

Russ White 0:00

Well, it's great to welcome Eric Qualman back to the MSU Today microphones. Eric, known as Equalman is a 1994 Broad College of Business graduate from the marketing department and he's the founder of Equalman LLC, and motivational keynote speaker with an emphasis on leadership, innovation, and digital trends. Eric, great to have you back on the show.

Erik Qualman 0:23

Go Green! Good to hear you, Russ.

Russ White 0:24

Go White, Eric! And you know the last time I spoke with Eric Qualman better known as Equalman, he told me his life goal was to empower 7 billion people. By his estimates he's reached 35 million thus far. Today we're talking with Eric about his latest book, "The Focus Project: The Not So Simple Art of Doing Less," as well as how the digital landscape has changed since we last spoke three years ago, and will continue to change in 2021. Eric is a five time number one best selling author and motivational keynote speaker. He's performed in over 55 countries. And his work has been used by the likes of the National Guard, NBC Universal and NASA. His keynote topics focus on innovation, leadership, digital trends and digital transformation. In our last interview, Eric mentioned centering his next project around finding focus in a world filled with distractions, that's harder than it sounds. So this past July, Eric released "The Focus Project: The Not So Simple Art of Doing Less." So Eric, tell us how did "The Focus Project" come to fruition?

Erik Qualman 1:38

It came to fruition because it was something I was struggling with that each day I get home and my hair felt like is on fire. And keep in mind, I'm sitting there going, wait, I own the company. Like I control my time, what is going on? And so then I went down the path of I wonder if I'm alone. And so when I traveled the world, obviously pre- pandemic, I'd speak around the world and I'd go to green rooms and talk to a CEO. It might be a school principal, superintendent, stay-at-home dad. And everyone wrestles with the same thing. Because I talked to top performers ago, what's your key to success? And they go, I can focus a little better than most, and I go, what's your biggest challenge? They go maintaining that focus! And so I'm like, cool, I'm not alone. I need to do this. And so I always start a book with a readership of one meaning, will this be helpful for me five years from now for me to reference the book. And so that's why I undertook the project and the not so simple art of doing less better or how to focus in this unfocused world.

Unknown Speaker 2:37

One of the hardest things for us to do sometimes is to say no, right? We want to say yes to everything. But we can't do that is that part of this?

Erik Qualman 2:45

It is. And as you dig into it, as we did in the research, like you'll sit there and Steve Jobs will say, "sometimes the most important thing you do is deciding what not to do." And it's exactly that

it's just really understanding, doing the big versus the busy. And all of us kind of fall in the busy because little easier, and it gives us that dopamine hit. So it's like our mind trickiness. Hey, you took your emails from 100 to zero, it feels good, you get a dopamine hit. But unfortunately, as you look back over the years, you go, did I get the big things done? No, you did not.

Russ White 3:19

And how in particular is the pandemic affecting, you know, the focus project?

Erik Qualman 3:25

Yeah, it's interesting to actually move the book launch forward, which is unheard of in publishing to actually release a book earlier than it's planned for. Usually, they push it out because it's not ready. And we just got a lot of emails and people reaching out to us saying, hey, worse, we're good from a physical standpoint, but mentally, you know, we're not doing so great. And this focus project really helped us focus on what matters most. And so we released it early, which is risky, because it can actually could either hurt sales, or it might help them. Unfortunately, the key. My metrics always is it helping people. And so I got a bunch of emails from people saying, man, this is really what I needed during this pandemic. So the project in the book were written before the pandemic, but crazy enough is like designed for the pandemic. And now that we've entered 2021, it's really helpful to kind of reset your focus. And for a lot of people actually encourage them to take on their own focus project, either just read the book, or you can take on your own focus project after reading it as well, which is focusing basically on one thing per month, like one big thing for basically 30 minutes to an hour a day. Like what's that thing that you said, you're gonna write your screenplay, and that's been now you realize, wait, I've been saying that for nine years. And so whatever that thing is, like, just kind of take on your own focus project.

Russ White 4:42

And you're you started to talk about it. But why is it important for leaders to find focus?

