

Episode 397 Adam Bennett Flying Solo podcast transcript

Cec Busby [00:00:03]:

Hi, everybody. I'm Cec Busby, editor of Flying Solo. Welcome to our weekly podcast where we step inside the minds and lives of soloists and small business owners. Now if you think The transformation is only in the realm of big business. It's time to reshape your view.

Transformation is a precursor to innovation, and today's guest knows all about it. Adam Bennett is the author of Great Change, The Way to Get Big Strategy Done. He's a former CEO and a big four bank CIO.

Cec Busby [00:00:34]:

And today, he devotes his time to management consulting where he assists businesses of all sizes through transformational change. If you're ready to reshape your business for the better, well, listen up as Adam has plenty of great advice. Adam, thank you so much for joining me on the show today.

Adam Bennett [00:00:56]:

Oh, thank you. It's great to be here.

Cec Busby [00:00:58]:

Excellent. I'm so glad you're happy to be here. Well, Would you mind sharing a little bit about your background with our audience because I know you do a lot of work in the transformation space with Big organization. So maybe you could just dip a little toe for us and tell us a bit about that for our listeners.

Adam Bennett [00:01:17]:

Yeah. Sure. Where should I start? My parents met at a dance. No. I won't stay there.

Cec Busby [00:01:23]:

Where did the interest come from in the 1st place? It's not something normally

Adam Bennett [00:01:27]:

In transformation? Yeah. Yeah. So I've always been interested in change in leadership and transformation. It probably comes from when I was a little boy. Actually, I was fascinated by history And, world history and military history and how, you know, men and women, you know, who were faced with With leading change and, whether that was an organization or a country or a company or an army, I was just always fascinated by how they did it And how they they kinda crafted a strategy and then got that strategy done. So it's really been a lifelong, a lifelong interest. And when I was first at university, I did a bachelor of business at UTS, and I didn't really know What I wanted to do, but then when I found out there was such a a thing as management consulting, I became really kinda quite keen, to get into that, profession, which which I did. And that really started what I call chapter 1 of my career where I spent just under 13 years with House Erwek and Price Waterhouse Coopers, as a corporate and operations strategy consultant.

Adam Bennett [00:02:39]:

And, loved it. Worked for a range of different clients, different, industries across Australia, doing all kinds of different works. So it's just a fascinating time. And then I stepped out of that and started what I would call chapter 2, which was, banking. And I worked for NAB in a range of roles, including kind of tech and operations leading, the back office of BNZ over in New Zealand. I, I was the chief information officer for Australia, and then a range of roles on strategy execution and implementation, digital direct banking, that kind of stuff. So I've always, Yeah. I've been lucky enough to work in roles that were directly related to change and transformation and and actually moving the organization From its existing kind of current state into a future, kind of more transformed, place.

Adam Bennett [00:03:32]:

And, now I stepped out of banking and started what I call chapter 3, where I was really privileged to be the first, chief executive officer of New South Wales Land Registry Services, which, the the New South Wales government privatized the land titles office in 2017. And a series of shareholders purchased the right to operate that for \$2,600,000,000. And so I was then tasked with Transforming that organization, which I

did, and then stepped out last, late last year, this time last year, And started, chapter 4, which is, back into management consulting. So I feel like I've come full circle. It certainly sounds like it.

Cec Busby [00:04:14]:

You you've run the gamut of, transformation and change there from all those different organizations and sectors. So In terms of transformation, I mean, I I guess it wasn't really something that businesses small businesses really thought a lot about until probably The pandemic, when kind of transformation was forced upon them. But how can small businesses benefit from adopting Transformation strategies now.

Adam Bennett [00:04:42]:

Yeah. Look, I think you make a really good point. And and, I guess my response would be that small businesses are probably doing it more dynamically than they realize. And, yeah, before I proceed too far, it's probably good to get on the same page in terms of when we talk about transformation, what what is it that we mean by that term? And I think of it in terms of 3 3 elements being present. Number 1 is there is, You know, some type of external disruption or opportunity or threat or forces playing out. Number 2 is in response to that, the organization has to develop some kind of strategy or make some kind of choice. And then number 3, the 3rd element is having done those 2 things, you then have to take action and implement And get stuff done to actually respond because we all know, you know, whether you're a small business or a large business, you know, if a strategy is not Actually implemented. It just sits on the shelf, so it's almost worthless.

