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## CTRL+CLICK CAST #50 - Professionalism with Dan Mall

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**Lea Alcantara:** From [Bright Umbrella](#), this is CTRL+CLICK CAST! We inspect the web for you! Today we are talking about professionalism with special guest Dan Mall. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

**Emily Lewis:** Emily Lewis!

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**Emily Lewis:** Before we get into the show, Lea, how awesome is it that we've already reached 50 episodes since the rebrand of CTRL+CLICK CAST?

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**Lea Alcantara:** I know! And it's been really fantastic to see our little show has been gaining traction recently. So in our last episode about [Podcasting 101](#), we mentioned we were going to try to implement more tracking stats.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Lea Alcantara:** So I just checked our PodTrac stats the other day and we've had over 10,000 downloads in the past 90 days!

**Emily Lewis:** That blows my mind! [Laughs]



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**Lea Alcantara:** I know. I know.

**Emily Lewis:** We are so grateful for everyone's support since listeners like you are the ones who have helped us get to 50! So thanks for subscribing, tweeting about us and sharing our show. Every little bit helps.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yes, thank you! And I'm so excited about today's guest being on Episode 50.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, it's kind of like a benchmark episode in a sense of it's number 50, but today we're going to talk about professionalism because we've had a number of episodes recently where we talked about the importance of so-called soft skills, like how critical communication, planning, empathy and even just being a good employee are to a successful web career.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** So we thought it would be timely to sort of dive into this topic of professionalism deeper, and who better than to help us than Dan Mall, cohost of the renowned Businessology podcast that teaches designers how to run better businesses. In addition to being a podcast host, Dan is a creative director and adviser with extensive experience leading design teams and crafting processes for successful digital work. Welcome to the show, Dan!

**Dan Mall:** Thanks! Thanks for having me!

**Lea Alcantara:** So Dan, can you tell our listeners a bit more about yourself?

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, I can. I'm a designer. I live in Philadelphia. I'm married to my wife Emily and I have two kids ... two daughters, Sidda and Charlotte, and with all the time that I'm not spending with them, I try to do design work and work with design teams to make nice things.

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**Emily Lewis:** So you mentioned one of your daughter's name is Sidda. Isn't that a character from a book?

**Dan Mall:** It sort of is. So I don't know if any of you remember this, but there was a movie around – I don't know – I guess ten or fifteen years ago called *The Divine*...

**Emily Lewis:** *Divine Secrets*, I thought that's what it was, *of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. That's right.

**Dan Mall:** Yes, thank you because I can't even remember the title of that movie.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** And my wife and I were dating at the time, she was my girlfriend at the time, and she went to see it.

**Lea Alcantara:** Aww.

**Dan Mall:** And I think – I don't know – we were pretty young, and she came back and she told me about the movie and she said, "Oh, there is a character in that movie named Siddalee. Maybe one day if we ever have a daughter, we'll name our daughter that. Ha-ha-ha," and we joked about it.

**Lea Alcantara:** Aww.

**Emily Lewis:** Aww.

**Dan Mall:** And nine years later when we got married and when she got pregnant and we're trying to pick out names, we were like, "Remember that name Siddalee?" And so, we named our daughter Siddalee after that.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

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**Dan Mall:** And so we tried to look it up and figure out like where it's from, but there's actually no origin. We found out that the author made it up for the book that eventually became the movie, and so it's just kind of a made-up name, but we really liked it so much.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh, I love that story. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, that's so sweet.

**Dan Mall:** So that's where Sidra comes from.

**Emily Lewis:** So let's go ahead and dive into today's topic. So how would you define professionalism?

**Dan Mall:** That is so difficult.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** I've never been good at defining stuff, but fortunately for me, there's a really great – I guess treatise is the only way that I can talk about it – written by a guy named Andy Rutledge, who's a great designer. And he wrote this whole like book about what it means to be a design professional, and there's a website devoted to it. There's an e-book, but you can read the whole thing online. It's [designprofessionalism.com](http://designprofessionalism.com). And there's even like a charter that you can sign that it's like, "I commit to being a design professional," and so he has a bunch of qualifications for what design professional means. And I'm not going to read the whole thing, but there are things like there's a great responsibility that comes with it, there's accountability, you have specialized theoretical knowledge, you may have institutional preparation, you have autonomy, you have clients rather than customers ... like all these really great things that make up what a design professional is. I think if I have to sum



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it up, it would just be about being very, very good at a particular set of things and then acting responsible, both morally and ethically, to the people that you're doing the work for.

