

Robert Richman BigSpeak Podcast Interview

Speaker 1: You're listening to the BigSpeak 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, pieces of knowledge only available from BigSpeak'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 skillsets that enabled them to inspire audiences on the biggest stages in the world. Inspiration begins now.

Today, we're talking with Robert Richman who is the culture architect and customer experience expert and the co-creator of Zappos Insights. Robert, welcome to the show.

Robert Richman: Thanks for having me.

Speaker 1: Hey, I'm curious in looking at your page on BigSpeak. There's a lot of things that you do, but one of the things in the Beyond the Keynote section, it talks about high-performance improv, and I've not heard those words strung together before. How does that help your speaking?

Robert Richman: Oh, sure, yeah. It's something that I love to do with high-end teams that already know each other. This is for that next level because, oftentimes, people are just starting to get the team cohesive, but the question is then what do you do with the team that's already cohesive and get them to the next level, and what improv does is really taps deep into your intuition, and it makes you rely on things like trust, trust of the other people, really being yourself, really letting go. People who are really good at improv, it's like they can almost read each other's minds. It's a practice that's really fun, but also has applications for the team because it gets them so in sync.

Speaker 1: Are you an improver, as well?

Robert Richman: Yes, absolutely.

Speaker 1: How long have you been doing improv?

Robert Richman: Oh, gees, maybe about seven years now.

Speaker 1: It's a lot of fun. Do you perform in a regular troupe?

Robert Richman: No, I don't. I've done a lot of classes though, and I have ... Sometimes trainers come over to my house and we'll do a party, and I've worked with some of the big schools in it in LA.

Speaker 1: It is a lot of fun. How long have you been doing keynotes? What was it when you decided like, "Boy, I'd really like to be able to share these learnings and these insights?" When did that first hit you?

Robert Richman: It first really hit when Zappos first put me on stage in front of 1,500 people because what was surprising was during school, I would be that kid who's shaking, can't really talk. It was really not in me, but then when I was thrown on stage in front of 1,500 people, it was like something was activated in my DNA, and I just felt like I was in my own living room on stage in front of thousands, and people came up to me afterward and said, "This is your thing. You are just natural at it." It felt like I found a new home.

Speaker 1: Had you not spoken to that ... This was the first time? It was like a blinding glimpse of your future?

Robert Richman: Yeah, exactly.

Speaker 1: Oh, my gosh. I'm curious now. How many years ago was that?

Robert Richman: That was about eight years ago.

Speaker 1: When you step onto a stage now, is there still a little bit of that anxiety or you're just so comfortable with it now that that's all behind you?

Robert Richman: It's both. I actually love the anxiety oddly. I've got a new relationship with it. I don't call it that. It's just a lot of energy coursing through my body, and I find that it's different sometimes. I'll just be in a very peaceful state, but when I do get that, what, oftentimes, people call nervousness, to me, it's really exciting and I even started to realize that I'll do things sometimes even subconsciously to get that energy up to go on stage.

I had a keynote recently speaking to Lowe's department store, to 4,000 of their managers, and I was about to go on stage, and I actually thought I had a little bit more time than I did, and one of the things I like to do to get out the excess energy is do push-ups, so I had all this energy, and I was on the side of this huge stage, 4,500 people, and I start doing push-ups, and my record was about 70, and I started going 10, 20, 30, 40, 60, 70, 80, 82, and I get done with the 82, most I've ever done in a row, and I was so surprised that they just grabbed me right at that moment to go on stage, and people couldn't tell in the audience or in the video, but my heart is beating out of control. I can barely breathe as I'm going up there. I don't even know if I'm going to catch my breath by the time I'm speaking, and I just went up there, started to breathe, relax, look at them smile, and my heart rate went down, and it was an incredible experience.

I've actually learned to love all the nervousness and excitement to the point where if it's not there, I'll do something to create it.

Speaker 1: I love that. You, as a culture architect and someone who's really focused on culture, that whole universe of topics, where do you think your expertise is strongest?

