

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

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Jacob: Hello everyone, welcome to another episode of the Future of Work Podcast. My guest today is Xavier Unkovic, the president of Amy's Kitchen. Thank you for joining me.

Xavier: Thank you, Jacob. Good morning or good afternoon everyone, delighted to be with you.

Jacob: Likewise, likewise. So we've known each other actually for a couple of years. Back in the day since you were over at Mars Drinks-

Xavier: Indeed.

Jacob: -and so now you're at Amy's, which I would assume that a lot of people listening to this have tried some of your products.

Xavier: I hope so.

Jacob: Because they're pretty much everywhere.

Xavier: I would love to.

Jacob: So why don't we start with some background information about you, how you got involved with Amy's, how you even got to this role of being president and then maybe give us a bit of background information about Amy's as well.

Xavier: Oh that's a big question, Jacob, to answer but that I need to share a little bit about my story with Amy's, which was, I would say, a beautiful story of getting to know the owners of the company. First being called about, are you interested about a particular role at Amy's and not knowing anything about the company but even though it's a company that is servicing a lot of people today, I'm cooking from scratch and I love to cook and my wife loves to cook and we buy our own ingredients and we cook it at home. So to be called by a food company, for me, was a very interesting call and therefore what I did very quickly, I went to a Whole Foods store, bought the products, look at the ingredient list and I remember perfectly me saying to my wife, listen, looking at the ingredients in the back of the packaging, if this tastes good, it's not possible, yeah? And so we went back home and we tried the products and we definitely fall in love with the products and I was massively impressed-

Jacob: Do you remember what you tried, by the way?

Xavier: Yeah, it was Chinese noodle, yeah? Funny enough. I'm a big fan of Asian cuisine as well as any kind of ethnic cuisines, so I did try those products and I said, this isn't possible. It cannot taste good. So I went to a very French based products because I was born in France and I said, I want to try the risotto now. It cannot be good and here we go again, I went to my Whole Foods store, bought the products, came back home, cooked the products or microwaved the products and then definitely fall in love with the products. So when I look at the price of the product, which was an affordable price, the quality of the ingredients, it really triggered my interest to meet with the people that were running the company and I said, I definitely want to meet the owners of the company because I knew that the company was a family owned business and therefore it really triggered my interest to have that conversations about, how is it that Amy's started to be in business and what is it about Amy's that makes it so good about the products and I came to a realization, after multiple discussions with the owners of the company as well as with people working in the company, that it would be a great place to work.

Xavier: A great place to work where I could contribute but also learn a lot and develop myself even though I'm over the 50 years old mark, I still believe we can learn, we can develop, and we can contribute. So this is very quickly, Jacob, my story, my personal story with Amy's Kitchen.

Jacob: Very cool. I love that story and I've actually tried some of their products as well and you're right, they're all very very tasty but how did you get into this leadership role? So maybe you can take us back to, I don't know if you want to go back as far as your first job, but how did you eventually get to become their president of a company? Was it just working hard, did you have mentors? I mean how did you ascend the ranks, ultimately?

Xavier: Oh this is a combination of multiple factors, Jacob. First of all is, I think it comes with ... Especially for me, because I'm not very talented, it's about working hard, yeah? And loving what you do and that would be the first advice I would give to anyone. Don't chase a title, chase the work that you love to do and it happened at the end of the day, throughout those years, I definitely came to a realization that I loved to be working with people and that's very important for me to have this people interaction and the willingness to work together with a team and with people and serving people and helping people to do a better job every day and of course, along the road, you have to learn, yeah? You have to have and receive those gifts from others, mentors, coaches, people you can learn from, even your direct reports that you learn from, you have those moments of learning and you have to have this ability to be very open to learn from others, yeah?

Xavier: I keep saying to my managers, when you go to school, we teach you at school to have all the answers and it's pretty damaging when it comes to the future at work where at work, it's not about having the answers, it's about providing the answers together, yeah? Not you, as a manager, having all the answers for your people but working it out with your people, being all together, working towards solution, not having all the answers yourself. So I think it's coming from the willingness of you doing the job that you want to do, having and enjoying every day at work and having this passion for

working for people and this humility of not willing to have all the answers because you will never have all the answers, yeah? So this is-

Jacob: I love that you say you're not talented. I don't have many executives come on the podcast and start off by saying, well you know, I'm not talented but ... A lot of people spend decades in their careers and they end up maybe as managers, maybe as senior managers, but they never get to the rank of president or CEO or SVP, EVP, et cetera, so I'm really curious, did you do something that your peers didn't do or did you do something better than them? I'm really curious, how do some people grow and get to these executive roles whereas other people don't? Because I'm sure you started your career with other people who were at the same level as you, same age as you, same location as you, and I'm willing to bet that probably 99% of them didn't get to be the president of a company. So do you have any secrets? Did you do something different?

Xavier: That's a beautiful question and in truth, this is a question I ask myself very often is, why me? And this is a beautiful question around personal awareness. So let's put it like this, I think that at the end of the day, this is about the traits that you have and you want to develop yourself in order to get there, more so than there's a particular recipe. I think this is coming ... We talked about hard work, I don't think you are an executive of a company if you don't work hard but I don't believe working hard gets you there either.