**Lea Alcantara:** I think that's a pretty good summary in a nutshell. The ... basically doing what you set out to do and then having the moral and ethical background to execute as well.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think the thing that like he does a good job in all of his writing about hold up certain parts of that. So it's not just doing something, but it's doing something well and doing something to a standard of quality.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Dan Mall:** And then also like doing it, so doing it to the best of your ability and the best of sort of the industry to look up to that. And then just doing a good job, like being outstanding about it and being trustworthy and all those kinds of things.

**Emily Lewis:** Well, this is the first time I'm hearing it, but I'm actually looking through it. It's available as I guess in e-book, but it's also available online.

**Dan Mall:** It's pretty fantastic.

**Emily Lewis:** This is amazing.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, it really is. Wow! Gosh, this should be taught in schools for like UX design or design. Gosh, no better way to prepare yourself than to understand what the standards are to start with.



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**Dan Mall:** Yeah, exactly, and I know Andy, he has put a lot of time into researching this, studying it, writing about it, and talking about it on podcasts. I mean, there are a lot of research and a lot of time and a lot of experience that has gone into writing this. I don't think he just sat down one day and just like churned out 25,000 words. I think this is like months' or years' worth of culmination of what he has understood about being a design professional.

**Emily Lewis:** Well, so I guess the definition of being unprofessional is literally the opposite of what you just described.

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** But I think some of the things that occurred to me based on my own experience is that I think far too often we may think that professionalism, especially within our industry, kind of extends to our skill set and maybe not necessarily how we interact with people, and some people may not realize that it may be unprofessional to not return phone calls.

**Dan Mall:** Yes.

**Emily Lewis:** Not acknowledge you received an email, even if you can't respond to it right away or just things like that. So are there any kinds of traits or behaviors you've seen within ... amongst design professionals or web professionals that maybe are just sort of subconsciously unprofessional?

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, absolutely. So I think I'll answer sort of the opposite of like what makes someone a professional to me. For me, if I had to pick one trait, it would have to be communication. So the people that communicate and over-communicate, I treat them as professionals because I feel like they're treating me as a professional and doing me a professional courtesy by communicating about



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what they're doing or what they're not doing. And I hold that higher than I hold the quality of their work.

So as an example, I've worked with people that are excellent designers and developers, so I'm thinking of one person in particular who is just probably like one of the best people in the world at what he does, but every time I work with him, he misses deadlines. And I'm like I don't know anyone that can do what he does better than him, but I still am hesitant to hire him for projects or work with him because I'm like, I know that if he says to me, "This thing is due on Wednesday, I'll have it by Wednesday," then I have to bake-in Friday. I have to sort of overcompensate for that. So I would much rather take someone who does mediocre or above average work that is on time and is communicative about their work over someone who has a high quality of work, but just sort of doesn't respect kind of the soft stuff around that.

**Emily Lewis:** I couldn't agree more. Dan, you and I had an opportunity to work together a little bit with Web Standards Sherpa. And that put me in a really unique position where I was dealing with lots of really talented designers and developers not to produce web work, but to produce content, which is a whole different skill set that you may or may not have. But when you sign up to contribute to a publication there becomes a sort of expectation of you communicating and meeting deadlines and things like that. And it was an eye-opening experience. It seems that deadlines almost seemed like they're flexible in our industry, you know?

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs] I hate that, and I know I'm guilty as well so I'm certainly not...

**Emily Lewis:** I am saying this as I'm literally behind on a deadline right now. [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs]

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**Emily Lewis:** I guess, and my point is that what I try and do – and I know I would have appreciated it when I was working with Sherpa – is that when I’m behind on a deadline, I know I’m behind about two days before the deadline comes up, and I usually give someone a heads up and say, “This is behind. This is going to affect it in this manner,” and I continue to keep them posted. And that’s something that I would have loved. I would have loved to have that kind of communication, even though it’s sort of saying, “Hey, I’m dropping the ball or I’m doing something that’s not great, but I respect your time. I respect your input in this, so I’m going to let you know about it.”

**Dan Mall:** Yep, absolutely. I think that’s probably one of the most professional things that someone can do for someone else. It’s just about courtesy, it’s about respecting someone else. Even if you’re dropping the ball, just let them know that. And I think that’s a matter of scoping. One of the things that I work on a lot with my apprentices is we learn to scope from month 2 of their apprenticeship. I try to teach them how to scope. Because when you’re late on something, you should know way in advance that you’re going to be late. Because if you’re trying to deliver something to a client and they’re sitting at their desk until 5 p.m. waiting for you to deliver this thing and you don’t deliver until midnight that night, who knows if they’re just sitting around waiting for you to send them that thing, like it’s just not courteous at all.

