

## John Ellis BigSpeak Podcast Interview

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Hey, everybody welcome back to the show. I am thrilled to be talking with John Ellis who is formerly the head of the Ford Developer Program. He's a technologist, founder, board member, entrepreneur, and software developer. John, I've been looking forward to this conversation. Welcome to the show.

John Ellis: Thanks very much, Marc. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Marc: You have expertise in so many different things. I'm gonna get to those because I can't wait to get to those actually. But I am really curious, when was it that you found that you really liked walking onto a stage and talking in front of a thousand people?

John Ellis: I was five-years-old.

Marc: What?

John Ellis: Yeah. Well, the TV station's WGN. But in Chicago, at this time ... this was early '70s ... they had a TV show called Romper Room. It was an early stage precursor to Bozo's Circus and whatnot. It was a week-long show. Your parents submitted pictures and stories and whatnot, and I got chosen. Every day for a week my parents would drive up to the studio, up in the North Side of Chicago, and I'd be on TV. I remember one day trying to talk about condensation at the tender age of ... I might have been four. I was in preschool, trying to teach them about condensation because I had learned that word from my father while we were talking in the car while driving up to the city. Yeah, it's pretty funny.

But in all seriousness, the real stage, I've always had an affinity for probably for teaching is where it drives from. Both my parents are educators and have always had a passion for breaking things down and sharing with other people. The stage is just a really super-big classroom if you will. Yeah. It's probably been a good long number of years.

Marc: It's interesting when you look at the things that you're known for ... internet of things, trends in technology, connected cars ... that the ability for you to take these very technical, very dynamic and fluid industries and put them into a language that makes it easy to communicate and easy for your audience to digest. Seems like a superpower. Do you have a trick there?

John Ellis: At the risk of exposing myself, there's a concept in math that you can always get to a better answer through indirection, which basically means going up another level. You can always find another level to explain something. What I've done in terms of all those what appeared to be very disparate topics is tried to find that level where there is a narrative that weaves through all of them. That has been truly the success in being able to do the things that I do. Which whether I'm talking to a large audience about the impact of autonomy in terms of convenience stores and what's gonna happen to the salad goods in convenience stores to the coming of electricity and the electric car and what that's gonna do to the gas pumps. Which is gonna do to credit card companies, to the internet of things and devices and what's that gonna do to the insurance companies.

All of them have a narrative that at the appropriate level is a narrative that it turns out is a really good narrative to try and teach. I don't ever really for the audiences I speak to get too terribly technical. We can, but since we don't have to I'm able to stay at that level. That allows me to do what appears to be so many different things with relatively the same skill sets.

Marc: Is it that expertise is being able to rise up above those specific things and have this layer of abstraction if you will to where you can string them all together, and then connect that particular client's challenge, the reason you've been brought in to all of those things? Is that fair to say?

John Ellis: Absolutely. A better way of saying it. Thank you. Yeah.

Marc: One of things when you choose to talk about technology is it is a constantly changing world. I've got to wonder, are you having to rewrite your talk all the time because of some new development?

John Ellis: Yes and no. I have a story, right? That is just a general technology story that I constantly am maintaining. This general story has chapters and verses in it. Then depending on where the client or the industry comes from, then I can focus on a particular chapter and read the story in a different way. It's very much like the books that were written before, right? You could create your own story as you'd flip from Chapter Two to One to Seven to Five.

For me, when I present to a client, clients look at me like, "I'd like your slides seven days in advance." I go, "Well, that's just not possible." Or, "I'll give you slides, but there's no guarantee that the slides I give you are the slides I'm using." Where that is born from isn't laziness. It's literally, as you pointed out, the stuff changes so fast that I find the day before there might be a news article, a commentary, just a small piece of information that is the appropriate hook to present the rest of the story. Then I re-jigger my slides or my story or the narrative. I don't ever find myself rewriting the story from scratch. But I do find myself always constantly, "Do I say this first or this first? How do I spin that narrative to make the most impact and the most information transfer?"

