POWDERKEG PODCAST TRANSCRIPT : MAX YODER

Intro: Max Yoder, a lifelong learner and trailblazer, knows that clearly-defined processes empower employees to level-up their quality of work from average to exceptional.

Yoder is the cofounder and CEO of Lessonly, a software platform that lets companies capture internal knowledge, best practices, and team policies as searchable and assignable step-by-step lessons. Lessonly currently helps half a million users from hundreds of companies learn the processes they need to excel in their work.

Yoder shares some of his most valuable insights in our interview, including how feats that look like magic are just processes, why you need to have difficult conversations with your teammates, how to be a great team player, and how to worry less and view challenges as opportunities.

I had a blast recording this episode with Max. He's a very down-to-earth guy with a great sense of humor who loves helping others succeed, and I'm honored he took the time to chat. Connect with him on Twitter and Instagram, and enjoy the episode.

Matt: Hey, I'm Matt Hunckler, back again with another episode of Powderkeg: Igniting Startups. This is Episode 19 with my good friend, Max Yoder, CEO and cofounder of Lessonly, a pioneer in learning management software. I'm your host, Matt Hunckler. I'm the founder and CEO of Verge, a network of local communities with global reach for tech entrepreneurs, investors, and top talent. As my team and I have grown Verge over the past seven years, we've hosted more than a thousand entrepreneurs at our events around the world. Those founders have gone on the raised more than $500 million in capital collectively, and they're disrupting industries, creating wealth, and changing the world. The cool thing is they're doing it in areas outside of Silicon Valley, which is exactly why we started this podcast. Each guest has their own powderkeg full of raw skills and talents that has ignited their startups and fueled their growth. These are their stories. You can find me on Twitter and Instagram @hunckler. Let me know how Verge, Powderkeg and I can help with your entrepreneurial journey. Make sure you're subscribing to the podcast on iTunes: powderkeg.co/itunes. You can find us there. I really appreciate your reviews and subscribes, because that's what helps us reach more people. This week's episode of Powderkeg is brought to you by DeveloperTown. DeveloperTown helps

enterprise companies move like a startup. I love these guys. We actually house our offices out of the DeveloperTown offices. They're so rad. They hook us up with space. Corporate innovators often work with DeveloperTown to explore software solutions that support their core business needs. My leveraging their years of experience working with startups, DeveloperTown is able to help companies better understand the viability of potential software solutions and quickly bring them to market. They've created a proven sprint-to-market process so large enterprises can move like a startup. I highly recommend checking them out: DeveloperTown.com/powderkeg. DeveloperTown: Start something.

Matt: Alright, here's the part where I get to introduce one of my favorite people in the world. Max Yoder is a good friend of mine. We've been friends since he moved to Indianapolis, where we both live today. I think we met in Bloomington, Indiana.

Max: Yeah, we're going on a decade.

Matt: Decade!

Max: Yeah. We need to celebrate.

Matt: Dang. Decade friendship. I like that, man. Well, Max, I appreciate you being here, because your company, Lessonly, helps companies capture internal knowledge, best practices and team policies as searchable and assignable step-by-step lessons.

Max: You nailed it.

Matt: I mean, I literally just quoted that verbatim from your website.

Max: I wrote that. [laughing]

Matt: I nailed it. We love Lessonly. We use it all the time at Verge. Huge fan of the tool. It's really helped us scale into new cities. We're in eight cities now, all of which has been powered by Lessonly's software.

Max: Congratulations, that's awesome.

Matt: ...And what you've done with helping bring, what, over 200,000 learners?

Max: We actually just hit a half-million.

Matt: Half-million?

Max: Yeah.

Matt: Dude, you're, like, outdating these—

Max: We're moving.

Matt: I think that number was from November, so you guys are moving fast. Well, you've got more than 60 people on your team now.

Max: Yes, that's right.

Matt: Raised $6 million in capital. Any other six metrics I should be aware of?

Max: That's good. We just hit the four-year mark, so business has been around...we're going on a half-decade, which is cool.

Matt: Happy Birthday.

Max: Hey, thank you. It's been a good four years.

Matt: Yeah. Well, speaking of birthdays, you just had one, and had an announcement to make.

Max: Yes, I proposed to my long-time girlfriend. Her name's Jess, and she's now my fiancée.

Matt: So she said "yes."