Erik Qualman 4:48

It's important because as a leader, people are looking to you whether that's one person or 10,000 people and clarity is imperative. When you're leading to other people, and so you'd be the smartest person in the world. But if you don't have that clarity, that focus on where you're trying to go that firm destination, but being flexible in your path, a, you're not going to get there and be no one's gonna follow you because they don't know what the vision is. And so that's why it's important. You know, you think about the words vision and focus. The reason they're called that, right, the reason they go hand in glove is you have that vision. And it's now I'm going to focus on that vision that I have. And so that's why it's imperative, it's imperative for all of us, because we all lead ourselves. But whether you're a leader of one, or a leader of 10,000, that's why it's critical.

Russ White 5:37

And how do you in particular, find your focus?

Erik Qualman 5:40

You gotta have systems so you can't rely on willpower. And also understand one of the key learnings there's basically the top three things I learned during writing the book, you always people ask, you know, hey, I want to write a book, Eric, what should I do? I go, first of all, don't write it, because you think it's gonna make you a ton of money. Because basically, only 5%. So more than 250 books. So once you have that in your mind, okay, if that was the reason you're gonna do it, don't do it. But most people want to do it because they have it in them. And it's one of two reasons you write a book number one is to either change the world or to change yourself. And in sometimes you do both. And so when I undertook the project of writing the book, the focus project, what did what did change for me, and I always, at the end, reflect what were the top three things that I took away from the process of actually writing the book, and in this case, undergoing the project. The first one was that focus is really, really hard. But the focus can be learned, it can become a habit, when I say really hard, I have written a book on the focus project, when I was writing the book, during the focus project there days go by when I fall into the old trap, I'm writing the book, I'm in the middle of writing the book. And sometimes I won't even write a word I go, what is going on, I write a book about focus, I never read a word about focus. And so focus is really hard, but it can be learned second, people that are really good at what they do, are better at focus than us because they say no to almost everything. And that's not because they're smarter. It's not because of a better education or some DNA, they have systems and processes in place to say no meaning now my system most of the time that I default to is if it's not an emphatic Yes.

It should be an emphatic no example of emphatic Yes. Hey, I've got four tickets to the Final Four to watch Tom Izzo crush another team? Yes, I want those tickets. Let me do it. The emphatic no is when you're like, I should probably do that because it probably be good for my career or probably good for XYZ that should be an emphatic n o. So should be an emphatic Yes. Or emphatic No. And then third is strive for progress, not perfection that relates to the question is asked me, it's how do I find focus? Number one is, I'm not trying to be perfect at it, I'm just trying to get better at it each and every day. And tactically the way that I do it, my system to get back to focus each night, write down the one thing that I must do that makes everything else either easier or unnecessary. And tackle that in the morning before the day tackles me. So set aside that half hour, most of these things that we need to tackle are literally 30 minute things. And so it's just tackling that for the day tackles me, then once the day starts going most days, I'm good at that. And then I'm playing with house money, anything I do beyond that, it's great. And when you're throughout the rest of the day, what I try to do is check in with myself, that's myself, What am I doing? Why am I doing it? And should I be doing that right now in this moment. And so it's really those check ins at night and the check ins throughout the day. That's the only way you have a fighting chance.

Russ White 8:47

We're on MSU Today, and I'm talking with Erik Qualman, better known as Equalman. And you can learn a lot more about what we're talking about and find the book at equalman.com. And, Eric, we mentioned at the top of your keynotes and website focus on digital leadership, how do you define what that is? And why is that important?

