



Thought Leaders Are Made Not Born



CAPTECH TRENDS PODCAST | EPISODE 27



Vinnie:

Welcome back everyone to the CapTech Trends podcast. Very excited today. I have Mr. Mark Broski. He is a technical director out of our Richmond office. How long have you been at CapTech?

Mark:

14 years.

Vinnie:

14 years. And you were an educator before this.

Mark:

That's right. Professor of economics at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas.

Vinnie:

I bring that up because we're talking about thought leadership today. And it was probably a couple weeks ago we had CapTech's 25-year anniversary and you and I were chatting about this podcast and getting a chance to speak on a topic that you're passionate about and this one jumped out. And what I like about it is it does speak to your past in being an educator and developing people, whether it be through academics or practical experience. So as we get into thought leadership here in this discussion, let's start off with some definition of terms and why you are so passionate about this. Is there a difference between a thought leader and a subject matter expert and all these different variable terms we throw out? And how do you think about that?

Mark:

Absolutely, there is. Vinnie, great to be here with you. A thought leader is a subject matter expert and then some. A subject matter expert can take a task, no matter how difficult or complicated, and execute with precision and accuracy. A thought leader goes beyond that and a thought leader's more than just a mentor that they can teach it. A thought leader looks around at the wider landscape and can make decisions about what's coming down the road that we need to be aware of. So if you're not skilled, your thought leadership's probably not going to be that good. But if you're skilled and you can pull your head up above your current task, there's a good chance you're going to see some opportunities that other people might miss.

Vinnie:

Right. So being SME is a foundational component to being an effective thought leader.

Mark:

Right.

Vinnie:

But it's not everything you need to be one.

Mark:



Julia Galef has a recent book called *The Scout Mindset*. And she draws a distinction between infantry and scouts. And it's really true. Scouts have to be willing to operate in a more independent way. They know they could be wrong. It could be dangerous. Where there's a great deal of skill required to be in the infantry, it's not quite the same thing in terms of what you need to do. So that's where I'm coming from on this definition of terms.

Vinnie:

We're going to come back to that analogy later, because the first thing I thought of when you said that is, well, that's all good and fine when that behavior's rewarded. If the scout is going out and making mistakes and that's penalized, you're going to have fewer people stepping into that space.

Mark:

That's right.

Vinnie:

We'll be talking about how to help create that. But tell me what the premise you wanted to talk about. And really, the first sentence of what I remember you saying is thought leaders are made not born. So can you extend on that? Because a lot of people think that being a thought leader and having a public face or even quasi public internally where you're leading other people is something that's an innate skill. So help me help the audience understand where you're coming from on this.

Mark:

I want to tell you a story. This goes back to the '90s when I was studying economics at George Mason University. And boy was I excited to be there. Because on the faculty, they had James Buchanan, who just a few years before had received the Nobel Prize in economics, on the faculty. I thought, "This is so great." Well being kind of brash, I asked him if I could do an independent study with him one semester. And to my absolute surprise, he said okay. So I got one hour a week for a semester with James Buchanan. And I went into his office and I immediately came to the conclusion, this guy is a worker. This guy earned this. It was not a gift. And he's surrounded by papers, desk covered, constantly studying what other people were doing, open to criticism. He wrote the book *Calculus of Consent* and founded the school of public choice economics in the process of that.

So fast forward. I come to CapTech. I can name drop Darrell Norton. I see Darrell Norton leading the .Net users group in Richmond. Same story. It's work to master, and stay on top of a technology. Fast forward a little further. I hear you talking to Mike Diiorio a couple podcasts ago about cloud and you guys were operating ... That's a pretty high level conversation. And you were really bouncing the ping pong ball back and forth pretty fast. It was impressive to listen to. But I go back to my original observation with Buchanan. This is not innate skill. This is something you earned. And it required a conscious choice for every thought leader. From Buchanan to Darrell, to you and Mike Diiorio. And I wanted to be on this podcast to make that point.

Vinnie:

Yeah, I agree with you. And one of the things I've learned is thought leadership isn't a single archetype. Early in my career, I realized I could rely on a sense of humor, a wit, a willingness to take chances and just laugh off if it doesn't go really well the first couple times and really kind of big personality my way through some of those mistakes, to summarize it. But then I started working with other people, specifically at CapTech too, that had very different styles. They could be incredibly academic. They could



be deep thinkers in a particular technology stack. And maybe come off as perhaps a little bit awkward socially in some areas. But what I've noticed is that their ability to connect with an audience is every bit as strong as mine or somebody else's. They're going about it a different way. And I think there's something about being genuine and authentic and passionate about what you're talking about, that people can see that. And that's really what they're getting at. Because if you just have a big personality with nothing behind it, people are going to see through that pretty quickly.