Max: She said "yes." She was planning a surprise birthday party for me. She did not realize that we had actually coaxed her into planning that surprise birthday party, and the whole idea was to get her really focused on this surprise and hiding things from me so that I could actually surprise her with something else, which was the engagement. So, the night before the party, I proposed to her, and she said, "Stop." And then she said "yes." I was glad she had more than just, "stop." I think "stop" was just the immediate reaction of, "Oh my gosh, I'm getting proposed to." Because she had no idea it was coming. It was great.

Matt: Are you good at surprises?

Max: No. Actually, she said I could never surprise her. About four days before I surprised her, she told one of her friends that she could surprise me any day of the week, because I have blinders on because I'm focused on the business, but I could never pull one over on her. So, that felt very good. One time, she told me I wasn't romantic, so this was my way of, like...I was like, "No, I need to be romantic."

Matt: You proved her wrong.

Max: I wanted to, very badly, yeah.

Matt: Do you like proving people wrong?

Max: Her. I just love her.

Matt: [laughing] I'm sure Jess will love hearing that.

Max: When she said I wasn't romantic, I was like, "Well, that's a call to action. That's a call to arms."

Matt: Challenge accepted.

Max: Yeah. You got it. So, it went great, thank you. It was a great birthday, the best birthday.

Matt: Congratulations, man. It was really cool to hear that story and see everyone gather there to celebrate your birthday, but also the announcement of your engagement.

Max: It was one of my favorite nights, man. It was so cool. Thank you for coming.

Matt: Of course, man. Thanks for the invite. Well, one of the things that I like about you, Max—and I wanted to dive right in here—is you've been passionate about learning and education since I first met you. You were at IU, still in school. I had just graduated from IU, and I was down there to recruit you, which we successfully did.

Max: It worked, yep.

Matt: It worked out. But, you had created your own learning path within Indiana University. Can you tell me about that? Why did you decide to chart your own path as opposed to getting an off-the-shelf major?

Max: I was lucky enough to learn about the individualized major program—it's called the IMP program at IU—and it was one of those things where really good guidance brought me to it, because it doesn't get a lot of publicity around the school. What it allows you to do is take the classes you want to take out of every college, because, you know, university is a series of colleges. You can go to the college of arts and sciences, you can go to the college of journalism, you can go to the college of business, and you can pull the classes out that you think are going to create a curriculum that you really want to take. You can give it a name. The only prerequisite is that you have leaders from each one of those colleges on your advisory board to make sure that you're picking classes that are actually appropriate. I just didn't really want to be a business student. I wasn't really great at finance and accounting, and I really felt I was going to fall down if I had to spend a lot of time in Excel spreadsheets. And I really wanted to be a liberal arts student. So, the goal was: let's create a liberal arts major that has a business-sounding name that allows me to learn a lot about sociology, and psychology, and

journalism, and communications, and kind of get a breadth of knowledge instead of a real depth in any particular subject. It's just a tough time to pick your specialty. You know, I was eighteen, nineteen, I didn't know what I wanted to specialize in. I was lucky enough to not have to choose, and just see a lot of things. It was a program that I recommend everybody who goes to IU at least check out. It's not meant for everybody, but it was great.

Matt: It's good to know it's an option. I don't think I knew that was an option. I probably would've taken it.

Max: Yeah, it's not highly publicized.

Matt: Dude, I love that, man. Do you think that sort of style of charting your own path is something that has had implications in the way you've grown Lessonly?

Max: Yeah, I think it certainly helped. It was one of those things where you kind of get a major that was mapped out for you. It just felt pretty restraining. And I also just really didn't know better. It was like, "Hey, this is a neat opportunity. Let's give it a shot." It wasn't some master plan. But when you graduate and you realize, "Oh my gosh, words matter a lot," and people see a business—my major was Brand Management and Advertising. They just made a lot of assumptions around what I knew. They didn't ask me, "Hey, do you know these things?", because I would've told them "no." They just kind of assumed a lot about what I was capable of, and that opened up a lot of opportunities for me to just try things that maybe I didn't have the prerequisite skills for, but could learn on the go. "Words matter a ton" was kind of the end-all deal of that degree, because people really don't dig a whole lot past that title. I wasn't trying to pull the wool over people's eyes, but I didn't know anything about business.

Matt: It was good copywriting, man. It clearly served you pretty well.