Robert Richman: Culture's really interesting because it's everything. It's recruiting. It's training. It's innovation. It's leadership. It's management. It's all the communication arts. I think my edge is in helping understand it from a systems perspective of what's really going on with human communication to a certain degree and understanding what's behind it, the games, the systems, and then the culture hacking approach, which is my approach of how you can do specific little things within the culture that makes a big impact. The same way that hackers find a small hole in the system, get in, and then create a lot of havoc, this is using hacking in a positive sense.

I empower people who don't feel like their empowered people, who are frontline employees, managers, even CEOs because, surprisingly enough, CEOs still say to me, "You know, I can't control or change the culture," and then teaching them how to culture hack is my angle.

Speaker 1: It's interesting. I'm thinking in a breakout where you've got a lot of C-level executives, talking to them about being a hacker. How does that go over?

Robert Richman: It's so funny because all my friends, when I initially told them, I said, "Don't do this. Don't talk about hacking to corporations. They're gonna be scared. They don't want hackers around." Oddly enough, it's the biggest ones, Unilever, Bridgestone Tire, the ones that call me in for culture hacking the most, because they get it. They say, "Oh, you know, we can't just change this whole big ship and turn it around. We need to empower people. We want people to feel like hackers. We want them to feel like they are empowered." Oddly enough, it's the biggest corporations that are really the most comfortable with the culture hacking.

Speaker 1: It's counterintuitive for your friends, but it was completely on point for you feeling like that was the right way to get in. Tell me what open space strategy is.

Robert Richman: Open space strategy is based on open space technology, which is a game meeting format that allows the individuals and the company or team or division to surface all the best issues and ideas and work on them together, and the way I discovered this was as a speaker, sometimes companies would call me in to consult and I do a week-long review, and then I create a big report telling them what to do, what not to do, here's all these things, and they won't do anything in the report, and I thought it was the client's fault, so I moved on to another client, and then I thought it was the client's fault again. I had to do this four times before figuring out that I'm the problem, and that's when I had this Eureka moment, and I said to myself, "I am done telling people what to do because it doesn't work. Even if they're gonna pay me loads of money and ask my opinion, I'm not gonna tell them what to do."

They need to co-create it. That's one of the principles in my book, The Culture Blueprint. It needs to be co-created. If they don't co-create it, they don't take ownership. Open space is all about a format that allows their issues and ideas and solutions to surface, and I create the game for them, but it's really them who are creating all their own answers.

Speaker 1: That sounds like a really fun experience for both them and for you. When you are thinking about the impact that you can make on this audience, and I'm guessing that's going through your mind, what are the specific kind of questions you're looking for before you go in front of that group to figure out how you can make the most impact?

Robert Richman: I like to ask a few things. First, I say, "What would be ... What would it be to knock it out of the park for you? What would be a huge home run?" I ask them, too, as specifically as possible because there's different outcomes, "Do you want them to think differently? Do you want them to act differently? Are you looking for them to be more productive? Are you looking for them to be aligned? Do you want them to collaborate more? Are we doing silo busting? How can we get actually more specific," because everybody will say, "We want a great experience," where they have a lot of takeaways. I'm going to do that regardless, but the more specific they can be about their outcome after my work with them, the more specifically I can change and target the speech.

I ask them, "What do you want them to feel? What do you want them to do? How do you want them to act? What do you want them to say as a result of this experience?"

Speaker 1: Do you feel that they have a really good handle on their ability to be specific?

Robert Richman: A lot don't, and I think that's a missed opportunity for them. I can certainly. I've got my work and can still do that and still provide an amazing experience with takeaways that I know will make a difference, so I'm not worried in terms of the outcome. I just like for them to do some homework on this and really think about what those things are only because I can deliver even more value if I can target it specifically towards those results.

Speaker 1: That feels like that's very on brand for you, this idea of co-creation.

Robert Richman: Exactly.

