

# The COO Roundtable with Matt Sonnen

## Episode 81 – Randy Lambert & Jason Mirabella

[00:00:00] Hi, I'm Luke Sonnen. Welcome to The COO Roundtable, powered by Coldstream Wealth Management. Here's your host, Matt Sonnen.

[00:00:14] **Matt Sonnen:** Welcome everyone to Episode 81. I've known both of today's guests for quite some time. Jason Mirabella is a repeat guest on The COO Roundtable. He appeared on Episode 37 almost four years ago.

[00:00:27] At the time, he was the Chief Platform Officer at Wealth Source Partners, and since then, he has gone into the operations consulting world. I should say he's gone back into the operations consulting world. Jason has partnered with our other guests to offer an operational framework which is designed to address the operational and growth challenges that are unique to RIAs and the FinTech companies that serve them.

[00:00:52] So Jason, welcome to the podcast.

[00:00:54] **Jason Mirabella:** Yeah, thanks for having me. I'm excited to be part of the two timers club. That's quite an honor.

[00:00:59] **Matt Sonnen:** Awesome. And joining Jason is Randy Lambert, the former COO of Orion. Many of our guests know Randy from his Orion days. After 30 years at Orion, Randy has teamed up with Intention.ly, which is best known as a marketing firm, but with the addition of Randy as their head of RIA Solutions, Randy and Jason are building out an operations arm at Intention.ly. Randy's LinkedIn profile says, "I understand scaling support models, reducing operational friction, developing strategic relationships, and building high performing teams." So we're going to have a great conversation today on all of those topics.

[00:01:37] Randy, welcome to The COO Roundtable.

[00:01:40] **Randy Lambert:** Thank you very much, Matt, for having me here. Just like Jason, very excited.

[00:01:45] **Matt Sonnen:** Awesome. Well, Randy, I'll let you go first. I talked about it just a bit, but in your own words, tell us about Intention.ly and the operation service offering that you guys are building.

[00:01:56] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah, that's great. So, as you said, we're part marketing agency. Kelly Waltrich was the CMO at Orion, and that's where we started working together about eight years ago. And she left Orion about four years after that. And so she started her own company, as a marketing agency. So, I joined her a year ago and I'll kind of get to that,

but so: part marketing agency, part growth consultancy, part strategic operations. So Intention.ly: what we're trying to do is be where a growth engine meets growth infrastructure. And so we design, implement, operate growth engines across the entire financial ecosystem, blending marketing, sales, operations, and technology to drive sustainable results.

[00:02:42] So Jason and I really worked together over the last year to build a comprehensive strategic operations service offering that addresses the strategic and execution gaps faced by RIAs and FinTechs. So that's where we came together and what we're - what we've been doing for the last eight months.

[00:03:01] **Matt Sonnen:** Great. It's really exciting. Jason, walk us through your career path that led you to teaming up with Randy at Intention.ly.

[00:03:08] **Jason Mirabella:** Yeah, so, I've spent the last 25 years working across just about, I guess, every corner of the wealth management world, whether that be investments, financial planning, operations, leadership, and even as an advisor, and regardless of my position, I've always wanted to understand the big picture. You know, how the business really works, what drives performance, and how each domain is connected across the firm. And that led me to create what I call the "Deliver Advice" framework, which we now bring to life through Intention.ly, and use it as a foundation for the delivery of our consulting services.

[00:03:50] And very simply, it helps enterprise level RIAs, and those that aspire to be at the enterprise level, bring sort of order to chaos. And that comes with high growth and change. And I like to think that my focus is where it really matters most, which is operational design, speed, connectivity, and building firms that move fast - you know, scale intelligently and stay resilient.

[00:04:19] And, you know, looking forward to the future and seeing what we - how we can help firms do just that.

[00:04:24] **Matt Sonnen:** Bringing order to chaos. That is great. That is well needed. Randy, I said, most of your listeners know you from your long tenure at Orion. Your bio says, "30 years experience building and growing an RIA and wealth tech platform from startup to maturity."

[00:04:42] So tell us about that amazing experience that you had there.

[00:04:45] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah, we started as a TAMP RIA with 85 million of AUM, so not very big. And we grew that - it's just crossed a hundred billion recently. While I was there, it got to 75 billion, so I was part of the operations, an organization of that, you know, from 85 million up to the 75 billion.

[00:05:05] And then at the same time, we spun out a new - a startup, a technology company that grew from serving one advisor, a RIA, which was a TAMP RIA that we came from to serving over 2,500 firms with about 5 trillion of AUA: assets under administration, 6 million accounts. And so, you know, I've had the opportunity to work across a lot of different disciplines: technology, operations, client success for both a FinTech and an RIA. So I think that gives me a little different angle on some of the problems that we see. But yeah, that journey exposed me to the complexity of scaling and, you know - from taking a platform, you know, idea to commercialization, and then the operational execution to do that.