Xavier: It's a combination of multiple aspects in life of you working hard but also being passionate about what you do, and how you do it, and it's also finding the place when you can do all of this in your work life. So I'm a big fan of helping others to, especially the young people, to find where is their best place to work? And what I think I've been very lucky and fortunate in my career is finding those places where I can grow, develop, and learn from and therefore, brought me to where I am today. So I don't think I would have been very successful in different company set up and what I mean by this, I was very fortunate to work for companies that brought me a sense of belonging, helped to better shape my personal sense of purpose, and with people that wanted to work together as teams and not as individuals.

Xavier: So I think finding the right place where you work and you find this happiness to come to work and happiness to do the extra mile because if you're engaged, you're going to work harder and you're going to enjoy it. It's not just about working hard, it's really about enjoying it and finding those places, both in my career, that allow me to go the extra mile and to get out of me what I had in me, I was very fortunate. Let's put it like this and now I've turned 50, I develop the sense of awareness, personal sense of awareness, where I know exactly where I know I'm going to be good at and where I'm not going to be good at and it all have a direct relationship with the purpose of the company, the values of the companies, the vision that I help building of the companies, and the culture of those companies. I don't know if my answer helps but-

Jacob: No, no, that's perfect because-

Xavier: If you want to grow a plant, you need to find the soil to have the plant flourishing. This is a little bit the image I would describe about me and finding those places.

Jacob: Couldn't agree more and I suppose sometimes people think that leaders become leaders, they network, they work hard, and that's probably all true but a lot of people forget that you, as a leader, you need to pick the right company where you can, as that plant, grow and thrive and if you take a job at a company where it's very hierarchical and people are beating you down all the time, it doesn't matter how talented you are and how hard you work, you're going to have a very hard time in that kind of a company and I know personally for me, I was never able to pick the right company, which is why I work for myself now for the past 12, 13 years but do you have any advice on how to pick the right company? So maybe some people are listening to this and their early in their career or maybe some people have been in the workforce for a year or decades, what's your criteria to determine how to pick the right company or if you're currently at the right company?

Xavier: So people will ... I would say very quickly, it's a culture fit but behind this culture fit, there's a lot in it, yeah? I'm going to tell you a little bit about one of my personal stories that helped me to develop self awareness because we're coming here to talk about personal self awareness. I was in one of my trips to Japan in my previous job and I was around my early 40s and I do practice martial arts and it helps me a lot into mindset and body health and there was a big sign in front of this, one of the dojos in Kyoto saying, there's two critical moments in a man's life, the day he is born, obviously, and the day he understands why and I was looking at this particular sentence and it helped me to reflect a lot because as much as I completely could understand that one of the biggest important moments in my life was the day I was born, I couldn't answer the second part of the phrase which is, what is my purpose in life?

Xavier: And it was at 40 years old, so let's be honest, I was lucky enough to find a job prior to me having the ability to define my personal self purpose, I was lucky enough to find a company that helps me to build my sense of purpose but when you start reflecting about why you believe you exist and what makes you strive, what makes you happy every day going to work and be able to put them on a piece of paper and rationalize it, which is an emotion, by the way. We're talking about something that triggers your emotions to put on paper, this is massively difficult and when you're able to do this, then you will understand, to some degree, which company will be your fit.

Xavier: Which company will be your perfect fit and it varies depending on what your own personal sense of purpose. So if you have a sense of purpose that you can define, then you're going to ... It's going to be easier to find company that will be a best fit for you and will allow you to be yourself, will allow you to feel at ease and come to work with a big smile, believing you can contribute, being massively engaged so you can make a great difference and you also fit with others, yeah? So that's a little bit of my advice. Start thinking about what makes you strive, why do you think you're here on Earth and what is the ... What's important for you and forget about this title and you'll get there.

Jacob: I love that. I think that's a great piece of advice, is figuring out that kind of, what drives you ultimately but what if you don't know? I mean you said you, for example, you figured it out when you were about 40 when you saw the sign in the dojo. So were you just unhappy before you were 40 or what was going on?

Xavier: No, I was not aware. So I was not aware that this particular work would help me. So I was lucky enough, as I was saying to you, to find companies that was fulfilling my sense of purpose without me having defining it and I think there was a chemistry that I had developed with those companies that I was working for, that helped me to grow and develop but ultimately, when I came back home, I was scared and say, wow, I was sharing to my wife and I was saying, that's ... How do I do this? How do I define my personal self when it comes to my purpose and I was lucky enough to have a coach working with me and I was ...

Xavier: I came back and said, Jack, it's his name, Jack Jeffery is an amazing coach and I said, Jack, I need to understand. He said, Xavier, fantastic. Let's work on it and helped me to decode my own self purpose by saying, tell me more about those moments in the workplace where you're happy, where you strive, what are the elements that makes you happy? Makes you strive? Makes you be in a fantastic place? And write it down. Think about the last 10 years of your life, where at work you've been striving, you've been happy, you've been ... and write it down and this is going to be when what you need to chase for and here we go, yeah?

Jacob: Yeah, so step one is having that level of self awareness, I think is very very good.

Xavier: Definitely.

Jacob: Yeah, that's crucial.