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But like if you know way before you’re missing a deadline, if you’re doing your work properly, you know the day before you’re going to miss it, or sometimes the week before that you’re going to miss that deadline. If you say to a client a week in advance, “Hey, I’m really sorry I’m behind on a couple of things. Do you mind if I have two days extra on this,” it’s usually like, “Yeah, no problem. Thanks for the heads up.”

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But if you tell a client that at 4:59 when the thing is due at 5 o'clock, of course they're going to be upset with you. Like, that's unprofessional. So I think a lot of it is just a matter of knowing where you are in your process and then as soon as you miss a small deadline, you know you're going to blow the whole thing, you've got to let somebody know about that, whether it's your coworkers or your project manager or your client or whoever it is that you're accountable to.

**Emily Lewis:** I think that example leads nicely to my next question because I was going to ask if you can learn how to be professional. And it sounds to me that at least for some things, like you were describing, your apprentices are learning how to scope and understand where they are in the schedule ... that's something you can learn easily.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, most skills in our industry can be learned. I certainly believe that as a philosophy of my own, otherwise, I wouldn't even do an apprenticeship. Like I wouldn't ... I feel like all of the skills can be learned, the design, the dev, the professionalism, all of that stuff. Like the stuff that comes with you is your own character, but all of the skills, hard and soft, I think are things that you learned. And you may have predispositions towards some of them that make some easier than others for you, but I think all of it, they're all muscles.

It's like when going to the gym, you don't go to the gym, the first day that you've ever gone to the gym and you're already buff, like you've got to work those muscles. And sometimes your calves and your biceps and whatever, they are weak because you haven't worked them out, and then the more you worked them out, the stronger they become. So I think the same thing applies to professionalism or design or any of that stuff. The more you practice design, the better designer you're going to be. The more you practice handing things in on time, the more professional you're going to be. So I think it's



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definitely a skill that you learn both by your own mistakes as well as your own successes and all of that kind of aggregates into you being a professional.

**Lea Alcantara:** So I'm curious though, we kind of mentioned a lot of things about the web, professionalism and design because that's the world we live in. Do you feel that there is a difference between how professionalism is perceived on the web versus other industries?

**Dan Mall:** I think so. Well, I don't know about other industries. I think any industry that has sort of craft-based, I think an appreciation for the craft is kind of prerequisite number one for being a professional ... or at least it goes hand in hand with some of the soft skills. Because if you hand things in on time and it's just garbage, like that's not really worth much. Like at least you've got it in on time, bonus points for that, but if it doesn't fulfill the requirements or the assignment or the brief or it doesn't actually do the thing that the person who hired you wants it to do ... I mean, that's only so professional. So I think certainly the appreciation for the craft part is part of the professionalism. You do have to be good at what you do.

And I think that's one of the things I like most about what Andy has written is that it kind of keeps both of those things in balance. You have to have the soft stuff, but you also have to be really good at what you do and continuing ... I think part of what he wrote is that a good design professional continues to work at their craft and they continue to try and get better at it by attending workshops and conferences and practicing what they do and doing all of that kind of stuff. So I think it certainly goes hand-in-hand with it. As compared to other professions, I don't know. I'm not really sure. I've been a web designer longer than I've been I guess anything else, so I'm not really sure how other industries really treat that.



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**Lea Alcantara:** I think the reason why I asked this question is that our clients aren't necessarily in the web industry. Do you know what I'm saying? So like they've got a service or a product that they are trying to sell and they have no idea how to work on the web. And then they speak to us and sometimes – and this is an unfortunate thing – they hire us because of other people in their industry not fulfilling the basics of professionalism. Have you encountered that, and what do they say to you?

**Dan Mall:** I think I've encountered that, although it does put up a big flag for me when somebody says like, "Hey, we'd love to work with you." I'm like, "That's awesome. That's a great compliment and I'd love to talk to you," and they say, "And we'd love to work with you because we have some baggage. These people weren't great to us or we didn't like working with them." That always makes me question a little bit. That's certainly not a thing where I go, "Oh, I'm walking away from this because it's not going to be good." But it's a conversation point now, "What didn't you like about those other folks? Is it something about them? Were they not professional enough?" And so I try to dig deeply into that because I think that affects your relationship. Working with a client is a relationship in the same way that when you first date somebody, you ask them how many people they've dated, you know?