Max: It served me well, yeah, and I think, ultimately, the thing about forging your own path was just having people around you who had already done that. And seeing how rewarding it was for them, and also seeing that...we talk about learning, we just talked about how much I enjoy learning. I think the thing I like about learning the most is there's so many things in the world that look like magic, when in reality, they're a process. If it looks like magic, in order to do it yourself, you have to be the magician, and that's very hard. That takes...it's impossible for some people. And they feel it's impossible, so they don't try. But if we can turn things that look like magic into the processes that they are, then it's following step-by-step to just up your odds with every step of the way, and it makes these things that some people think aren't available to them, totally practical. I think we have a lot of that in the entrepreneur world, where people think they can't start a company because they don't know the process. It just looks like magic to them, so they just kind of wait on the sidelines, and they're like, "Well, I don't really understand that magic, so I'm not going to give it a go," when the reality is it is not magic. There's a lot of well known processes that you can follow to up your odds of at least getting it off the ground. Doesn't mean you're going to win. It's hard as heck to win. But it does mean that you have a

chance. So, I like the idea of taking things that look like magic that shouldn't look like magic, and turning them into processes, because that means more people can get on and give them a shot.

Matt: Well, now you're making me wish I'd brought a deck of cards. We could've done some magic tricks.

Max: Hey, nothing wrong with magic in that sense. I just think magic can be pretty alienating to some folks.

Matt: [laughing] Well, even magic in that sense, everything is broken down into processes.

Max: You're just the only one who knows the process.

Matt: It's the mechanics, it's the moves. Yeah, you're just not sharing it with anyone.

Max: Right, yeah.

Matt: Well, that's probably the case in a lot of different processes in a lot of different fields. What I love about Lessonly and what you guys are doing is that you're giving the tools for people to break down that process so it doesn't feel like magic.

Max: Exactly. Because employees enter a job, and they say, "I want to do great work." They don't sign up like, "Hey, I kind of want to do this half-assed." They sign up, and they're like, "I'd like to be really good at this job. I want to hit my quota. I want to make sure my CSAT scores are where they need to be," depending on what your role is. Companies expect them to do great work, but they don't always do their part as a company to document what great work looks like. We talk about being a team player a lot, but how many companies actually document, "What does a team player mean?" What are the fundamentals of a team player? Because you might think a team player is one thing, and I might think it's another thing. I might think I'm crushing it as a team player, and in your mind, you're like, "No."

Matt: [laughing] How do you define a team player?

Max: I define it the way somebody else does. There's a guy named Patrick Lencioni. I was trying to define it myself. I took a whole week off work to try to figure out what a team player was, because I was like, "People need to know." He'd already wrote a book on it, and I read the book, and I was like, "This is great." It's hunger, humility, people smarts. So, having an urge just to do great work. Not an incessant urge. Like, you need to make time for your family, but you need to step up to the plate and be hungry, and be challenged, and want more. Humility just means you're not overly arrogant and you're not overly full of self-doubt. You balance something in the middle. People smarts is: can you empathize with folks? Do you have emotional intelligence? If you have all those three things, you tend to be a very effective team player. If you don't have emotional intelligence—I might say something to you that I don't realize really

bummed you out, and then you don't want to work with me again, or you don't want to be as open with me next time we're having a difficult conversation. All these things coming together makes that team player. If you lose one of them, you have some perversion of a team player that can be less than ideal. And nobody is hitting it out of the park on all of these, but we need to know what they are, and we need to be working toward improving places where we're weak. Lessonly isn't about that kind of leadership and development stuff. It's about the process. It's about, like, the tactical process of, "When you come into your job, here's how to move this opportunity from, maybe, the negotiation to the proposal stage. Here's what needs to happen before you do that." Just spelling it out, documenting that stuff. In Lessonly's case, internally, I thought it was important that people knew what a team player was, and a lot of companies don't spell it out. And then people have to guess. You know what happens when they guess? They get some of it right, and they get some of it wrong. But they're doing their best. They're cobbling together the suboptimal...what they think is the picture, but it's not the picture. You gotta help them paint it. Doesn't mean you put handcuffs on them. Doesn't mean you be overly prescriptive. Just show them the guardrails. "Everything within these guardrails: you're going to nail it. Anything outside of these guardrails: not great." You know?

