Mark Sylvester: You're listening to the Big Speak Podcast. A program populated by the voices of thought leaders, successful CEOs, and renowned entrepreneurs. We'll hear their exclusive tips, behind the scenes insights, and off the record stories. Piece of knowledge only available from Big Speak's unique slate of keynote speakers, and business leaders. During these episodes, we'll meet just a few of the best speakers in the business, learn their unique skill sets that enabled them to inspire audiences on the biggest stages in the world. Inspiration begins now.

Hey everybody, welcome to the show. I'm Mark Sylvester. With me today I've got Adam Cheyer. He is the co-founder of VP of engineering at Siri, and the co-founder and VP of engineering of Viv Labs. Adam, welcome to the show.

Adam Cheyer: Thank you very much. Nice to meet you.

Mark Sylvester: Tell us what part of the world we've caught you in today.

Adam Cheyer: I'm in downtown San Jose, California.

Mark Sylvester: Right in the hard of Silicone Valley.

Adam Cheyer: That's right.

Mark Sylvester: When I started the top our astute listener heard the words Siri, and just quickly because we can read about this at BigSpeak.com, but you were the guy who came up with Siri how many years ago? Was it 20 years ago?

Adam Cheyer: Yeah, I've done working on this for quite some time. My first version of Siri, or it wasn't called Siri back then. It was actually in 1993 before I ever saw a web browser, and I just dreamed that someday there would be a world with computers around the world, each with their own content and services, I knew that people would need a way to discover that content, and services, and interact with it. The idea of having a web browser, I just never considered that with hyperlinks and web pages. I thought everyone would have an assistant that they could delegate tasks to, and that would take care of all the coordination for interacting with all of those different computers around the world.

That was my dream in 93. I keep at it. We launched Siri originally as a startup in 2010, and about 2 or 3 weeks later Steve Jobs must've seen it because he called our office unannounced, and after some back and forth we ended up going to Apple and building the Siri that you know and love.

Mark Sylvester: Feels like 1993. What a great ride that has been for you. I want to focus on that part of you because you're a technologist. I mean deep on technology, yet there is this other skill that you have, which is talking, and taking technology, and putting it into terms that civilian audiences, and lay audiences can understand

that, right? When did you first understand that you really liked being a public speaker? It's clearly not something for everybody. Is it in your DNA or was it something you learned?

Adam Cheyer: I think the first time I ever spoke to an audience, I was maybe 20 years old, and I was pretty nervous. I still get nervous, and I don't really consider myself a professional speaker, and that's what I do. I would much rather but building, and doing things than talking about them, but I do find useful, and important to get out a message. I pick a few events, only a handful every year, and I go and speak to audiences because I want to bring a message to them that I think they can use either in their daily lives, and businesses, or maybe just in the way they lead their life, and think about the world. I find it important to not just sit on my computer programming all day, but to get out, and bring a message to audiences.

Mark Sylvester: It's nice to be in front of a live audience, right?

Adam Cheyer: Oh, absolutely.

Mark Sylvester: Makes all the difference in the world. You said that you do a few events a year. What's your selection criteria? The person who's listening to this is probably thinking about maybe having you on the stage. What's the event that you say yes to?

Adam Cheyer: Really there's two types of events that really attract me. One is there are a lot of CEOs, and businesses out there trying to grapple with things like artificial intelligence, and understand how should this impact my business? How should I be thinking about this? And what's real? And what's hype? I want to bring the message to this type of audience, so that they have practical skills, a clear understanding of where are we today? Where is it going? And what's real, and what's not? For me, that's an important message to bring to audiences. The second is I started Siri in Viv labs, I've also ... In all, I've started four successful companies including Change.org, which is the world's largest ...

Mark Sylvester: You bet.

Adam Cheyer: ... Donation platform. About 200 million members are making the world a better place. I was a founder of another AI machine learning company called Sentient. Saving lives and doing some amazing work, then Viv labs will take the Siri vision to make it become as important as the internet and mobile itself. But the whole creation process of how do you take an idea and really get it out to the world? I love speaking to that, especially to young entrepreneurs, or anyone who ... Maybe it's a particular country that really wants to get people working, and thinking about how to be impactful in the world, how to be successful. I really like talking to people about the entrepreneurship process, why is it important, why is it good, how do you do it, and how do you make it successful?

So far, I've managed to be pretty lucky or skillful with four out of four successful companies, and I want to bring some of those lessons to others trying to do that.

Mark Sylvester: I want to unpack that a little bit. Clearly it's ... You are in the position where you can't have a canned speech, and just give that speech over and over because technology is changing, and because you've picked an area of expertise, specifically AI, which is massively disrupting industries probably more than our listener really understands, but you and I know how much it is doing that. But I think it's a very unique skill to as a technologist be able to interpret what's going, and the rapid change, and put it into terms that a business audience could understand because that's not their job. But as you said because you've worked with start ups, you have that kind of unique point of view, right?