**Lea Alcantara:** Right, right. [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** It's kind of the same thing. At the risk of being crude here, you want to know your fear of chance of getting STIs.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

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**Dan Mall:** So I think the same applies when working with clients.

**Lea Alcantara:** Oh, Dan, that's amazing.

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I think it's very true, and I think it also reflects another level of professionalism as you get further in your career – you, the general you. I remember when I was first starting out, I took any project that came my way. And as I become more professional in terms of valuing the investment of my time, my time in the business, valuing the kind of clients that I want to work with that you do want to have those conversations, that you do want to look out for the red flag, that if one of the reasons they didn't like the previous person was really something with the client.

**Dan Mall:** Yep.

**Emily Lewis:** Knowing those things, knowing the questions to ask so you don't get yourself in an engagement that you're really going to be unhappy in.

**Dan Mall:** Yep, absolutely. I think, Lea, to kind of see your question about the other professions as I think about it.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Dan Mall:** I'm a big basketball fan. I grew up playing basketball. I grew up in North Philly and I like watching basketball. And I think about like there's a bunch of basketball players that are excellent at what they do, but they don't show up to practice.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.



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**Dan Mall:** So like I live in Philadelphia. I root for the 76ers. They haven't been that good for a long time. They're starting to get good now, but Allen Iverson was one of the star players on the Sixers for a long time, and he was notorious for just never coming to practice or coming to practice drunk. And like as good as he was – he's an excellent basketball player – but as good as he was, he just wasn't being professional because he just wouldn't show up and help his team and he would just kind of show up on game day. And that's partly why the Sixers never won a title when Iverson was part of it because he just wasn't professional. So I think that quality exists in all industries in some form or another.

**Emily Lewis:** So do you think that if the definition of professionalism or the expectations involved with being a professional is the same as someone who's first starting their career versus someone who's established? Is the expectation higher for someone who's established, or should it be the same regardless?

**Dan Mall:** I don't think it should be the same regardless, because I think that the old uncle Ben quote from *Spiderman*, which is the, "With great power comes great responsibility." When you start out as a designer, you don't have great power. And that's the nature of it. You learn to get that power. You learn it by how you command language and how you command tools and how you project in a meeting and how you can walk into a boardroom. Like that stuff that I don't expect any student or apprentice or starting designer to be able to do well because they haven't exercised that muscle. So I think definitely the stakes are higher as you get more professional, and I think it's not a coincidence that people that have been doing what they're doing for a long time do get bigger-budget, higher-stake projects.



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I think it would be lopsided if, whoever, Nike hired some student out of school to redesign their website. It would just be the wrong amount of responsibility for the wrong amount of power. So I think they do work in tandem where the more you learn, the more you grow, the more professional you become, the more responsibility you can take on and you can be ethical saying like, “Yes, this is a gigantic project with a gigantic budget, and yes, I do have the skill to take it on and be a professional through it.”

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I was also going to ask, do you think that there is an expectation ... well, you see, I find this is hard because I can't say that I experienced this when I was working with like another web agency. It was when I was working as an employee for a large Fortune 500 company, and I was just a web professional on a marketing team, so I wouldn't have called it web industry. And the executives in that company, I felt like they were the least professionally-behaved people in the organization almost that they have risen to a level of, as crazy as it sounds, responsibility and prominence – and I'm sure they were making good money to reflect that – and yet they would have their own schedules. I literally experienced one of them screaming at someone over the phone and you could hear in the whole office, and it almost felt like there was like, “Well, I got to this level, so I don't have to maintain what I used to get to this level.” Do you think that's something that that is a trend, not a trend, but is it something that can happen as people kind of move up and get distant from what got them there?

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, that's an interesting one, because I think there are a lot of factors that go into that. So there is a thing, there's like a management theory called the Peter Principle, and the Peter Principle says – and I'm just reading from the link from Wikipedia page; I looked it up while you were talking.



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**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** It's that the selection of a candidate for a position is based on the candidate's performance in their current role rather than on their abilities relevant to their intended role. So another way to say that is managers rise to the level of their own incompetence. It's like, let's say, you get promoted and promoted and promoted where you can no longer do the job that you're actually good for. So I think a lot of people, especially in our industry end up in their positions by accident, right?