Matt: I want to get back to what you do as a leader when you get off the guardrails and when you do get it wrong, but I first want to dive into the earlier days of Lessonly as a company, not necessarily the product itself. You're bringing on some of your early employees or early teammates, like Conner. I imagine you didn't have a lot of this stuff documented at that point, right? Because you're a solo founder at that point, operating mostly as the only person full-time, working on Lessonly. How do you get some of these key pieces and parts in place as you're bringing on your first couple teammates? Or do you?

Max: It's a great question. I don't think you do. There's not a whole lot of institutional knowledge when you're hiring that first person, and you don't know your market yet. You don't really know where you're going to find success. We don't sell to companies with Lessonly that are that young. It's just not going to help them. What they need to be is entrepreneurial and nimble. But when you grow a company past 25, to 35, to 50, you hire a lot more process-oriented people where you need to give them what they need, which is, "What's the process?". In the early days, there are some things that were meant to be documented, but, man, the vast majority of it is just, "Let's make sure we're sitting around the same table." Because when you make a decision, and I can see how you handled that decision-making process, I can then intuit what the right thing to do is. That doesn't scale, though. When Conner comes in, we can intuit all day long, and we know how one another works, and it works great. But you can't do that past a table. Once you grow past a table and multiple rooms, that's when it gets a lot more important to be direct.

Matt: What do you think is important in the culture early on with teams that are five or less?

Max: Three things. You have no time. Time is your...you're running against the clock of, "Hey, we're going to run out of money." So, you have to share before you're ready. You can't go in a

hole and work on something that you think is going to be the perfect thing, and then come out of that hole three months later, and be like, "Hey, I've got the perfect thing," and everybody else goes, "That's not what we need right now." I have no fear of the team working hard. I have fear of them working hard on the wrong things. Sharing before you're ready is the value that gets us to making sure that people don't go in holes and come out later having wasted a bunch of time. They get feedback early, and they get feedback before they're ready—before they're comfortable. Ready doesn't mean...ready just means they probably are...maybe feel a little exposed when they share that, because they know it's a half-baked thought right now. But that's the time to share it, and to get it out in front of people and say, "Here's, like...I wrote this in 30 minutes. I'm going to work on it for the next two weeks, but I want your feedback." And if I read it, or somebody else reads it, and they're like, "Hey, this is the right thing. This is awesome, go full bore," you've shared before you're ready, you're working on the right stuff. That's super important. We can just mitigate a lot of trouble if we get things out in front of one another quickly and say, "What do you think about this?". Getting consensus...nobody can perfect anything in a vacuum. It's all about just making sure you get out of the vacuum fast. The next one is having difficult conversations. When you share before you're ready, somebody's probably going to pump the breaks on something that you're pumped about. That can be hard for people. We like to please one another, and we're generally not taught anywhere in school how to be direct and have difficult conversations. Especially in the Midwest. It's not a muscle that we flex very often, very early in our lives. We feel like we might be rude if we tell somebody directly, but the reality is not being direct with you just means I don't respect you, when it boils down to it. If I'm not looking at you and saying, "Matt, here's what I think," honestly, that probably means that I'm hiding something from you, and I don't actually think you're worth my direct opinion, or I just don't want to invest in you. I don't think you're worthwhile to invest in. I don't think that's cool at all.

Matt: Is that something that you had to reframe, being someone from the Midwest—Goshen, Indiana—who was raised with those sort of...you know, maybe direct feedback isn't the first route to go? Or was your family kind of different in that direct feedback was what was cultivated?

Max: Yeah, great question. My family did not cultivate that. Kristian Andersen cultivated that in me, and so did Nathan Sinsabaugh. Two guys I worked with at Studio Science. I got an internship there after you and I met.

Matt: We actually met when you were at that internship.

Max: Yeah. You came into the office. Because that would've predated when we actually met at IU. They were just...they would look at me honestly and tell me how they felt. And it wasn't to be rude. I knew they cared about me. They had already established this base-level appreciation of, "Max, we like having you around. We love the energy you bring to the team. We love how curious you are. But that doesn't mean we're going to tell you everything you're doing is right." And, man, did I grow really fast in that environment, when they'd be like, "Don't do that." Or,

"Here's a different way to do it." And it didn't feel like it was cutting me down. It felt constructive, because it was constructive. What they had done is said, "I appreciate you"—established that baseline appreciation—and they showed that they were vulnerable around me. They didn't just act like hard-asses around me all the time. They opened up. They were vulnerable. They shared things that were maybe uncomfortable for them. That allowed us to be, like, fighting for one another. I knew when Kristian gave me feedback, he cared about me, because I was able to be vulnerable with him. He knew I appreciated him, and vice versa. When you have vulnerability and appreciation as kind of the bedrocks, you can have candor. If you don't have those things, candor really feels bad to people, because they're like, "Oh, that person doesn't like me. That's why they spoke up."