Mark:

Let's go back to the times we've worked together at the college bootcamp and the boot campers would give their final presentations. And we would be sitting in the room, watching them go. They'd work for two weeks on a project coming to CapTech, some sort of fake consulting project, and then give their results. And well, there's green and then there's green, right?

Vinnie:

Correct. There's some awkwardness there, as I said. Yeah.

Mark:

But you can see it that they could become so much more than they're capable of seeing, if we can connect with them, if we can inspire them. So yeah.

Vinnie:

There was this one example and I won't even name or specify a gender here because I don't want this person to know who they are. But this one person a couple years ago was incredibly uncomfortable during that bootcamp presentation. And I was thinking, "Oh no, this is-"

Mark:

I remember that.

Vinnie:

This is tough. Gave some feedback. It wasn't but two or three years later, this person was on a very important project, had stepped into it and was excellent at presenting to the client, presenting internally. Really, really stepped into that role and knocked my socks off. And so if you let that first impression stick with you and you think it's an innate skill, you would've rejected that. You would've said, "This person failed the litmus test. Let's move on." But this person developed it and developed it quickly. Or probably was very nervous on the first couple times.

Mark:

When I heard that story ... I think we're thinking about the same person. I thought I'm thinking about somebody else, because even I judged that this was not going to work, but no, things happened.

Vinnie:

What are those things? I think it's an important point that we think anybody can become a thought leadership and help develop other people in the organization. What do you see as common traits or patterns of behavior?



Mark:

Vinnie, I think there's a moral component to this. There will be a JIRA board or some sort of board on every client gig and every internal project where I will be assigned jobs that I'm supposed to do. As a consultant, if I do just those jobs and no more, I will be no thought leader. The thought leaders think about what they're doing as they're doing it and figure out if there are lessons that other people could benefit from, from what I'm seeing right now. And then they share it. It could be at an account meeting. It could be at a service offering meeting. But they step up and share. And then over time, the audiences tend to get a little bit bigger.

Vinnie:

Right. It's reflecting. Have an honest reflection. And I think even as a prerequisite to the reflection is you have to be passionate about what you're doing. Because if you're just waiting for the end of the day so you can check out, then you're not going to put the time in to reflect and get those nuggets of wisdom and then want to share them because you're passionate about it. It's hard to force that.

Mark:

You're hitting all my spots here, Vinnie. I think we have the best job in the world. And it's more than just a line item on a statement of work. We're creative professionals in the best sense of the word. We bring into existence things that didn't exist before. And if that's not worth talking about, I don't know what is.

Vinnie:

Yeah. And talk about a learned skill. There's a couple of things I wanted to throw by, because we've had some of these conversations before. But it's knowing what you're doing and why you're doing it. And so often ... I do this a lot in the bootcamp classes as well and also the college internship. Or people who've been working with us for a couple years. I ask what project they're on and what they're doing. And without failure, they'll tell me what they're doing first but not why. So I'm moving data from point A to point B, I'm writing this script, I'm working with this data set. As opposed to starting with the value of what you're doing. We're helping this company reduce fraud and waste and we're saving them \$30 million a month. And here's how I'm helping. And I think that's incumbent upon our account managers or account managers, project managers in all companies to make sure that the people on your projects know the value of what they're doing to help with that passion part.

Mark:

Account managers may not know about, I'm crafting loosely coupled code here that's going to be really maintainable down the road. They may not get that. But I think to the extent that they can appreciate that, as opposed to, we delivered a feature with zero bugs. Account managers do care about that. But somehow the craftsmanship, the creative professionalism, we can't lose that sense and celebrate. But really the point I want to make here, it's not on you, Vinnie, or me to walk around our organizations and tap with a little magic wand the future thought leaders of CapTech or our organizations. It's not on us. Sometimes we act like we need to do that. I think that's wrong. I think what's on us is to raise the expectations level and to say it's to you to stand up, to go above and beyond what's on that JIRA board. And that's what I'm trying to communicate. That's really why I wanted to be here today.