[00:05:55] So my firm - my true passion for firms is just really helping them remove friction and improve their outcomes. I just love to see people be successful. It's no fun being frustrated. And so find those pain points and help them work through those and get to the other side. That's what I like to do.

[00:06:14] **Matt Sonnen:** You mentioned the all important S-word - the "scale" word, and Mark Tibergien is so good at reminding everyone that the definition of scale isn't simply to get bigger. To truly scale an organization means that your revenues are growing faster than your expenses, and so many RIAs get this wrong. They just keep adding bodies and taking on more clients and not thinking about the expense side of things. So the revenue has to be growing faster than the expenses. So give us your thoughts on scale and how firms can best achieve that.

[00:06:45] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah. I'm going to - end in mind, you know, for all the cliché out there, but - so, really the first thing that an operator should be thinking about is keeping score. And you're like, what does that mean? And it's really a four dimensional aspect of keeping score. You can go with a balanced scorecard, but there are financial metrics, there are scale metrics like revenue per employee, how many activities you're completing. There's also a client experience, and then there's a risk and compliance aspect to that.

[00:07:19] So if you're going to scale. you have to keep score in all four of those dimensions and make sure that you're not giving the customer a poor experience based on your financial needs or whatever. So that's - it just - it takes a little bit of thought, but I think you have to think through what you want in those four dimensions, and then you have to score them.

[00:07:39] And then you don't have to do it perfectly. You can, over time, you can iterate and make changes to those. But with the end in mind there, then you have to build a culture of scale. It's - it just needs to be a part of your DNA. And I actually, I'm going to speak more to that later as we get through this, but two of the things that Orion did, just as a mantra as we were growing was: reject the status quo and disrupt yourself.

[00:08:04] Meaning just don't accept where you are today. See how you can get better, you know? Don't keep doing the same things over and over, you know, the - those are the definition of insanity. So you've got to be willing to disrupt yourself and make some changes. And so, like I said, we'll get into that, but, you know, Jason and I are seeing firms struggle with the idea that being busy - they equate that to scale.

[00:08:29] Yeah. And so I just think, you know, from our standpoint, we want to help people build efficient, repeatable processes that leverage their technology fully and help them with data designed information or decisions that they have. So, focus on things like capacity planning, standard operating procedure optimization, strategic technology enablement.

[00:08:51] So all those things that kind of plug into how you can leverage scale: that's what we really focus on. But that's, you know - I didn't do a great job being really concise, so I'll just go back to the beginning. Keep score. That's like number one. You don't know unless you're keeping score.

[00:09:11] **Matt Sonnen:** And so you had said there were four things to keep score of. And I jotted down a couple of them, but I missed all four of them. What are the four things to keep score of?

[00:09:17] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah, so there's a financial dimension.

[00:09:20] **Matt Sonnen:** Yep.

[00:09:20] **Randy Lambert:** There's a level of effort which can be defined in the number of accounts you, you know - it just depends on kind of your business model, but whatever you're tracking, but there's - how much effort are you putting into that?

[00:09:32] There's a client experience component, like, is the client doing better or worse? You know, month to month, quarter to quarter, and then there's risk and compliance that you have to score. Are the decisions that you're making, putting your company at risk for, you know, compliance reasons or whatever? So those are just the four dimensions.

[00:09:49] Making sure that those are all balanced and operating in the way that you - that help you be successful and help your investors or your clients be successful.

[00:09:57] **Matt Sonnen:** I like the framework. Yeah, that works. Well, Jason, you and I have talked about the fact that the traditional advisor-centric triangle or diamond teams - they aren't necessarily optimized for scale and organic growth, so talk to us about that.

[00:10:14] **Jason Mirabella:** Right. So I think most traditional team models in our industry were optimized for what I would call advisor-centric practices, not enterprises particularly, and larger firms. They assume the advisor is kind of the sun around which everything orbits, right? And while it works in smaller environments and lifestyle firms, what I've seen is it creates some real challenges for firms that are trying to scale meaningfully and grow fast. In larger environments, those structures can, you know, have benefits in smaller structures, but create drag and cultural conflict and inefficiencies and business risk in the enterprise environment, and it tends to pull advisors and team members away from their highest value work, which is something that I'm very focused on as an operator, to put people in the right seats.

[00:11:04] To scale effectively, I think firms need to evolve towards a system-dependent model and one that supports growth and consistency and accountability, while obviously still preserving the human element of what makes advisor relationships so valuable. I'm going to use the kind of the traditional service advisor role as a - that's common in our industry as an example.