Xavier: As I aged, I realized ... I don't know about you, Jacob, but I realized that I want to leave this life on Earth in a good way, yeah? And I'm not going to take away the money that I'm going to make and I'm not going to take away the title that I'm going to ... I want to enjoy every moments I have on that particular planet. So it's about doing something that I really love to do. So it's not about the money you make, it's not about title you have, it's about what you enjoy doing, and it happens that yes, I'm leading a beautiful company today and working with fantastic team and I love what I do and it could have been something different but at the end of the day, it comes to personal fulfillment.

Jacob: What about people who are listening to this that maybe don't have that at their company? Should they just quit or what do you do if you're part of a company where you kind of ... You feel like the cog, you feel like the drone that's just showing up every day for a paycheck. Do you just quit your job and go look for something else or what would you do?

Xavier: Especially in today's situation, that would be my invitation to everyone. If you're not happy, do something. For sure. Quit, I don't know but do something. Try to really understand which company will make you strive. Sometimes it's not about the company, it's about the boss. Sometimes you can be in the right place as a company but you don't have the right manager. So my advice when the case, it's the case of the manager, is try to have a conversation with the manager. Often, people quit because they believe the managers do not care about them and they don't invest into the relationship. My advice would be, sit down with your manager and tell them how it's

impacting you. If the case is your manager is engaging you and not the company but I would definitely give an advice to everyone to select the company they want to work for, not just go for the paycheck. Life is too short, life is too short.

Jacob: Totally agree.

Xavier: And you need to ... As far as I know, you have one. Hopefully there's many waiting for us but-

Jacob: You never know.

Xavier: That's just a wish, yeah? That's just a wish.

Jacob: Have you ever had a situation where an employee at Amy's was unhappy and they came to you or they came to a manager and they just ... They felt like they didn't have that purpose and if that's ever happened at Amy's, what did you do about it?

Xavier: So yes, of course and I think this is part of our job as senior leaders is to make sure the purpose is very clear, it's well defined, it's well understood, it's well communicated, and also lived, yeah? Because you always challenged by living up to your purpose as well as because we're talking here about the why, the purpose, as well as making sure the people in the company know where the company is going, which is the vision, yeah? And understand how we going to get there, which are the strategies. So there's a real role that senior leaders need to play when it comes to managing vision and purpose, which is to make sure the communication is there.

Xavier: We're also massively listening to our people when they feel that the company is not living the purpose or living the vision or living the principles of the business and we have this continued dialogue but leadership for sure has a critical role to play when it comes to communicating the vision, living the vision, communicating the purpose, living the purpose, continuously explaining our people why we do what we do and how we going to get there, so they have full confidence but also full understanding of why and how and what we do and this in complete transparency. So I think most of the time when I had people at Amy's not really in sync with the elements of the purpose, the vision, and the strategies, is because managers have not done a good job to communicate well.

Jacob: Yeah, it does ... I think the managers and the leaders do play a big role. I realized I asked you, I didn't ... or I realized I didn't ask you about Amy's Kitchen. So maybe you can let people know a little bit background about the company, how many employees do you guys have, what does the company actually do?

Xavier: Oh at Amy's? What we do is we cook for you, in fact. Amy's was created from the belief that great tasting foods should be available to all. So it's a very interested approach and what we do is we just offer delicious, organic meals to consumers that will make it themselves if they had the time. So that's, in a nutshell, what is Amy's and Amy's was created 30 years ago out of a beautiful story and the story is very simple. It's about Rachel and Andy Berliner, which are the owners of the company. They were the

pioneers of the organic food movement and the story is the following, when Rachel was on bedrest during her pregnancy, Andy, that didn't cook at the time, went looking for ready made meals, sorry, at the natural grocery store and couldn't find any.

Xavier: So here we go, they couldn't find any organic and vegetarian meal that was satisfied their taste buds. So they decided to create one on their own and as simply said, it turned out that they were not the only ones in search of such a delicious meal and delicious organic and vegetarian foods. So this is how the business was born. Not long after the birth of their daughter, Amy, the namesake of the company. So that's how the business was created from a simple need that didn't exist and today, Amy's Kitchen remains a family owned company, fully committed to offering meals and recipes made by hand and with organic ingredients and accessible price. So the way we care about the food we make today is similar to how we cared about it 30 years ago, with slightly larger pots and pans and that's pretty much it.

Xavier: We're committed to feeding everyone at the table, different dietary needs, from people that have dairy free needs, to vegan needs, to gluten free needs, to vegetarian needs. So we really here to satisfy people that love great food, that care about food, and care about their own health and because we're offering frozen meals, when you freeze your meal, you don't need preservatives. So this is very delicious and good for you foods. So the owners are still there, they're still owning the company and they take a lot of pride of seeing the company growing because it achieved their own personal purpose that they created 30 years ago and after 30 years of existence, today we are servicing more than 14 million consumers and we're servicing more than 210 million meals a year with 2,600 people working at Amy's.

Xavier: So it's a beautiful story coming from a very very beautiful need, which is to eat well, eat with beautiful ingredients, organic ingredients that we know are very healthy for you, way more healthy than ingredients that could be bought in the conventional world because they don't carry pesticides and they are vegetarian and they answer specifically a big consumer trend today, which is the reducing the amount of meat we have, we are taking in our day to day life. So 375 years ago, before Christ, sorry. 375 years before Christ, Hippocrates was saying, let food be your first medicine and this is what Amy's created 30 years ago.