Speaker 1: Staying along with that, with the various talks that you give, you have several thematic ways that you can dive into this. How much do you reserve for customizing for a given client?

Robert Richman: It really depends. With a workshop, there's a lot that can be customized with that because we have a very intimate interaction with people, a lot of dialog. With a keynote, it's more like a performance. Then it's about picking what kind

of bits, what stories, which techniques will be most helpful. I love it when it's to workshoping because we can adjust on the fly. If I'm doing facilitation for a client, then sometimes we throw the entire script out the window based on the culture that's there, and then open space is in one way the exact opposite. I barely have any impact because I'm there to surface what's most important to everybody else live in the moment.

Speaker 1: You've got a formula that works and then you just execute that. I'm going to guess that some of the best stuff happens when it's unplanned, much like improv. This thinking about the action that people can take immediately after or those takeaways that they have, do you have any strategies for helping the organizers or the people that bring you in after the talks and some strategies on making sure that the ideas took root?

Robert Richman: Yeah. What I like to tell them to do is run an experiment. I'm very against new programs because new programs feel like they're forever, and they usually don't last forever, so the organization loses a lot of credibility. They say, "We're gonna do this thing now," and then it fizzes away in three months, and then they lose credibility with their audience. What I like to do is tell them to run an experiment. Rather than it fizz out, plan for it fizzing out instead where you put a time cap on it like a story. You say, "There's going to be a beginning, middle, and an end."

For example, one of the practices I recommend is to be on time for everything. Some companies are really not, and that's really harmful to culture because it means if people are running late to meetings and running their meetings late and not meeting deadlines, it means they're putting their own individual agenda in front of the culture, so they need to really start being on time before we can do the deeper work on the culture, but that can scare organizations, so rather than creating the new program of being on time, I say, "Just run an experiment. Run an experiment for two weeks where everyone's on time, and then inspect the results and see. Do we like that better? Do we get more done? Are we less stressed?"

Then people have an impact, an input on it, and what experiments allow for is for people to learn without needing to change their beliefs because enforcing a program means you must change your belief about this or you're not going to like it here, whereas an experiment says, "Well, maybe we're wrong. Let's just try it out, and then we'll have our belief just based on an experience rather than based on what we think works or could happen."

Speaker 1: That sounds like an incredibly effective and successful strategy.

Robert Richman: It's great. I'm just give a shout-out to my fellow speaker, Dan Mezick, off of the Culture Game who speaks to this, as well, and he's incredible player in the culture space, as well.

Speaker 1: I want to go back to your time at Zappos. Zappos is famous for their culture and freely giving out the Zappos culture book to anybody who writes in and asks for it, and there's lots of really amazing stories for it. Tell me, what was it about that culture? It's so unique, but unique enough to create something called Zappos Insights and then for you to spin out and do a whole book and a whole talk and build your career around it? What was the impetus of that, where you just said, "This is such a big topic. We need to create a specific organization around it, Insights, and then there's so much here, I'm gonna write my own book and then go spend my professional time talking about it."

Robert Richman: I give a lot of credit to Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos. It was his original idea to productize culture. He saw how many people were coming in for tours, just to see the people work and asking so many questions about how the company does the HR and training and recruiting and he saw the need for business. They didn't quite figure it out. That's when they called on me to come in and figure it out and figure out how to productize culture itself. I created that business with Tony and other people there and developed the whole multimillion dollar business line of teaching and packaging culture in a way that can be shared and reproduced in other companies, and I really didn't think I had anything to say on the matter until I realized I had compiled hundreds of pages of notes based on patterns that I saw work in culture, and then only after seeing I just had hundreds of pages of notes did I realize, "Oh, there's an actual book here."