[00:11:29] It's a great structure, you know, for smaller firms, but at scale, it tends to evolve into what I see as a bottleneck when you're assigning advisors' responsibility related to operations and kind of tactical aspects of service delivery where their attention should belong elsewhere in the system.

[00:11:48] And kind of as a core premise, I believe that advisors are most effective when they're doing basically four things. Number one is finding new clients. Number two is building relationships. Number three is delivering advice, and number four is holding clients accountable to driving outcomes. And I think firms should design teams and their platform exclusively around this reality.

[00:12:12] I think it's one of the reasons why we struggle with organic growth, because we're not creating the space for advisors to really thrive in these aspects of service delivery that I

mentioned. The goal should be instead to sort of redesign service teams around specialization, putting people in the right seats, aligning work with strengths, leveraging centralized services to increase operational leverage, managing the business risks that you know, through team-based service delivery, and then probably the most important thing is improving collaboration across stakeholders. And I think when firms make that shift, it actually does not diminish the advisor role. And I think this is - this can be very counterintuitive for a lot of advisors and owners. It actually elevates it by creating that space to really allow them to thrive within their core competencies. Because they create the space to focus on relationships and growth, while the firm itself creates scalability, consistency, and resilience. So I think it's a dynamic that benefits everyone in the long term.

[00:13:19] **Matt Sonnen:** Well, another concept, Jason, you and I have talked about is the concept of speed - not necessarily size - is what's becoming the defining advantage for RIAs.

[00:13:29] Again, everyone's so focused on size, and they're not thinking about scale, they're not thinking about speed. So walk us through this concept of speed versus size.

[00:13:38] **Jason Mirabella:** Yeah. This has been a huge focus and I've thought a lot about this as we've worked with firms and just a basic understanding of like the business environment that we're operating within.

[00:13:48] I think, you know, we are entering an era where operational speed is not optional. It's actually essential, you know, consumer expectations, technology, AI are evolving faster, I think, than most firms can adapt to and that pace is only going to accelerate. So I think the firms that win in the future won't necessarily be the biggest.

[00:14:11] They'll be the ones that can deploy change quickly, can integrate new capabilities seamlessly, and then continue to redefine their value proposition as the industry and the business environment evolves. And I'm a big believer that speed comes from clarity and connectivity and you know, we're really focused on creating internal systems through our framework and how we work with clients to create that clarity on what matters most.

[00:14:38] You know, connecting systems that allow teams to move without friction and confusion and really turn strategy into momentum. So, I think the risk here is, you know, we've already seen it - we've seen it a lot in the industry, particularly with, you know, the M&A environment - is that firms that grow simply through acquisition or reaction without this intentional design component, you know, are at risk for creating kind of these Frankenfirm structures where size actually becomes a weakness, not a strength.

[00:15:08] And they may look impressive on paper and they may be even attractive in a PE in - to PE in the current environment, but under the hood can be slow and fragmented and struggle to adapt and maintain a truly, what I would call a value-added platform for advisor teams.

[00:15:24] I think that, you know, to kind of put a bow on this, I think the top firms of the future will have operational speed engineered into their DNA and it'll show up on how they plan, how they make decisions, how they connect leadership and team, and how they execute change. And the best ones will operate as connected enterprise and not this like siloed, connected, independent team structure that we've seen in the past.

[00:15:48] I think this is a natural part of the industry's evolution into this next era of taking what the industry has built, and operationalizing and creating scale across the industry as we continue to consolidate and level up our value proposition.

[00:16:03] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah. Well, Randy, what's your take? What do firms do to ensure that they're quick and nimble and not bloated and slow, I'll say, as they grow into enterprises.

[00:16:15] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah. I mean, I'm kind of piling on to Jason's comments. I believe it takes a framework and to me - and the framework needs to accomplish two things. The, you know, you've read in books, the Hedgehog and the Fox, you know, staying head down, but also being cunning. You have to be able to do two things at once.

[00:16:38] So I think as a leadership team, you need to stay laser focused on your top initiatives: three to four initiatives that will move the business forward right now while creating space to continuously evaluate, you know, and adjust based on data. And so that's really easy for me to say. It's not easy to do, but you have to build a framework that allows you to do that.

[00:17:02] And that's - I mentioned that EOS framework, that's what we kind of base our approach with our customers. That requires discipline and saying no to things that come up. You know, you have the visionary and the integrator and so you have to have an integrator that's empowered and not just constantly being moved and shaped by the visionary to constantly change - oh, this is the next thing, this is the next thing.

