

Agency For Change Podcast : Angel Kwiatkowski, Founder of Cohere

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change. The podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing, and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change. And these are the people who show us how.

Lyn Wineman:

Hello fellow changemakers. This is Lyn Wineman, founder and chief strategist of KidGlov. And welcome to another episode of Agency for Change podcast. Now, statistics tell us that on average, a full-time employee in the United States works 1,768 hours per year or 38.6 hours per week. That's a lot of time. And our guest today, Angel Kwiatkowski, is on a mission to make our working hours more fun and more productive. I love that combo. Angel is the founder of Cohere, the first and largest community managed shared office space in Fort Collins, Colorado. And a consultant whose advice can be found at diycoworking.com. It's great to talk with you today, Angel. How are you?

Angel Kwiatkowski:

All things considered, I'm medium, high.

Lyn Wineman:

Medium, high, I'll take that. And would you pronounce your last name for everybody? Because I might have slightly butchered that and I bet I'm not the only one.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

You did a nice job. It's Angel Kwiatkowski.

Lyn Wineman:

Kwiatkowski, fantastic. Angel, would you start by just describing what co-working is, for those who haven't experienced it? And tell us why you're so passionate about this topic.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Sure. You'd think after 11 years of doing this, I would have a more succinct description of co-working, but I do not. Co-working in its purest form is a movement. It's a way for people to find connection and avoid isolation in situations where they normally work from home, but don't enjoy that anymore. They come to, or used to come to, physical places where we share resources together like in an office. And we work alongside each other, even though we don't all work for the same company.

Lyn Wineman:

Angel, I've owned my own business for just over 10 years now and the movement of co-working was not quite so big back then. And I do remember, I started, like many entrepreneurs, at literally the dining room table. And at some point you get tired of that and then at some point you get tired of being in

coffee shops all day. But you're not quite ready to make that move and sign a lease, which is terrifying. And I think co-working is really a great, great solution.

Lyn Wineman:

Can you talk a little bit about your space at Cohere? And I love that it's not just a space, but you describe it as a community. Can you talk about that and how it's making a difference in people's lives?

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Sure. Nobody joins a co-working space to have wifi and a desk. Those things are ubiquitous, you can get them anywhere. Most people are getting them from home right now, obviously.

Lyn Wineman:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Angel Kwiatkowski:

People think that they're joining a co-working space to have a different desk than the one that they currently have at home. But once we get ahold of them, they realize that co-working, in fact, is not about a desk or wifi or a printer or a whiteboard or a meeting room. It's about people. They find this incredible community of people just like them, who sometimes don't feel productive. Sometimes you feel stuck with a client, sometimes you want to fire a client and you've never done that before. And you have access to all of these people who have done all of those things before.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

And so, it's sort of a metaphysical rescue from Google, so you no longer have to Google the answer to your problems. You can turn to your neighbor in your co-working space and say, "I'm really frustrated with this client and they don't pay me very well. What should I do?"

Angel Kwiatkowski:

"Fire them." We'll say, "And make way for a better client." We run these wonderful work forward events called Work Sprints. Where we get online with each other and you tell the group what you want to get done in an hour. And then we all work on those things we said we wanted to do. Then you go back together and admit to the group, if you did what you said you were going to do. People find those just wonderfully productive, more than you would feel if you were just at home by yourself, in a room, trying to keep yourself motivated all day long.

Lyn Wineman:

Angel, I have heard that we have a KidGlover who is part of your community and they have talked often about how great those Work Sprints are. Also, I think you've just come up with that great succinct description of co-working. It's a metaphysical rescue from Google, I love that, that's fantastic.

Lyn Wineman:

Now tell me, I know that you have expanded from Cohere and you have your own website now where you're consulting others. Can you tell us a little bit more about diycoworking.com?

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Sure. So, for better or worse, I have more experience running co-working spaces than most other people in the world. I wasn't the first to do co-working, it wasn't my idea. But definitely in the first wave of people who started up spaces in the United States. And so naturally being in co-working, it's filled with lots of helpful people who help each other do co-working. I ended up writing the first book about co-working with one of my members, who's also a writer, Beth Buczynski. We were like the Polish crew, the authoring crew. We wrote the first book about co-working back in ... gosh, was it 2010 or 2011 or something? And we were just trying to educate people about what co-working was, that this movement had arrived, and what we were doing to support that.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

And then we wrote a second one aimed at people who are working from coffee shops. The book was aimed at freelancers to tell them the stories of people who co-work and try to educate them about what co-working was. And then just probably four years ago, I wrote, not my last, but another book about co-working, which was all about how to launch your own co-working space. My specialization is really helping people in bootstrap, DIY, and not VC funded, not independently wealthy, open co-working spaces and serve people in their local neighborhoods. And in the process of all of this work over all of these years, I've determined that I just really don't enjoy one-on-one consulting at all. Please don't contact me after this podcast and ask me to help you open your co-working space, I absolutely will not do it for any amount of money.