Jacob: I like it. I like it and even my wife and I, we try to eat pretty healthy and organic food all the time too, so that is why we have come across several of the Amy's products and like I said, I'm sure several of the listeners have as well and so 2,600 people, so almost at 3,000 and I understand that you guys are growing quickly. So what does a typical day look like for you? So as the global president of Amy's Kitchen, what are you responsible for and maybe walk us through a typical day, even from when you might wake up in the morning.

Xavier: So what I've learned is not to wake up and open up my cellphone or my iPhone. Again, you want to be very careful of when you wake up that you take the amount of time that your family deserve and this is my first call for action, I should say, is making sure I start my day the right way, which is spending time with the ones I love every day, which is my wife and my son, my daughter being in college, so I don't have that luxury anymore and

I'm pretty sad about it but it's about starting the day with the ones that I love and not with my cellphone.

Jacob: Don't check email right when you wake up.

Xavier: Don't check emails. I've learned the lesson pretty heavily when my daughter, when she was six years old when she told me, daddy, your cellphone is more important than me and again-

Jacob: She told that to you?

Xavier: Yes, yes. That's a disaster. Again, this is part of my learning path. Yeah. When you're receiving fantastic feedback from your family and you're able to correct. So this is why I'm saying this by the way, it's because I think it's I'm in everyone's life to define your priorities according to the moments you're in and when you wake up in the morning and you're home, your priority is not in your cellphone, is to take care of the ones that are around you, if you have that chance or luxury. So then I get into my car and then comes some work, yeah, because I'm using the time between home and work to connect with our people and this is very much about my day, it's about being surrounded and with people to spend time with my people that are working overseas.

Xavier: So we have business in Europe and we have business in Australia and in Asia and when needed, I'm definitely making sure that my people that are working in other countries don't have to stay up too late, so I'm addressing all their questions, eventually concerns, very early in the morning and then comes to my coming into the office, where I make a point to go through the office and say, hello, as many as possible ... the people as possible even though I start very early, so there are not too many people in the office when I do start but it's about ...

Xavier: This is pretty much it. This is about connecting with people and making sure you continue to have the organization focused on what you have said you would do when you have clearly expressed or have the family expressing their vision for the business and you with your team, clearly define the strategy of the company, you have to be very focused on delivering towards the strategies that you have committed to, especially when you have such an ownership that is dedicated to help and support the development of your people and the business. It's about making sure that one, you know where you're going. Two, you know how you're going to get there and three, it's about execution of the strategies. So personally, I try to be in as little ... as few meetings as possible but I'm trying to have as many conversations as possible.

Jacob: What is your leadership style like? Because I mean since we've been talking, you've already said, I'm not that talented. You say that you're trying to make it harder on yourself so that it's easier on your employees. You know that they're up early, so you try to be up early. You show up to work, you say hi to as many people as you can. So it sounds like you're more trying to serve other people instead of them trying to serve you. So what would you describe or how would you describe your overall leadership style?

Xavier: I think you said it, Jacob. It's more ... I see more my role into serving and helping the organization than the reverse and I think this is when ... This comes with respecting everyone that works for you and believing that everyone that works for your organization play a critical role from the people that are in the reception desk and to the people that are in your direct report team. I think we all deserve the same amount of respect and I think we, as leaders, should show respect to every of our people and definitely serve our people and empower our people to be successful. I'm a strong believer that life is not about being right, life is about being together and my role of bringing people together and my role into helping people to collaborate more and to be the one that speaks the last, not speaks the first.

Jacob: You have all these ... You're kind of like a little executive Buddha. You have all these wise words of wisdom and I'm wondering where did this all come from because I'm sure a lot of people listening to this are thinking, you know what? My managers and my executives, they don't get it. They're hierarchical, they're commanding control, they don't get the things that you're saying. So how did you come to believe these things and to act this way? Were you always like this since you became a leader or was there a time where you were like the traditional stereotypical manager and something happened that made you change?

Xavier: Definitely. Yeah no, I was like everybody else. So I have to admit, it's been part ... and this is why I believe the leadership journey is a tough one, it's not an easy one. It's a journey. So you start with all the preconceived ideas that you need to know everything, to the end of saying that you don't know anything. So it's easy to say but to get there, you make a lot of mistakes. So I was lucky enough to have great mentors, great coaches and also to belong to an organization that knew how to develop senior leaders and help them and equip them into huge amount of tools around self awareness and I think when you start to understand, as a leader, this is not about the intent that you have but this is about the impact that you have, yeah? Which is massively different, by the way, and this is something that I've learned very late in my career.

Xavier: It's not about the intent, it's about the impact. Then you do everything to maximize your impact, not to clarify your intent. So all of us leaders wants to perform and there's different way to get there and it's about how you have the best impact to generate the performance, not how you generate a strong intent and then hoping that people will do what you want to do but that's my personal point of view is, no, I was not like a ... I couldn't say what I say 20 years ago. Of course not. I made tremendous mistakes. I was a very poor CEO when I ... in one of my past life or past experience. I was lucky enough to have a boss that look at me and say, you need to change, Xavier.

Xavier: What got you here will not bring you to the executive level of running a company. Being a sales and marketing performer, as well as being a great CFO because I had a dual background, don't bring a ... don't make you a great president or a great CEO. This is not because you're technically solid in finance and in sales or in marketing that suddenly you can be a great president for the company. Surround yourself with people that know more and make sure that you bring the team together and again, having the sense of comfort, of not being good at everything, it's helping a lot, and no, Jacob, I was not like

this at 30 years old. At 30 years old, you would have known me, I probably would not have liked myself.