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Dan Mall:** Like how many of us started as like "I just want to design stuff," and then all of a sudden you're managing design teams or you're leading something. And no one set out to be a leader, they set out to be a coder or a designer or illustrator, and then all of a sudden as you become more professional, people think that you can be in charge of other people. And sometimes that's a welcome thing and sometimes that's not a welcome thing. So I definitely think the Peter Principle comes into play where you do have some CEOs that are just CEOs by accident, you know. [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

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**Dan Mall:** And they're not good at that job, but that's just kind of where they are, and like it's the same thing when you start your own design company, you're by default the creative director, even if you don't have any experience with creative direction just because there's nobody else there, you know?

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.



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**Dan Mall:** So I think the thing to realize is that you're just as much creative director as you are a janitor because there's also no one else there to water the plants, to sweep the floors. So I think a lot of that applies to our industry where you can kind of make your own path. Like people start agencies by accident because they want to just do good work, and then all of a sudden they've got a team of ten people just by surprise. And so I think there's certainly a lot of that at play. The other thing too that I'm a bit sensitive too is like I've been part of places where I've heard people yell and scream at clients, and I always thought that that was pretty wrong and pretty rough, but I've had one mentor say to me, "You know sometimes clients just need to hear you drop the F-bomb to know that you're serious."

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Dan Mall:** And I thought that's like one of the best pieces of advice that someone gave me. Now, I usually don't use bad language at all, but there have been phone calls where like it's for effect ... where like sometimes you need that for people to understand how serious you are about it. And I remember being on one call, last year I did a project, and a friend of mine who was a tech director on the project, we were on Skype and a bad channel on the phone and he was screaming at the client. He told me before the phone call, "Hey, I'm going to yell on this call. Is that cool?"

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** And I was like, "Yeah, that's cool." And so he's screaming and dropping F-bombs and doing all this stuff, and all the while typing to me like, "Hey, is this okay? Like is this fine?" So totally calm, totally composed, but that was what the project needed in order to get it on track, in order to



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reset the expectations. So in that case, I think the best way for him to be a professional was to be able to kind of let loose. So I don't know, I think it's tricky. There are a lot of factors that kind of go into it.

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, I think this just goes back to your initial distillation of professionalism which is communication. If you understand how your client or your employees behave and react, then you adjust your communication style in order to get the behavior that you need. Like if we take it to like other industries, for example, like you mentioned sports, in basketball ... coaches are notorious on being extremely hard on their players – and we could debate over how far they should go – but obviously that technique has worked really, really well to help motivate a lot of players to achieve their highest standards of play. What I love about what you just mentioned here is that professionalism isn't one standard definition. It's all about context and the situation you're in.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, I mean I've seen people that are professionals in a suit and tie. And I've seen people that are like completely dressed down that are more professional than people in the suit and tie. So I think you're right, it does come in a lot of different flavors.

**Emily Lewis:** Right. So Dan, let's talk about some specific traits. We've talked about communication. What else is another good trait that a very professional web worker has? What I mentioned at the outset is we've had a lot of episodes on that have mentioned soft skills like empathy or planning or like you had mentioned earlier, good communication. Can you describe some other things that a web worker who's a professional would demonstrate?

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the things that I hold as high as communication is accountability.



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**Lea Alcantara:** Yes.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Dan Mall:** And it certainly goes hand in hand with communication, and it's tough to nail down, like what does accountability mean and what does it mean when you're accountable to someone or somebody is accountable to you? I went to a conference two years ago called Brooklyn Beta, and there was a great speaker at Brooklyn Beta, he's Cory Booker, who was at the time, he was I believe the mayor of Newark, New Jersey, and now he's I think a Senator. And he spoke about accountability because one of the things that he was famous about the way that he runs his administration in New Jersey was that things were getting done. And it's like one of the most crime-ridden cities in the world, but suddenly when he became the mayor, he turned a lot of things around, and a lot of people attribute that to his use of like social media and technology, and so one of the questions somebody asked him was, "How do you get your staff to actually commit to change and do it? Is it that you guys use Twitter a lot or is it that you guys use technology?"

