

True, Fast & Sharp with Chris Isabell
The Shred Coach Podcast Transcript

TOM

Chris Isabell, welcome to The Shred Coach Podcast. I'm glad you're here.

CHRIS

Hey Tom, thank you.

TOM

It's good to hear your voice and I'm glad to talk to you today. You have been in the industry a long time. You and I have encountered each other over 20 years, it feels like, or it's been a long time. But for anybody who doesn't know you, tell me a little bit about iSecure. Tell me a little bit about your company.

CHRIS

Okay. Well, iSecure... I read this article by this guy named Norm Brodsky many years ago. I think it was 2000 or 2001. A lot of people know who Norm is. And at the time I was doing something else in the finance business and I read this article. I thought, man, that sounds cool. Totally different from what my regular job is, you know, numbers and just looking at numbers and the returns and all that kind of stuff. And, took a few years, but got started in '05, my partner and I. And sort of on a shoestring, got a company going, iSecure. Stands for information security. We thought that was kind of a good focus. Kind of described what we did, but also more than that, more than just shredding. And started with one truck and we were driving and doing everything kind of on the side. So, it was really a bootstrap, make it happen kind of thing that kind of turned to a "Gee, I hope we're in business next year" to, "Actually I think we can make it go to this."

TOM

So, 2005 you started, that was what- the beginning point.

CHRIS

Yeah. '05. It was September 12th, 2005.

TOM

Wow. So, let's jump forward to today. Tell me about the size, scope, relative services offered by iSecure, information security. Give me the, like the picture of today. The sort of moment in time.

CHRIS

Yes. Okay. So iSecure today is... we're going to make it. So, we're 17 years in. I think we're going to; I think we're...

TOM

Thankfully. Good, I was starting to worry there for a second.

CHRIS

It's actually, it's funny. I got on the board in 2006 and I remember joking with my partner saying, "Gee, I just got on the NAID board. I hope I'm still in business a year from now. It would be embarrassing to have to resign because we failed."

TOM

Yeah, that's beautiful. Yeah.

CHRIS

So, yeah, iSecure today. So, we're in Southwest, Oregon, and it's a rural area. So, you can imagine what that means for doing routes, where you do some miles. Density is always a challenge, but we run five different trucks, five shred trucks, and we also do a little bit of records management, record storage for a handful of clients who really wanted it.

TOM

Okay.

CHRIS

But our bread and butter, as it was in the beginning, is on-site document shredding. We have added iPad, we've added hard drive destruction, but that's our bread and butter. We do our own recycling. So, we bale paper.

TOM

Oh, do you. Okay.

CHRIS

Yeah, we do.

TOM

So, you have your own baling plant, basically you're backing your trucks up, dumping paper and shoving them through a baler.

CHRIS

Yep. We have, facility, so we're able to do that and started doing that in '08. So, it took a few years, but we found this old horizontal baler up on top of the mountain in the woods and that's the truth and brought it back to life.

TOM

Really?

CHRIS

Didn't have to buy it, made it work. Yeah. It was a funny story. A good friend of ours said, "You know, you guys were talking about bailing paper. Well, I was up in this, in the woods the other day, and there's a bunch of dumped equipment up there." People do that in Oregon, they just get rid of their equipment. They just go to the woods and leave it in the woods. So, I said, "You're kidding me. There's a horizontal baler in the woods." And we went and picked it up. Sure enough, brought it back to life. And we used that baler for the first ten years.

TOM

No! So, what kind of baler? I mean, I'm intrigued, what was the make of that baler?

CHRIS

I think it was called Global. I don't think they're in bus- I think they'd been out of business for 20 years, so...

TOM

Interesting. So, you've got this old baler that you've brought back to life. It's in your plant in 2008 and you start pushing paper through that. And now you've got a bailing plant, which is amazing.

CHRIS

Exactly. Yeah. Yep. Getting rid of the paper was a challenge where we live. So, being able to do that was sort of a game changer for us. Yeah. It was one of those fortunate things.

TOM

How many staff are you running with? Five trucks. What's your staff level?

CHRIS

Yeah. We've got a total of 10. We've got 10 on staff, four drivers. We, the owners, are also licensed, but we, you know, we don't do it out to anymore. Those days are passed.

TOM

Good.