Lyn Wineman:

That makes me laugh so much, but we have to know what we don't like doing.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Yeah.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Part of the reason I wrote the book is that I put everything I knew in the book. And so instead of paying me many thousands of dollars to hold your hands to open your co-working space, you could spend \$25 and...

Lyn Wineman:

I love that.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

...take yourself through the process. And so that's why I built the DIY co-working website, to be able to point people who wanted to hire me onto a platform that would give them everything they needed.

Lyn Wineman:

For all of us who are out there trying to get people to hire us, you're out there doing the opposite. I love that, that's fantastic. Angel, you may not be the first person who started a co-working space, but from my perspective, you are one of the most passionate. And I think that's really cool. I love it when you see somebody who can take something they're passionate about and turn that into their business. Now we're in an interesting time here, it's October of 2020. And we're in Women's Small Business Month, which is why we're celebrating you and talking with you. But we're also in the midst of a global pandemic and that has to have impacted your business in co-working somewhat. Can you talk us through that? And tell us how you're getting through this.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Sure. I don't even know ... there's so much to tell. I feel like I've pivoted my business 17 times in the last seven months.

Lyn Wineman:

I can imagine.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

So, the main problem facing co-working communities right now is that people aren't super jazzed about getting into a room and sitting there and sharing your air for a whole day. The first wave of co-working modifications was, we removed lots and lots of furniture. We can't sit as close together as we used to. We used to love to just be as close together as you could put two people, two and a half feet between each of us, crammed into 800 square feet. Now we're all spread out to the recommended distances, we wear masks all day while we're in the office. I'm breaking that rule because I'm in a room by myself right now. We've made a lot of modifications to the physical space and that's been good and helpful for the people who are ready to leave home and come and share space again.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Along with that, we had to figure out how to take everything we were great at in person, and we were really great at in person, and we had to figure out how to translate that to online. It's been now seven months in, I think we've finally sort of iterated and cracked the codes. The most popular events are those work forward productivity events, the Work Sprints, something we call ultra co-working, which is a whole day of Work Sprints, and lunch and learns, and wonderful things that happen online.

Lyn Wineman:

Nice.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

And then we did keep one in-person event, called Drive-In Donuts, where I get little boxes of donuts and people can pull up and I hand them donuts and coffee through their car window.

Lyn Wineman:

That's awesome.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

So that's been great. It's been tough on the co-working industry.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, yeah.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

I think I just saw a statistic saying one in five small businesses are going to close in a few weeks or months here.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, that just hurts my heart so much.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Yeah. And I would say that number is probably tracking into the co-working movement and impacting, surprisingly, the really small operators as well as the really large chain global companies who are declaring bankruptcy and closing branches and doing all kinds of crazy stuff. And the little guys, we've got these big brick and mortar buildings that it's no longer a popular selling point to say, "Come to old town and do your work in our amazing office space." It's trying to convince a whole bunch of people to hang out with us online.

Lyn Wineman:

Right. I appreciate what you're doing. Do you think you will keep some of these things that you've learned and added even after we go back to whatever the new normal is?

Angel Kwiatkowski:

For sure. Actually, I'm feeling ... how could I have known? How could I have known how popular the online programming would have been? I've got members now, who we used to lose when they would move away to a different city, and now they don't have to leave Cohere, they can stay at Cohere. And we've actually picked up members from California and Canada. And one of our members is going to the South Pole and keeping her membership.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

It's this wonderful thing, all of a sudden we were forced to be global and it's actually working. And it's really cool because we just talked to one of the members about, "Well, how far away is the beach from your house? And tell us about what it's like to go to the beach in the middle of your day." "And you're going to the South Pole, we want to learn all about what that means for you and how you're going to stay in touch."

Lyn Wineman:

That's great. I love what you're doing, and this is a tough time for many of us. And I think those of us that embrace the pivot, we'll be stronger when we come out the back end of this. I want to switch gears a little bit. I read in your bio that you were voted most likely to change the world when you were in high school. And since this is a podcast about people who are doing things that make the world a better place, I love that we're talking to you. How did this path lead you to becoming a co-working consultant?

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Sure. So, what's interesting about career paths is they hardly ever go in a straight line.

Lyn Wineman:

Never, they never go in a straight line.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Unless you're doing like, "I want to be a lawyer and I want to be a doctor. I want to be an engineer or something."

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, maybe.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

But for all the rest of us, people like me with psychology degrees, it's a real twisty turny road to get where you're supposed to be. I started in retail management at Target and I did that for a handful of years. And that was great because I really learned about branding and customer experience and the visual aesthetic of physical places, which has been really handy. Then I became a career counselor to try to help people get jobs and that was really great. And that was very development focused on people who wanted to improve their circumstances. And then I became the first HR person at a really, really, really popular global cell phone case company. And 89 days later, at my dream job, they pulled me in to the office to tell me I was fired and that I was an entrepreneur and I should get the hell out of their business and start my own.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, how cruel.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Which was a message I had never heard before and I certainly had never been in trouble at work before. So I spent the summer reading the Harry Potter series on my porch, weeping about my circumstances. But it was great because I realized when I was at that cell phone company, that the thing I liked most about that job is I would spend some time in all the different departments. In the web design department, in industrial design department, in the warehouse, in the PR office, in my own HR office. And I really just had an affinity for creative people and the work that they were doing, because I had never seen any of that in my other jobs. It was always sort of obscured for me in the roles that I had.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

And then I was volunteering at an entrepreneurial incubator to try to figure out my next step. And a friend of mine said, "Hey, have you heard about this thing called co-working? It's where creative people who normally work from home, get in a room together and do it together." And I was like, "What? A job where I get to be around creative people, but I'm not their boss and they're not my boss. That sounds perfect."