He's like, "It has nothing to do with that. It has all to do with accountability." So the follow-up question was, "Well, what do you mean by that?" And he gave a formula for accountability, which I'll never forget. He said, "Accountability means three things." So the first thing in accountability is that you need to have a standard, and that's a thing that everyone has to accept and agree to. So whatever that standard is, it could be a high standard or low standard or medium standard, but everyone just has to agree to it. The second thing is that you have to have a way to measure that standard. So a standard for us might be you come into work at 10 o'clock. That's the standard that we all agree to. If somebody comes in at 10:05, they have not met that standard. If somebody comes in at 9:55, they have met that standard, like it's pretty easy to measure. And then the third

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thing is that you need to have consequences for that standard not being met, and those consequences can be both positive and negative. So if somebody comes in at 9:55, maybe they get a reward for coming in early. If somebody comes in at 10:05, maybe they get penalized for coming in late.

It's a bit of a silly example, but accountability sort of has those three points to it, so when I try to work with people on teams, I try to establish what the accountability is. So how am I accountable to you? What standard are we going to agree to? How are we going to measure that, and what are we going to do if it doesn't happen, and what are we going to do if it does? I think that's probably what I like most about the people that I do like working with most is that the commonalities that they're the most accountable people that I know. So when I work with people that are very accountable, it almost doesn't matter how good the quality of work is, I just know that whatever they say they're going to do, they're going to do. So if I say, "Hey, can you build this thing that you've never built before?" "Yes." Great, I can trust that that's going to get done, and so one of the things that I also hold as highly as sort of the communication part is definitely accountability. I love working with accountable people. It makes me more accountable and it challenges me to do that, and so I think there's this really great thing that's being built up when you work with a lot of accountable people on a team.

**Emily Lewis:** That actually introduces a new question for me. Do you think being professional causes the people around you to be professional?

**Dan Mall:** I think so. I think that...

**Emily Lewis:** Like raises your game?



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**Dan Mall:** Yeah, totally. I think the idea of leading by example is not a fiction. I've seen it happen before. I know certainly when I've seen other people do things that are professional, I'm always like, "I want to do that, like yeah, I could do that, or I don't know how to do that. I'd like to learn how to do that." So it certainly works for me. I know a lot of people learn differently, and so it doesn't work for a lot of people, but I think that when you do something that other people can admire and see and you can be an example for them, I think that is a really good sort of leadership and management and professional thing to do.

**Lea Alcantara:** So I'm curious about action. So I feel like communication and accountability, those are all traits. What are some actions a web worker can do to convey these aspects of professionalism?

**Dan Mall:** Oh, that's a tough one. [Laughs] That is a really tough one. I don't know. This is certainly my own personal philosophy, so I don't know that this is like a thing that everyone should do, but this is the way that I like to work. When I work on a team, I try to think about what are the ways that I can best serve all the people on the team. So how can I look out for everybody? Because I feel like if I look out for everybody, there's probably somebody looking out for me and then I don't have to worry about being looked out for. If I'm the only one looking out for me and I'm not looking out for anybody else, then probably everybody else is doing that same thing, especially like when that comes from the top of the chain or however you want to refer to it. If I'm the creative director on a project, people are looking to me for the example of to set for how the project is going to be. So if I act like I'm out for number one, then they're going to act the same way. If instead I look like I'm out for somebody else and I'm willing to help them over what I need to get done, I feel like that is contagious as well. So I



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think that's certainly one of the things that I try to do. I try to act it out, like I don't state that anywhere. I'm not like, "Okay, I'm going to look out for you today."

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** It's not an explicit thing, and I think it would be weird if it was, but I try to do that and I try to set that example. And when people have questions about what they should be doing, I always point them to like, "Well, maybe you could help this person, or maybe you could help this person because they're struggling on this thing," and I feel like that makes projects go really well when people are looking out for each other. So I think that's one of those things that you just sort of do, and if it catches on, great, and if it doesn't, that's okay too. And you can be more or less proactive about trying to enact that on your projects. But I think that's one of the things that I try to do most.

**Emily Lewis:** One thing that occurred to me is Lea and I when we're working with a new client or even someone who we haven't signed yet – especially because we're remote, we very rarely get to meet prospects or our clients face to face – and so it's not challenging, but I feel like we have to go an extra mile to convey our professionalism. I think it's easier for us to convey our skills because we can point to things and show that to them when they're evaluating us, but in terms of conveying how we operate and that we're professionals.

Our high standards are for ourselves, but they're also for our clients. We do expect our clients to reciprocate and so especially at the beginning of an engagement with a prospect, we're sort of checking to see, "Are they responsive to us?" We also err on the side of over communication, making sure everything is explicitly clear, and we want to see that in return and so we take extra steps to



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make sure we're checking in via phone, that we send emails. Once we're engaged with the client, we do regular weekly check-ins, which is something that we hadn't always done, and it's a simple little thing that really makes a big difference to keep everyone on the same page because normally we would just one on one update the main contact, but we're updating the entire client contact list every week so everyone knows what's going on, and I think it really conveys that we're taking the project seriously. We take their time seriously. We're giving them an opportunity to ask questions, putting something in front of them. And it feels very actionable, like an action that demonstrates how we communicate.