Matt: Kristian was actually our first interview we had on Powderkeg Podcasts.

Max: And he did an excellent job.

Matt: He did phenomenally. We've since upped our audio quality quite a bit, but it's still great content in there, in Episode 1. Kristian Andersen, High Alpha, with several other people that I'm sure you now consider mentors. Guys like Scott Dorsey.

Max: Yeah, he's...just a great guy.

Matt: Are there...well, I'm going to put a pin in the mentor thing, because I think there's probably a third thing that you were going to say when...when you're just a small team. I want to make sure we tie off that thread.

Max: Oh, yeah! Sharing before you're ready, having difficult conversations, and critiquing in love. So, that was the last part about that appreciation: making sure that when I'm giving you that critique, you know it's coming from a place of...we both want to win. We're on the same team, and we both want to win. And the reason I'm giving you this feedback is because I think it's going to help us win faster. I don't want you spinning your wheels on something that isn't the right thing to spin your wheels on. You might come back to me and say, "Max, I think you're wrong. I think that is the right thing." We should have that difficult conversation, but we should do it from a place of, "I know you're not saying this because you want to spite me, and I'm not saying this because I want to spite you." Baseline appreciation and vulnerability make that possible. So, share before you're ready, have difficult conversations, critique in love. That is a virtuous cycle. If you don't have difficult conversations, people just keep sharing before they're ready, and all they get is, "Great job!" They're going to stop, like, "This is not helpful. I can just skip that part." And if you don't critique in love—you kind of beat somebody down when they share before they're ready—they're going to stop sharing before they're ready. They're going to go, "That sucked. I don't want to do that again." So you create this virtuous cycle if you get them all nailed, and we didn't know that when we went into it. It was the natural ebb and flow of our personalities that allowed that to be possible. We saw that it worked really well, and we said, "We can't lose this." So then, we institutionalized it as three of our seven values, which I used to

think were just total bull. Scott Dorsey said that they were not, and I was like, "Well, this guy probably knows something about something." Eventually, he said it enough times, like, "You gotta get your values down," and it was a great, great piece of guidance.

Matt: Taking your magic and turning it into a process.

Max: You nailed it.

Matt: Well, technically, you nailed it. I was just repeating what you said.

Max: But you're right. I was making people into it, where I should've been more prescriptive, and it wasn't fair to the team.

Matt: You mentioned mentors like Kristian Andersen and Scott Dorsey. Were there other people—whether in-person and real-life conversations, or particular books, or podcasts, or guiding lights—that you had early on in the days of Lessonly that have really put you on this trajectory that you're on right now?

Max: Yeah, Conner Burt. He's the guiding light. He does...there's a lot of people who made this company what it is. Conner does not come in...when he comes on and works with the hunger that he had, and the humility that he had, he just changed the trajectory of the business forever, and never rested on his laurel.

Matt: For those that don't know Conner, his role at Lessonly—

Max: His role is the Chief Operating Officer. He came on as the first salesperson, and he just continues to punch up into new and incredible...he's got a lot on his shoulders, but he continues to carry it very well, and do so with the humility and hunger that I've always known about him. What really drives me every day is I want to win for the entire team, but you know how hard it is to...like, we personify companies. We pick the one person that represents the company. You know, Steve Jobs is Apple. Apple is Steve Jobs. That's easier for our minds to wrap around when we've got a personification of an individual instead of, "Apple is 3,000 people, or 30,000 people." That's not a story. It's hard to tell a story about 30,000 people. It's a lot easier to tell a story about one person. When I think about the story in my head, about what makes me want to win at Lessonly...I've promised a lot to a lot of people, but when it really boils down to it, it's, "I don't want to let Conner down." That is my motivator. I know he's getting up in the morning and getting after it, and me sleeping in makes me feel like a jackass. It makes me feel lame. It makes me feel rude. I love the guy. I don't want to let him down. I never want him to look at me and go, "You didn't do enough." That is, like, my greatest fear. I love having that motivator on the team every day, when I can look over and be like, "He's going to get after it. I gotta get after it." And our friendship doesn't stop us from having difficult conversations. It doesn't stop us from sharing before we're ready. It doesn't stop us from doing all the things we need to do, but man,

it is the gift that keeps on giving. It's just having somebody around who you're deeply motivated by.