Vinnie:

I agree and disagree. A lot of organizations, and we've done this from time to time, will do nine boxing. I'm sure you're familiar with the nine box. For those who aren't, it's just one of those fancy grids where



one axis is effectiveness and the other's potential. And so someone could be really effective, but have topped out or have all the potential in the world but for some reason aren't delivering or it could be both. And the idea here isn't to penalize people in certain boxes, it's to understand what the people in these boxes need to improve or get better. Obviously if you have all the potential in the world and you're not effective, that's an enigma. Why is that? How can we help that person? I do think there's some good thought into that, but what we learned, especially when we did the innovation challenges that we do ... and for those listening who don't know what that is, we have a three month process, we do it several times a year, where we'll throw a technology or innovation help and allow teams to self form and compete and come up with some solutions. Very loose guiderails. And so it's really a true innovation. We were introduced to so much more talent than we knew existed because we gave people the freedom, to your point, we challenged them to step forward and show us what they could do. And so the nine box would've missed all that. So I think it is important to do, but if that's all you're doing, you've got a huge blind spot.

Mark:

Not that we shouldn't be aware of people with high potential, but I don't need to be waiting around for Vinnie or somebody else to tell me I can be a thought leader before I can dig in. That's my point.

Vinnie:

I totally agree with that.

Mark:

Okay.

Vinnie:

And those are the people I respond to.

Mark:

Yeah. Right.

Vinnie:

Right. I like when someone knocks on the door, virtual door, and says, "I've got an idea. What do you think?" And then all of a sudden we're peers, and it's fun working on a project together.

Mark:

There you go.

Vinnie:

Right. So other aspects that you think of when you think of thought leaders that you've seen develop. What are some patterns of behavior that you've noticed that you would recommend? So I'm one or two years out of school and I come to you and I say, "Heard the podcast. How do I get traction?"

Mark:

Okay. Well, I would direct them to read a book called Show Your Work by a guy by the name of Austin Kleon. And we could maybe put that link in the show notes, if we do that.



Vinnie:

Sure.

Mark:

His mandate is that every day we should be able to share something we did or learned that day in some kind of forum. Chat in Teams, an email to a colleague. In some way, we ought to generate micro thought leadership every day. So to build that habit. Before we can write the famous books, like the Calculus of Consent, we have to have thought leadership sentences. And then we can go to paragraphs. And we're all learning stuff every day. Unfortunately, if we don't write it down, the lessons escape us and they're gone forever. Till the next idea comes along that we know we're never going to forget.

Vinnie:

Right. And there's something I tell people, usually it's three to five years out of school. And it's something that no one told me and typically people don't have this conversation, which is why I like to have it. And that is ... And I remember being this person. When you come out of school, there is an expectation that you are going to be an incredible individual contributor. I'm going to show people my worth. I'm going to work hard. I'm going to make sacrifices. I'm going to be the one willing to travel. Have to stay late? No problem. I'm going to do those things. And you can make a good impression early on. But no one tells you that after three years of that, that performance almost becomes a negative because people will say, "Oh yeah, Mark is that strong and he's going to be good, but he's an individual contributor."

Your influence, your ability to affect outcome is limited to you. And so I often ask people, I say, "Who do you look up to? Who do you follow? Who's your mentor here? Who do you aspire to be like, act like? Who's job do you want to have in three or four years?" And they'll give me a list of names and you probably know many of those names. And then I say, "Great. Who's saying that about you?" And that always causes a stop. And it's like, "Oh, okay. Now I get it." So there's a responsibility as you develop this network of mentors to look backwards and say, "Am I being that ... In order to be that person, I've also got to be a mentor because that's who they are." And that's how you develop expertise above yourself.

Mark:

When you watch yourself work and you develop ideas, there's always a risk that the ideas you develop may not be a good fit for other people, but they are good fit for you. Like the scientific method, kind of falsifiable thought leadership. And that's the risk we take in this area. And that's why I admire the technical thought leaderships we have at CapTech, because I see an element of courage here. And it's more than just people afraid to stand up in front of a group, but people who are willing to stand up and express ideas that no one's thought of yet, that could well be wrong and live with the consequences. They say fail fast. Well, sometimes fail fast hurts. So thought leaders got a thick skin, Vinnie. They're not always just recognized for being the geniuses from Mount Sinai.

Vinnie:

Yeah. And people ask, we do these trends every year, CapTech trends, where we come up with-

Mark:

Yeah. I wanted to ask you about that.



