

Gil Moegerle: Welcome to the new Executive Scheduling Associates' podcast, and to some of the best business insights we've heard during the COVID-19 outbreak. I'm Gil Moegerle.

The idea behind this podcast is really pretty simple. For 14 years, ESA has provided appointment scheduling services to North America's financial industry professionals. To set those appointments we have roughly a million exchanges per year with industry people. And we thought you might find several recent comments by our clients about the COVID-19 crisis interesting and perhaps helpful.

With me is ESA's Chief Executive Officer, Mitch Santala.

Mitch Santala: You know, Gil, this is what I love about our interview today with Brett, a client of ours for the past year, a 25-year veteran in the financial industry where he worked for 15 years at his own practice overseeing about 150 advisors. Then he moved to his hometown where he now practices as an external for a life insurance company. I think he has some really good things to say today.

Gil: You'll hear ESA's Director of Communication, Erin Pruetz, who was on this call.

Here is Brett's response to our first question, "How has the current world health crisis impacted you and your family?"

Brett: I'm in the house. Most of the time during the week I'm out the door by 8 o'clock in the morning and, on average, getting back home around 6, 6:30 at night. I've got a 13-year-old and a 17-year-old and they're usually in school from 8 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock and then club volleyball practice afterward. To some degree, it's been great because things have slowed down. Our 17-year-old is a junior; next year is her senior year and after that, she's gone. And the colleges that are most interested in her, only one is in the state of Texas. The rest of them are all over the United States and we're blessed that all these colleges want her to come play Division I volleyball. But having this last month and a half where we haven't been distracted with volleyball and with challenges of all being going in different directions has been wonderful. On the flip side of that, as much as we love each other, I'm pretty sure we're all looking forward to seeing somebody other than the four of us.

Gil: That's so true.

Erin: I have kids the same age as you.

Brett: And just to add insult to injury, the first 11 days in Texas -- or at least in North Texas - - when they did the whole sequester-at-home or whatever you want to call it, it rained every single day, so you couldn't even get outside.

None of us are sick, none of us have any issues. The 17-year-old is funny. All she has to do is hear her mom say something like, "I need..." and I don't even think she gets "need" out of her mouth before she is in the car and headed to the grocery store.

Erin: I'll do it!

Brett: Whatever she can do to get out of the house! Thank you for asking, though. I would imagine if folks with younger kids...they probably are frequenting the liquor store at a much higher rate than most of us.

Mitch: Oh man, I relate so much to Brett right there, about his kids and his daughter who can't be quick enough to find reasons to get out of the house right now. I think we're all in that boat.

Gil: So I take it the first insight that caught your attention that you wanted to highlight was, in a crisis, think of your family first.

Mitch: Yeah. I mean, it was a natural first question that we're going to ask any person that we are interviewing. I think it's just because it's natural in our humanity to really think about the things that matter most to us. And family first in crisis is really something that's being revealed at this time. You can't listen to any news story, you can't read any headline, you can't follow any social media posts where people are trying to hack the transition into sheltering-in-place where people aren't talking about rediscovering the importance of family and the value of family during this time. Whether they're cracking open a deck of cards or they're playing a game, there's just something about knowing "I'm with the people who love me the most," so together we get through this as family.

Gil: I thought the picture that Brett painted was moving. Here's a family with a kid racing toward college, high-speed American life, forced to slow down and loving the fact that they're in closer touch with one another in these last months of their daughter's stay-at-home life.

Mitch: Yeah, exactly.

Gil: Well, there's another insight that you wanted to shine a spotlight on. Let's move onto that. The question actually will be posed to Brett by our Director of Communication, Erin Pruetz.

Erin: Can you talk to us a little bit about how your work has changed this spring and, equally as importantly, how it's stayed the same.

Brett: That's actually an excellent question. The changes really have been driven by the way we communicate with the advisors now. Where before, we were typically face-to-face in an office and, to be honest with you, we could tell if we had their undivided attention. Now

transitioning to conference calls and things of that nature, a lot of the advisors that I am talking with I am not positive are quite as focused as they would be if we were sitting in front of them, simply because I can hear keyboards in the background clicking and things of that nature. Probably from an ability to get someone to focus on our conversation and really make complete, meaningful use of our time it's probably become more difficult.