[00:17:27] So, I just think those two things need to be in place. Like you do need to look at yourself. You do need to evaluate and use data to make decisions. But you also have to stay very focused. And so both things have to happen in order for you to move fast.

[00:17:45] **Matt Sonnen:** I think it's such a good point. I mean, you mentioned - you know this, but it's hard to actually do it. Yeah. And you know, I'm super guilty of this. You know, you say, well, these are the four priorities, you know, December, these are the four priorities for next year. By February, you're up to, these are the 12 priorities for this year. Yeah. And by May, you're at 21 priorities because you haven't even gotten rid of one, two, and three yet because you're spread so thin. So it's - I love that you brought that up. It's so important.

[00:18:13] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah, I would say, you know, just a quick comment on that. Yeah. That at Orion, you know, I would say Eric Clarke did a really good job, and our executive team did a really good job. Yeah, probably like 2015, 2016 of really doing that. We were going too many different directions and, like, if you look at the - really, the growth hockey stick for Orion was the 2015 to 2020/2021 period of time.

[00:18:39] And that was - Orion was fully, you know, baked in with the EOS process and focused on Rocks.

[00:18:47] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah. Well, one mistake we've seen many firms make when they're attempting to scale is they confuse the role of a Director of Operations versus the role of a true COO. And I've described the difference between these two roles this way.

[00:19:02] So I've said on this podcast before, I've written about it, a Director of Operations in my mind is a task-oriented position. They're a person that is going to take the tasks off of



the CEO's plate and knock them out in a timely and efficient manner, and this is extremely valuable for an overwhelmed CEO; it's exactly what they need.

[00:19:23] But the role of the COO is different. It's more of a strategic thinker that plans the path forward for the organization. They probably have a bunch of direct reports that the direct reports are the ones that are knocking out those tasks on a day-to-day basis. And the mistake is that many firms hire a task-oriented person and they ask them to be a strategic thinker.

[00:19:43] Or, they hire a strategic thinker and they ask them to be happy in a really task-oriented role. And that always goes - it always goes poorly. It causes confusion, frustration, not only for the individuals, but just across the entire organization. So, Jason, I'll go to you on this. How do you differentiate the two roles and what advice do you have for firms so that they can hire the right role for their organization?

[00:20:09] **Jason Mirabella:** I mean, I echo - I mean, obviously, you know, we've talked about this and we sort of have a very similar way of looking at this, you know, a Director of Operations, fundamentally as an administrator. And I would add to what you said is, you know, the positioning of this role is not conducive to, you know, strategic change within the organization.

[00:20:30] They tend to - just the way it's positioned - drive very low authority within the firm that's required to affect change operationally and to connect that vision. COO on the other hand, you know, positioned as a strategic operator, number two, with the CEO; I think they're - they need to be the person that connects leadership vision with team execution and client experience.

[00:20:54] You know, they're keeping the train running, they're designing the tracks, they decide where, you know, the firm is going and they build systems to allow the whole organization to move faster and more effectively. That is very true, and I think a lot of firms that are smaller - call it under, you know, \$500, \$750 million dollars - the operational complexity in those environments, they can get away with having sort of this person that serves both functions.

[00:21:24] But as you scale past that level, the complexity of operation requires intention, and the two roles are very specific, not only from a skillset standpoint, but from a mindset standpoint. And the COO in the enterprise environment needs the authority to connect other leadership. And the Director of Operational role by its nature does not have that authority.

[00:21:52] So I mean, my advice overall would be firms looking to scale - you know, really be intentional in finding that integrator, you know, COO, that's multi-discipline that understands all of the aspects of the business because that's going to be what's required to move the business forward.

[00:22:09] And you know, back to the idea of operational speed, the COO should be the leader of those systems. And if they're stuck in the day-to-day and they're - they have an executor's mindset and a task-oriented mindset, that is not going to happen. So yeah, specifically, it's just know the difference between the two. And map this hire to your firm's aspirations, because if you're looking to stay status quo, I - you know, you can get away with hiring a Director of Operations, but if you're looking to scale platform, create a value-added platform for advisor teams, it's differentiated. If you want to connect vision and keep up with

the state of the art, you're going to need an integrator COO to do that. And that's going to be more and more the case as the industry gets bigger and bigger through consolidation and, you know, continued PE investment and all the things, so.

[00:23:01] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah. And Randy, I know you've seen this mistake at not only RIAs, but a lot of FinTech firms as well.

[00:23:07] So, in your mind, how do firms approach the hiring process to ensure that they're getting the right person in the right seat?

[00:23:15] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah, I have three sons and so everything I say is always - I have three points on, so I don't know what happened there, but it's just, but I'm going to give some context on each point, but, it'll go fast.