Matt: That sounds like a great dynamic to have on the team. As I've seen you guys together and collaborating, mostly in the early days, when you guys were working out of your Broad Ripple apartment that was just down the street from my house. I'd pop in and see you guys collaborating from time to time. Great energy, and I imagine it's had massive impact on how you've grown this team to over 60 people now.

Max: Unreal. We just couldn't do it again. And I don't mean to belabor the point. It's just, like, we didn't know that was going to happen. So, when people pick their teammates, pick somebody who you want to fight for, and who has proven that they will fight for you. We just were lucky to fall into that. It's the greatest gift you could have when you're starting a business, to have somebody around you like that every day.

Matt: Talk to me about how you guys have gone about building this team. Did you build it very intentionally, or did it just kind of—to your point, magically—happen, and unfold?

Max: We got lucky a ton, but that happens a lot. You more you act, the more you get lucky. Everybody says that. I think it's very true. When it comes to how we built the team, it was very intentional. The first two hires after Conner were Mitch Causey and Corey Kime. We were Orr Fellows together. We were in this thing called the Orr Fellowship together, so we knew that they were just solid people. We knew that they were hard workers, we knew that they were kind, and we knew that they had a lot of ambition. We made those hires very slowly, and they sacrificed things to join the team that early, and we'll do everything we can to make that worthwhile for them. Ideally it already has been, but you know what I mean. It was awesome to see them sacrifice to come aboard, because that makes us all want to fight really hard for one another. Those people really created a dynamic that was pretty evident when you walked in the room. We were all very different people. It's not like a homogenous thing where we all like the same music, we all like the same books, we all think the same way. Not at all. Corey's very different from me. Mitch is very different from me. Conner's very different from me. And that is great. But they all had the same similar kind of DNA, insofar as they were built in a certain way, where it was like, "I just want to get after it. I don't need the spotlight." And they understand how people work. They understand the dynamics of people, and that's huge. Anyhow, those guys set the precedent. Aaron Milam joined next as our first full-time engineer and fit in great. He was our first guy we didn't know, which is very scary when you hire somebody you don't know. He was wonderful. That was the thing that was hard for me as we scaled the team. Every time we'd go from five to eight, and eight to 13, and 13 to 26, I'd worry we were going to lose that special thing that made the company what I wanted to wake up for every day. The reality was we were very picky about who we hired. We fired quickly when it didn't work out. And that didn't mean the people weren't good people, it just meant they weren't the right fit for the team. I realized that we were getting stronger, and that was a really exciting thing, to know that, "We're at 25, but we're actually a stronger team than we were when we were eight." Doesn't mean that things

don't change. They do change, but you decide if they change for the better or the worse. I think a lot of people get scared of seeing a culture that is great change, because they're like, "Well, I like this." But we can't stay this way. We didn't sign up for that. We signed up for high growth, a lot of changes, dynamism that you've never seen before. We just need to make it better, and that is a choice.

Matt: When you talk about that early team, with Corey, and Mitch, and Conner, and you, I love that you point out that you guys were very different people and had diversity of thought. But to someone from the outside, they're like, "Oh, these guys were all in the Fellowship program together…"

Max: Four white males. Yeah, it doesn't look very great.

Matt: Right. Talk to me about diversity. Is that something you're thinking about now as you grow the team? I ask it obviously knowing that it is something we've talked about in the past. How are you thinking about diversity, and why is that a priority?

Max: To be clear, we offered Mitch's job to somebody else before we met Mitch. It was a woman, and she said "no." It wasn't that we weren't trying to hire women. It was just, we kept getting...I don't know. She said "no." But we kept trying to hire the best people for the right role, and it just turned out that the people who ended up accepting—that we were thrilled about—were, for better or worse, white males. As soon as we got our first woman on the team...it was exciting. It's always exciting to have a change like that, but it was also just so eye-opening around how much we were missing. Now, with our leadership team—having the presence of multiple women on our leadership team is huge. We've got directors and executives, and they comprise our leadership team. People just bring different perspectives, and we are wired differently. There's entire books about how differently we're wired, and it is a very important difference. I think what really happened in the early days was: I'm pretty high-estrogen. I don't think I'm a heavy testosterone—I'm not very athletic, that very, kind of, macho dude. I think that helped, you know, bring some of that perspective, but you gotta get the real thing. And we got the real thing, and it went swimmingly. It continues to go swimmingly, and the more we bring in people who have diverse backgrounds, the better it gets. The next thing we need to do is fill that...we have an independent seat on our board, and my job is to fill that seat with a woman who either comes with technical talent or a leadership and learning background. I meant learning and development background or technical background. I just think that's huge. We gotta do it.