I do notice that when we do WebExes and we both share the camera view, it's more of a face-to-face meeting. It's interesting that it seems that a lot of the advisors aren't quite as open to the WebEx meeting and it may be because some of them are working from home and don't have the technology there. But for the ones that do, it seems like the meetings are almost as productive as if we're face-to-face.

And I'll say probably the other one that has probably been more problematic in an environment when it's by phone, is that advisors seem to be more willing to blow off a phone call versus if you had gotten in your car and drove to them. It hasn't happened often, but occasionally I call in, "Oh, he's out of the office," or "She's on another line." Those kind of things that if we drove to their office, they'd be more cognizant of and really wouldn't be distracted by those other things. That's kind of the challenges I face.

Now I will say there's been a few positives. And the positives have been I seem to get a lot more time available for contacts with the FAs and with their clients because I'm not spending... being a part of the Dallas-Fort Worth area, just because two advisors are in the same town, does not mean that they are close by any means. Not spending 30 minutes driving between offices means that I probably picked up three hours a day that now can be used more dedicated for interaction. That's been a positive.

The other challenge with this spring -- and there's nothing we can do about that from a scheduling standpoint or even from what we are trying to use for technology -- what I am tasked to do is help them implement life insurance with their clients. That is not at the top of their thought process right now. The top of their thought process is, "I've got to retain my clients. I've got to figure out some way that I can get new clients because I can't go out into public which is where I typically pick up clients."

And then, "Hey, by the way, the market is starting to recover. I need to start making phone calls outbound to try and generate revenue to try and generate revenue."

Where Julia and I have created some synergy on that is I've given her some language on why they should take the meeting with me.

"Hey, if Brett could share one idea that made an impact in your clients' lives, would that be a reason to hold a 15-minute phone call with him?"

"Hey, by the way, Brett's doing this weekly seminar at 5 o'clock for clients, why don't I get an appointment for you, you two can talk through and see if it's something you want to invite your clients to."

I'm trying to give her ammunition for a reason why they should talk to me. Because they're getting just inundated with folks like myself trying to get access to them right now.

Gil: Perhaps I should mention, before we go any further, Mitch, that the Julia that's being referred to is Brett's professional scheduler here at Executive Scheduling Associates.

Mitch: Yep.

Gil: What insight jumped out at you during that piece of our interview?

Mitch: Well, there's several things that jump out at me, but all around the theme that some forced change turns out to be good for us. One of the things I'm watching Brett do as he's telling his story is he's having to pivot and get better at something he's probably been really good at for the 25 years he's been in his industry. So here a 30-minute or a one-hour meeting, that used to just be kind of an automatic, "Can I schedule a one-on-one?" "Yep," and show up, it's a one-hour presentation. He's finding that working from home with the shelter-in-place order, trying to get the attention of the advisor who, right now, is trying to do damage control with his book of business and his clients...

Gil: And take care of his own family.

Mitch: Exactly and take care of his own family. So what Brett's doing is he's innovating and improving his skillset to try to still add value to the client without forcing the client to adopt around his traditional way of doing things. He's trying to adapt and pivot. I think it's Peter Scazerro who wrote the book *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* where I heard him say, "When the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing, that's when we actually change."

Some forced change actually turns out to be good and I wonder if Brett will go back to just the way things were or if this is actually going to up his game and if that allows him now to bridge into a one-hour presentation where people show value there.

Gil: So, I guess the insight you're talking about there is that change sometimes, maybe often, produces good outcomes.

Mitch: Yeah, I think so. I think change and crisis sometimes gets a bad label or a mysterious label. If we can look at change as the wider context of what can I do, what can I bring into my life to constantly keep myself sharp and on the cutting edge. And in this world of being a life-long learner and under continuous improvement and constantly trying to become more excellent in what I do, then I don't fall prey to be growing obsolete or becoming too

traditional. In fact, that slogan or that statement that says, "Today innovation becomes tomorrow's tradition" and so it's our jobs as leaders, as productive contributors to society that we stay sharp and we stay on our game and as strategic as possible. And if it means we have to take a one-hour meeting and adapt it to 15 minutes to still get the one-hour meeting, then by all means, let's do whatever it takes to stay on our game.

