



EPISODE 25

# Leading people-focused tech transformations: Insights from Justin Schwartz, commercial IT leader at Marathon Petroleum Corporation

**Host:** *Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP*

**Guests:** *Justin Schwartz, commercial IT leader at Marathon Petroleum Corporation*

**Alan Hart:** Today on the show, we've got Justin Schwartz. He's a commercial IT leader at Marathon Petroleum. And on the show today, we're going to talk about transformation, humans and how they change the ways of working that help you drive that transformation, and the all-important, all-encompassing conversation around AI and AI agents. That and much more with Justin Schwartz.

**Alan Hart (voice-over):** Are you ready to go beyond the basics of marketing? I'm Alan Hart and this is Marketing Beyond, where I chat with the world's leading chief marketing officers and business innovators to share ideas that spark change and inspire you to challenge the status quo. Join us as we explore the future of marketing and its endless potential.

**Alan:** Justin, welcome to the show.

**Justin:** Thank you. Appreciate it. Thanks for having me.

## Marketing Beyond | Episode 25

**Alan:** Yeah, well, let's get started. You're a dad. You have, I think, four kids under 12?

**Justin:** I do.

**Alan:** How do you manage that? I have one.

**Justin:** Well, I think you said the word "I," but it's really a "we" situation. Yeah, I've got a hero at home in my wife. She makes a lot of the things happen. My job is to not mess it up and be at the places at the times. And so it's a lot, but it's a fun experience.

**Alan:** Yeah. I mean with four... I mean, I always think about this, like, you have me and my wife—we have one, so we can tag team, right? Then you get two, and it's man-to-man defense. You get more than three? It's zone. Zone all the time!

**Justin:** Yeah. We are strictly zone. And yeah just a lot going on, but yeah, it's a great experience and it's a fun time.

**Alan:** That's awesome. Well, you are the commercial IT leader at Marathon. Where did you get your start in your career? How'd you end up at Marathon?

**Justin:** Yeah. I've had a ton of great opportunities. Coming out of school, I was actually with a consulting firm, and I feel like that really set the foundation for my path, where I found my interests and things like that, working for a lot of different industries at the time, and then ultimately fell in love with the oil and gas space and got hired into Marathon. And so, over the years, I've been working on transformation projects, M&A work, major technology deliveries, and that's propelled me to the spot that I'm in today.

**Alan:** OK. I mean, most people will have heard Marathon; you see the gas stations on the side of the road. But how do I think about Marathon in total? What is the business?

**Justin:** So we're integrated downstream oil and gas company. We have the largest refining footprint in the United States—over 3 million barrels of capacity on a daily basis. And so, a huge refining company. We have a midstream organization—that's going to be transport, logistics of all those molecules—and then a retail footprint that you mentioned. Marathon and Arco brands coast to coast in the United States. So it's a large organization and fuels a lot of the things that we do every day.

**Alan:** Yeah. Well, it's in your bio: Transformation is something that seems to be core to who you are and the type of work that you do. Talk to me about what that word "transformation" and what's the scope of the types of transformations you've been driving over the course of your career?

**Justin:** Sure. I think that is kind of the core of who I am. I think that transformation, for me, really narrows in on change. And whether that is taking an operation and how we do it today—how can digital uplift and change the way that we operate in order to unlock more value for the company? And so I've had experiences doing major—call it ERP transformations. We've done many different, call it modernizations, around decision support, analytics, and solutions like that within the commercial space. And now we're certainly on a period of transformation to understand how do we unlock more with this technology evolution that we're going through. And so, we're really focused on those things today.

**Alan:** Yeah. I mean, transformation—and you described a couple of different ones, like the big systems and then the analytics—I think of those as, I mean, they're all big, but there's the big clunky ones, and then there's the more nimble, agile ones. As you start the transformation process, how do you think about doing it the right way or the best way you can?

**Justin:** Yeah, actually, we talk a lot about this because I do think that there's a challenge out there where technologists really want to focus on the tech. They want to focus on what's new, what's the shiny object. How can we use this hammer and find that nail. But our viewpoint is you really have to work from what the business opportunity and the value pool really is, and work your way backwards to the technologies and solutions that are ultimately going to deploy it. So when we think about transformation, I really think about what is the business problem that we're actually trying to solve here or that opportunity, and then work your way backwards. And that's how we think about it. I think it also helps with your change adoption and the communication associated with those things. And those things really matter. When you're really trying to change the way you operate, you've got to have the whole team on board and understanding the purpose.

