

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 1, EPISODE 1

CLINT PULVER - Grow Humans, Not Just Employees, or Who Said They Wanted a Fish? Interviewed by Michael Lee

Clint Pulver is an Emmy Award-winning, motivational keynote speaker, author, musician, and workforce expert. As the president and founder of The Center for Employee Retention, Clint has transformed how corporations like Keller Williams, AT&T, and Hewlett Packard create lasting loyalty through his work and research. Clint has also been a professional drummer for over twenty years, founded the Green Man Group, and directed the Drumline for the NBA's Utah Jazz. Clint was featured in Business Q Magazine as one of their "Top 40 under 40" as a premiere Corporate Keynote Speaker. Clint is also the author of the new book *I Love It Here!: How Great Leaders Create Organizations Their People Never Want to Leave*.

In this episode, Clint, aka "The Undercover Millennial," talks about how the kindness of a teacher who helped him become a world-class drummer taught him everything he needs to know about employee engagement and retention today. He looks at the importance of providing an individualized human experience for all employees in which they are acknowledged, rewarded, and affirmed for who they are, what they want and need, and where they personally are going. More and more, Clint seems to be saying, engagement IS work, and no one will tolerate being dehumanized in work's future.

Michael Lee

*Today, we're here with Clint Pulver. He is described as an Emmy Award winning motivational keynote speaker, author, musician, and workforce expert. The twist is that he's also been a professional drummer for over 20 years. He also directed the drum line for the NBA's Utah Jazz. But that's not why he's here today. Clint is here today because he's an expert in workforce, and especially employee retention. And he's written a book, which I just finished reading, called, *I Love It Here*, about employee retention. And he initiated a project, which he'll describe to us a little bit later, known as the "Undercover Millennial," that helped a lot with understanding what motivates people to stay in a company.*

Clint Pulver

I grew up in Heber City, Utah, a small little town. I was the kid that always had a hard time sitting still. I would move all the time. I would fidget and I tapped a lot. And everybody obviously saw that as a problem and as an annoyance.

And it took one teacher in my life who actually saw it as an opportunity. He saw me tapping, he told me to stay after class. I thought I was in trouble. I thought I was gonna get kicked out of school. I was always on the list.

He sat me down and he said: "Listen, I've been watching you. I know all the other teachers talk about you, and you are a little bit of a problem. And you get called that a lot because you tap in my class, and you tap in everybody else's class. But it's crazy. You'll sit there and you'll take a pen, and you'll start writing with your right hand. And then you'll tap with your left hand. And then you can switch the pen. And you'll start writing with your left hand and you'll tap with your right hand. I think you're ambidextrous."

And I was like, "No, I'm Presbyterian."

"No, that's not what it means. No, no, no. Can you tap your head and rub your belly?"

I gave it a go, and I could do it.

He said, "Can you switch it in back and forth without even thinking about it?"

I could do it.

He sat back in his chair, and he looked at me and he said, "I don't think you're a problem. I just think you're a drummer."

And those few words changed everything for me.

I'm someone that I very, very heavily believe in moments. I believe that moments are what create our lives. I think that's what we remember, in life. We don't remember the days. We remember moments. And the better we are at creating moments for ourselves, for our families, for our workplaces, for the people that experience us, the more memorable and influential we become.

Because in this moment, Mr. Jensen, the old teacher, he leaned back in his desk, and he opened up the top drawer. And he reached inside. And he took out my very first pair of drumsticks, my very first pair. And I'll never forget, he took the sticks. And he handed them to me.

And he said, "Clint, these are for you. And I just I need you to promise me one thing. Just promise me that you'll keep them in your hands as much as you can."

Michael Lee

Now because I've read your book, I understand the connection between that beautiful personal story and the work you do around making employees happy. For those who haven't read your book, can you tell us a little bit about that connection?

Clint Pulver

Absolutely. So five years ago, I was a part of a mastermind group. We were in New York City. And we were meeting with other CEOs and executives and learning about their business strategy, what was working and what wasn't working. One of the gentlemen we met with owns a large sporting good retail store in Manhattan. And we're sitting there and we're talking about his business and his strategy and how they've had to change and pivot over the years.