[00:23:26] So understand your hiring spec and what are you really looking for? I - so many times I've seen people go, oh, just go write your job description and then hire to that. Well, make sure you're hiring that job description is very specific to what you need. Like go meet about it. Think about it. Be thoughtful about that hiring spec so you understand what you need. And you might go like, well, I need a Chief Operations Officer that's strategic, or I need a Director of Operations that's tactical. Well, actually write it out and say what you do need. And so I just, I think that's a key step that often gets overlooked.

[00:24:08] Listen to yourself and your people. So, like, as you're working with your people and working through situations and problems, just like very much listen to what you want. Because, like, people will say sometimes, I really need a strategic person and, ah, I just can't get our - we have too many trade errors. Well, you probably really don't need a strategic operations person. You need some - you need to tactically fix your trading, you know? Right. So, those are things are just, like, there's kind of the pie in the sky of what you want versus what you need. And then, don't talk yourself into shortcuts. And so, I was talking to a CEO earlier this year and kept telling me: he's like, this is why I need a strategic thinker. And they're thinking about hiring our services. And I went through it with him multiple times, had multiple meetings with him, and he really, you know - based on what he was saying - he really did need a strategic partner. He felt like he didn't have that at his firm. He felt like he was kind of the only strategic thinker in the company and he wanted somebody else to partner with him.

[00:25:12] And so then at the end of the decision, he talked himself into hiring an Operations Director and, you know, just feedback I've received from just knowing this firm, it hasn't gone exceptionally well for them. And so I just think at the - so there's kind of those three things, like: understand the hiring spec, listen to yourself and your people, and then don't take a shortcut just because there's somebody available or something that you think, well, maybe this will work. Can't take shortcuts. You've got to really, again, stay disciplined to what you want and what you need based on the facts, and then go do it.

[00:25:51] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah. Well, Jason mentioned it earlier when another key role for the COO is that of change agent and change is so hard for all organizations. There's a technical component to change, and then there's a really big human component to change, and you have to get both right in order for the change to be successful.

[00:26:14] So, Randy, what does a COO need to keep in mind as they attempt to affect change at their firm?



[00:26:20] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah, I - this kind of goes back to that, you know, your scale question you had earlier and where I said, needs to be part of your culture.

[00:26:28] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah.

[00:26:28] **Randy Lambert:** And furthermore, I wrote down on this one: just make it part of your DNA.

[00:26:32] So I would talk to every employee when they started at Orion on the operations side of the business. That's, you know, 1400 employees; about 800 of those were service and operations. And, you know, part of that was used to get to know them and understand and, you know, start a relationship with them. But at the end of that, I would give them like my three keys to success.

[00:26:54] Like, these are the three things: if you can do these things at Orion, you're going to be successful in your role. And the first one is not - does not have to do with being a change agent, but the other two do. So the first one was: always be recruiting. And I can go into that later if you want me to.

[00:27:07] But the second one, I have this actual words, is: be a change agent. So what that meant to me and what I would explain to them in a very concise way, is you have to provide feedback on decisions. So whether you're a grunt or whatever, you always have to be providing proactive feedback to your team, to your leader, and have that type of trust. Once a decision is made, sometimes that's out of your control and you have to get behind it, so individually, you have to get behind the decisions that are made. There could be three right answers to a problem. So you could do A, B, or C. You want to do C, your boss decides to do A. Well, you have the ability to make A work, B work, and C work. So you need to get behind the decision A and make it work.

[00:27:59] And then what's really next level for a change agent is they get their teammates to get behind it. And so, you know, I've had some really bad experiences with teammates that did the opposite of that, and so that gets into my always be recruiting. But, so, if you can get your team to get behind Decision A and make it, that's going to make it that much easier to make it successful because your boss is aligned, you're aligned with your boss, and your team's aligned to moving that forward.

[00:28:26] And so then you go back in that little circle of being a change agent and you provide feedback. Always got to iterate. And so that was one of the big ones: be a change agent. That's how I defined it for our team and how we worked together or tried to work together.

[00:28:42] And then the third thing that was a success factor was: have a growth mindset. And so, versus a fixed mindset: so there's growth mindset and fixed mindset. The growth mindset says, I'm going to be better tomorrow than I was today, and a year from now I'm actually going to be even, you know, maybe I'll be 10% better, or whatever it is. But I set the expectation for every employee that, like, we're not here to just do what you're learning to do month one. Like, there's month two, There's month three. You're going to progress, you're going to grow. We had a coaching program that we met every 90 days to reset personal growth goals and all those things. But you have to have a growth mindset. And so those last two values really helped create a culture that wasn't a passive: oh, the only thing you can expect is change and you've got to adapt to it. You know, that's kind of a very passive, non-

inspiring way to deal with change. Really what you need to be able to do is have that change agent mindset where you're providing feedback, decisions are made, you get behind it, you get other people behind it, you provide feedback, and you iterate. And so those are kind of my three big success factors.