Erik Qualman 9:06

Digital leadership at a one word level is empathy. So we've been now nine years looking at Digital leadership, because what happened is I go into these companies, we wrote a book, social dynamics, it took off, I'm coaching companies, and I get in there and go, Whoa, you guys are like using an old playbook. Like we're talking about this stuff, but you're talking about Flintstone stuff right now. And so what were the look at all right, there's nothing out there the top business books which are awesome. Like you think Malcolm Gladwell's "Tipping Point," Jim Collins "Good to Great" you got Stephen Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People." I call those the big three awesome people great books. But all those were written before Facebook existed YouTube, tik tok, yada yada Instagram on down the line. So that's why we went under went the research for that particular book and have been in it since just for nine years have been telling people this is what digital leadership looks like. And now the pandemic's pushed everything forward five years. So now everyone really gets it and understands that transformation isn't a one time kind of thing. It's an all the time kind of thing. And so what we want to do is give them habits. So digital leadership, technology changes every second, but human nature never does. And so it's really about having those habits each and every day, no one that technology changes, but human nature never does what what happens as a digital leader you can employ and some of it's simpler than you think. So we're coaching a big chocolate company, I won't mention who it is great people, but they brought me into the board meeting. And I'm sitting there and we're kind of doing some brainstorming, just looking at it. And I go look, you sell this chocolate at Kroger, you have no idea who buys this chocolate, you don't have a relationship with your customer, you have a relationship with Kroger, but your customers, the person that eats that chocolate, and that's an issue that you don't know who's buying your chocolate. Now, that might have been okay a couple of years ago, a decade ago, but this is a digital world, Amazon is going to eat your lunch, no pun intended, because they know who buys your chocolate. And some people now subscribe to buy chocolate every month in so you've got to move quickly to make sure that you're treating your chocolate company as a software as a service company, meaning that people do want to get chocolate delivered to their door every month. And so what does that look like at a retail level is I would take a candy bar and open it up on the table in this board meeting in London, and just say, why is the inside of this wrapper blank? Like why doesn't this tell me how to reorder this chocolate and issued enough like, let's talk about the jeans company. And I have these jeans, like you find a pair of jeans, you're gonna wear those for like 10-20 years, right? So like, it's like a glorious day when you find a pair of jeans that fit. And then you go to reorder the jeans, I'll try to reorder these things. I'm like, there's tons of information inside these pants. Like there's 1000 numbers. They're like saying why they're the greatest thing and that they are invented. And during the Gold Rush, blah, blah, blah, how do I reorder these pants, and then you call up, you're putting in every number in the website, it doesn't tell you the pant because you don't know if it's 510-530-7574, whatever. Then you call up and you're like, Hey, I'll read you every number that's inside these pants Just tell me and they don't know. And it's like, the number one thing that should be in these pants is scan this code or go to this website address to just hit reorder. So sometimes it gets it's easier than you think. So that's digital leadership.

Russ White 12:36

I know these things change so much, Erik so fast now these days, but since we spoke in 2017, you know, how has the digital landscape changed?

Erik Qualman 12:47

Yeah, it's changed a lot. I think that I've always said that, like digital leadership, that's just an adjective right now. Like, it's just gonna be leadership, the pandemic style, push your companies five years forward. And it's just a it's more of a mindset, that that's why we always talk about those habits that you need to practice. And it all starts with that empathy, can you understand your customer, your employee, in we think about that it's not really necessarily digital, it's just imperative in the digital era, since there's 100%, transparency, and that your customer is more of a partner, not a customer that you're working together to come up with the solution in the biggest shift to is communication, like almost everything has been productized, meaning that China can rip that product off in a second. So it's who can communicate to you their story, and we buy stories to where you're going to purchase that service or that product. So interesting enough, I was marketing major. at Michigan State, that shift in the last couple decades has been massive, because it was before marketing is like, oh, funny commercial. Now marketing is the only thing that separates a company because the product can be replicated in China five seconds later. So it's like how do you tell that story? And how do you get people interested in what is so much noise out there? So it's been a fascinating journey to watch that change?

Russ White 14:06

What about moving forward? Erik? I mean, there's things like TikTok and podcasts like we're doing are increasing in popularity and consumption, there are streaming wars, just what are some of the trends you see on the horizon?