Angel Kwiatkowski:

I started a meetup group and people started coming to our little meetups to figure out how to do co-working. Then we opened our first wee little space back in 2010. And now we've been in a bigger

space that's been growing over the years for, since I don't know, 2012 we've been over here. Every single day I get to make a lovely space, fill it with creative people who I love being around. I'm not their boss, but I get to help them with their careers, I get to help them with their personal struggles. I don't know, it's just perfect. It's a perfect job for me and I never want to work for anybody else.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. People will listen to this and they won't be able to see you but I can see you right now and I can see the joy in your face. And it is really interesting because I can also see and imagine how each of those stops on your career path built into this. And I think that's really neat. Angel, what are some of the biggest challenges you face? I mean, in your work, you're doing something that's really kind of new and different.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

There are so many challenges. I am a company of one. I briefly had an employee and she was wonderful and we had a great time together, but fortunately she left right before the pandemic hit. So I didn't have to take care of her, which was an amazing relief as I watched our revenue drop. Something I wrote down, I don't know if it's the greatest challenge I face. But as a solo business owner, there's so much messaging to take in about how to run a business and how to do marketing, how to do communications, how to do all of it. And I think it's so easy to fall into this trap of, "Well, I have to spend \$3,000 a month on pay-per-click and I have to hire a PR company to do this strategy for me and I have to do this and that."

Angel Kwiatkowski:

I get really overwhelmed by that because I'm just one person and I've got little kids and I don't work full time. And I can't hang in those circles as a solo business owner. And so every time I get lost in the woods in that way, I remember, What is the Cohere way of doing this? And the Cohere way is not a bull horn, "Come everyone in the whole world, come be with us." It's more of a, "I'm going to send an email to a person I used to work with and tell him a memory that I remember from 12 years ago, and then they'll end up joining Cohere." We really take a high touch, personalized approach to all of our marketing and it never fails. I still forget it all these years in and I get distracted by the shiny thing. And then I remember, "Oh, I know these people, I could just email these people who I already know and I would get new members."

Lyn Wineman:

That sounds wonderful. I think that is really great advice because marketing, in essence, is all about conversations and it's all about knowing who you are and that is at the core of it. Thank you for that advice. Being a marketer, I love it when people say things like that. And it is overwhelming, it takes us back to one of your earlier comments about the rescue from Google. There's so much information out there and you could really drive yourself crazy by reading it all. And some of it's great advice, but some of it may not be. So, I think that's fabulous.

Lyn Wineman:

Angel, I also love motivational quotes. Would you be willing to give us an Angel original motivational quote that I could put on my wall to help get me through the pandemic?

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Yes. And this is a hard one group of words I have strung together for you.

Lyn Wineman:

All right.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

I've never had more anxiety over a single question.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh no, I'm so sorry.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Well, I don't want the listeners to think that I have everything together and then I'm over here just cruising along, knowing what I'm doing.

Lyn Wineman:

Got it.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

The quote I wrote down and I feel is true for me is, "Be known by the ways you have helped."

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. I'm writing it down here, "Be known by the ways you have helped." That is really lovely. And honestly, I think it is a great sentiment for what we're going through right now.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lyn Wineman:

Because we all can just use a little help. I even noticed that one thing that I didn't know was so important to me is I like to smile at people, people that I don't even know. And now when I'm outside and I have a mask on, I always feel like, "Oh, they don't know that I'm smiling at them." It's just the world has changed. So figuring out the ways we can help, that is really cool. Angel, for our listeners today who would like to learn more about your work, but not to call you directly for consulting. How can they find out more about you?

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Sure. I would say if anybody's at home working right now and you are not feeling your most productive, best self, we're looking for members from all over the world and can be found at coherecommunity.com

Lyn Wineman:

Cohere, so coherecommunity.com. That is wonderful. And once again, I'm just going to say, I've heard great things about your online work community. We spend so much of our time working and I really think that if you are fulfilled and happy at work, your time spent at home, whether it's with family, doing your hobbies, working out, whatever your thing is. If your work life is happy and productive, that's going to make a huge difference for you.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

For sure.

Lyn Wineman:

Angel, this has been so much fun and I love that you're passionate about what you do and that it does bring joy to people's lives. Thank you for taking time with us today.

Angel Kwiatkowski:

Thank you so much for having me.

Announcer:

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