Vinnie:

Yeah. Yeah. Where we believe the market's going to be in 12 to 24 months and we align our recruiting, our development, our partnerships, our go to market strategies around those sets of trends. One part I'm proud about is that we are futurists where we need to be futurists and we do look at that, but that's not a trend. And so a lot of times the analyst groups, or some of the larger international consulting firms will go futurist to get the clicks, but it's really not actionable as a trend. It's a nuance. Thought I'd call it out. But people ask me often where we get these trends from. And it's really from all the other people at CapTech that I talk to and clients and industry professionals, whatever else. It's from practitioners who are deep and care about it.

So your point before about write down your experiences, capture those nuggets. I agree with that. The second thing I would add to that is ask other people about their experience and what their nuggets are. So yes, you have to share, but you also have to ask. And so big part of my job is to go around to key engagements, seek out the people who are making some really cool, innovative ideas and asking them questions. "Why that architecture? Why did you need to choose that over this? I would've thought about it this way. What made you go that way?" And really interrogating and getting into that intense curiosity about why something was done a certain way. And if you do that enough, across a wide variety of engagements, trends emerge. You start seeing, okay, we're seeing the same pattern, the same fear, the same aspiration, the same limitation, et cetera, across seven different industries. Write that one down.

Mark:

That's a trend.

Vinnie:

That's a trend. Right.

Mark:

When I look at the trends, they resonate with me. And I wanted to have this because how long have we been doing it? A while. Five, ten years? Five years?

Vinnie:

Probably eight to 10 years. Yeah.

Mark:

Eight to ten years. So they don't come out of whole cloth. They were not folded in some newspaper that you got on your doorstep one day. You earned it. You listened. And that's the part of it that I wanted to highlight.

Vinnie:

Well, my fear ... Because I'll go and I'll talk about these trends at different ... Used to be publicly, but post COVID, now they're pretty much within single organizations, but there could be a couple hundred people in there that we're talking about the trends. My big fear is that people are going to say, "Yeah, of course. That's not insightful." Because we are not being futurists in this case. We're saying what should be obvious because it is a trend. A trend is something that everyone should be experiencing. Now, some of these are 12 to 24 months out so some of that is there. But what's interesting is even though I have



that fear, there's a lot of comfort in a particular company or a particular vertical to know that their challenges aren't unique to them. So you can share examples across other industries and that breadth of we're seeing it here, we're seeing it here, this is what people are doing, this is what's working, this it's not working, that's where a lot of the value comes. It's not just aha, machine learning's important. It's who's using it? How they're using it? How are they making sure their data's correct? How are they hiring data scientists that aren't data engineers? All that nuance in the detail is where we try to put the value in.

Mark:

A, the insights could be wrong and the trends could be wrong. And the trends might be things that somebody else has already figured out. And so not move the needle. Those are the risks we take. And you're willing to accept both of those ignominious results for the sake of reaching out. And to me, that's okay.

Vinnie:

Being uncomfortable. Let's touch on that.

Mark:

Comfortable being uncomfortable.

Vinnie:

Yeah. That's a big deal. Because yeah, you put yourself out there when you start making predictions or talking about these things. The other part that I think is really important, just coming up through your career ... And we can wrap it around thought leadership, but I think it's also more general than that. Is as you advance in your career, really listening to the feedback you're getting. People think that they're very good at hiding their weaknesses to those around them. You're not. If you think you're effective at it, go have an honest conversation with your spouse. They'll tell you. Or a coworker or whatever else. One of the hard things for me was learning that I'm not good at hiding these things. People are just polite and they're not calling it out. But when you get that feedback, a lot of people will jump to answer shopping. "Let me go ask these four or five people. Can you believe Mark Broski said this about me? That doesn't sound right." And then you get some confirmation bias and you move on. But really taking that feedback, admitting where you're weak, doing the work to get better, that's uncomfortable. That's hard. Being wrong in front of your peers is hard. But if you're not working on those things and thinking about those things, like you said, beyond just knocking off the JIRA tasks, if you're not thinking about those things, you're not developing that thought leadership quality.

Mark:

I'm really struck by that because I know for a fact that the qualities that annoy me most in other people are the ones I probably need to be working on the most myself. So I've got a little barometer I'm watching all the time. But yes, that's right. This is not a straight shot and there's going to be setbacks along the way. And if we were scientists ... They say scientists are happy when they get a negative result. They actually learn more from a negative result. Well, I still have a hard time with negative results. I want things to work the first time, every time. But experience does teach us that we actually learn more from our failures than we do from our successes and getting that kind of feedback, although it stings, actually does more to accelerate our career than anything else.