Erik Qualman 14:19

Now I love that term trends. And so I always tell people invest in the trend, not in the tool, because if you could predict the tool, I'd have this five Apache helicopters taking over I wanted to go that not that there aren't those a bad example likes to say, say five helicopters that are flying around and so but what you can see is the trends. And so always invest in your people that your customers, your employees, because whatever tool if MySpace becomes Facebook, if you over invested in MySpace, your customers and your employees don't come with you. But if you invest in the people and then the trend of social then they come over no matter whether that MySpace becomes Facebook, Facebook's comm Instagram, Instagram comes tik tok. And so the trend that I'm most interested in is anything that removes friction. So why is Amazon dominating, they remove friction, I don't want to go to the store, I thought to return something, I want it to be free. And it just everything's been Amazon, you know, that's they remove friction, they're in the business of removing friction. And so in my mind, it's marrying a couple things, if you marry voice. So if you think about artificial intelligence, most of us, the simplest level is like Alexa or Google Home. So Alexa, and then you marry that with the gig economy gig, meaning that you outsource stuff like Uber or instacart. So people are willing to do work, they're kind of for hire. If you marry those two technologies, that's where I think the big thing is

because it removes friction. So an example what that looks like, Alexa, please send the same groceries about last week to my house two hours from now. So then you marry that voice activation, it's got the information about what was ordered, it goes and find someone that's willing to go get that out of the store, it's then delivered to your home. And so in my mind, that's the biggest opportunity in the near and far term is marrying those two things to remove friction.

Russ White 16:11

I'm reminded of Wayne Gretzky's line about "you got to go where the not where the puck is, but where the puck is going," sort of.

Erik Qualman 16:18

Oh, you're right.

Russ White 16:21

But what about some predictions? Erik, for the future of us tech, giants, Facebook, Google, Twitter, apple, Amazon, they're all in the news all the time. Having some some battles with legislators that I'm sometimes not sure even understand what they're trying to legislate. But where do you think big tech is heading?

Erik Qualman 16:40

Yeah, does the famous when Mark Zuckerberg was big questions like, do you even understand what we do? Does, but I mean, you can make fun of me, of course, they're not gonna know this stuff. I mean, it's not, that's not their strength. But with the big four column, the big tech giants, is they're smart. So they'll proactively break themselves up in some instances. So I think Amazon, they did this before. So you just have to look at history like people call Erik, you're a futurist. It's like, how do you I go, and I don't predict the future, I just can kind of see kind of the trends in the way I can see them is because they repeat themselves. What that looks like, as I say, repeats itself, as you look at Amazon, about eight years ago. Now. It used to be you'd never got taxed on Amazon, or either you are online, which is glorious, right? There's new, they're new, so there's no taxes, and there's no taxes, because they're not paying for the roads. They're not paying, like they're not using the stuff that you pay taxes for. But then, obviously, you need some money. So the states wanted to get taxes from Amazon. And so they resisted that first. And then they flipped it. They did like a judo move, like, they totally flipped it, wait, wait wait. How do we get rid of the competition? Ah, taxes, we can handle it, they can't, yeah, you should tax us. And that's when they started to put warehouse into that we're gonna pay for this stuff, pay for these roads, we're gonna start putting warehouses right next to where we're shipping and these major cities. And so I tell you that story, because these guys are smart. And so they'll probably Amazon most likely will break off AWS not to bore your audience to death. But AWS is basically cloud servers. So anything that you need to kind of have the operation, like they control a third of that market, it's big money. So think big building with tons of these blackbox servers in it. And so they're making money in margin hand over fist. Now, the monopoly side what they do, the person would argue why it's bad is they take that money, and they allow you to buy a roll of scotch tape for 299 to get shipped to your house free within the hour, meaning

their lives losing money on that, but they can afford it because they're making so much money on the other side, they're like, let's use that money to dominate this side, and get rid of every piece of competition. And so most likely, you'll see AWS spun off. I think that Amazon will do it on their own accord rather than wait for legislator legislation to do it. But they don't become the most valuable company in the world, just to AWS part of that spin off. And there's a reason why they headquartered their second headquarters in near DC.

Russ White 19:28

and then we'll just put a several billion more in Jeff Bezos, his bank account right.