Matt: Absolutely. Well, if we can help, of course, we're happy to help expand the search.

Max: Yeah. OpenView's doing a great job—I appreciate that—of just finding people out there who are just killing, and who are great people, and who can bring a new perspective to the team. We've got a lot of sales and marketing expertise on the board. We need to bring some dynamism to that.

Matt: And you mentioned OpenView, who led the last round of funding. Talk to me a little bit about picking investors, because that's part of the courting process as well, right? I imagine OpenView and your early seed investors had a huge amount of impact and have their fingerprints all over Lessonly.

Max: Oh my gosh, yeah. Some people...I think it's important. We had to talk to the team about...the team was like, "So, does this mean that they're our bosses now?" And it's like, "Well, no." It means that they have a voice, but it doesn't mean that they are THE voice, and it doesn't mean they want to run the company. Their entire goal is to not run this company. That is good for them, that the company is running itself, and they don't need to step in. But it's something that people don't know if they're not in the world of, like, "What does a VC do?" Well, they don't want to run the business. They want to help and be a value-add, but they don't want to be the value. That's not why they signed up for.

Matt: At least good investors.

Max: Yeah, the right ones. I mean, and these guys are best-in-class. They've done this many times.

Matt: Can you tell me about a time where maybe they helped you level up?

Max: Oh, sure.

Matt: Beyond the cash, obviously.

Max: Yeah. The cash helps a ton, but when it comes to helping us build out our leadership team...when they invested, we had 17 people. Well, that's not true. We started the year with 17 people, and when they invested in about March of last year, 2016, we had about 25. But we didn't have a very rich leadership team. We had a lot of contributors, and it was really like Conner, myself, Corey, Mitch, Aaron, and I'm sure I'm missing some folks in there. It wasn't...we didn't have a whole lot of experience on the leadership team. None of us had a whole lot of management experience. You're gonna love it when you bring people in who have seen the movie before. What they're going to be able to do is look at you and go, "This is normal," or "This is abnormal, because I've seen it before." And I need that, because when I see something that doesn't feel right, my first worry, when I kind of get into my psyche, is, "Uh oh, is this something we did? Is this a natural thing, or is this a mistake that was made because we made bad calls?". To have, like, Justin Fite join the team as our Chief Sales Officer, and look at me and go, "Normal." I'm like, "Heck yeah, normal!" It just feels better.

Matt: I know you've been there. I know you've done that.

Max: Yeah. And he can say, "And I've got a couple ideas for how we're going to get over this hurdle." Scott Dorsey has done a really good thing for me, of just making me look at every challenge as an opportunity instead of a threat. It sounds very trite, it sounds very, like, "Oh, yeah, that's a self-help book waiting to happen." And it's probably already been written. SuperBetter is actually pretty much all about that. But it's real. You get to frame the problem how you want to frame the problem. I read a quote that said, "The problem isn't your problem, it's your perception of the problem." Or, it's your attitude about the problem that's the problem. Challenges are going to come at you. Every time they come at Scott, he just does this. He smiles, and he tackles it. That's way better than looking at it as a threat, where you kind of want to recede back into your cage, or your cave, and just go to bed because you're like, "I don't want to deal with that." You waste a lot of time worrying in that mindset, and you then don't have that energy that you've already wasted on the worry to put into actually solving the problem. If you come at it from a challenge mindset, you're like, "I didn't waste my time worrying. I'm just going to get after it. The easiest way for this to go away is I work on it, and I don't hide from it." I know how simple, and maybe even lame, that sounds if you've not tried it. It took me a long time, and then all of a sudden, you just start to default into that mindset. And life gets a lot richer when that happens.