Vinnie:

So let's wrap up with some takeaways and rounding out some of these thoughts. I said early on that your Scout book recommendation, I wanted to come back to. In the context of how scouts, to continue the analogy, are treated when they come back.

Mark:

Right. They could be treated like prophets. False prophets.

Vinnie:

Right. What's the culture of an organization that respects that type of thought leadership? And why is that important to grow thought leaders and give them that space?

Mark:

Okay. Glad we're start with this because are we on a lifeboat that is gradually sinking and we're running out of fresh water to drink? Scout mindset probably won't help too much in that environment. Are we headed to a new land to break ground on something entirely brand new? Scout mindset really helps there. So if the culture is in expansion mode, as opposed to defensive contraction mode, the scout mindset is critical. And I want to be a part of an organization that's in expansion mode. And I think we make that kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy, Vinnie, by doing thought leadership. One more quick story?

Vinnie:

Go for it.

Mark:

2008, in the middle of the great recession, and we had company meeting. And we had clients that were having a hard time and our president stood up and said, "We're going to use this as an opportunity to grow our market share. We're going to continue expanding to a new office and it might be Northern Virginia." You remember that?

Vinnie:

Mm-hmm.

Mark:

Now that's a mentality, a culture of expansion that rewards people who are going to go looking for the next best thing. I think of Jason Snook, our UX pioneer, really a pioneer in the company. Sandy, one of our other founders told him one time, "You eat what you kill so feel free to go grow that business." And I feel the same way about thought leadership. Our culture is sufficient to support this. And to the extent that it's not, it's our job as thought leaders to make that happen.

Vinnie:

Yeah. So a couple tactical things I would say. One is obviously reward that behavior. And there's ways to do that. But recognition, I think is one of the key ways to do that. And you have to have an environment where people can get reps. It's a practiced skill when we go out and we do pre-sale sales calls, chalk talks, that type of thing. Bringing people with you who are up and coming thought leaders. They're not there just to sit and watch. They're there to also participate. And they're bringing, usually, deep SME



knowledge that's valuable and contributing to the conversation, even if they're not leading the conversation. But bringing people in and giving them those reps over and over again, finding ways to present internally over and over again, providing feedback that's constructive and honest and helping them internalize that feedback as not criticism. So all those things, is that mentorship? Is that process? We do a lot of that, but I don't know where that originates from.

Mark:

Let's talk about feedback for a second. Let's say I've got some tough feedback I want to give somebody on my team. No matter how carefully I word it, if I type that feedback in to the HR system and it ends up in their inbox, there's a good chance it's going to be misunderstood. But if I have a one-on-one conversation with that person, and I say, "I need your help typing some feedback here. And we got to talk about this. The way you presented to this client. Help me phrase this." We can go a long way towards giving them really tough, constructive feedback people learn from in a way that's inspiring and not deflating.

Vinnie:

Yeah. And feedback isn't always singular.

Mark:

Right. Feedbacks.

Vinnie:

Right. Every time we do a presentation, whether it's internal or external, I pull the team aside immediately and we do a debrief. "Did you notice when Mark said this, audience kind of did that? Did you notice this? Did you notice this?" And someone else would say, "Well, I didn't see that. I saw that." And you have those discussions. Because you need to develop an out of body camera that you can watch yourself in the moment.

Mark:

I'm writing that down. I like that phrase.

Vinnie:

I like to think this is a camera above me, behind me, and to the right. And so when I'm presenting, I can kind of see myself in the moment in the room and respond and react.

Mark:

For me, it's Jim Nance, color commentator, as I'm working, observing. "And there he goes. He's running those unit tests. Green, green, green."

Vinnie:

That's because you got the radio voice. Great. So let's wrap this up. I think the important takeaway here is if you're someone who wants to be a thought leader, who wants to be SME that's sharing your knowledge and being valued and rewarded for that, believe that you can be. That you don't have to match an archetype of somebody else. That your unique skills and attributes can be applied in that way. I've seen very, very, very different people be successful and in the same environment. So that's one.



Two, look for people that you want to have mentor you or who you want to model part of your career, part of your behavior around. And third, be that person for other people. Mark, any closing thoughts?

Mark:

That about wraps it up for me. I think that's exactly right. I don't see it as an optional thing. And I think it's not that other people are constraining us, sometimes we constrain ourselves. And so, my goal in sitting here today is say, hey, let's don't be so constraining to ourselves.

Vinnie:

Well, great. Thanks for joining me. Always a pleasure catching up. And again, for the audience, thanks for tuning in and there'll be some more to follow quickly. Thank you.

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