Marc: This might be a little bit of inside baseball for people who are speakers. But there's a certain, I guess, confidence and ease when you know your content is locked and you

don't have to worry about it. It's also a little bit of a high wire act when you have to be that fluid. You sound like you're pretty comfortable with breaking news if you will and integrating that into an established fabric of a talk if you will.

John Ellis: Oh, absolutely. In fact, I relish it. It's something that allows me to always ... Never will they see, even within the same day, two different people from the same industry won't necessarily see the same presentation. Even if I use the same slides, the narrative isn't contemporaneous, but it's not a script. I don't script and my slides aren't heavy in verbiage. It is an opportunity. I know how much my speaking window is. I know the start of the story. I know how to follow the story graph line, right? Start it up. Get the rise, coming back down, and move along and so that within that texture, I create the story.

One of my defining opportunities is I always give people the slides. But more importantly, I always give them what I call the information-sided document, which is my notes about every slide that I used in trying to deliver the message to them plus my reading list. If something happened on the Friday and I'm speaking on Saturday, it will be reflected in my reading list because that's what I use. Yeah. I'm very comfortable with it. In fact, I relish it because it makes sure that the customer gets the most up-to-date information. That's an opportunity to differentiate myself from all the other quality speakers that exist out there.

Marc: I've not heard that before. I like that idea of giving the reading list because that's one of the fun questions is: What are you reading now? We get a sense of who you are. But it's: What did I read to help inform this content and, by extension, what are things that you might think about reading if you want to stay current with the topic?

John Ellis: Absolutely. When I speak, and depends on, for this particular scenario, I'll work with the BigSpeak folks and the client, and we'll talk through what the message is or what their intended message or what their intended outcome is. Not maybe the message but the outcome. Then to the extent that I understand that outcome, I build a reading list for myself. If I don't already have it, I build it, and then it gets added into this document.

When I speak, I offer ideas, provocative questions. I try and stay away from opinions. Ideas, provocative questions, thoughts, what-ifs, right? What could happen? What will happen? I wait until the Q&A when somebody says, "What do you think?" Because in essence while I can share my opinion, the goal of my speaking is to educate them to a point where they have the tools and the understanding to take what I've said, digest it, interpret it for themselves. Then understand what that means in terms of transformation to the business, direction of product, or what the case may be.

Marc: On the takeaway from a talk when we're talking about internet of things and trends and technology, this isn't like personal transformation and leadership development though you do speak of some of those things. What are the kinds of takeaways you get from a technical talk that we could apply to a general business? Give me an example.

John Ellis: Probably the most technical talk I give is a talk that is about the evolution of the car and the technology and the software that's in the car and the rapidity of the change and the

evolution that's occurring. I won't go into how a sensor works, right? We don't go into the math. While I'm comfortable about that, that's not the goal of any talk I've ever given to date. It's always generally been about: Here's a basic understanding of the technology, and here's how you incorporate it into business transformation or business model transformation.

That said, what the takeaways are? Probably the first takeaway that generally seems to apply to everybody is get comfortable being uncomfortable, which is phrase draw from down by your area, which is the US military, the SEALs specifically.

Marc: Yep.

John Ellis: You do it for the BUD/S training, right? They throw them in the pool. I have a picture where you see young men, right, with their arms tied behind their backs and their ankles tied together thrown in the pool, and we talk about it. We say, "You need the new world. The new world for every one of you is a world of discomfort. You need to get comfortable being uncomfortable." Then we talk a little bit about I had the pleasure of listening to a former Navy SEAL talk about what they meant. Basically the three takeaways were, as the drill sergeants or the trainers would say, "If you're worried about dying, that means you're not dead yet. Get your head out of your ass and start focusing on the situation, right?" That's number one.

Number two is recognize and understand a very small box. The small box is: Where's my next breath? Then very focused on the fact that the trick in their specific training class is to relax. By relaxing, your body will naturally float up. You'll break the surface. You can grab a breath. You'll fall back under the water again. But now that you understand the buoyancy aspects of the body, you're in control. It's still very uncomfortable. It is unnatural for the human body to be under water that long. However, once you can master the uncomfortableness, you're now comfortable. Now you can move on to the next task.