Jacob: It sounds like you were a stereotypical "manager" that everybody's used to, so what made you change? Was it the conversation that an executive had with you where he came up to you and said, hey, you got to change because this is not going to work or did something happen?

Xavier: Multiple things. Yes, that particular one, yeah it happened to me. Having someone to start to teach me what it is to be an executive and for me to realize this is what I want to do, so I want to do the effort because it's not easy to work on yourself, to have ongoing self assessment around 360s and hearing feedback, dealing with the feedback. People say feedback is a gift but when you first receive the feedback, it hurts and being able to deal with feedback and progress and a good knowledge and being authentic and transparent around how you feel and how you want a progress. So a combination of everything, Jacob. It's not just about a person. He helped, definitely but it's about also a process and acknowledging it's a journey.

Xavier: I was sharing with you that I do martial arts and I love karate, which is a beautiful Japanese martial arts and you get your 10th degree black belt when you die, yeah? So it's a huge acknowledgement that in your journey of a human, you're never going to get there and this is how I would describe the leadership journey, which is you're never going to get there and you keep learning every day. You keep dealing with your emotions every day. You need to ... Your every day challenge with those emotions and how you're going to react and if you want to maximize your impact, you always, every day, have to work on your style, on your impact as a leader, and again, you're never going to be there but it's a fascinating journey because when you start to realize that you get better and people around you thrive and grow and develop and enjoy what they do, then you can look at yourself and say, I didn't do a bad job today.

Jacob: What do you personally do to keep working on yourself and also what do you do to stay relevant, right, because things are changing so quickly in the business world. How do you stay on top of everything that's happening in your industry, in the world, and also how do you keep working on yourself to become a better leader?

Xavier: So I do have ... Just to answer your question, how do I stay relevant in the industry, so you need to stay educated, so you definitely have to be massively aware of what's happening outside of your four walls in your company, very very quickly because you love what you do, you can be very isolated if the only point of focus you have is your own company. So you have to give yourself moments of learning, what's happening outside, spend time with the outside industry, so you can come back with all those data and informations to your business. So staying relevant means you need to keep learning and it's very similar on your personal development, very very similar, and this is why I do work with a coach. So I'm lucky enough to have the same coach for the last seven years and he keeps challenging me because every day, different day, every period of a company at a different time and your impact needs to be well understood and your self awareness needs to be always on the go. What can I say more than open of learning and listening to feedback?

- Jacob: How do you personally keep learning? Do you just go to events? Do you have conversations with people? Or how do you keep teaching yourself new things?
- Xavier: All in the above. Yeah, it's about spending time with others, peers in the industry as well as your own team members, as well as being curious. You have to have this curious aspects of things, understand better the consumers, so it's ... I would say that 60% of my time is about learning and listening, probably even more so. I'd say 60% but it should be 80% of my time because when you start talking, what you don't do is listening and learning. So I'm trying to spend most of my time around learning and listening to others, so the strategies of the company, the family vision can stay relevant to how fast the world is going today.
- Jacob: Makes sense to me. What is it like to work at Amy's? So for a typical employee there, maybe you can give us sort of an auditory tour. For example, do you have open spaces or is it cubicles? What are some of the perks and benefits, the overall leadership style or culture? What is it like to actually be an employee there?
- Xavier: So if you ask me about the, how does it look like to work in the office at Amy's, in fact, we're going through a significant evolution today where we're thinking more so how our workplace could better translate our culture and our ways of working. For yours, because of our growth, we were very focused on adding more people, getting more cubicles in, more desks, and we kind of not very much looked at the impact of building a workplace that could serve us better, build culture, and in the ways of working that you're trying to have. So we have ... If you come to the office today, you have different setups of desks and offices. You have cubicles, open space, it's a little bit of everything and anything and I think it is time for us to be more intentional and think a little bit better about how our workplace can serve us better.
- Xavier: So we're not there yet, we're in the development phase of building a very intentional workplace design so we can all strive and we all know that it is more important to have a place where you can achieve the type of work you're trying to do versus a place to work and having four walls and an office in a corner because if you want to collaborate with your team, there's no better than an open space but if you want to be focused on making a presentation, there's no better than a closed space. So you want to design an environment that helps you to achieve the type of work you want to do and we're not there yet.
- Xavier: So we have progress to be made and we're working on it at the moment of time and this is why today, we're thinking about the design of a future campus at Amy's, in California, where we can really build a workplace that will be Amy's when you first see it and when you first enter it and today, I have to say, when you enter the office, you really wonder what is the company you're entering in because there's so much diversity. So we're not there yet. We're not there yet. How it is to come to work at Amy's? I don't think you would see anyone that is not having a smile because I think they have what is important for all of us.
- Xavier: They have a massive culture fit, they all excited about why we do what we do, they all excited that we are making a difference to people through how healthier they can eat,

we're making a difference to the planet, and we're making a difference every day in what we do and how we do it. So I think it's a very fulfilling environment when it comes to the place to work and of course, the simple fact that we're a family owned business with a long term vision and not a very short month after month or a mindset of, you're not as good as your last PNL, this is not Amy's. At Amy's, we're thinking about how [inaudible 00:43:11], that is 7 years old today, will drive the company when he's going to be 30 years old. That's how we care about what we've created 30 years ago.