Erik Qualman 19:31

Now, your audience might be curious to know that he's building a clock in the middle of nowhere Texas for \$42 million. And it's basically wants them to, it's inside of a mountain. So it's protected from the elements and he wants it to be like the pyramids. So that and the reason he does it because he wants to think long term because like for 15 years, people thought basis was crazy because they're losing money. Why would you invest in Amazon? I remember, every time I travel around, it's like, well, I'd never buy stock in Amazon because they lose money. It's like nobody wants to think long term. So he's got this clock that's gonna work for 10,000 years because he wants people to stumble upon it in the middle of nowhere Texas go Why is there a clock, a giant grandfather clock inside of this mound?

Russ White 20:11

I've always wondered with the social media and particularly, I guess thinking of Facebook and Twitter and Instagram with so valuable it's such a contributor society in some ways, but then such a cesspool and others. Sometimes I would, what would your comment be? Would we be better off if it had never been invented? The social media, just just your thoughts on the good versus bad of those these media?

Erik Qualman 20:36

Yeah, no, it's a it's something I've wrestled with, because I'd say that my "Focus Project" book is an anti-venom to "Socialnomics," my first book, meaning that I told people get into this stuff, this isn't just for teenagers, it's going to change the way we elect politicians are going to change the way we communicate, could change business can change the world. And people went too far into their phones. And they're at a disadvantage, because they've got these trained PhDs, they pay millions of dollars to make sure that you stay on the site. Now the proponent of this social media, Alex would say, that's a good thing, we're giving you something that you want to see, we're just reacting to what you like, so that we serve an ad up for something that's relevant to you, the opposite side of that, we would argue that that's a bad thing. Because sometimes the stuff you serve isn't in the best interest of that person. And so my take on it is that it's a scalpel. All these tools, all these digital tools, the telephone, anything technology going back hundreds of years. They're all scalpels, meaning that they can save a life or they can take a life. So it's all depends on how you use it. And so my whole purpose, I think, and why I'm here is to help people understand how to use these tools. I mean, that's why we wrote the book, what happens in Vegas days on YouTube, and why so many colleges and middle schools

and high schools are using it for their kids that we wrote what happens on campus days on YouTube. And so the hope is that it just shows these tools aren't inherently good or bad, they're actually can be very good. They can connect the world like never before. When you break down those barriers of culture, that I can understand you better, and it's less likely that we're going to go to war. I mean, that's the vision at the highest end. But it's also it can take a life because someone gets served something that they make fun of the way they look and all sudden there's a person to commit suicide. And so it is literally that those two extremes when you think about world peace to someone taking their life. And so the whole point of my mission is to make sure that everyone lives their best life and understands how to use these tools in the best way.

Russ White 22:38

Because there's one thing I don't know if I invented this term, Erik, but I call it like keyboard victory all it's like the venom people spew on Twitter and Facebook things they would never say to your face. And I just wonder where that comes from? And why is there so much anger in people sometimes? I don't know.

Erik Qualman 22:54

Yeah, no, I think it might always been there. It's just now there's an outlet for it, they can go. I mean, think about Twitter, you now have a platform that go to a billion people. And so I tell people about your digital stamp, you can positively influence someone a second from now, five years, 50 years, 500 years, or you can negatively influence them. And so, if the negative stuffs out there, remember all of you out there, these tools are free, you don't have to be on them. If it's not doing you positive, unplug for those that can use them and it's positive for you use them like no one's forced you to use these tools, they're free. And so do what you will and find out what's best for you on how to use it.

Russ White 23:36

Very well said and Erik, I mentioned at the tap of course, you're a graduate of Michigan State University and just reflect a little bit on what that means to you to be a Spartan how the place impacted you and maybe still does?