[00:29:53] I have one other thing I just thought on being a change agent: it requires, especially for a Chief Operations Officer, to be able to communicate across the organization. That means up, across, down: you have to be willing to adjust your communication style, and you have to be willing to be repetitive.

[00:30:10] And so, communication is just such a critical part of being a change agent. You can't just say, oh, we're going to do this, and you know, six months later, why didn't this happen? I told you guys six months ago to do this. Don't you love it when a leader says that? So it's like, you have to stay on it, stay on it, stay on it.

[00:30:29] You have to adjust up like, you know, speaking to a board or a CEO is different than speaking to your peers, which is different than speaking to people that are directly reporting to you. So those are kind of the three or the two different things - kind of the cultural thing and the communication aspect of being a change agent.

[00:30:47] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah. So, Jason, in your mind, how can a COO set themselves and the firm up for success when they're trying to implement change?

[00:30:55] **Jason Mirabella:** Yeah, I mean this is an area that in my - as particularly in the last, you know, seven or so years as I've become more in - put more into operational leadership positions within the firm is, you know, really understanding that there's a human and technical component here.

[00:31:09] I - early in my career, I really leaned into, okay, create a good system. Create tools, a great process, and people, you know, it'll just kind of sell itself. That is not true. And you know, I think a successful COO understands both sides and their job is really to create a structure and rhythm around change within the organization.

[00:31:31] I think that starts with clarity of purpose, you know, and defined outcomes as, you know, as foundational. I think teams need to understand not just what's changing, but why, how it affects them, and what success looks like. And I think from there, you build, you know, like Randy said, good positive feedback loops. You create systems for that feedback to by nature be sent up to leadership and other team members. You create visibility around progress markers. You know, you can even, you know, I've used in the past kind of gamified change within an organization to really highlight people that do great work. You know, so that teams can see momentum building and know that their input matters and you know, when change stalls - I think change stalls when it either feels invisible or it feels endless, right?

[00:32:25] So, like, you get into these environments where it's just either: it's like constant change - everybody has to, sort of, like - there is a finite amount that you can go to the well and ask your team to change. And I think a great operator understands the cadence at which you are deploying change within an organization and how resources from their day to day are being pulled into, you know, the evolution of the firm. And, you know, the top 1% operators, I think, understand that balance so they don't fatigue their employees.

[00:33:00] So, you know, you have to design - you know, I think the baseline is you need to design systems that make change easier than staying the same. Like that is fundamentally what effects extraordinary change in organizations. If the thing that you're doing creates friction to the current state for no reason or is not easier or more leveraged than what you were doing before, you are going to get pushback from the teams and people will opt out of that, particularly at the advisor team level. Like, things that don't obviously change the experience of the advisor team or the stakeholders on platform will not be implemented - will not be - you won't have advocacy across your business. So I'm, you know, being very mindful of: are we just changing for changing's sake? What is - like, why are we doing this?

[00:33:54] And, you know, so we can drive real operational transformation. You know, and I think, you know, the CEOs that get this right: it's an art that really makes change feel, first and foremost, safe, for all stakeholders. Because that is something that I don't think a lot of people think about is: everybody has their own unique perspective. And a lot of people have their own incentives with regard to what's driving them, whether that be not getting fired or career tracking or you know - whatever. I think a good operator needs to have empathy for making everybody feel like this isn't - you know, they need to feel safe in the environment and that the thing that they're implementing is repeatable, makes their job easier, and ultimately inevitable for the next phase of the organization and its evolution.

[00:34:46] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah, I've tried to - you know, Randy was talking about the growth mindset and you're talking kind of about just the culture of it and thinking of staying the same is more painful than the change we have to go through. I've tried to just say, hey, let's not call it change; let's call it improvement.

[00:35:02] Change feels very flip floppy. God, we just - we created a workflow a year ago. Now you're changing it. Well, no, we created a workflow a year ago. A hundred people have used it, and we're going to iterate on it. We're going to make it better, we're going to improve on it. So we're not - you know, I think people get worried about the word change. And I try to just say, well, you wouldn't think that we're not going to continue to improve the firm over time. So I've tried to use that word as opposed to the word change to address this culture issue that both of you are talking about. Yep.

