

# #SXSW2019 Recap: Decentralize Your Company's Hierarchy

*Wendy Glavin, Founder & CEO, [Wendy Glavin Agency](#)*

From the moment, I sat in my seat on JetBlue flying to Austin, TX, my iPhone started shaking. Since I was on my way to SXSW, I hoped I was sitting next to a tech guy. "Excuse me, do you know what's wrong with my phone," I asked. Matt fixed it in 20-seconds, and we spent the next four hours discussing all the events, restaurants, parties, and topics of interest at SXSW this year. It was Matt's tenth time attending.

Matt asked if I wanted a vodka when the stewardess arrived. I said, it's 9 am. He said it's SXSW! I knew this was just the beginning of a completely different experience.

After arriving in Austin on March 7, 2019, I picked up my badge and wandered to different events for which I registered. The feeling was something I've only experienced once during The Future of Storytelling ([FOST](#)) event in New York. There were none of the typical vernaculars like, where do you live? what do you do? where do you work? what company do you work for?

Rather than using company or brand titles which seemed antiquated, people of all ages, backgrounds, interests, industries and ideas were what was important. There was little discussion about generational stereotypes, politics, immigration, elections, or buzzwords such as customer journey, disruptive, thought leadership, customers, solutions and many more.

It was a community of sharing ideas and having meaningful unscripted conversations. I was never given questions ahead of time during panel discussions at side private events with #CryptoVixens Investors Lounge. Spearheaded by Anne A. Ward,

Global CEO, Veritoken, and [Adryenn Ashley](#), CEO of Loly, and Global FinTech and Big Data influencer said, *“When you know the questions ahead of time, my guests overthink it and struggle for perfection. I’m looking for deeper insights and want to tap into their souls for more intimate conversations because it’s about the person. Consumers are sophisticated and don’t want overly engineered statements. They want to know the people behind the brand. It’s refreshing when audiences respond and fully engage with the speakers.”*



L-R: Stewart Rogers, Adryenn Ashley, Wendy Glavin, Tina Mulqueen, Priya Kuber

**Interestingly, a common buzzword is authenticity.** When you’re asked questions on the spot, you answer genuinely and truthfully because there’s no time for spin or contrived answers. I’m not suggesting that we never prepare, but if you’ve done your research on the topics and industry sectors that interest you or in which you work, your answers will be taken seriously whether people agree with you or not.

One of my favorite quotes (not from SXSW) is Carla Harris’s,

Vice Chairman, Managing Director and Senior Client Advisor at Morgan Stanley who described the power of authenticity, *“Perception is the co-pilot to reality. How people perceive you will directly impact how they deal with you. You are your own competitive advantage. Nobody can be you the way you can be you. The last thing you should ever do is submerge that which is uniquely you. Anytime you’re trying to behave or speak in a way that is not consistent you will create a competitive disadvantage. If you bring your authentic self to the table, people will trust you. Trust is at the heart of any successful relationship.”* – 2014 video [How to Own Your Power Presentation – Take the Lead](#).

The expression “show don’t tell” has been around for a while. When I asked a technologist, (or I think he was based on his answer) what do you do, he said, we have no titles. Then, how do people know what you do? We’re working to achieve economic justice in the legal cannabis industry. Small businesses and disadvantaged individuals cannot access the capital markets to take out loans and invest in this sector. What is missing are the economic and regulatory pathways to promote equitable access to underrepresented and disadvantaged communities.

Rather than, I'm the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) or the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), or Chief Digital Officer (CDO), Relationship Manager, Facebook Social Media Manager and the list goes on, speaking about how companies are purpose-driven first automatically shifts the conversation away from the person or brand and is more thought-provoking and educational. I wanted to learn more because it was interesting and I haven't worked in the cannabis sector.



**Another takeaway was everyone's perspectives matter.** I attended a panel discussion hosted by John H. Meyer (@SXSW) Fox Business Tech Analyst, and Brittany Kaiser, Co-Founder, Digital Asset Trade Association, on data, privacy, about how Facebook sells your data for ad revenue. Moderator Rachel Sibley, VR/AR lecturer & Futurist, ensured the audience participated. She asked "scaling" questions like how many people understand or know about the whole data discussion on user privacy and what it means? What are you going to do as a parent (if you are one), a company, brand and individual to support tech for the good of society? Most of the 75+ people raised their hands or provided answers.

**The discussions were always about the exchange of opinions.** No one called out another person for being wrong which alleviated

the fear of speaking up or speaking out. The topics in which I participated in or spoke about were on the media, the use of our personal data, [blockchain](#) use cases in financial services, banking, voting, tokens, GDPR, self-reliance, personal sovereignty, democracy, peer-to-peer (P2P), AI, taking back control of social media, chat bots, brands, fake news, and more.

Every night ended in meet-ups (not in the traditional sense) and parties at different venues with #BadCrypto at the Chuggin Monkey, #CryptoVixens at the Riveter, the Founder, and other groups of people with whom I never met before at The Hyatt, JW Marriott, The Hilton and others which typically included **Tito's** Handmade Vodka in support of the National Park Foundation with "Cocktails for a Cause" during **SXSW 2019**. Of the eight days and seven nights, I was in Austin, no night was complete without tacos, chips, and guacamole.

Since I do like to speak up and speak out I felt completely comfortable there. Of course, there's the point about what if you're an introvert? You can join groups to listen and learn and feel accepted.

People said to me, you're obviously a New Yorker because you have an accent. I grew up in Philadelphia and majored in communications and don't have an accent. Once I returned to New York City, I understood. The aggressiveness that exists here versus the kindness in Austin was obvious. A colleague from Dallas sent me a Facebook message yesterday, "Are you ready to move to Texas?"

Recently, *Fast Company* covered the issue of meritocracy—["Meritocracy doesn't exist, and believing it does is bad for you..."](#) "The most common metaphor is the "even playing field" upon which players can rise to the position that fits their merit. Conceptually and morally, meritocracy is presented as the opposite of systems such as hereditary aristocracy, in which one's social position is determined by the lottery of

birth. Under meritocracy, wealth and advantage are merit's rightful compensation, not the fortuitous windfall of external events.

In his [book](#) *Success and Luck*, the U.S. economist Robert Frank recounts the long-shots and coincidences that led to Bill Gates's stellar rise as Microsoft's founder, as well as to Frank's own success as an academic. Luck intervenes by granting people merit, and again by furnishing circumstances in which merit can translate into success. This is not to deny the industry and talent of successful people. However, it does demonstrate that the link between merit and outcome is tenuous and indirect at best.

Frank's research on gratitude indicates that remembering the role of luck increases generosity. Frank cites a study in which simply asking subjects to recall the external factors (luck, help from others) that had contributed to their successes in life made them much more likely to give to charity than those who were asked to remember the internal factors (effort, skill).” [Fast Company, March 13, 2019.](#)

If you're worried about the huge talent shortage like most companies, look for diverse people of all age groups that have soft skills since hard skills can often be taught. Get rid of the silos that separate people to work towards a common good. Decisions are not only made by the C-Suite. Help incentivize people and show them they have value by asking for their opinions from the bottom up.

In 2018, some 80,000-people attended SXSW. I'm sure it was at least that amount in 2019, but probably much more. To advance your startup, company, brand, agency or organization use some of the lessons from SXSW's playbook. They're obviously doing a lot of things right.

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