Matt: I have to compliment you, Max, because I've known you for a long time through your entrepreneurial journey—or journeys, counting the first venture that you pitched at Verge and grew to a certain point—but this journey that you've gone a lot further on, with Lessonly...I feel like I can tell that you worry a whole lot less. You seem like you're in flow a lot more than you were in the early days.

Max: That was hard for me. I'm a big worrier.

Matt: Talk to me about when you're shifting. Because on one end, you've got worry, on the other end, you've got, "I see challenges as opportunity." Talk to me about that middle part where you're recognizing that you're worrying and that it's not helpful...how would you snap yourself out of that?

Max: Yeah. I am trying to meditate because it helps a lot, but normally, it's really just about talking about the problem and writing the problem down for me. Just getting it documented, and realizing that it's not as threatening as it feels like it is.

Matt: When you say "talking about it," are you talking into a recorder by yourself?—

Max: I'm talking to people.

Matt: Talking to people. People on your team.

Max: Yeah. People on the team, and...I don't like to burden people on the team with my deep, dark worries, because they've got a lot on their shoulders already, and it doesn't seem fair to

them. But then sometimes I realize how much they appreciate it when...you know, it's me being vulnerable. I expect them to be vulnerable. I've gotta be vulnerable back at them. So, there's a certain balance of, like, "Hey, I believe in this place, but that doesn't mean I don't worry about it." And it's my job to worry about it, because when I worry about it, then I work on the problem. Eric Tobias, who is a cofounder of Lessonly, helped me reframe. I said, "Eric, I'm really worried about the team growing," when we were eight people. He said, "I'm glad you're worried about it, because you worrying about it means you're going to work on it. If you weren't worried about it, I'd be worried you wouldn't be working on it. But if you're going to work on it, you're probably going to figure it out. You can put enough will into it that you're going to get there." And I like that reframing of worry. So, my mind defaults to worry, but the more you practice around saying, "I recognize that I'm worrying right now, and I recognize that there's not a whole lot of value to it, and I recognize that if there is value to it, I'm only going to uncover it by just working"...that's how I absolve my worry. I work. And it helps. Now, I have to stop working sometimes, too, and I make music when I do that, and I spend time with my fiancée. Those are all really great balancing moments for me, but I just really stop worrying when I start working.

Matt: That's good, man. That's really good. I'm glad to see it, and I'm glad to hear it. It's really impressive what you've built. I have so much to learn from you, and I think you have a ton to teach. I was wondering—it's actually a perfect transition that you mentioned your music—I was wondering if you could teach me a song off the new album.

Max: Yeah, you bet. I will try. I've never played this song in full on a ukulele, but I'm happy to give it a go. And you've got a full guitar here.

Matt: I've never played this song in part.

Max: You've never even touched it, yeah.

Matt: So we'll be learning together.

Max: Yeah, you bet, man. I'll be happy to. Do you want to just pick up some guitars?

Matt: Let's do it.

Max: Alright.

[Musical interlude]

Matt: That was good, man.

Max: We did our best.

Matt: I messed up the song, but I tried to keep up with you, man.

Max: You got about two minutes of practice in there.

Matt: You're a good teacher.

Max: Oh, dude, thank you. That was fun.

Matt: What chords I did hit was because you're a good teacher.

Max: Yeah, I just yelled at you. There was no vocal warm-up there. Please give me, just, you know...

Matt: No, you're good, man. If people want to check out your music, where can they find it?

Max: MaxYoder.com. None of the new stuff is on there yet, but it will be in no time. There's a bunch of old stuff, but it's still stuff.

Matt: Awesome. We'll link it up in the show notes, as well as Lessonly.com.

Max: You nailed it.

Matt: Awesome, man. And on Twitters?

Max: Twitters @maxyoder. And it's @lessonly.

Matt: Awesome. Instagram, too.

Max: Maxyoder and lesson.ly, because we used to have lesson.ly as, like, our main thing. We can't get it on Instagram, so we kept—we can't get the Lessonly on Instagram—so, you know how it goes.

Matt: I like the .com.

Max: Yeah, I like the .com, too. It's definitely way easier to talk about. People used to be like, "It's .ly, .com?" No, just Lessonly.com now. It's way better.

Matt: I like it, man. Well, dude, thank you so much for coming in and sharing your story, sharing your music. We'll have to get back in here. I've got another page and a half of questions.

Max: I thoroughly enjoyed it. Thank you for having me.

Matt: Absolutely.

Max: Take care, brother.