As leaders, I think our strongest asset that we bring is looking for change and trying to be ahead of it. We need to be almost prophetic, in a sense, to interpret the hour we're in and the times we're in, so that we actually lead by insight rather than lead from behind. And I think that's really the core strength of a leader is that we learn to interpret and get ahead of it so we can lead the people and then lead our organizations rather than be sucked down. Because change is going to happen. You're either going to be on the front end of it or you're going to be some of the collateral damage on the back end of it. And honestly, even if we're on the front end of it, usually it's because we're lucky and we somehow caught a good break. The reality is that change is going to happen and if we don't accept that and we don't adapt to it and we don't lead into it, then it's only a matter of time where that becomes a death sentence over our business.

Gil: All right, let's move on to the third insight that we heard from Brett that you wanted to emphasize: Where are we headed next?

Mitch: Well I think as we listen to Brett's answer, we might find a couple themes here, that we can tackle in a moment. But the first one I think that you're going to see is the key to being productive isn't necessarily in doing more activity. But it can actually be in doing less. And then the other idea that we will tease out of this is managing a crisis is a team activity.

Gil: The question we asked Brett in this interview at this point was, "How can we best support you?"

Brett: Just continue to try to suggest advisors to give us, at minimum, 15 minutes. If I can't provide enough value in 15 minutes that you want to continue the conversation, shame on me. And the reason I like a 15-minute phone call is that I can get just about anybody to agree to 15 minutes. That's one of the things that Julia's done very well for me is if the advisor's a little reluctant or they're too busy taking care of clients, "Hey would you mind having a 15-minute phone call? I think that the could share enough information in 15 minutes to make a decision on whether or not it makes sense to schedule an hour."

We're all doing the best we can to try to get in front of them, at least on the phone, and the challenge is so is every annuity wholesaler, so is every mutual fund wholesaler. Even our competitors on the life insurance side, the other distribution partners, and their bandwidth is just so frazzled right now that I think it's just about being insistent. "Hey, you ought to at least take a 15-minute phone call." But then again, I think it's also on the DLCs, or us, to give the schedulers the ammunition to use to say this is why (I'm a very good *why* person)... "This is why you need to talk to him." I'd say it's 50-50 there, it's not all

the scheduler. I think that we as DLCs have to take some responsibility to give them that ammunition to give them the ability to insist on a meeting.

Gil: All right, Mitch, I heard you say there are at least two insights you wanted to emphasize there.

Mitch: Yeah, I think jumping right in, not spending a ton of time on this because we already spoke to the 15-minute rule in the last point. But productivity is not necessarily in the craft of learning to do more. But it's actually in the art of learning to do less and actually bring the discipline of focus and really getting clear on what your yesses are. Steven Covey with the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, the Franklin-Covey system that's out there, the *Five Choices of Extraordinary Productivity*, they all talk about doing less is actually the key to getting more done. It's not about doing all the things right, it's about doing the right things. And so he's talking about, "If I can't get clear on my message in 15 minutes," then I have to do better work. I have to sharpen myself to get there.

Gil: And I think you said the second point you noticed had something to do with teamwork.

Mitch: It would be summarizing it, managing a crisis, is a team activity and I can't stress this enough. I think we all know that the journey to the top in our life is never a solo trek. If we're taking a trek, if we're taking a journey, we know it's going to come with ups and downs, some winds, some real challenges, which is why we need people. And what Brett's talking about, he's highlighting his responsibility, 50% of the partnership with his scheduler, 50% of the partnership here. He's not putting the entire burden on the scheduler to dial for dollars and somehow pull a rabbit out of the hat where he has a miraculous calendar in a very tumultuous time that's historic. But he's also not putting the entire burden on himself. He's recognizing there's teamwork, there's partnership, that we're going to have to lean into each other and really, really navigate this together if we are going to come out on the other side.

Gil: Make sense.

Mitch: It reminds me from a couple years ago, me and my best friend, we took one of our sons each on a couple-day rafting trip up in Oregon on the Rogue River. And I'm not the rafting expert -- I'm kind of a large guy, six-three, 250-plus pounds...there's a lot that's wrong with that picture. But here we are, going on a rafting trip together.