CHRIS

So, we're pretty small, but effective, you know, we'll make the most of what we have. We've got... our people like to hustle, so we get a lot done with few resources.

TOM

That's great. Thank you for sharing a little bit about what iSecure is. But as you know, this show is all about practical, proven stuff that's working. More specifically recently than in the historic, you know, back at- like, I love the idea of taking a baler out of the top of a mountain and

making it work again. And that's great in 2008, but I'm interested now in what's working for you now, or what specific strategy, tactic, implementation, intervention have you done that you've seen some really practical, pragmatic results from?

CHRIS

Sure. A lot of what I do comes from my- I was in the military many years ago in the army. And so, it's interesting how much useful skills and information you pick up in the military. It's a great education. And so, a lot of business principles I still use that I learned in the army to this day, just daily operations. So, I was in the infantry and we used to talk about our unit, our commander used to talk about being true, fast and sharp.

TOM

True, fast and sharp.

CHRIS

Yeah. So, the idea there is sort of a military concept. You know, true being on target, fast being, seize the initiative, element of surprise is always an advantage. And then sharp is essentially be effective. So, true, fast and sharp. And I've always remembered that. I've applied that concept to just, I guess, our business philosophy. So, it works when it comes to sales, it works with operations. And I can elaborate on each one of those, how those work, but that's really what dictates our processes. Both from a sales standpoint and operation standpoint is being true, fast and sharp. We always talk about that.

TOM

Yeah. So, I'm intrigued by that because it's what you said. It's a philosophy that you've now taken and molded from a military perspective now into a business perspective. So, maybe start with an example of that. Cause you mentioned it works in sales, it works in ops, but maybe give me an example of true, fast and sharp in a sales perspective.

CHRIS

Okay, good. Yeah. So, imagine if you will a circle. At the top, you've got the word process and it's got an arrow that points to the right and at the bottom is performance. And then an arrow off of performance pointing back up to process. So, process is what sort of guides us forward. And performance is what we look at to see if we achieved kind of our goal. So, this true, fast and sharp works really good in terms of the process side. So, how we do sales.

For example... fast, you can look at that as the philosophy being, let's be responsive, let's be agile. So, you get a call and somebody is asking about service, and then you get the information that you need to get from them. And in a lot of cases that client, what they get from a company like ours, may not be received right away, or it may not be just very good information. Might not, might not look good. Might not be professional. So, to us, being true, fast and sharp means that we respond immediately.

CHRIS (cont.)

So, we've got, for example, templates that we use. Sales templates, proposal templates. They're all ready to go. So, when we have somebody call in and they need a service proposal, we're able to, within a matter of minutes, really respond with the information they're looking for. That makes a big difference because people oftentimes comment how surprised they are, how responsive we are, how quickly we get back to them with the information. So, that's a valuable skill to have, this ability to respond to people quickly and with agility.

TOM

Yeah. So, does that also then, something in the way your templates are written, is that what makes them sharp or true? Like, how you write your templates, how do you envision that whole true, fast and sharp connecting back to these responsive templates?

CHRIS

Yeah. Good question. I'll just go through the list here. So, of examples I've got. So, you talk about the first one: true. True to me is being consistent, being correct. What does that do for your customer? Well, it builds trust. But also, being simple, easy to work with. So, correct, being consistent, having your information be simple. We have both in the verbal communication and your written communications. So, correct, consistent, simple, easy to understand, easy to work with.

On the fast side, as I said, being responsive and agile. If you're responsive, you're meeting the need quickly. You're giving the customer a really positive experience from the very beginning. And the idea is to exceed their expectations from the very first conversation.

TOM

Okay.

CHRIS

I think a lot of companies think that if a customer is calling them and they want service that it's in the bag. And that's not the case, there's a lot of competition. And the expectation for a high level of service is, I think, is higher than ever.

TOM

Yeah.

CHRIS

And then the last one, sharp, is, you know, look good, be good. So, look good in terms of, and I know you'll appreciate this, your print materials, your communications, your branding. A lot of people focus on that to the detriment of the others, but look good. Be good is competent, be competent. So, those three ideas are all encapsulated in those points.