Adam Bennett [00:05:42]:

So it's not really until you actually take action that value is created. And I'd suggest many small businesses, probably doing that really dynamically and sometimes even without realizing it because they're nimble, they're customer centered. Yeah. They realized that if they don't really, you know, continue to serve their customers with with, you know, a valuable Product or service, you know, they go out of business very quickly.

Cec Busby [00:06:08]:

Yeah. They do have the benefit of that agility, which I think can often hamper A big organization.

Adam Bennett [00:06:15]:

Yeah. A 100%. And I think many small businesses, you you have the owner, if not working full time in the business, certainly hands on in the business. And there's a lot at stake for the owner of a small business, and I've been a small business owner With my wife, we own a small business. I I know exactly what it's like, to make sure that business remains relevant, delivers good quality for its customers and, you know, remains profitable.

Cec Busby [00:06:42]:

So when you're talking to small business owners, do you are there any kind of common Misconceptions that they might have about transformation or, you know, facing disruption or technological changes?

Adam Bennett [00:06:57]:

Not so much, misconceptions, but I would say there's probably some universal principles that really are true regardless of whether you're a small business or a large business. And they're particularly around the mindset that you adopt In terms of how you run your business. And I think some of those, you know, mindset, elements, they are truly universal. So, you know, I'd put those things down to, are you curious? You know, are you curious as to what is going on in the world? You know, are you humble? Are you kinda willing to admit that how you operate now and how you've always operated even if you've been successful, may not be what you require to be successful going forward into the future. And that can become very, very difficult for people either in small businesses or large businesses where They're so used to their existing way of thinking. As the world changes, they almost cling on to how they've always done things, And that's the pathway to irrelevance. You know, are they ambitious? Are they urgent? Are they Kinda really looking to be determined for the the the ambition for their organization and them and themselves, frankly. So, Yeah.

Adam Bennett [00:08:11]:

Are they resilient? You know? Are they kind of willing to take the knocks that will come in business regardless of whether you're a small business or a large business? So there's a range of different ways of thinking. You know, are they focused? Do they really focus on those few things that will make the biggest difference? And that's typically, I would suggest, easier for a small company because sometimes they don't have the resources to have a lot of choice. But that's also very, very difficult for many large organizations where it's very hard to focus everyone on those few things that matter. And I'd suggest, you know, whether you're a small business or a large business, it's always best to move 1 or 2 things forward a mile and 50 things forward an inch.

Cec Busby [00:08:59]:

Yeah. You spoke a little bit about, that resistance to change then, you know, things are being disrupted around them, but people are still continuing to do stuff the same old way. So what if you're a business owner and you kind of find that you are stuck in that kind of cycle of, oh, we did it this way, so we should always keep doing it this way even though it's not working.

Adam Bennett [00:09:22]:

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that makes transformation very difficult is the status quo never has to argue its own case. So it just plugs along. And if it's fit for purpose, great. If it's not fit for purpose, then it just does what it does. And it's a little bit like, you know, the rings of a tree that each year it puts on a little bit of weight and businesses whether they're small or big can be the same. And so I think that makes, that can make transformation difficult, but so can that mindset. And I would suggest that, you know, again, whether they're small companies or large companies, there's probably a couple of kind of mindsets that can make transformation very difficult.

Adam Bennett [00:10:07]:

And, yeah, number 1, as I mentioned, would be someone who's just not curious. But I think there are also, in many industries, traditionalists who

have grown up in their industry or grown up in their their business. They've been successful, and they can't really imagine their industry or their company working any differently To to Howard Howard does. There's also autocrats who who really just wanna tell everyone else want what to do, and they're not really open to, Yeah. The possibility of, someone coming in and saying, hey. Why don't we try this? Yeah. You also have, you know, people who may want to get, you know, changing their business, but they just don't know how. They don't have the tools and the the skill sets and the the the techniques to change their business.

Adam Bennett [00:10:55]:

And That's really a recognition that running a business is very different to changing a business. And they're 2 very distinct Skillsets, they're not better or worse than each other. They're just different. And then also, you you know, in large companies, you can have rationalists who just do what's in their scorecard. So If their scorecard is not, aimed at, you know, transforming and changing the company, then nothing on earth will make them change Change

Cec Busby [00:11:22]:

company. No. It's not on the to do list.