**Alan:** Yeah. I want to come back to the change in the culture, in the people part, in a second. But do you? I'm just curious. You've driven a lot. Do you have a favorite transformation?

**Justin:** You know, I think that some of the transformations that we're in right now, I mean, ultimately at Marathon, we're an integrated system. And so we're trying to unlock the most value we can across our value chain. And so I'd say the transformation that we're in right now about improving decision support—all the way from our planning teams to our traders to our schedulers. And the transformation we're going on right now is probably my favorite. It's such an exciting time, and this change and how we think about unlocking that value is only being supported by more and more technology that's coming out. So this is probably my favorite time that I've had in my career.

**Alan:** Yeah. I mean, as you just described those different users, even giving more appreciation for the types of transformation. I mean, you have everything from a retail footprint to trucks to people out in the field driving the extraction and the refinement process to traders sitting behind desks trading products. That's a lot.

**Justin:** It's a lot. It's a lot. And I think the fascinating thing is when you think about technology and how it can unlock more, it's really the connective tissue into how we operate. And so as we think about making better decisions, it's providing more high-quality data—speed and reducing latency and cycle time—so ultimately, those roles that you just mentioned can make the best decision every day. And so that's really what we're after and what we're focused on today.

**Alan:** All right. Come back to the people. Culture is a big thing. As you're driving these changes and transformations, how do you foster the right ways of working with people?

**Justin:** Yeah, I think that's a big topic. I think in our industry and in the world, as things evolve, the culture and the dichotomy of that's got to change with it in order to really unlock value. And we really focus on, first, involvement. Ensuring that whether it's an analyst, an individual contributor, all the way up to senior leadership, is educated. We believe in really radical transparency and involvement of these teams. And

## Marketing Beyond | Episode 25

then, I think, really pushing leaders to talk to their teams about being curious, asking the hard questions, and if something doesn't make sense raise your hand—and trying to support that at every level of the organization and make it inclusive as we go along.

**Alan:** Love it. Well, maybe, if you can, share an example of something you've recently done together with the business.

**Justin:** Yeah. So just a recent example, we're actually out here at Dreamforce today and we've talked with a lot of different partners and things like that and partnered with a third-party firm. And we've deployed some agents that we're testing, and that's a transformation in itself. And ultimately one of these solutions is trying to uplift and augment our field personnel. How do we give them better insights, reduce their friction in operation and administrative activity, and have some agents help us along the way. And so we've recently deployed a few and are actively testing and maturing that capability, but the fun thing about it is you're really learning through the process and that iterative cycle, where the business is alongside you, you're working on these solutions together, and then improving them as you go. So it's a really, really unique situation.

**Alan:** You almost can't step 10 steps here without hearing AI and agents. How are you approaching agents in general, as a technology component?

**Justin:** Yeah. I think you mentioned, we can't get to the finish line immediately. So it's certainly a journey, and we're absolutely on that journey. I think a lot of it is discovery. We're testing a lot of things. We have a lot of different solutions that are currently being developed and currently being piloted and things like that. And along with that, a lot of learning comes. It's not a typical IT app development situation. There are nuances to that. There are changes in the way we operate relative to that, roles and responsibilities and things like that. So, we're really trying to move fast but with purpose, and understanding how is this change also going to impact us, and then also how is it going to impact our business users? And at the end of the day, we need to manage that change along this journey. So we're moving fast, but we're also discovering a lot along the way.

**Alan:** Yeah, I mean, as I've heard people describe, this move into agents—and AI in general, but we'll stick to agents—you've got the data piece is critical—because what is the agent going to work on? You've got then the agent technology itself. But I think the thing you underscore in that last comment was around how people are going to use it, how are they going to engage with it, and how does that change work and what work is going forward.

**Justin:** Absolutely. And I think that's a question the industries across the world are asking themselves right now. And I think our perspective is that we want to put the human at the center of this. We want to ensure that the solutions—and it's not the shiny object, blunt force on any problem or situation—we want to make sure that it's really unlocking value and augmenting that human experience. And I do think it's going to change the way we operate. I think it's going to improve not only the experience of the business users; I also think it's going to just generally improve the employee experience. I think if you think about the consumer world outside of work, you have a much different experience typically than when you come in to work. And maybe you're working on legacy platforms or you're working on these huge monolithic applications and disconnectedness and things like that. I think this technology has the opportunity to

## Marketing Beyond | Episode 25

really not only uplift the value proposition, but also the experience of work itself for employees. And I think that's something we really want to focus on as we go through this is telling that story, too—whether you're a developer or you're an engineer or you're a trader sitting on the trade floor. How is this also making your employee experience better?