I'll never forget in his thick New York accent, he said, "You got to adapt or you're gonna die. If you don't adapt in business, you're gonna die."

I was like, wow, that's very profound. And then I asked him, just out of curiosity, he turned it over to Q&A time, and I said: "I've got a question. What about your management style? What about people? Have you felt the need to adapt and change to meet their needs over the years?"

And he said: "No, no need to change. What I do today is the same thing I did twenty years ago. And we get results."

Another fairly profound statement, and I remember thinking, Okay, he feels the need to change his business strategy to meet the demands of an ever changing marketplace, but when it comes to people, there's no need to adapt.

And I looked around and in the store, all of his employees were my age or younger, all millennials, Gen Z. I just thought, I wonder if they would say the same thing. So I thanked him for his time, I had literally thirty-five minutes to kill until we needed to be to the next place. And I was dressed like a regular customer. I wasn't in a suit or a tie. I literally had a backwards hat on and a hoodie.

With the time I had I walked up to the first employee that I saw, and I said: "Hey, I'm just curious. What's it like to work here?"

And the employee got really quiet, started looking around, I felt like we were doing an illegal drug exchange. And he said, "Do you really want to know?"

And I said, "Yeah, I'm curious."

"Man, I can't stand it here. Dude, we're cogs in the wheel. All of us. I literally don't even think my manager's here right now. Or I don't even know if he knows I'm here right now. I just, I don't know, dude, it's just a job."

"Okay, well, then why are you still working here?"

"I've already applied to three other places."

And it was really shocking. I thought, Man, okay, well, maybe he's just having a bad day. So I went to another employee, and asked them the same question. And then another, and another, and another. And at the end of the thirty-five minutes that I had, I interviewed six of his staff members. And at the end of those conversations, five out of the six of his employees said they would not be working for this guy in his store in less than three and a half months.

That was a big realisation for me, a moment that I really came to understand the perception of leadership versus the reality of the employee experience. A lot of the time they could not be further apart. There's sometimes a massive disconnect. And that was the moment I started the Undercover Millennial programme. It's kind of like Undercover Boss without the makeup. I am the Undercover Millennial.

The beauty of all of this is that I get real, authentic data. I've done this for almost four and a half years now, and we have interviewed over ten thousand employees, and I've worked with one hundred eighty-one organisations, and it has really been a unique perspective, because it's something that's never been done before.

I decided to title our new book that just released a month and a half ago, I titled it *I Love It Here: How Great Leaders Create Organisations Their People Never Want to Leave*. And I titled it that because that was really the magic of the research, was when I would go up to an employee and say, "Hey, I'm just curious what's it like to work here?" And they would respond with: "I love it here! I love this job, I love what we get to do, I love what we're building, I love my manager, I love the opportunity we have! It's a great company, you need to apply!"

And that would trend from person to person to person, in companies and in organisations. It was beautiful to see what great leaders were doing to create that type of a response in their people.

Michael Lee

It would be fair to say, after four and a half years, ten thousand people, you have a fairly good idea of how to get employees happy and make them satisfied to be at their work.

Clint Pulver

Yes.

Michael Lee

So tell us the secret.

Clint Pulver

Well, first off, I wouldn't say that there's just one secret, and I wouldn't say there is a one size fits all approach. I tried to kind of in the book, you know, really emphasise the importance of an individual. You cannot look at someone based off of their age and say, Well, this is the way you're supposed to be. Or this is the this is the one secret or the hack that's going to work with every person in every situation.

But there are principles. And one principle that was really significant and interesting was the power of mentorship versus management. When an employee hated their job, they talked about the manager. When an employee loved their job, they talked about the mentor.

Mentorship was really unique because usually in leadership or in employee engagement, we talk about good leaders, we talk about leadership, and then sometimes we talk about management. Those are the two, kind of the variables between authoritative positions in business. But what I found is this middle section, and it's what I called mentorship.

Mentorship is not leadership. Mentorship is not management. Mentorship is mentorship. And it's unique because mentorship has to be earned. You cannot become a mentor for an employee until that employee invites you into their heart.