Adam Bennett [00:11:25]:

It's not on the to do list. And if, you know, their scorecard says, you know, We're gonna put this boat on the rocks, you know. That's precisely what they'll do. So, you Yeah. So sometimes you need to, hang on a second. Let's actually go around those rocks and, we'll adjust your scorecard to reflect that as success. And I will then very happily, you know, sail around the rocks. So but unless you change their scorecard, they won't.

Adam Bennett [00:11:50]:

So there's a range of different personalities that can really make change more or less difficult.

Cec Busby [00:11:56]:

Yeah. So just a few things that you spoke about and that I would be keen to unpack. You know, the small business owners running a business is different to changing a business, But they also have quite often very limited resources, especially compared to the big companies that you might be working with. So How could they effectively plan and maybe execute a transformation strategy When, you know, they don't have time, they don't have much money.

Adam Bennett [00:12:26]:

All they've

Cec Busby [00:12:27]:

got is their thinking maybe.

Adam Bennett [00:12:29]:

Look. It's a really good point that you're making because, you know, the resources available to a big business are, just so far in excess to a to a small business owner. So A small business owner really has to be a bit more reflective and thoughtful and focused as I just mentioned because they just simply don't have the resources to waste on pursuing a whole heap of different, different things. But I think part of it is, number 1, is a is firstly a deep reflection and thinking. And I know, you know, small business owners spend a lot of time thinking about their businesses. We certainly did when we were the owner of a small business. And, Yeah. One of the questions we continually asked ourselves was, you know, are we remaining relevant to our customers? You know, are we remaining good value in those types And so we would try different things from time to time.

Adam Bennett [00:13:18]:

And what we found was, especially and it doesn't matter what type of business it is. Well, Yeah. If you're let's say you're in a a hospitality business and you wanna really, you know, start Ramping up the degree of customer service that you provide, for example. Well, that might be as simple as, You know, scheduling all your staff to, you know, stay back an hour and you pay them for that hour and you sit around and

you have a discussion Around, alright, what could we do to improve the service to our customers? You know? And that would come up with, You know, some ideas and solicit the ideas from the people who are actually doing the work. Now that that might take some time. That might cost you some money. But if you think about it through the lens of one of your employees, that's an amazingly, energizing session that they can have when they're like, woah. What? The boss is asking me my ideas.

Adam Bennett [00:14:16]:

And, yeah, I've got plenty of ideas because, you know and then, you know, do you write those down and then you you might, after another shift, spend, You pay everyone to stay back an hour, and you you train them in the new ways of working that you want them to do Rather than always relying on trying to do it during the online shift. So I think, you know, designing thinking up and designing interactions And then being prepared to pay for them, which gives it a different weight, and the employees start to think, wow, this is actually quite serious. I'm getting paid Stay back an hour for this discussion. Could be quite powerful. And in the grand scheme of things, not massively expensive.

Cec Busby [00:14:57]:

Yeah. So is there any kind of step by step or, you know, specific framework that, You know, when you're going into a business or an organization and you're looking to transform that business, is there a specific approach you take or it really is unique to the business?

Adam Bennett [00:15:15]:

It's both unique and but it's tailored. I would say it's tailored. And there is definitely a approach I take. And, Yo. There's there's what I call the mechanics of transformation. And if you're the leader, I think there's there's probably, you know, 5 key things that you can do To really give that transformation, every chance of success. And as the leader, number 1 is, is personal commitment and Getting out in front and being the face of that change. You know, being not only doing the work, but being seen to do the work, I think, is really important.

Adam Bennett [00:15:52]:

Number 2 is you have to make decisions. You have to choose, commit to and then communicate a compelling strategy. So you have to be able to say, you know, because of the, you know, forces x y zed in the world, we are gonna do a, b, and c. And that's that. And be prepared to get out in front and actually commit to a course of action. I think the third one is you have to build the team around you. You know, transformation is a team sport, and you can't do it all yourself. And so really engaging with your team, Building allies and really looking for people with the right temperament.

Adam Bennett [00:16:35]:

And by that, I mean, you know, curiosity, humility, Yeah. Ambition, urgency, those types of traits I mentioned before, together with the right skills, I e, they might be skilled in, Yeah. Using technology or customer service techniques or business process design, but really making sure you've got some good people in that team. Number 4 is taking a really thorough approach. And I would always recommend that people take a very broad view of how to change a business. And if you think of that through, you know, a lens of what I would call the the leaders of change, and there's things like your products and services, the customers and markets that you serve. You might have alliances with people, and then there's what I would call operating levers, which is how you actually change business. And that's things like business process, Technology, organization structure and roles, people and culture, facilities.