I wrote the book with the intention to it to be almost like a stereo manual, like, "Are you having problems? Here, just turn to this page and deal with it." I didn't think it would honestly be a very good read. I thought it's more like a manual that you need if you're in trouble or something, but it actually surprised me how many people said they love it, that it's got all five stars on Amazon. The CEO told me that his 16-year-old picked it up and couldn't stop reading it till halfway through the book and he had to go. It's been surprising to me, but I think it speaks to ... It's really the time for culture, that people are realizing, "Oh, this is what's really running the show. It's the relationships. It's the people. It's the conversations, the language," and that's what's really driving the results and that's what's kept me doing what I'm doing.

Speaker 1: I was going to ask about the core idea, which I understand, and why does the world need to know it now, and I think you explained that perfectly. This is a big missing piece in our organizations, isn't it?

Robert Richman: Yes.

Speaker 1: Tell me what your fireside chats are like.

Robert Richman: I love these. It's kind of like an interview on stage. It's almost like doing the Oprah Winfrey show on stage. What I love about it is it's completely off the books. It's unscripted. People can ask their questions. The CEO can ask theirs. I like it for several reasons. One is it's improv, which I love. It's all fresh and exciting. People know I'm playing without a net, so they can throw any question

at me, they know I haven't heard it, and they get to hear the real answer, and I love being on stage with the CEO because I feel like it gives them a lot of credibility to be in that conversation.

To some degree, I think handing over the stage to a keynote speaker, it's like handing over that authority, but when we're up there together and we're talking about it and we're talking about the importance of it, it's really bringing in the CEO in a way that says that they get culture, that they know it, that they find it's important, that they're willing to engage and maybe even answer my questions, and that gives a lot of credibility to their [inaudible 00:16:50] on culture with the whole company that's there to witness the whole thing, and everybody feels like they're part of an experience because nobody knows what's going to happen since it's all improv, and I'll throw this in there as an option. It's honestly rare that they do it, which I think is sad because I think it's a more engaging experience, but I think most people are just used to the keynote format.

It's my hope that more people will hear this and book me on stage for a fireside chat because it's so fun and engaging.

Speaker 1: I would think that immediately afterwards, having that engaged CEO come and sit down and spend a few unscripted moments would be spectacularly helpful. Let me ask you a little bit about BigSpeak. How did they find you, or did you find them? What was that story like?

Robert Richman: It was really interesting. I heard about BigSpeak as such a reputable bureau, and my friend, Stephen Shapiro, was working with them. I said, "You know, I really wanna work with them more, as do most speakers." We'd love to work with great bureaus, and he gave me an amazing tip. He said, "Look, if you really wanna work with them, then take one of your strong leads, a client that you're about to book, but rather than book them, hand it over to BigSpeak to let them take it, take the commission. They'll appreciate it, and they'll also learn what it's like to work with you. They'll get to see the result with the client, and if you knock it out of the park, that's a great reason for them to keep working with you," and that's what happened. I gave them a great gig with a client that was about to book me. I had a great experience, and then I started working more and more with BigSpeak.

One of the greatest honors and pleasures was BigSpeak called me in to facilitate one of their company events, and I got to do that and I loved that because facilitating is one of my favorite things to do. It's, again, off book. It's off improv, and I got to know more of the agents that way, and I really got to contribute back to this agency that I really love.

Speaker 1: I love that. I love working with that crew, as well. I enjoy their offices here in Santa Barbara and being able to spend some time with them as I have been able to spend with you, Robert. Thank you so much. I appreciate learning and [inaudible 00:19:02] this. I have long admired what Zappos has done in culture,

and I, too, believe it is really the missing piece where we need to focus as people who run organizations and I'm so glad that there's a guy like you who's a world expert in it.

Robert Richman: Thank you so much. I appreciate it. It's great to talk to you.

Speaker 1: Thank you. Bye bye.

Robert Richman: We at BigSpeak appreciate you listening to one of our many episodes. We hope you've enjoyed this exclusive and unique access behind the scenes of a keynote speaking world. Highlights from this episode are available on our website, BigSpeak.com, along with the option to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. To learn more about this episode's guest or invite them to your special event, contact us at BigSpeak.com.