Traditional leadership is about standing in the front of the organisation, you're at the helm of the ship, you're the visionary. This is where we're going, I got to get you from point A to point B to point C, you're a leader and people follow you.

Management is about efficiency. How do we make sure there's no holes in the ship? How can we get from point A to point B faster and more effectively.

But mentorship is about taking care of people on the ship. It's really the five C's and I talked about this in the book, The five C's of mentorship.

The first C is confidence. The second C is credibility. The third C is competence. The fourth C is candour. And the fifth C is the ability to care.

Those five C's, if I found somebody that that earned the right to be in that position, to earn the respect of a mentor, to have mentorship, they possess those five C's. And that was really the ultimate combination out of ten thousand employees.

And when they talked about these types of individuals, and I asked them: "Why do you listen to them? Why do you stay for them? Why do you work for them?" Because they were a mentor, not a manager. Very powerful.

Michael Lee

It sounds like there's actually a sixth C in there, which is Connect.

Clint Pulver

Yes, yes. Yeah, well, and I consider that to kind of fall within caring, right? When we really care about an individual, and we care on their level.

In the book I wrote about the importance that every employee is asking you the question: "Let me know when it gets to the part about me. Let me know when your mission statement, your meeting agenda, your schedule, your P&I Statement, your quarterly projections, let me know when that considers my life."

And a lot of people in management, they hear that and they go: "Why those entitled little shi....ining stars in my life..."

"Let me know when it gets to the part about me." It is not about entitlement. It's about good humanity. It's about bringing humanity back into the workplace. It's about learning to connect with individuals.

Too many times, we look at people like a fireplace, and it's literally you know, I see managers, and they look at an employee and they go: "Give me heat. Give me the heat. Give me effort. Give me results. Show up on time, do your job, then we'll talk recognition."

I saw the ultimate amount of loyalty and influences when a leader flipped the script and they realised you're here and you're working really hard to make MY dreams come true, you're working hard to make sure we're more efficient, you're working really hard to make sure that the store looks clean, you're working really hard to make sure that your family is taken care of. I need to care about that. I need to flip the script and I need to care about your dreams.

That just is a natural, innate, beautiful relationship-building character trait that creates connection. And it's that ability to just care about people and to realise that we've got to get to the part about them.

Michael Lee

You talk in the book quite a bit about the role of opportunity, praise, recognition, awards. Making people feel heard is how I saw that. Making it the fact that you're part of a company that's a community.

Clint Pulver

Absolutely. It's about recognition, but it's also about individualising the recognition. A lot of times the company will be like, Okay, we got our spring summer fling, or here's our Christmas party. And those are great things. Those are really those are good things.

But most employees never talked about that. They talked about the time when a manager said, "Hey, listen, I know you and your wife really enjoy theatre, and you did a great job last month, and we just want to show a little bit of love, and so I got you tickets for you and your wife to take a date night and to go watch the show." So now that's what you love. Or when a manager says, "Hey, listen, we just appreciate everything what you've been doing, you've

gone above and beyond, we've really struggled through COVID and I know it's been crazy and you've been working a lot of hours, and I know you love to fish, John, I know you're a fisher and I want just to show you a thank you." And it's a little bit of gratitude and appreciation, just for Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays, take the day off at 3 PM, just take it off at 3, we're still gonna pay you the same wage, and go fishing.

That's what they talked about. Those were moments where someone was like: "Man, they recognised me in a way that considered me. They knew me, they understand my family, they understand my life, they understand my lifestyle, they understand my talents, my strengths, my desires, my interests, my hobbies."

And when you can recognise a person in that realm, man that beats any Christmas party, that beats any swag bag, that beats any custom little water bottle that we give to employees a lot. Those general things will never outweigh the personal, significant moments we can create when recognising a person.

Michael Lee

Really recognising that each person in the team, in the company, is a human being.

Clint Pulver

Yes, what a concept, right? It really isn't rocket science. My book is not something that's filled with things that have never been said before. You would even think to say it's common sense. But unfortunately most organisations never do them. It's wild to me.