I talk about that. Not because I'm pro-military or have had the pleasure of serving in the military. But just it is the new world, right? Everyday we're hearing something. Everyday something's coming out, new technology, new alliances, new products. Most of the takeaways regardless of who the audience is, first one is: Get comfortable being uncomfortable.

Marc: It feels like that would work with any audience. Do you know, just curious on audience demographics, does that work better with an older audience or a younger audience?

John Ellis: I've done it. Most of my audiences have probably, I'll say, been maybe late-30s and older. I don't know that I've had the pleasure of having many younger persons. Yes. I can't say for sure, but it certainly does resonate with an older audience because they have the comparison. Life in the past, for whatever that means for them, was easy or was predictable. They got up. They went to work. They have a five-year, long-term plan. They knew what they were doing. Day in and day out, it was good. Every once in a while there was a crisis, but generally it was good. Today they wake up and everything is

changing. Chaos seems to be the rule of the day or disarray. We're constantly breaking down and reforming structures of businesses, right? I'm gonna guess it's older audience, but I don't have enough data points to suggest that it doesn't resonate with the younger audience.

Marc: Do you think that this lens that you look through as a trainer, I get that from you. It's like it's about teaching and it's this big classroom that that gives you a different spin on the way you deliver information?

John Ellis: Yeah. One of the things that I learned when I started teaching graduate school. I was teaching executive education, so it was executive MBA programs. I learned quickly that the students in the classroom ... Very accomplished CEOs, CFOs, right? Very accomplished executives ... had one goal. That was to make the instructor or professor look foolish. That became a motivator for me to ... Don't take this comment out of context. I would never set myself up for a question that I didn't know how to answer. That said, I would get questions from the audience or from the class that I didn't know what the answer was. I would approach it by saying, "You know what? I don't know the answer, but here's the process I think we have to follow to find it." I'd talk about that. Then I'd take a note to myself and then the next class I'd come back to it.

What that prepared me for in the speaking world is: I don't come across like a professor. My slides are very Jobsian from like Steve Jobs. They're very Jobsian. They're very picture-oriented, very colorful and with a few words, maybe a graph or a picture. But it's me. It's my narrative. I'm the center of the stage and the graphic exists to support me. From that standpoint, I'm more of a storyteller. But because I'm trying to convey information, I know the key aspects from the education side on how to do the storytelling such that when they walk away they realize, "Oh, wow. That sounded cool, and I actually learned something."

Marc: Don't you love it when they learn something in spite of themselves, right?

John Ellis: You know what? It is gratifying when somebody comes up and says, "Oh my God, that was so cool." Or, "I thought I'd do something and now that you've explained it in that way, I didn't." That is so gratifying. Whether I get it on a stage of five, a stage of a thousand, it is super, super-gratifying to hear that. Again, whether I get paid to speak or if I'm just doing it as a volunteer effort, it is so, so interesting and so helpful. There's that, "I touched somebody." That's really cool.

Marc: Stay on storytelling for a second. Are there storytellers that you study or ones that are your heroes and you fashion yourself or you learn from them?

John Ellis: There is one, and it is Malcolm Gladwell. I don't necessarily mean storytelling in his written form. I do mean his oral recitation form.

Marc: Yep.

John Ellis: I am so, so impressed by how he speaks, the manner in which he speaks. He was the first speaker in my ever life. I saw him a couple of times at Motorola back in the heyday when corporations had lots of money and were gonna do corporate training and corporate education. You brought in Marshall Goldsmith. We brought in Malcolm, Don Tapscott. It was just a whole laundry list of people at the forefront of the new writing and new way of thinking. He was the first person ever in my professional career to stand on a stage and for 45 minutes tell a story without a single slide.

Marc: Yeah. Right.

John Ellis: It was just like, "Oh my God." It was so impressive and I was so riveted. When I walked away from it, I'm like, "Holy cow." I actually found it way more interesting to focus only on him then on the slides. It's not that there aren't other great speakers. I'll listen to folks and whatnot. But the person I try to emulate is actually Malcolm Gladwell.