Jacob: I love it. So it's not being obsessed with the quarter to quarter, month to month, you have that kind of longer term perspective and vision, which honestly, a lot of companies just don't have that, which is unfortunate. What are some of the big trends in the world of work that your personally looking at and paying attention to?

Xavier: Personalization, so making sure everyone will be satisfied about the workplace. If you ask me about the trends in the workplace, I'm very attentive to. A workplace where people enjoy living, not just working. I'm a big fan of the working ... the living workplace and there's a beautiful author of an amazing book, which is Tracy Brower, as she's a sociologist and she's been very much studying people sociology on the workplace design and how the workplace can be fulfilling in people's life and again, when you want to take care of people and want to take care of what people eat, you want also take care of how people's life can be and especially in the workplace.

Xavier: So a workplace would be an environment where people strive and enjoy coming to the workplace and not have only one wish, which is to work from home, even though it helps. I never say no to anyone that will want to work from home but if you're building a company and a community, it's for people to be together. So you want to offer that space, that physical workplace, that is physical workplace that helps people to have a better life at work.

Jacob: I love it and I know Tracy as well. We met at a couple of events. So I definitely recommend people check her out too. How are you seeing the workplace changing? I mean are you seeing, for example, inside of Amy's or even the course of your career, have you seen major changes happen around different generations, technologies, are you actually seeing change happen or is it the same company from 10, 20, 30 years ago?

Xavier: Of course. Of course change happens. Change happens every day. What I love is, I think the younger generation are way more demanding on leaders than they were before. I remember my time where we were here to listen and do what the leader was doing. That was probably a result of our own education to some degree and today, when kids ask, what they think about particular topics from their parents, I think they bring those behaviors in the workplace and it's no longer ... The leaders are not longer there to tell people what to do but they're here to ask questions, to work with people, and I think this is way more fulfilling for me because again, asking people opinion does matter when it comes to increasing your performance, gaining perspective, helping the company to strive, and again, you're back to doing it together and not by yourself.

Xavier: So I think the young generation are probably challenging today for senior leaders but in a good way and I think they're helping senior leaders to be better senior leaders and we,

as senior leaders, need to be ready to listen, to engage with them, and to be ... also to learn from them. I love seeing younger generations in the workplace and doing things that I don't know how to do and I look at them and say, you need to teach me how to do that. Again, this is not about knowing everything. It's about having this openness to welcome differences, to welcome different mindsets and perspective, and at the end of the day, those are your consumers too. So you'd better know them well and at least this is for us, we're serving more millennials at Amy's than any other consumer categories. So it's very important that we welcome any type of employees, gender, race, everything. The world is about diversity and it's evolving every day. So this is it.

Jacob: I know purpose and meaning and vision are really big themes and concepts for you, so first question for you is, how would you explain what purpose is and also, is purpose the same thing as meaning or are those two different things and maybe you can also share, what is Amy's doing or what are you doing to help employees feel that sense of purpose and meaning inside of the company?

Xavier: Yeah. So your question, Jacob, is purpose about meaning, correct?

Jacob: Yeah, is purpose and meaning, are those the same thing? Because people always use those words interchangeably.

Xavier: I don't know. What do you think?

Jacob: Me personally, I think they're different but I'm kind of cheating because I'm actually writing about this in my new book. So I spent a lot of research, a lot of time researching purpose and meaning and I mean one of the things that I've concluded and I don't know if you'll agree with this, purpose is more around understanding how the work that you're doing is having an impact but meaning is more a subjective sense of fulfillment that you get. So for me, for example, if I were to think of my purpose, my purpose is to create educational content, it is to speak, to write, my purpose is to help educate organizations on how the world of work is changing but that's not my meaning. For me, I would say the meaning is more around helping create organizations where employees actually want to show up to work and my purpose is what gets me to the meaning.

Jacob: So in other words, I have to understand my purpose and then I can feel that sense of meaning from it and what I've found is that a lot of employees, they don't even understand how the work that they're doing is impacting the company or the customer or the world and because they don't understand that, they can't extract any meaning from it because meaning is very subjective, right? I mean it's very individual, it's very ... Everyone gets meaning from different things. So that's kind of what I've found but what I also find interesting is that whenever I talk to business leaders or whenever you read a research report for that matter, people always say purpose and meaning, meaning or purpose, they just switch the words around but we don't spend enough time really understanding that there's a difference between the two. So that's kind of my long spiel about purpose and meaning.

Xavier: I love what you exactly said and prior to what you just said, I would have said that's the same thing because I would have been one of those leaders saying, that's the same but after you just ... After hearing from you, it's definitely different. It's definitely different. I would agree with you. I think your purpose and meanings are real and you're helping us to do a better job every day by just saying what you just said, for sure. Yeah.

Jacob: First, thank you. I'm glad to hear that and how do you, inside of Amy's, what do you guys do to help employees feel that sense of purpose and or meaning? Is it like training programs? Is it ... I mean, I don't know. You tell us.