Adam Cheyer: Yeah, that's a great point. I'm lucky enough to have worked in research labs, I was at SRI or Stanford Research Institute, I've worked at some of the biggest companies in the world, including Apple, and I'm currently a VP at Samsung, and I've worked on a number of start ups. Either other people's start ups, or my own start up. I have some perspective, I think really ... I understand the technology, and can I hope cut through the hype. What's real? What's not real? How is it being applied? How is it useful? What can it do? There's this kind of interesting dilemma. I say I've been working on AI for 30 years, and there are things that have happened in the last 7 or 8 years that I never thought would have happened in my lifetime. That's a pretty strong statement right there. It has been incredibly rapid change in this area, and I'm not sure everyone is aware how significantly things have advance of late.

On the other side of this spectrum, there are many people who are raising fears. Do we need to be afraid of AI?

Mark Sylvester: Right.

Adam Cheyer: Is it going to take over? Is it going to replace us? There's a lot of hype, and hyperbole, and I really believe it's important that people have an understanding of what works today, where it should best be applied especially for business, and what AI cannot do. There are many things we've made no advances, and especially on this area of hype. Is AI going to be smarter than humans? That's not something in my view that we have to worry about anytime soon, and I try to make a case for that reasoned approach, and thoughtful discussion of why that's true.

Mark Sylvester: I'm curious. I'm a big fan, and I'm a technologist myself, and I happen to work in AI. I know that probably 20% of my time is just staying current with the literature, and the research in what's going on. For a busy guy like you, how do you, because you're the one who's going to come to the audience, and tell us what's real, and what's not real. How do you find the time to stay on top of such a fluid field?

Adam Cheyer: Well, as I said I'm not a full time speaker, so I don't have a stock keynote that I go around the world 100 times repeating. I work, and live, and breathe this every day in industry. I'm building systems today that will ship hundreds of millions of devices in the near future. I have teams, and I run teams who are both kind of more researched focused, as well as applied. I'm literally working to solve problems, and to get out products in major companies every day, and that's my life. The speaking is sort of on the side. When I choose to accept an event, I really talk. I like to talk to the group, and understand what they're looking for, what's their vision for their event, who are the people, what's the theme of the conference or the event that they're trying to do, and I will put together, and tailor a presentation specifically for them.

For me, this gives me a chance to review all my past material to being in some of the latest findings on things that I've learned maybe since my last event, and make it fresh not only for myself, which I think is important, but I think for the audience, and make it current. I think largely because my day job is keeping me abreast of what's going on in the field that gives me ... And the speaking engagement is a little bit on the side. That gives me a chance to update, refresh, and really tailor any presentation specifically for that audience at that time.

Mark Sylvester: An organization that has you speak one year, if you come back and speak the next year there's going to be so much that has happened?

Adam Cheyer: Oh, absolutely. Year over year, I mean the whole industry is changing around us. Just this week I think Google announced new technology, and products, and the AI assistance smart home space this week. Next week Samsung is going to be having their software developer conference. There will be new announcements there. I mean every single week, new important things are happening that will shape humanity, and I'm lucky enough to be right in the thick of it.

Mark Sylvester: You have said that one of the other audience is start ups over the last several years. I'm going to say post 2008, there is a renaissance in start ups, and entrepreneurialism, and start up weekends, and mash ups. I mean there's nine incubators in every city these days, right? That when you look out to the sea of those kinds of fresh faces, especially when you're outside of Silicone Valley you're into the Midwest, or some place else. Tell me what it is about that audience that lights you up so much that lets you want to go and talk to them?

Adam Cheyer: Number one I think the start up as an engine of creation is the most important tool that we have to change the world. I've worked at the big companies in the research labs, universities, and I believe that a start up is the best way to change the world for two reasons. Number one, as a start up you have to be ambitious. You cannot just do what every other company is doing because the big companies will do it better than you. They have more resources, more people, etc. on the other hand, you have a focus. If you raise money, maybe if you have a runway, you can count the number of days until you die.

Mark Sylvester: Right.