But the ones that do are massively reaping the rewards of an engaged and empowered workforce, people that are empowered to do more, to see more, to be more, to understand that they don't just love their job, but that they actually love who they are while they're at their job. And that always increases profitability. That always increases retention. That always increases productivity. We've got to start with the people.

Michael Lee

Is there a way to build a system into companies, especially larger ones, that builds that culture, that aesthetic into the company? Not just based on that particular manager, you know, but the system, the way it's built? Is it possible to do that?

Clint Pulver

Obviously, there's the overlying culture, right? Where you start with an organisation and you go kind of to their mission statement, you go to their values, you go to, you know, the core of the organisation. What do they stand for? What do we want people to feel? What do we want people to think? What experience do we want to create for our people? That's going to be different for every organisation.

Obviously 100% of the time, it's always positive, right? Companies say they want to have a great environment, they want to have a great culture, they want to have happy employees. But it really comes down to the nitty gritty. It comes down to the individuals. It comes down to the moments. It comes down to the experiences. And that is easier said than done.

A lot of people they'll read the book and they'll go, "Okay, it's a grand idea, but how do I implement this?: You do it by small, small, small little things done consistently over a long period of time.

Michael Lee

When we talk about Innovation at the Edge, the name of this podcast, we're talking about the idea of spreading innovation through the organisation, so it's not the job of just one team or one group of people, it's not something you do in a hackathon for one day, but it's something that everybody gets the opportunity to constantly be contributing to. Everybody all the time able to be heard if they have something to offer and to be recognised for that. What is the connection that you've seen between engagement and innovation?

Clint Pulver

When people feel seen, heard, and understood, when people work in an environment where they also feel safe - so much of good engagement comes from trust, creating an environment where people can actually thrive, they don't just feel like they're surviving. You know, I'm not stressed out, I'm not walking on eggshells, and obviously, there are going to be ideas and things that are maybe in left field or they aren't realistic. But I think it's important for leaders to understand that if you can harvest and foster a community, an environment, a culture, a meeting, where people feel safe to contribute, where people feel safe to think. So I would really try to create an environment where people can be their best and feel their best when they're with you.

Michael Lee

Safety is a very important first step.

Clint Pulver

I look at some of these great companies that are great innovators, and they innovate because they welcome ideas. They're open. How can you help innovation if you're so closed-minded? How can we think outside of the box? Would we want to keep everybody in the box? It just doesn't work. But when we open that up, and we open that to opportunity, and people feel safe to play in that space, then I think that's a great foundation for innovative ideas to flourish.

I mention a story in the book about an organisation called Weave that we worked with. I believe I echo what DaVinci said that simplicity is sometimes the ultimate sophistication. Simplicity is sometimes the greatest way to innovate, to do something different and unique.

Simplicity is such a beautiful thing. So this company, they said, All right, we're struggling with retention, we're struggling with getting everybody aligned, we're struggling with everybody knowing what we are and what we do. And so they simplified everything, they brought all of their core values into three simple words.

They said, We are hungry we're caring, and we're creative. That really represents what we do. That represents who we are.

But then they got innovative, because a lot of companies have very simple mission statements, but I found in my research that most employees have no idea what the mission statement is. Could not tell me. "I don't know, do your job don't get fired? I don't know." They don't know. And again, I do I believe that if you're facing the right direction, all you have to do is keep walking. But most people have no clue what the direction is.

And so they got innovative, and they decided to make it memorable. How can we take some simple words, and integrate them into the whole of what we do and why we do it. And so they attached each word with a mascot. So the bear was hungry. The gorilla was creative. And the sloth was caring. Everywhere in the office was gorillas, stuffed animals, pictures, frames, ideas, thoughts, quotes from a monkey, sayings. It was beautifully done. It was elegant. It was classy. It was fun. And it was memorable.

And I'll tell you one thing, I walked into that organisation, and I said: "What do you guys stand for? What's the mission of the company?" Every employee said, "Oh, man, we're hungry, creative and caring. Hashtag sloths!"

Michael Lee

People are people. They're not just cogs in a system. And if you treat them like people, they'll be engaged, they'll want to be part of the company. And they'll do a good job.