Adam Bennett [00:17:27]:

There's some of the things that you can really pull and flex to change a company. And then lastly, I would say keep score. So set yourself some KPIs, a couple of KPIs and measures, that can objectively measure, you know, the from to story that you're you're looking to create. And if you're a small business, that could be things like Revenue growth that could be number of customers you serve, that could be number of products that customers have. You know, there's a range of different measures you could design To reflect the reality of your own small business, and you you then start tracking them. And it will be very apparent as to whether you're Hitting them. Does that make sense?

Cec Busby [00:18:11]:

Yeah. No. It does make sense. And, you're talking about the different levers that they could Paul, and I noticed you mentioned, you know, digital and, you know, AI and digital have been making Leaps and bounds in the last couple of years. So what's your advice for business owners that might be still feeling a bit reluctant to Embrace the opportunities of AI in their business.

Adam Bennett [00:18:36]:

Oh, look, it well, it really depends on their business, and I think some professions and businesses will potentially be Kinda impacted, more than others, but, you know, any any kind of Small business owner, I would recommend get on something like chat g p t and just have a play around with it. And It might be let's say and let's say they're they're writing a proposal for a new customer. So let's say that they're they're gonna pitch their company to someone else. You know, put in put in something to GPT. If I'm a in certain type of business, you know, pitching to this type of business, what are some of the things you you think would be, you know, of benefit to put in a proposal. And I think if they did that, I'd be surprised to actually what it generates. And I'm not suggesting they cut and paste That and that becomes their proposal. But, you know, using things like AI to complement what you already do and to help save time and to, Most importantly, stretch your own thinking and your own perspectives on, you know, How you how you run your business.

Adam Bennett [00:19:45]:

And I don't know. Let's let's say you run your business, I don't know. Let's say it's a coffee shop or a small factory or it's a personal trainer. I mean, you could put, you know, you know, give me 10 tips to improve a, you know, coffee shop business. And, Chad, I think they'd be amazed at what chat g p t comes up with. So I think all of these things are complements to how they run their businesses if they so choose to use them.

Cec Busby [00:20:12]:

That's true enough. It's also I think it's only as good as, You know what you're prompting at? If you just put something very generic in, it will give you a very generic response.

Adam Bennett [00:20:21]:

Yeah. Exactly.

Cec Busby [00:20:22]:

The more detailed you can be, A 100% a better response you might get. The other thing I'd like to touch on is that, that leadership role because You know you talked about you know leading from the front and having to kind of embody those changes if you're wanting to To bring transformation about in a business. So are there specific qualities that you look for in a leader who's wanting to drive change in a business?

Adam Bennett [00:20:51]:

Yeah. Look. I think that's a really good question. And and again, in a in a business context, what what is leadership? And, you know, there's many books written on what leadership is, but if we distill it down to a very simple thing, I think, you know, leaders Leadership is all about taking people on a journey and adapting to change versus management, which is how to Deal with complexity and kind of, you know, be as effective and efficient as you can be. So I think leadership and management can sometimes be thrown in as the same thing, but I think they're slightly different. And I think in terms of leadership, you know, what would I look for in a leadership? And in fact, try and aspire to be myself, and that is a couple of things. One is Back to the transformation. 1, you you are sensitive to what is going on in the world.

Adam Bennett [00:21:47]:

You know, you are taking, an external view of what is going on and continually thinking about how could that impact my business. But again, that's not enough. 2, you have to be out of then translate that into a set of, you know, strategies or choices. And then 3, you'll be able to get those things done. Now that's a pretty kinda clear, approach. I think the under under, underlying and and critical trait that you would

also look for in a good leader is You can do that whilst being a positive kind of, force for good with regards to how you treat people. You know, you treat people with respect and dignity and courtesy. You're kind to them.

Adam Bennett [00:22:37]:

And now that doesn't mean you don't make hard decisions or you're very direct. Those are all important. But, essentially, you're looking to to take people on a journey and have the people that make that journey feel Kinda engaged and enthusiastic and up for the changes that are that are either necessary or you have to implement. So I think, you know, in summary, good leadership is being able to get things done and as well as doing so in a positive, Respectful, courteous, ethical manner.

Cec Busby [00:23:09]:

Yes. So you wanna create a culture where your team or your staff or whatever will Come on that innovation journey with you.