Adam Cheyer:	That unique combination of ambition, and having to have a focus, and produce value in a short period of time I think is what makes start ups special. At one point you said "What is it about speaking to these audiences that charge you up?" A brief story. These events, I get so much back from the people that I mean.
Mark Sylvester:	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Adam Cheyer:	Both speakers and participants, this is one of the main reasons why I do these events. When I had left Apple, it was very difficult tie for me emotionally because I have been working for decades on this vision, and we achieved something. I was being incredibly well paid, and I had a team that I loved, that we were working with, and it was very hard for me emotionally to walk away from this. I had certain reasons. I went and did one of my first public speaking talks, and I was speaking to 3000 entrepreneurs in Europe about the challenges, and the opportunities of starting a company, and by giving them these stories, they gave back to me. Such excitement.
Mark Sylvester:	Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Adam Cheyer:	I came away fully inspired, and I went from like down kind of almost grumpy place in my life, to like "Yeah, I have to get out there, and do it again. I have to do whatever I'm saying." Within a few months, I started my next company. I said, "I'm going to go pursue the vision again, even if I have to start all over and try to get it the way I always imagined it." I don't think I would've been able to do that if I hadn't interacted at this event, and I remember making a comment to someone. I said "I came to inspire, but came away inspired." This has happened to me countless times whereby talking about it, and speaking, I almost reinforced myself how I need to be living my life even more. That's helped me a few times.
Mark Sylvester:	I wonder who gets motivated more. Is it you? Right? Is it the audience? It's something there.
Adam Cheyer:	It's both.
Mark Sylvester:	I love that. With your world view, you've talked about not giving the specific talk over and over again, and that you really were giving this slice in time. Why do think it's so important to get out there and get this message out to people?
Adam Cheyer:	Well, like I just said, I think it's important for others to hear. I mean these are messages that I want them to know. I want them to know what's real. I want them to realize that they're not applying AI to their business, maybe their competitors are, and they should.
Mark Sylvester:	Right.

Adam Cheyer: But I also want them to know, don't get caught up in all of this hype, and what's not true. For me, it is important, and it's important for me also to learn, to hear, to listen, to interact with people many times after the talk itself. There will be a gathering where cocktails or what have you.

Mark Sylvester: Right.

Adam Cheyer: I get to talk to people, and answer questions, and many times that will actually help refine how I think about the world. As I said, it's not my full time job, but I really value the chances that I do it. I think it's important hopefully for others. There have been cases where I meet someone who maybe I talk to years before have taken some idea ...

Mark Sylvester: Oh. Wow.

Adam Cheyer: ... Or some lesson, and applied it in a way that I might never have thought of. One case I can think of, I talked ... I was working with a 15 year old boy, and he had ideas about how to create an AI company at age 15.

Mark Sylvester: Wow.

Adam Cheyer: I gave him some tips and some hints, and some lessons, and not only did he do it, a year and a half later at age 17, he sold his company for multiple tens of millions of dollars to one of the internet giants. He comes back and he says, "It was so important when you gave me inspiration, and hope." I'm like, "Wow." That's just one person I talked to. If they can get some benefit out of it, that's fantastic. If I can get some benefit learning, and interacting as I explained, it's worth doing.

Mark Sylvester: That sounds like there's so much energy on both sides of that equation. As we come to the end here, I've looked at the talk about your relationship with Big Speak because there's another entity that you're getting to work with. How did they find you? What was that conversation like?

Adam Cheyer: I don't know how they found me. They must've reached out at some point, and this was not something I was actively seeking or looking with, looking for, but it's been a really, really good relationship. There are very few companies in my life, whether it be a hotel, or just any company that I think really excels in service, so it's rare that I'm a promoter or a champion for any specific company. But my relationship with Big Speak has been so pleasurable. I mean they have really a level of service. I have a person that I work with. He listens to me, he never seems to take into consideration my needs, and desires, and constraints because I have a day job, and I never feel pressured to do more talks that I want to do, or to do something I don't want to do. They're just on top of it, they make everything easy, and smooth, and organized.

For me, it makes fitting in these little excursions to go give a talk. It fits into my life, and that's I think a really thing I value from Big Speak. I probably wouldn't be doing this if it were ... If they couldn't make it so easy.

Mark Sylvester: I love that. They're going to love hearing that. You're one of those few guys on the planet who thinks big, and then acts even bigger.

Adam Cheyer: I'll close on just one comment. I only started really creating companies about 10 years ago. It's literally about the 10th anniversary of Siri, my first company, etc. At the time, I remember feeling like there's no way that I can impact the world. I'm just one person. What can I do? A whole world is out there, and I'm powerless really other than to influence my very small circle around me. Now, my perspective is of course I can change the entire world for all humanity. Change.org, a couple of hundred million people. Siri, hundreds of millions of devices, and many billions of queries every week, and Viv Labs I think will eclipse anything I've ever done. Reflecting on that, I realize I'm just the same person that I was, but I'm probably dumber, and slower than I was 10 years ago. Yet the thing that's changed is my belief that of course I can impact the world, and sometimes the confidence and the belief to try, and the confidence to succeed that often makes the difference.

Mark Sylvester: I'm glad we are able to get that in. That was perfect Adam. Thank you so much for joining us.

Adam Cheyer: My pleasure.

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