Clint Pulver

Yeah, and I think not just treating people as people, I think also treating people the way that they want to be treated. I think that a lot of leaders understand that, okay, I'm leading an individual. I've got to get to know them. I've got to understand what makes them tick. How do we create a workplace where they can thrive? Could you imagine a place where you could go to work every day, and you felt like you were really living?

Some people might think that I'm living in the clouds, but to your people, that's what they want. That's what they're looking for. And we are in a world right now where people have options. And if as an employer, you're the stick in the mud, you're the guy that's like, "Yeah, get over it, I gave you a job, I give you a pay check, do your job," then have fun being a solo entrepreneur. Have fun enjoying the revolving door of turnover in your company.

Because there are too many organisations now that are learning to adapt. They're learning to change. They're learning to get to the part about their people. And they're seeing the investment, that when they grow humans, not just employees, it changes everything.

Michael Lee

It sounds like you're saying it really starts with a lot of listening.

Clint Pulver

Absolutely. You've heard that age-old adage of, "Feed a man a fish, then you feed him for a day." You've heard that, right? "But if you can teach him, if you teach a guy to fish, then you can feed him for a lifetime."

Every time I hear that story, I'd say to ask the guy if he wanted a fish. Who said he wanted a fish? Maybe he wants a steak.

The point is, if we create those relationships where people can trust us, where people can talk to us, when they can communicate with us, that creates opportunities for us to listen, creates opportunity just for us to get to the part about them, to know what they want, what they value.

But most businesses that have employees, you know the cost of turnover, it's costing your organisation thousands of dollars and there's sometimes a few things, just a few things, that a company can tweak and change here and there to make a world of a difference. And yes, it will help the bottom line, it will save you thousands of dollars.

But could you imagine also creating a better story for your people, making it an environment where people spend so much of their time where they get to go home and they're more fulfilled. They go home and they're less stressed. They get to be better moms. They're better dads. They're better partners. We raise better families. You become the best for the world.

Michael Lee

In the book, you talk about a friend of yours named James Lawrence. Tell us about James, and that lesson he brought to you, and how that also applies to work and business.

Clint Pulver

James Lawrence is known as The Iron Cowboy. This gentleman has done fifty Iron Mans in fifty days in fifty states, full triathlon events, miles and miles of swimming, one hundred and twelve miles of biking, twenty-six miles of running, and he did it every day for fifty days, in fifty states. He literally did something that was deemed by the world to be physically impossible, mentally impossible. And he made it possible.

James speaks a lot, and we've shared the stage many times and he's a dear friend. And everybody always asks, "How did you do it? How did you do the impossible?" And he gives the same answer every time. He says, "I did small things consistently, over a long period of

time." Small things consistently over a long period of time, allows us to make little efforts. Little by little, a little becomes a lot.

The coolest part about leadership is that it matters. The hardest part about leadership is that it matters every day. Consistency is the key. And James understands that extremely well. He is doing right now, right now as we speak, he is doing what's called the Conquer100. He is doing one hundred Iron Mans in one hundred days. And if you were to ask him right now, How are you doing it James? He'll give you the same response: "I'm doing small things consistently over a long period of time." That's how we make the impossible possible.

Michael Lee

Is there anything else you'd like to add? That we didn't cover?

Clint Pulver

If you are in a position of management and leadership, just remember your call. Remember the opportunity that you have, that it's not just about delegation and making sure we're more efficient and that we're making a profit. You are developing and advocating for people. You're playing an intricate role in their lives. And if you do it right, you'll never be forgotten. You'll become legendary in your leadership. You'll become legendary in your influence.

I think at the end of our lives, all of us will be surrounded by two things. We'll be surrounded by the "Woulda Shoulda Coulda"s, and we'll be surrounded by the "Do it, Did it, Done it"s. You have the opportunity to do some really significant things for people, to live a life of significance, not just a life of success.

Michael Lee

Thank you again, Clint. Really we appreciate you being here and what you've shared with us. Thank you.

Clint Pulver

You're very welcome. All my best.