[00:35:33] So that's culture. Let's talk tech now: as AI takes over the world, many are predicting that the CRM itself is going to completely go away. You'll have an AI agent sitting on top of a data lake, and you won't need a traditional CRM anymore. So, Jason, I know you're very passionate about this idea. Give us your thoughts on this.

[00:35:54] **Jason Mirabella:** This is a really exciting space for me because I think it represents the next evolution operationally for our industry. And it also presents for the firms that really focus on this a way to differentiate themselves moving forward and create great work and client experiences. You know, this isn't just about the clients or the advisors or leadership. I think these technologies like a Mile Marker, a Jiffy AI, and other similar tools - I think these - I feel like these platforms are going to facilitate a move beyond what I would call traditional CRM-centric model sooner rather than later, especially for larger firms that operate in high levels of operational complexity. You know, the CRM has traditionally been and continues to be, for the most part, kind of the heart of the firm, service delivery, and kind of the hub at which everything is connected.

[00:36:45] But these new platforms are enabling firms to build data lakes and an orchestration layer that unifies planning and portfolio management and billing and

compliance and client experience into one connected environment. And we think there's an opportunity to sort of build on these three - like we view it as like three connected hubs.

[00:37:09] Number one is business intelligence, right? Giving leadership, real-time visibility into the financial and the health of the business, and giving them decision making clarity, and bringing data together to facilitate that.

[00:37:23] The second layer is what we call the advisor or team workstation, which is where work happens. So fully integrated, automated across systems and technology, and getting away from this siloed technology approach where we're relying on questionable native APIs, I would say, or unstable APIs to facilitate that connectivity and to really create a bespoke work experience for the firm and to deploy collateral and tools and templates to advisor teams to create leverage in their day-to-day work.

[00:37:58] And then finally is the client experience layer. Which is very exciting because now we can bring together all those tools and create a custom experience for the client. And I think this solves something that the industry has been struggling in - struggling for a long time, which is true operational connectivity.

[00:38:17] It solves almost - I would say one of the hard problems of managing operational complexity. And you know, instead of juggling dozens of disconnected tools - you know, low value and these unstable integrations - you know, you can - you really, truly can build a hub or an ecosystem where at a minimum, I think it relegates the CRM to just becoming one node in that operating hub.

[00:38:42] And the new hub is this orchestration layer where the industry can sort of figure out best use case for AIs evolve past, like, just note taking and create a more - you know, create AI use cases for other aspects of the firm, whether that be compliance, workflow, delivery of service. So I think it creates a framework to sort of understand how we can deploy AI in a meaningful way in our industry.

[00:39:10] So I think we're standing on the edge of a major shift. And, you know, Randy and I, I think, look forward to being - hopefully driving some thought leadership in this space and really helping this technology become very useful in the real world. And that's where we want to be. And we want to - we're actively trying to figure out how we can serve clients and get them to these outcomes.

[00:39:35] **Matt Sonnen:** Randy, what are your thoughts? Is the CRM going away; is it going to get replaced by AI?

[00:39:41] **Randy Lambert:** I'm similar to Jason - not thinking it'll go away; It's just transforming, you know, the traditional - I think especially for the home office CRM experience, trying to build workflows and data insights from, you know, I'll just use Salesforce as my example. That's really hard. And so, if you can disconnect or dislocate some of the operational features from that CRM and have it go across your entire tech stack, that's way better than trying to integrate everything to a CRM. You, like, say, oh, what's the difference? Well, the difference is that this new layer of experience is built off of the data from all the different systems.

[00:40:27] Versus, you know, trying to plug in an integration with the CRM. And so, I do see exactly what Jason is saying - you know, getting these future AI driven interaction layers to

sit on top of all that different technology, automating tasks and orchestrating workflows. So I do see that happening and transforming and I - you know, a lot of RIAs tried to do this on their own. They'll remain nameless, but the amount of firms that hire their own CTO and then hire large tech teams to try to create a client portal, an advisor portal experience. I think there could be some better opportunity and use of money by using something that is more elegant and AI-driven versus something that's proprietary, that once you build it, then you have to continue to add onto it.

[00:41:22] These are platforms that are very nimble and feature, you know - have a really good experience feature. I mean, Jiffy has just a - they solve problems really fast and they're very custom, and so that wasn't - we didn't have that ability, say five - six years ago. And so I do see this new, what Jason's calling the Enterprise Nexus tool, I think, which - we've got to work on that name, Jason.

[00:41:49] But anyway, it's a good problem to have and we're seeing several of our firms that we're working with using these and we can really see the light at the end of the tunnel in terms of getting there and having a really great client experience and advisor experience. And then that then makes the home office experience so much better as well.

