don't we start reviewing our managers? Why don't we start ... Actually my wife, Liz, when she was working at SAP implemented the removal of annual performance review programs. And it was just, it caused this massive amount of positive change because employees felt empowered to take that approach. And that's my challenge to HR is to think of yourselves as the strategic value role that you have to the organizations that you work in or that you're advising to empower people to be more engaged in their work. And that's really, HR is so much more than benefits and payroll and all those things that are important obviously. But I think he

opportunity to get people engaged and involved in work is really the ultimate opportunity that HR has.

Meghan M. Biro: [15:13](#) And I also think it's on us, every one of us to lose the word employee ... those two words, employee engagement together. Because I just feel like it's overused at this point. Everyone's sort of beat down by it. It results in us just rolling our eyes, which we don't want. So, let's all think about that. That'll be an exercise for the community to think about. What else can we call it other than employee engagement?

Michael Brenner: [15:34](#) What do you call it?

Meghan M. Biro: [15:35](#) Well, that's a great ... I'm thinking about it in real time. I don't know. I mean, I know part of me wants to say, "Employee experience. Of course, Michael, that's what I call it." But I think it's more than that. I think this is a bigger conversation. So, I think we have an opportunity for another podcast. How's that?

Michael Brenner: [15:51](#) Let's do it.

Meghan M. Biro: [15:51](#) We've got to followup.

Michael Brenner: [15:52](#) Yeah, we should.

Meghan M. Biro: [15:52](#) All right, so it's crystal ball time here. We love to do this here where we start looking ahead at predictions. What do you predict will change about the way we work in the next five to 10 years?

Michael Brenner: [16:03](#) Yeah, it's a good question. And I think, Meghan, you and I, we almost started working together when I was at SAP and was put in charge of at least the marketing side of our future of work program. And I know our team had a great experience working with you. It's interesting for me because I've been thinking about the future of work for a long time. And what I think we're just starting to see now, and so my prediction for the five year mark, maybe not 10, but is I think we're starting to see the seeds today of employee centered organizations. And for example, even in the NFL, there was a controversy about, I can't remember the Antonio Brown, I thinks, helmet.

Michael Brenner: [16:41](#) And we're starting to see it in even these organizations where real top down command and control centers. Cultures that are very traditional are starting to understand the importance of employee centered or employee driven cultures. And so that's what I think we're going to start to see. The days of that



traditional mindset where decisions are made at the top and filter down. I think we've had a long period of time where that's been questioned. I think the emergence of social media started to question that in all of our institutions. But I think in five to 10 years, I think we're going to truly see employee driven cultures.

Meghan M. Biro: [17:16](#) I love it. We're going to be seeing people in cultures for who we really are and that is exciting. So, I want to take this moment and thank you, I know you're a busy guy these days, for stopping on by. And I can't wait to continue this conversation with you.

Michael Brenner: [17:31](#) Yeah, thanks. Thanks so much for having me and thanks for giving me an opportunity to totally promote and create propaganda for Mean People Suck, but I would love it. I'd love feedback from your audience especially, probably more than any. And so hit me with it.

Meghan M. Biro: [17:45](#) You got it.

Michael Brenner: [17:46](#) All right, thanks Meghan.

Meghan M. Biro: [17:53](#) All right. All right, let's keep that conversation going. Join us for our WorkTrends Twitter chat. We are going to be on the Twitters with Michael Brenner on Wednesday, October 2nd at 1:30 PM Eastern, 10:30 AM Pacific. Join us to talk about bringing empathy to your workplace. And if you'd like to get our Twitter chat questions in advance, sign up for our newsletter at [talentculture.com](http://talentculture.com).

Meghan M. Biro: [18:24](#) Thanks for listening to WorkTrends from TalentCulture. Join us every Wednesday at 1:30 PM Eastern for a live Twitter chat with our podcast guest. To learn more about guests featured on today's show, visit the show notes for this episode at [talentculture.com](http://talentculture.com) and help us spread the word. Subscribe to WorkTrends wherever you listen to podcasts, leave us a rating, review on iTunes. Share WorkTrends with your coworkers, your friends. Look forward to it. See you next time.