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**Dan Mall:** I love that. I think that make such a difference. Over the last year I've been trying to do this thing where I'm like writing down philosophies for myself. Like, here are ways that I would like to be and act and do, and one of those philosophies that has emerged from me is that I think the clients freak out when they can't see the future. And so my job as a professional is to help them see the future, and it could be the future of their app or the future of their career path or the future of their trajectory at their company or whatever it is. But like all of my tools and processes and conversations are designed to help them see the future a little bit more.

So like from a tool standpoint, I made a thing called a "project hub" where it shows them, "Here are the upcoming milestones on this project, and at any point you can come back to this project hub and you can see next week we're going to deliver this thing, and the week after that, something else." And that's all subject to change, but at any point, they could just look and see what the next six weeks are going to be. And if anything changes, I'll have a phone call with them or I'd let them know in some way, but it makes such a difference because when clients don't know what's coming, like a delivery a



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design round that they're not really happy with and they don't know that it's going to be corrected, but you could say, "But look, next week, we have a revision cycle planned, so you'll see some more stuff next week," and something as simple as that helps them to go like, "Oh okay, cool, like I got it," and it's not an issue anymore.

So I think like that's one of the things I try to do is help them see the future somehow. It could be through a tool. It could be through a conversation. It could be through anything like that. I think our industry has a tendency to only want to talk to clients when things are going well, and I think the opposite needs to happen. My friend Greg Storey wrote this great post about using the phone. I think he wrote it on Medium, and he's like, "Whenever something happens, just pick up the phone and call somebody, like call your client. If it's something bad, if it's something good, whatever, just pick up the phone and call." I forget where I heard this from, but I think it was Richard Banfield who runs Fresh Tilled Soil. He said, "Email and Slack and Basecamp and all that stuff are communication tools for when things are going well, and the phone is communication tool for when things are going poorly."

And we tend to do the opposite, like we celebrate all the good stuff, and then when the bad stuff happens, we're like, "Oh man, we don't want to talk about this stuff." But I think the more we can get into a habit of just talking about everything, then the bad stuff doesn't seem as bad because if the only time that you're using the phone is to call your client, then as soon as they see your number on their caller ID, they're not going to pick it up because they know it's bad news. So I love the idea that you're talking about of weekly check-ins because it just becomes normal like here's the progress and that progress could be bad or it could be good.



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So a lot of projects that I've been doing, we've been doing weekly check-ins, and sometimes I check in as like, "Everything is full speed ahead. We're doing really well. Here is the status of things." Other times it's, "We're at the risk of blowing launch because we need this X or Y or Z from you team, and we don't have those things and we've been asking them for three weeks." And when that's the only type of phone call you have with a client, that becomes a big deal, but if that's just part of a regular status, that's protocol. That's just the way that we work. So I think sort of going back to the communication point, I think that's such a big deal, and it has nothing to do with how good the design is or how clean the code is or how fast the CMS loads or any of that stuff. That stuff is on top of it or is at least a balance to it, but the communication is just as important.

**Lea Alcantara:** So we've been talking a lot about professionalism mostly in the lens of a vendor-client relationship. What about an employee-to-employee relationship, how do you convey professionalism with your peers?

**Dan Mall:** I think it's about motivating your peers and kind of the same thing that I just mentioned about like looking out for everybody else. If you're looking out for everybody else, then chances are somebody is looking out for you, and everybody gets taken care of. There is this great, I guess it's an allegory of the Long Spoons where everybody –and there's a YouTube video about this too – where everyone is sitting around a hole and in the middle of the hole, there's like a one column that has soup in it and everyone has a long spoon and their long spoons can reach the soup. And so everyone has their long spoons that they're trying to feed themselves with, but the spoons were so long and awkward that they can't really do it, and they ended up fighting over the soup. So somebody knocks over somebody's spoon, somebody breaks someone else's spoon, and it's just a really bad situation



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until one of them realizes, “Actually, if I take this spoon and I try to feed someone who’s sitting across from me, that’s a much better experience.”