We're putting our helmet on, we're down at the river and the guide is explaining to us all the rules, the dos and don'ts - strap your helmet on and make sure this and that. One of the final instructions that he gave us was, he said, "So today, we're going to be going through two four-class rapids." Which caused my eyes to kind of go up a bit.

Gil: Four is, I think is like, the toughest?

Mitch: I don't know that it's the toughest, but it's a good ride.

Gil: Yeah.

Mitch: So I know a four-class rapid...

Gil: It's not a swimming pool.

Mitch: Yeah, it's not the bunny slopes at the ski resort.

And so here we are, we're getting ready to go and he says, "So two points of advice that you need to know when we get ready to go through these four-class rapids is, first of all, I'll alert you, so we'll have plenty of time to get ready." But he said, "Two things you need to do: you need to hold on to the raft and you need to lean into each other." He said, "If you guys will hold onto the raft and lean into each other, towards the middle, I can promise you we can get through these four-class rapids safely and we'll enjoy it and we'll come out on the other side and celebrate together."

So, of course, that was some of the best advice that I held onto the whole river rafting trip. Because when those two four-class rapids came up what do you think I did? Well, I held on for dear life and I leaned in toward to my friend and we all leaned into the middle and I think that's basically what Brett is getting at. That, "Hey...we're kind of facing a class four rapid right now. We've never been here before; we might be a little new here. We know we're going to survive, but the more we hold on and the more we lean into each other, potentially the less bruises we're going to have, the less bumps we're going to have and the more we're going to be able to celebrate when we come out on the other side."

Gil: Let's finish here, Mitch. The word I think I've heard you use more than any other regarding the business challenges of this COVID-19 moment is "storm."

Mitch: Yeah, exactly. Here at ESA we've been using the language of a storm to define the trial we are currently in. And one of the things we're focusing on in our company is that storms or trials or hardships...it's that they don't create behaviors in us. They *reveal* behavior in us. Storms don't make me do anything. But they exposed almost everything in me, because I feel very vulnerable. I'm stepping into things, I've maybe never been down this path before so all of the sudden, I feel a little insecure, I feel a little threatened and I'm being exposed, and I'm being revealed.

Another way of saying it is that storms on the outside of me often reveal the storms or the calm or the peace that's going on inside of me. That's not to minimize any loss or pain that I might face in a real struggle. I've been through plenty of storms in my own life where it takes everything in me just to get out of them alive and to pray that I survive it.

Gil: That's true. In fact, I find it interesting that one year after you founded this company was 2008, one of the historic chaotic periods in the marketplace and you're company serves the financial marketplace. You're a baby as a company and BAM! you get hit with 2008.

Mitch: Yeah, exactly. If we had a crystal ball back then in 2007, we might have avoided starting our business knowing what was coming down the pike because it felt like we were at ground zero of the end of the world. And who could survive that?

I'm not a fan of blaming God for every storm in my life. I know some people might, but I'm not that kind of person. I'm most definitely not a fan of trying to make sense of very real, sucky situations and labeling them as "Acts of God." I've kind of wondered by God gets blamed sometimes for all the bad stuff that happens in my life.

Gil: It's true. And sometimes too little credit for the good stuff.

Mitch: Exactly. And I'm not a fan of slapping a cute bumper sticker over every situation of my life with slogans like, "Well everything happens for a reason."

Gil: Oh, I hate that!

Mitch: Yeah. I'm all for this bumper sticker: storms happen. I don't think God calls a staff meeting every morning, with His angels in the weather department to decide whether I'm going to have a sunny or a cloudy day. Now just because I don't believe God causes every storm in my life, let me say this: I do believe I can find a cause in every storm if I look beyond the disruption for the deeper revealing.

Storms can grow me. It's in the revealing where I grow bigger and I grow better. How else will I ever know if I'm truly seaworthy if I don't weather a few storms from time to time?

Gil: You've been listening to the first in a series of podcasts we're calling Navigating the Business Storms of Crisis.

Next time...well, you'll hear a financial wholesaler use a surprising term to describe a crisis: refreshing.

Join us again.