Xavier: So for us, it is very important. So having the ability for us to express our purpose is something new at Amy's, even though you always act with a purpose in mind, that's my belief, it is important that you're able to express it. So somewhat you could if I ... Why you do what you do and therefore, you're able to communicate about it and you're able to attract new talent because of your purpose and that's where I say it is very important because as a company, today, we all compete.

Xavier: Companies all compete for the same resource, which is people, yeah? And what you hate the most is to have people that come and join you for six month, a year, and leave because they believe they can enjoy better work somewhere else and for us, it's becoming more and more meaningful that we can be very clear with people about why we do what we do and help people and ourselves, as well, finding those people that will connect well with us and this is what I call the culture fit and why purpose for me is so important is to some degree, when the company purpose can be a great fit for each and every individual purpose and having the ability to express that purpose to the individual is very important, so he can position himself or herself by saying, yes, this is the job I want to do.

Xavier: This is the company I want to belong to. So then, I can have a [inaudible] ... I can contribute and I will definitely be one of yours to continue this beautiful purpose that you have expressed and this is where the meaning takes place, where every job, every role at Amy's, are designed to help the purpose to stay alive and to achieve our ambition, which is our vision and of course, you want to communicate around the purpose and the meanings and you want to train and help people to grow and develop but you will have an amazing return on investment on your training and on your growth and developed plan, when you grow and develop the people that are emotionally attached to the why you do what you do in your company and I think this is ... and all companies are different when it comes to their purpose but it is very important that you bring people in your company that someone will benefit from your purpose or will see themselves being a clear match with your purpose.

Xavier: So I don't think at Amy's, anyone is not eating the right way. I don't think anyone at Amy's do not care about sustainability because it's a big piece of us. So those elements are clearly expressed and you want the perfect fit to be happening. In the meantime, you want also the people that you recruit can grow and develop accordingly, in parallel to the growth of your company and you want to make sure that their talent is well developed as well.

Jacob: Makes sense to me. Maybe one last question for you before I just, I have a couple of fun questions for you. But maybe the last sort of official business-y podcast question is around leadership and for people listening to this that want to strive to be this kind of a new leader, emulate some of the concepts and the ideas that you've talked about, where do you begin, how do you start to change the way that you think about leadership? Do you have any advice on what you can start doing?

Xavier: That's a tough question, Jacob. That's a tough question.

Jacob: Yeah, I don't want it to be all easy for you. I mean if you were advising somebody and they're like, I love kind of your philosophy and your approach and what you're doing at Amy's and maybe they themselves aren't able ... are having a hard time understanding this but more often I find, employees come to me and they say, you know what? My manager just doesn't get it. He doesn't act like this. He doesn't think like this. He's very commanding control. I mean, how do you start having these conversations to get people to change and think differently and act and behave differently?

Xavier: I think what's very important for leaders today is to receive feedback. So organize some feedback for you to understand better your impact versus your intent. This is where I would say everything should begin. When I started to work with my coaches, said, Xavier, before we start working, I love talking to you but I want to hear from the people that are in touch with you. I want to hear about your direct reports. I want to hear from your boss. I want to hear from the people that see you at work and then we're going to hold the mirror to you and share with you how people sees you and compare your intent and the impact that you have and I think this is a good start. That is the good start for every leader to really gather some very honest feedback.

Xavier: The risk of the feedback, it's when the feedback is nice and not kind, where people don't learn how to provide feedback, when it's not anonymous. So you really need to equip yourself with a really great coach that is not here to please you but to challenge you, coach that will be here to make you a better leader, not just taking some good money out of your pocket because it's going to be all you, a fair amount of dollars. So you want ... Like every coach, you want a demanding coach, you want a coach that gets you better, but I think that's what I would recommend, get help because there's no shame of getting help. Every great ... Anyone in sports, athletics, get a coach. Why not leaders will get a coach to be better? There's no shame about this. Working on yourself, it's very important if you want to get better.

Jacob: Yeah and actually a lot of the executives that I've interviewed on the podcast have coaches. So quite a few of them have mentioned that they do have coaches. Okay, so last fun questions for you, some rapid fire questions for you, starting off with, what has been your greatest business failure?

Xavier: As I mentioned to you, it's almost when I got fired by trying to do everything my people were paid for. So I was a CFO for my CFO, I was a sales person for my sales person, I was a marketing person for my marketing person. My stress level was huge. My team was not looking at me as someone that could lead them and more about someone that was telling them what to do and at the end of the day, I was not in a ... I was not very healthy

by doing this. Mentally, physically, and I was lucky enough to get my boss calling me one day and said to me, Xavier, it has to stop otherwise we won't be able to keep you and that was a beautiful call for me to change and I was doing ... That was terrible. That was not just one mistake, there were multiples.

Jacob: Yeah, it doesn't sound like a fun situation.

Xavier: That was not a fun time for anyone, the family, myself-

Jacob: I can imagine.

Xavier: -anybody. Yeah.

Jacob: What's your most embarrassing moment at work?

Xavier: Oh, I cannot tell you that.

Jacob: That means it's a really good one.

Xavier: So it's a really good one and it's one because I'm French and sometimes, I don't know if you know but people in Europe, especially French, the way they speak English and I guess you all have heard that I have an accent. We speak English and we pronounce words sometime with a little bit of a difference and I pronounced a word that has a complete different meaning in a meeting, which was very surprising for some ladies being present in the meeting and I didn't realize it but so some of them being completely red and I realized I was making mistakes and I was lucky enough to have an HR director calling on me, Xavier, I believe you said that and I said, yes, why? And then she explained to me the word I said and I was very disappointed in myself but so I can't say to you what it is. That's not proper. That was embarrassing, definitely. That's really embarrassing.