[00:42:09] **Matt Sonnen:** Yeah. I think - some of the arguments I've seen online - it's been an argument of or: do I have AI or a CRM? And I just think it's and: I think AI will sit on top of the CRM and it's going to sit on top of my Outlook and it's going to sit on top of my data lake, et cetera. I think it's going to make these tools better, but I - maybe I'm being shortsighted, but I don't see it eliminating the CRM altogether. I think it's and.

[00:42:34] b You're exactly right, like, the advisor that's doing prospecting and that sort of thing, like, what are they going to keep track of that? Like, do you really want to build out that feature of a CRM into a data lake? I don't know. Yeah, it's interesting. Like, I'm not saying it's not possible, I'm just saying, I do see the advisors still being able to use the CRM and be able to create automations off of the data that's inside there.

[00:43:02] **Matt Sonnen:** Yep. So we went technical on that last question. For our final question, let's go high level. Let me just ask you guys, what skills do you think the COO of the future needs to possess in order to be successful? And Randy, I'll let you tackle this one first.

[00:43:18] **Randy Lambert:** Yeah, I think COOs have to be cross-functional leaders fluent with data, technology, human behavior, and systems thinking. And so, I don't think it's - it's not somebody that's tactically executing your trades for you every day. Doesn't mean that they can't do that, but a really good COO is going to have those kind of four features that they are able to navigate. And they'll be transformation specialists, comfortable leading change, building tech-enabled operating models, fostering cultures of accountability.

[00:43:55] Kind of a world where emotional intelligence is as important as intellectual intelligence, and so. You know, that's what we're trying to help people do is add into those additional capabilities in helping them upskill into those four dimensions. And it's not something that, you know, a 25-year-old person's going to just be able to dive into that.

[00:44:17] It does take a little bit of experience, but I think the gap of getting there is a lot faster. And that's what Jason and I are really excited about doing is helping these operators upskill into those dimensions.



[00:44:31] **Matt Sonnen:** I like your four dimensions. I think that's fantastic. Jason, what are your thoughts? What is - or how is the role of the COO going to change in the future?

[00:44:39] **Jason Mirabella:** Yeah, I mean, similar themes, but the way I kind of think about it is they're part technologist, part psychologist, and part strategist, so they need obviously fluency and data automation and AI, but I think

[00:44:53] **Randy Lambert:** I like Jason's better. He only had three. So,

[00:44:57] **Jason Mirabella:** but just as much, I think strength and empathy, communication, and influence, so Randy and I are - and I think this kind of defines the culture at which we deliver service, is we're very balanced with, you know, the data automation, AI side versus you know, how to be a good human, how to deploy empathy, and good communication systems and influence.

[00:45:18] So, an operator that is actively engineering connectivity across teams, ensuring every team process and system is aligned with moving in the same direction. You're - you know, their chief integrator, their architect of clarity, their guardian of speed, you know, to call back to some of the other topics that we've talked about.

[00:45:38] But I think one of the things gets lost, so I want to highlight this, is they are cultural architects and, you know, building, I think in the future, and based on the expectations of the talent pool that we are operating within, particularly at A-level talent, like, the people that you need to attract your organization to manage the operational complexity of a complex organization. You need to be very specific about the culture that you're creating. To attract that top talent, to foster the collaboration and empowerment that A-players want and need, and to create real value for everyone involved and moving beyond just making, you know, financial engineering in the firm for the sake of, you know, the shareholders, but like, evolving it into the benefit of the advisor, the teams, the clients, the shareholders, and thinking more getting back to basics as far as: we are a business, we are trying to create outsize - like, extraordinary value for our clients and extraordinary value and attract great talent and allow our talent to also thrive in that environment as well. So I think success won't just be measured through efficiency and margin.

[00:46:52] You know, that's kind of, I think, table stakes obviously, as you're running a business, but I think how well a firm aligns the systems and the people and the purpose is going to create sustainable growth and shared success that's going to drive firms into the top 1% in the future.

[00:47:10] **Matt Sonnen:** That's great. You guys both recapped it really well.

[00:47:14] I've tried to keep this podcast to, you know, people that are in - actively in the seat today, but I like these conversations with folks that are working with COOs because we can talk a little higher level and talk about the role and you both recapped it really well there. So thank you.

[00:47:29] Well, overall, Randy and Jason, I can't thank you enough for being here today and sharing your deep expertise with us. I really enjoyed this conversation, so thank you both for taking the time to be here today.



[00:47:40] **Randy Lambert:** Thank you. It was really fun.

[00:47:41] **Jason Mirabella:** Thanks, Matt.

[00:47:43] **Matt Sonnen:** Well, that is a wrap on Episode 81. We will talk to you all soon.

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