Funny enough, I did a TEDx Talk yesterday and he was the motivator. I normally speak with slides. I could do without slides and have done it once or twice. But this was gonna be an 18-minute TED-style talk on a TEDx stage in Wilmington, Delaware. I debated heavily and I finally said, "You know what? No, I like Malcolm-style. I'm gonna do it." I showed up and gave an 18-minute presentation without a single slide. I got to tell you, it was scary. It was really scary because what I learned is I use my slides not as a crutch but as a helpful guide through my own narrative. When I advance slides, it reminds me of certain things. But now I had to be on the stage and tell an 18-minute, 2,352-word story and hope to God that they caught the message.

Marc: I am so glad you opened up the TEDx door because I'm a 20-year TEDster and produce-

John Ellis: Yes, sir.

Marc: ... TEDx events and kudos to you. Most speakers have a real hard time just standing there telling a story. It is really challenging and unless that slide really serves the narrative, I'd just as soon not have it. But it is very challenging. I saw Malcolm perform here in front of 2,000 people. He walked on and he started by saying, "In my drive up from Los Angeles, I was thinking about ..." He just launched into his thing. Well, the way he presented it, it was like, "Oh, you mean he just thought of this talk on the drive up here? Oh my gosh." He completely sucked-in 2,000 people. Two weeks later I heard the talk on a podcast. I was like, "Oh." But he had that beautiful way of doing that-

John Ellis: Right.

Marc: ... which was great. TEDx Wilmington, because I want to make sure that BigSpeak puts a link to that because I'd love to see that. While we're on BigSpeak, how did they find you?

John Ellis: Ken Sterling actually is the one who reached out, and he reached out.

Marc: Ah.

John Ellis: Yeah. He found out about me through a shared client. A number of years ago, I gave a keynote at a dinner. One of the members at the dinner reached out to me and said, "I found that so interesting. Would you be willing to come and talk to my customers?" I said, "Sure." I, a couple of months later, did this presentation for a company out of Knoxville. It was a keynote and the customer base gave him the most incredible response. They thought this was a great. Again, I had no slides. It was a story. Part of it was about me, but part of it was about Ford and the evolution of what's happening at the automakers and what's gonna happen in transportation.

Then, the next year, he wanted a sports figure who happens to be represented by BigSpeak. Ken is the person that arranged that contract, and Ken has a habit of asking clients, "Do you know of any great speakers or good speakers or speakers that you would recommend?"

Marc: Ah, yep.

John Ellis: This person recommended me. He reached out and said, "Do you mind if I introduce you?" I said, "No." One thing led to another. Ken flew up and saw me speak in San Francisco a couple of weeks later, and we signed an agreement right after that. It's been almost 18 months ago I think now, almost now.

Marc: I think you said you were just here a few weeks ago. You had a gig right here in Santa Barbara, so you got to meet the folks from BigSpeak. I think you went out and did a little canoe work on a leadership development. That's what we call canoe work. We call that leadership development.

John Ellis: Is that what you call it? Is that? Yeah. Okay.

Marc: Yeah.

John Ellis: Yeah. I thought it was a painful exercise in paddling and whatnot. But don't get me wrong. It was beautiful. It was gorgeous. But it is certainly something I've never ... I pride myself on client events that I make myself available for a client literally the entire event. I don't just show up for the speech. I do that because I find, depending on where I fit in the agenda, that I can glean super-interesting information like: Who's there? Why are they there? What kind of fears do they have? What are they looking to get out of the conference? What's going right? Whatever it might be.

While I don't generally change my slides, I can change my narrative. I can weave the story a little bit more tightly and little bit more personally. Yeah. I've been at many events where I've been there for three days. Gone to dinners, drinks, hung out before I've had to speak. Never had to go paddle in the ocean. Now that was a first. That one was a first.

Marc: Well, John, well, thanks for spending time with us on the show and giving us a chance to get inside and learn a little bit more about you. We really appreciate your time today.

John Ellis: Thank you so much for having me on. I hope to be back soon.

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