Jacob: What are you most proud of?

Xavier: Oh, there's so many things, Jacob. So many things but a very defining moment for me was when I worked 10 years in Canada and helped build the business I was leading in Canada and when one customer said to me, when I left Canada for the US, he called me and said, Xavier, you can't leave and we don't want you to leave and when a customer said that to you, it's very rewarding because you know, at the end of the day, what you have built is something is not only good for your people or yourself, it's also good for the customer you were servicing and the consumers you were servicing. So it was a very mutual ... It's for me, the best of mutuality and I am a strong believer in how mutual business needs to be for people, consumer, customers, the planet, and I was very emotionally touched when the customer called me and said, you can't leave. We don't want you to leave.

Jacob: Yeah, that's a good one.

Xavier: I was very proud of that, not because it was me but it was about somehow we, as a corporation, were doing the right thing.

Jacob: What has been the hardest business decision you've ever had to make?

Xavier: It's always when you have to let go someone for me. Even when the person is not performing, even if this is the right decision to take, because the person do not want to perform. To let go someone is always the toughest decision to make for me.

Jacob: What is your favorite business or non business book that you recommend?

Xavier: My non business book, which is a business book to some degree, it's Zen in the Martial Arts. It's a beautiful book that helps you to get perspective on yourself but also helps you to get perspective on business and life and it ticks a lot of boxes and I found that the philosophy of martial arts helped me a lot to develop as a leader in business.

Jacob: Perfect and last question for you, well I was going to ask you who the best mentor was that you've ever had but it sounds like you have a coach and it sounds like one of the CEOs at a previous company, those ... I'm guessing those would probably be your best mentors.

Xavier: He is my best mentor. Yeah. Henri Lagarde. He used to be the CEO of Royal Canine, which is the brand now, which is the biggest brand of Mars, Incorporated and he was the one leading it at a point prior to being acquired by Mars, Incorporated and he sent me a text yesterday by saying, Xavier, keep in mind what's very important in your business is your product needs to always stay and be good and that's very simple words but sometimes-

Jacob: He just randomly texted you?

Xavier: Yeah. Yeah, like this. He's 78 years old now and it just ... He always had this belief about sometimes business is not that complicated but we make it very complex and keeping ourselves very rooted to what matters the most is very important and sometimes this is what it does to me. So he is the one that almost fired me, to the one now, at his age, texts me and we have an amazing relationship between the two of us.

Jacob: I love that he just randomly texts you these things. That's great. I mean I think that's what a great leader should do. They're constantly there, they're constantly-

Xavier: Care, care.

Jacob: Yeah, they genuinely care. Very last question for you, if you were doing a different career, what do you think you would have ended up doing?

Xavier: And what do you mean, Jacob, about a different career?

Jacob: Just anything. If you didn't end up being the president of Amy's, where do you think your career would have gone? Do you think you would have, for example, been like a martial arts instructor or what would you have done?

Xavier: I have no clue. I'm sorry. I don't know. It's a great question and I'll think about it.

Jacob: This is the only path.

Xavier: I don't know. No, but it was my path and I don't think it was all planned at all. When I was young enough, I wanted to, like a lot of boys, I wanted to be an air force pilot and I realized that I had to wear glasses, so it killed my dream and I ended up to be working in finance because I was not good at it and I said to myself, if you don't learn about finance, you're never going to have an opportunity to do it. So I worked for Deloitte because I was really bad at finance and then I ended up to be in the merger and acquisition division, which I love because this is all about energy and people and trying to do the right things and then I ended up to do sales and marketing and it happens that when you do sales and marketing because you like it and you know about finance, you're pretty well rounded to operate as a CEO or president. So only one, yeah. I don't know what I would have done. I don't know, Jacob. I have to admit.

Jacob: Hey, that's a fair answer. That's a fair and honest answer. Well we've come to the end of our time. Where can people go to learn more about you and Amy's Kitchen? Anything that you want to mention for people to connect with or check out, please feel free to do so.

Xavier: Yeah, well if people want to engage with me in a conversation, feel free to write me to xavier.unkovic@amys.com. Connect with me on LinkedIn. I think I'm connected to Jacob, so we all are connected to some degree and this is about me and if you want to know a little bit more about Amy's, feel free to go on our website, amys.com and we'll be delighted to have you try our products, have a beautiful experience around our products because they are amazing and everyone deserves to taste them.

Jacob: I agree and as somebody that has eaten many of your products, I fully endorse the Amy's products food. Well, Xavier, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to speak with me. I really appreciate it.

Xavier: Jacob, it was a real pleasure and thank you for your questions. They were very challenging for some of them. There was like, wow, but it's always a pleasure to have a discussion with someone like you that really care about people and how leadership develops to impact people's life at it's best, so thank you for everything you are doing.

Jacob: Oh my pleasure, my pleasure. I got to throw out some hard questions for you. It can't all be easy. I got to keep you on your toes. So thanks again and thanks everyone for tuning in. My guest again has been Xavier Unkovic, the president of Amy's Kitchen and I will see all of you next week.