**Alan:** One of the things we like to do is get to know you better. We know you've got four kids, a great spouse. But the question I love asking everyone that comes on the show is, is there an experience of your past that defines and makes up who you are today?

**Justin:** That's a great question. There's probably a lot of them. You know, I think that, if I think about my workplace experience, there's been a lot of projects and efforts and these things that I think ultimately shape the leadership style that you have. But a lot of times, I don't think a lot about the successes. I focus in on the times of challenge. We all have at points in our career, and I think in those moments, what I think defines me and hopefully defines future leaders and teams that I support is when you've faced those challenges, whether it's a specific implementation challenge. We've got all kinds of problems that are going on. Are you resilient? Can you push through that? Can you rise to the opportunity and band together as a team? And I've got some moments like that for me in the past, and I think those have really built who I am in that leadership style I try to present.

**Alan:** Yeah, that's great. I think a famous golfer recently was talking about the process. You've got to love the process because the wins, they come. But it's not a high percentage of the time you're winning. And the other analogy I use, too, is without friction and force, you can't build muscle. So you can't get stronger.

**Justin:** That's right. So if you're uncomfortable, you're learning. And when you're in the face of adversity, in those times of challenge, you won't be comfortable. And that's also, to your point, a process. You're building capability in order for future leadership opportunities.

**Alan:** Awesome. What advice would you give your younger self if you were starting this all over again?

**Justin:** A lot, a lot—change careers! No, I'm just kidding. I think what I would say, and you know, I also think about—we talked about kids and things like that—I think about their professional careers at some point. I think one of the first things I would say is really listen. I think that especially for folks that are early in their careers and things, high ambition, moving fast type of thing—those things will come. I think you really want to focus on listening, understanding—and really, patience within that. And I think that if you allow yourself that grace and having that perspective, it really builds up your acumen and all the characteristics later in your career that you can leverage.

**Alan:** Love it. What are you trying to learn more about right now, or you think other people should be learning more about?

**Justin:** Oh, man. I think on a personal side, I think I'm into a little bit deeper reading than I've had probably earlier in my career. So, reading a few more books. I'm trying to pick the pace up on that. I think everything around technology and leadership. I know we can't get away from the word "AI," but listening and absorbing, experimenting. And I think I've got a lot of energy in that right now. And I think a lot of

## Marketing Beyond | Episode 25

people do, because the deeper you understand, the better you can help lead through transformation. So I'm pretty deep in that right now.

**Alan:** Awesome. Are there any trends or subcultures that you're following or geeking out on these days?

**Justin:** Yeah. I don't know about subcultures! [laughs] Yeah, I'm probably not quite in tune to that as much, but no. There was a little bit of this in the keynotes and stuff at the convention this week—I think this whole, idea of digital transformation and understanding really, again, the human and change element around this and thinking about how people and how their work experiences... How do we message that? How do we help bridge the gap with this change and obviously the organizations that we're supporting? And so there's a lot of energy in that. There's a lot of conversations going on about how you talk about it and how you prepare folks and the organizations that you support. And so I would say that's probably one of the biggest things that I'm following right now.

**Alan:** OK. Well, last question for you. What do you think is either the biggest threat or opportunity to these transformation and business change efforts?

**Justin:** You know, I think that speed is one of the biggest elements of change—or sorry, impediments—to some of these big efforts. I think part of that, again, goes back to, look, it's called technology evolution. It's changing at a pace that we've never seen. It's probably only going to be as slow today—the slowest it's probably ever going to be in history now. Tomorrow it's going to be faster. And so, how do you recognize that? How can you absorb it? How can you take advantage of it and then get these efforts right really to maximize value? And I think that speed of evolution is one of the biggest issues that we have right now. And being able to absorb and really take advantage. That cycle time is just getting tighter and tighter.

**Alan:** Well, Justin, thanks for coming on the show.

**Justin:** Awesome. Well, thank you for having me. It was great.

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