TOM

So, how then, because I love how you think about that because it's a model that you live from. But how then do you take that and get it to resonate in your unit, right? Because in the military it's a unit. And my sense is that, because of that background, there's an element of this that you bring to your team. You mentioned earlier, you know, the kind of team you have, you know, it's not a big staff. But my guess is you've done something with a true, fast and sharp with them too.

CHRIS

Right. Yeah. So, here's a real practical example. So, in order for us to really manifest those values, and have provide the kind of customer service that is represented by that, the information that we share should be consistent and accurate. So, one tool that is commonly used is a CRM. So, we use a client relationship management program. It's a web-based program. And every time someone contacts us, whether it's to pay a bill or to request an extra bin or to inquire about service, we're taking a lot of notes, with names. And so, when our caller ID comes back up again, and this customer's calling us back, they come up and we can answer the phone and use their first name. Say, "Hey, Susan."

TOM

Yeah. So, is that auto-generated? And I'm just asking a really practical question because it matters to be fast and responsive is, when the, caller ID comes up, is that triggering in your CRM system automatically?

CHRIS

No, not.

TOM

It's a manual process. Okay.

CHRIS

Yeah. So, our phone system presents the, you know, the credentials or the ID, and then we look them up as we're answering the phone. So, I know there are, there are applications that do that. We're not that sophisticated.

TOM

Okay. No, I just wondered because there's a technology aspect you mentioned. I just wanted to see if there was a correlation there. So, you're using that CRM, that CRM holds the data so that when your team are talking to people there is history. There is, there's all of this. Yeah.

CHRIS

That seems so basic. But let me tell ya, I mean, it is... I think it's a really revolutionary, it's simple, right? Use people's names. Remember the last conversation. That's hard to do when you're a big company. So, I understand there's limitations to how far you can take this, but I think

for a lot of your listeners out there that they're like me; they're a smaller company, you know, they're not publicly traded. And the reason they're a small company is maybe they've remained so because they want to know their customers. And they want their customers to feel like they're a part of something. So, and if you've had any sort of relationship with people over the years, remembering a person's name, remembering past conversations, builds trust, and that goes a long way. If you want to have customer retention, persistency of accounts where they're not moving, even if the price of a competitor is lower, those are the kinds of things that you do.

TOM

Yeah, so when I asked about team, you told me about a system. So, let's go back into your team again, because the first question I would have is, true, fast and sharp, like, something that you slap, you know, every time you go by a wall or, you know, you jump up and- or is there a grunt or, you know, a sound that you make when you... Is this deeply embedded in your culture or is it a philosophy that's embedded the way you've created the systems of your company, or is it both?

CHRIS

Yeah, I think it's both. We're not walking around with true, fast and sharp t-shirts or anything like that.

TOM

Okay.

CHRIS

But it's the principles that guide. You know, it's like a mission statement. A mission statement... if you have a business plan or marketing plan, you look at that mission. But you may not be walking around muttering it under your breath every time you fill up your coffee cup. But at the same time, these are principles that we talk about to the point where I don't know that we really have to think about it. We just reinforce those good behaviors. The value of information is high. You know, there's a premium on it; accurate information.

TOM

Right. Okay. Where do you run into obstacles with true, fast and sharp? Where do you hit walls with this? Fast, you've already talked about how you respond quickly to things, but sometimes quick can also be a detriment. Because... and I'm asking that not to, you know, dig into the dirty details of your life, but a lot of times we have philosophies that we run by and our teams have to implement those. So, we create systems around that, but underlying that we often, you know- and with a world that... team change. There's a old, you know, there's a transition in our staff, things like that. How do you get people to buy into that, and at the same time deal with the inevitable stuff that shows up as a result of trying to be too fast sometimes or trying to be too sharp? It may be a weird question, but that's something that strikes me. As you're processing this, how do you think about that?

CHRIS

Well, I think we talk about being competent. Nietzsche, one of, I'm sure, one of your favorite German philosophers there, had a great mustache, by the way. He talked about, freedom is the ability- is an ability that needs to be constrained or disciplined if you want to be competent. I think that's the buy-in is, we're iSecure, we're going to be competent. Here's the benefits of being competent. We're going to look good. We're going to get sales. We're going to have loyal customers. And so, it just broadens from there into this philosophy.