Erik Qualman 23:49

No it still does, oh shoot. I was going to show you these shoes are awesome, although we're not we're kind of more audio anyways. But Aaron Theory sent me a great guy. He was a manager a couple years on the basketball team after I was he graduated, he's younger than I am and he's just a great he's a Spartan right Spartans will help like I always say Spartans Will. help like I think they need to add the help and the Spartans Will. give and your audience can't see these but I mean, these things are awesome. So the basketball team and Aaron sent these to me. So the Spartans well in the back of Spartan on the head there and so I think he epitomizes it least behind the scenes there like you if you look at Lisa Parker, you know, it's Mark Shanell for one of the things that we have set up with Michigan State on down the line Coach Izzo , man, I can still hear him in my head. I mean, I was a manager and then walked down and got a scholarship at Michigan State to play basketball and just hearing him every day in my head, like "If it's easy, it would already be done." You know, just like stuff like that, or, you know, "good players play,

tough players win." It's about the grit and the grind. And so I think that's the shared is that the two things I think are common was Spartans and my wife would echo this. She went to Miami University, you know, in in Florida, and she goes like, it's like, you guys all seem to have one you're always excited when there's another Spartan and you're willing to help them out, oh, you went to Michigan State, okay, I'm more likely to help you out. And then two is that just have that grit and that grind. So whoever came up with Spartans Will. they nailed it. I mean, that should be there for 100 years.

Russ White 25:23

And Erik, let's circle back to "The Focus Project," your new book and the reason we decided to catch up today, just some key takeaways, what would you like people to make sure they get from the book?

Erik Qualman 25:33

Number what I'd love for them to do this today. So even if you don't read the book, obviously love if you read the book, but if you don't read the book, I want you to go and either email yourself or text yourself. So text 10 years into the future. So go ahead and text or email yourself 10 years in the future, and write down what's the one thing you'd regret not doing. Like if 10 years went by and this hadn't happened? What would be the biggest regret. And I want you to take that I want you to screenshot that. That's not your new screensaver, I want you to print it, I want you to take that up to the mirror in your bathroom. So you see it every morning. And I want you to undergo starting January 1, or for all you a type personalities all you Spartans start December 31. And that is what you're going to do for a half hour a day, you're going to attack that thing that you wrote down. That's what I want you all to do. That's your takeaway. That's what I want to make sure that you do as you stop listening here, or just unplug right now and just write it out. Do it right now, I want you to get started today.

Russ White 26:34

And Erik, you're so full of great wisdom, just any other thoughts you'd want to leave us with today?

Erik Qualman 26:42

Go Green, Go white! Just remember, it's I forgot to remind myself this because it's tough. I mean, 2020 go through these tough periods. Know that, you know, all of us kind of have that self doubt, whatever that is, they call it imposter syndrome. Know that I've been backstage with some names, you'll know like, I won't name all them. But like Magic Johnson, for instance, or whoever it is, you name them. And they're nervous back there. They've got imposter syndrome. So why me? Why will this audience why Listen to me or for you, it's might not get on stage. It's like, Why can I start this company? Or why would I be the person for this position? And it's like you are and just know that everyone wrestles with that even the best of the best, always have that creep in. And the key is you can't live there ever creep in and go, oh, even the top people in the world have that creep in their mind. And if I'm nervous, I just got to change that word from being nervous. And I'm excited. So use that to your advantage. Yeah, I'm nervous to go out there on this court. I'm nervous to go into this new job interview. But now let me change that

to my power. Now I'm excited to go. And so it's not a "Pollyanna" that everything's rainbows and unicorns, as my daughters would say, it's just understanding that don't live there. Don't be a black belt, beating yourself up in the head. And the best way to do that is to take action stress isn't caused by doing something, stress is caused by not doing what you know, you should be doing, what you're put on this planet to do. And so undergo that focus project, write down that one thing that will make everything else either easier and unnecessary and start it today.

Russ White 28:18

Well, again, it's "The Focus Project: The Not so Simple Art of Doing Less," from Michigan State University alumnus Erik Qualman, and everything we've talked about and more on the book, is at equalman.com. And Erik, great catching up with you. Thanks for joining us today.

Erik Qualman 28:35

A pleasure to be here. I love it. Sparty nation. It's a good time to be a Spartan as always, and if I can help in anyway, let me know.

Russ White 28:42

Will do and I'm Russ White. This is MSU Today.

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