Adam Bennett [00:23:17]:

Yes. And feel like that is a good thing to do. And, Yeah. And not not because you coerced them or you bullied them or, you know, you gave them a sense of, Your optimism kinda engagement and, you know, kind of space for them to also inject their ideas, Yeah. Which I think is a very powerful way to win people, across to the changes to actually get them involved in it. And, yeah, there's a great quote from, Franklin d Roosevelt, he said, you know, I could just get so much more done once I didn't care who got a credit. And it's such a good lesson for all leaders, you know, to, you know, put your ego aside and, let people get on with things and guide them and let and give them the credit, you know.

Cec Busby [00:24:09]:

And I think it also creating that, that more of a a nurturing culture, it stops the fear because often there's a lot of fear around change.

Adam Bennett [00:24:18]:

Yeah. There can be. And I think the fear comes from the uncertainty. And I think, you know, sometimes that fear is well placed Because sometimes many times transformation does result in different ways of doing things, which either Forces people to learn new skills or it does turn out that not as many people are needed. And so I think being sensitive to that and being honest and transparent and direct and taking people on that journey recognizing Not everyone may make it through the transformation. You know? You may have less jobs at the end of it than you did at the start of it. But I think naming that and taking people on that journey is really important if you wanna be effective and you wanna be respected. And it and My advice is never to kind of pretend that's not gonna happen because people people, you know, dare I say, have a very sensitive bullshit meter And rightly so.

Adam Bennett [00:25:19]:

So they will see through any attempt to sugarcoat or kind of gild the lily on this stuff. So I think you've just got to be really upfront, and commit to that if anyone is, Kind of impact negatively impacted by the change, you look after them as well as you can. You treat them with respect. You treat them with the gravity that you know that that is if they lose their role. That's a very big thing, so it's not something to be done lightly.

Cec Busby [00:25:50]:

Is that kind of one of the common sort of pitfalls or maybe potential Downsides to transformation.

Adam Bennett [00:25:59]:

Look. I think it is. And I think it's it it is. And, Yeah. I've been in organizations where, you know, my predecessor had said there's gonna be more, you know, this is all going well. There's gonna be more jobs Because we're gonna grow, and that was contrary to what everyone really knew was gonna happen. So that person was not believed. But also I had to come in and then say, actually, that's not true.

Adam Bennett [00:26:26]:

There will be less roles. And, Yo. That message may not have been liked, and I may not have been liked for saying it, But I think I was certainly respected for having said it. And then as it played out, that's exactly what happened. So people trusted me, And they knew if I told them something, they could believe it.

Cec Busby [00:26:48]:

Yeah. Kawhi, just about out of time. So as we wrap up, Would you have any kind of final advice to offer our small business owner listeners who might be thinking about starting that transformation journey, But maybe they're a little bit uncertain. What's the first step?

Adam Bennett [00:27:05]:

Yeah. Look, I think the first thing is to is to Really try and get themselves outside their own mind and outside their own organization and look inwards at their company as though they're a customer. And, you know, everything should be lined up to deliver what the customer needs today and also what the customer is likely to need tomorrow. And that might mean, getting out and talking to your customers and saying, you know, what is it you need? What is how are you thinking about your business? And actually being quite upfront around, yeah, what is it that you need and what is it that you value? And that will give them some really interesting insights. And that could also be if they're, you know, business to consumer business. You know, in the talking to their customers and say, hey. How's it all going? How are you finding everything? Like, Actually soliciting feedback. And then once they've got a bit of that feedback, taking the time and I know that it's different because I know running a small business is almost sometimes a 5 hour a day job.

Adam Bennett [00:28:06]:

And there's just simply not enough time. But making the time, to actually sit down and then reflect what have I learned? What have I learned about the customer's view of my business? And then what may I need to change? And and then if they can do that, obviously, they you know, small business people are very adept at at running their businesses and and and making Dynamic adjustments to their business. So, yeah, that's how they came to be in business, in fact. So I

think they will know intuitively how to respond. But their their biggest challenge, I think, is gonna be, you know, creating the minds the mind space to actually think about their business And then taking their people on that journey.

Cec Busby [00:28:49]:

Thank you so much, Adam. It's been great chatting with you today. Thanks for all your awesome advice.

Adam Bennett [00:28:55]:

You're most welcome. It's been great to to, to chat with you. Thank you.

Cec Busby [00:28:59]:

Thank you.