But it's really, I mean, what we're talking about right now are values, a way to manifest values. So, if you just say, "I value, integrity", what does that mean? So, you have to go deeper. And you have to be more detailed, but not so detailed that you doesn't make a difference every day. How do you execute integrity? Well, I say be true, be fast, be sharp. Be consistent.

TOM

That's good. That's good because it, what I love about it is it gives something you can grasp onto. You know, when you go back into your history, back into the military time and your time in the military, how did that true, fast and sharp, was that something, your commander, the base, whatever... and I'm completely butchering the way to say that... but how does that get imprinted there?

CHRIS

Yeah. Well, it's simple, especially if you're in the infantry or any of the combat arms, you just have to - I hate to be so blunt - but you either win or you're defeated, so you've got to be on target. You've got to be. Take the initiative, the first to act, you know, you decide when the attack or when the defense happens. To use a swordsman kind of analogy, a sharp sword is an effective sword, so you don't want to use tools that aren't effective. So that's all, that's all comes from a military training, of course. Because you want to win, you want to survive. You don't want to be the one that becomes the casualty. So, you seize on the initiative you strike first.

TOM

Hence, the focus on tools, because when I asked you about this originally you brought tools to bear, right? So, the swords, which are the bailing machine, but also the templates, the brochures, the things that you have ready to go are a really important part of it. So, it's your tool kit, having your toolkit ready, but also having a team that's prepared.

CHRIS

Yes. Yeah. Right. I mean, time is money. So, if we're going to do this, do it in a competent way. Don't waste time. You know, it's like, if you don't maintain your trucks, you're not going to be able to rely on them. So, that's part of that being effective.

TOM

Yeah. Yeah. That's good. You said early on picture, a circle with process and performance built in, and you said that true, fast and sharp really related to process. How does it relate to performance or what's the performance part of the loop?

CHRIS

Yeah. So, in the finance world, we use TTM as a reference; it stands for trailing 12 months. So, when you look at investment performance as an investment advisor, you're always looking at things like standard deviations, averages, you know, relationship to risk and those things. But those are all trailing indicators. It doesn't tell you what to do, it tells you what happened. The process is how you affect future performance. So, performance is really what happened. So, in terms of business performance, you're looking at, you know, sales volume growth, sales revenue growth, net income, customer growth, number of accounts. These are all trailing indicators that are your report card of how effective your process was.

TOM

Yeah.

CHRIS

So, it doesn't tell you what to do, but it tells you what happened. So, performance is where the rubber meets the road. And everybody's got their own favorite metrics. I encourage people to create what I call a dashboard. So, it's a one-page graphic that has all those key metrics. Maybe half a dozen, no more, that you pick out. Could be, like I said, account growth, sales growth, compare it to 12 months ago; you know, June 22 versus June 21. These are all metrics that can be used, there's hundreds of them.

TOM

So, I'm just processing this. So, true, fast and sharp is how you manage your process. Your process, if it's true, fast and sharp should deliver performance. That performance should indicate that you're on track with that. And so that's why it's a circle. You're going process into performance, performance back into process. And so, that military way of thinking means you're constantly moving your processes to impact performance. I mean, it's always an integrated whole, it's not independent of each other.

CHRIS

Yes Exactly. Back to the military analogy. And we're talking about this a lot, so I'll just go back to it. In the military world, you have what's called an operations order. And that is kind of, here's the plan. Here's what we plan to do. Here's all the things you need to know to make it successful. When it's over, when the mission's over, planning, mission, whatever happens, happens, there's something called an after-action review.

TOM

After-action review.

CHRIS

And that's really what happened and what do we need to make, what changes do we need to make? What worked, what didn't work? And so, it's the same concept of process and performance circle. You create the plan; you execute it and then you come back. What do we need to do different to make it better next time?

TOM

Yeah. that's good. So, how has this changed since 2005? So, in 2005, you start the business. You still come from that military background. Has your way of dealing with process and performance and true, fast and sharp adjusted or changed, say, in the last three years than when it was eight years ago. Not necessarily the results, but how you're implementing this philosophy and values?

CHRIS

Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's changed because in the beginning I was talking to myself and, you know, now I've got a team and there's unique challenges within that. Some of them very practical, like scheduling time to meet on a regular basis.

TOM

Right.

CHRIS

And making sure that the understanding is there in each set of eyes that you're looking at or on the same page. So, that's the difference is when you become a manager of a company that's just a couple of people and one of the people's you versus a team. And as people know, as you get bigger that just becomes more important to be able to competent managers that can help you with this process. So, it just gets more complicated, but the principles don't change. But it's a little harder, a little harder. Yeah.

TOM

Well, one of the things that I often ask related to whatever somebody shows up with on this conversation, because I don't ever know what you're coming with. So, when you come it's a conversation that unfolds. But I'm always interested in what have you seen as the result of this? What's the practical ROI of living from a true, fast and sharp process into performance, back into process into performance. What's the result of this in your business? Like what are you seeing? How do you see it proving itself versus just showing up every day and just getting in the truck and shredding stuff? There's a reason you have this as an underlying philosophy and value system, and it must do something for you.

CHRIS

Yeah, right. I bet a lot of the audience is familiar with somebody that's getting a lot of attention the last couple of years, Jordan Peterson. And he's a psychologist used to be a clinical psychologist, teacher, I think Toronto University. He's written some books recently. 12 Rules for Life, for turning chaos into order. I think that was 2018 he wrote that. But he's got a chapter in his book, he talks about, you know, even a guy that's on a sinking ship is happy to get up into a lifeboat. And the idea there is that today I want to compare myself to who I was yesterday or my previous situation. Did I improve my situation?

And so, for me, I don't get too granular day-to-day on the numbers. So, when I'm looking at to say, am I moving in the right direction? Is there something about today where I'm just a little bit better than yesterday? To kind of feed off of Peterson's idea is don't compare yourself to other people per se. But you personally, as a business owner or a manager or leader, am I a little better? Did I do a little better than yesterday? Did I improve, am I a better person a little bit in some way than I was yesterday? Am I more effective? Have we moved the company forward a step? So, sometimes that's a very technical, but sometimes it's can just be, yeah, I think we are, we are improving. We're getting better and making fewer mistakes. We're getting more accounts or we're saving you money a little, a little bit each day.

TOM

And day after day, those 1% 's add up. Those 1% improvements where you've gone from process into performance and you go, what's the 1% incremental thing we can do today that's slightly better. And it's not these big, massive jumps it's incremental growth and movement towards a better result. Yeah.

CHRIS

Yes. Exactly right. And when you're, I would say younger, or at least younger in the business, you're impatient. You want it to happen because maybe you know somebody or you read this article and, you know, I've been doing this for five years, why aren't I independently wealthy by now? Well, there's other ways to measure success, but you're exactly right. Focus on the incremental day by day improvement.

TOM

Yeah.

CHRIS

The results will be there. It's inevitable. It's inevitable at some point.

TOM

Yeah, that's really cool. As we get to the end of this, I was digging into your LinkedIn profile and like we said, we've talked for, I don't know, maybe 15 years we've known each other. But I'm digging into your LinkedIn profile and I discover in there, and you mentioned it earlier, you're in the investment business and I didn't know that about you. You're a registered

investment advisor. And what's intriguing to me about that is how that you've brought your military training and thinking and philosophies into this business. What has your investment advisor training, learning, experience brought to the business?

CHRIS

Yeah, right. Okay. Well, I think in the course of my work as an investment advisor, I worked with a lot of trusts and retirement plans and institutional kind of stuff. So, I got to be around successful business people. And so, I paid attention and watched what they did to be successful; their mannerisms, their habits, picked up a lot on that. I think a lot the way I look at today in terms of data, you know, having a performance dashboard, that all comes from my number's day. All that kind of stuff. So it was, it's been invaluable.

But really the biggest thing was, and this would be an encouragement too for the listeners, would be hang out with successful business people. They don't necessarily need to be NAID members or even in our same industry, but there's a lot to be learned from mentors that you can communicate with and connect with. And I think that's one of the biggest contributors to success is to be around successful business people,

TOM

Yeah.

CHRIS

Rub elbows with them.

TOM

Yeah, that's great. Well, Chris, I deeply appreciate you spending the time to talk about true, fast and sharp. I love that. I think it's a really helpful- even if somebody doesn't employ it, using that mechanism and the value structure that you've talked about in their own way allows them to actually engage some really cool results. And, I just appreciate you sharing with us and sharing your philosophy, your values, and what that's done for your business. So, thank you.

CHRIS

Thanks, Tom.