Then once one person does it, the other person does it, and everybody starts feeding each other, and it’s just like really happy just great video to watch. It’s like a minute long, but I feel like that’s a great way the project should go. If everybody is looking out for everybody else, then the project succeeds, and I think my philosophy about that is that projects are about people, not about the output. I think a lot of us just focus so much time on like, “Well, my jQuery has to be really tight, or these animations have to be really good, and that’s what’s going to make the project.” I don’t think so. I think if people have learned things and if you helped your client’s business and if they feel like they’re empowered because of the work that you did, like it doesn’t matter if your code is clean or if your design is the best design that you’ve made – like that’s what they hired you for. Maybe they did hire you to write clean code, and that’s a part of professionalism, but they certainly are paying you for the other stuff too.

**Emily Lewis:** Do you think that professional practices or expectations of professionalism shift if you are an employee and then become like self-employed running your own shop?

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, I think so, and certainly I’m biased because I am a shop owner now as opposed to an employee. And so my last three years have been with the mindset of an owner as opposed to the mindset of an employee, but I have been an employee for the last ten years before that. So I think I could still empathize with that role. I think the stakes are a little bit higher when you’re an owner, and especially if you have payroll. Especially if you have people that you are paying. I mean that is scary, like I don’t employ anybody full time, but even the risk of hiring contractors and having to pay them, that’s a big responsibility. And I think on top of that, like there are conversations that you have to have



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with clients that when you employ people ... or when you're an employee, you just don't have to have. So there are sort of principal-to-principal conversations about invoicing or about when to submit a deliverable or when you get paid about something that are difficult conversations to have that a lot of employees, I would say most employees have never experienced before just because that's never been their role. That's always been the role of the owner or the CFO or whoever the person is at that agency that's sort of a non-employee.

So I think certainly the stakes are a little bit higher, and I think that most employers see the benefit of that as well because they get rich off for that stuff. Like the more responsibility you have, the more risks you're taking, the more potential for your profit. So that's why agency owners do fairly well compared to their employees is because they take on more responsibility, they take on more risks and so they see more of the reward.

**Emily Lewis:** I've spent probably the vast majority of my career as an employee. I've only been working for myself now I guess for five years I'm in ... and I think I'm at some things vastly more professional now that I'm a business owner, and some things if I was still using the employee benchmark, I'm far less professional. Like when I was an employee, I never showed up on time, ever.

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs] Me too.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** I can't think of a single time I showed up at work on time, and I always took long lunch breaks and in my head I justified it because I was like, "Oh, I did some great work." It's sort of that younger person mentality or less experienced person mentality thinking that the work was good



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enough. And I also probably was very casual dresser compared to the way everyone else is dressed. I'm still that same way today. That has not changed at all. I don't start work until probably 10 a.m. each day, and I'm not even dressed right now, I'm wearing my pajamas still, so like that's still who I am. But I operate still very professionally and even in a more elevated level. Like what you were just describing as the owner, I feel so much more responsibility, and not just since working for myself, but since Lea came on board. Since there's now someone else who counts on my ability to keep this business running, that level of responsibility just forces me to have those hard conversations. I do not like disappointing people, and I don't like conflict, and I hate having a difficult conversation with a client, but I have no choice. There's nothing else for me to do, and because I'm not skilled in those areas, I literally write drafts of what I need to say to the client before I ever either send an email or pick up the phone so at least I have some point of reference since it's a very uncomfortable sort of emotional experience that you go through, but you have no choice so you have to find a way to be professional amongst your discomfort.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, absolutely. I certainly identify with the piece of that, and then another piece of that, I feel like I'm on the opposite where when I was an employee, I never came to work on time, like I'm chronically bad at being on time. My wife is excellent at being on time. She's a very punctual, and for her, it's not punctuality for the sake of being punctual, it's because she sees it as a courtesy, like if you say somebody, "I'm going to be there at 10," well, be there at 10. It's courteous to do that, and that never really sunk in for me. I'm like, "Well, look, I'm doing the work, like if I want to show up at 10:15, I'll show up at 10:15." [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]



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**Dan Mall:** “And I’ll stay 15 minutes late, that’s fine.” And I never really understood that until I became an owner, and specifically until I started running the apprenticeship that I run, because what I realize is it’s not about the time we start, like I don’t care if we start at 10 or 11 or 9 or 8 or whenever, but if you say you’re going to do something, do that thing. If you say you’re going to be in at 10, be in at 10 because if I can trust that you’re going to be in at the time that you say you’re going to be in, I could also trust that you’re going to make this deadline when you say you’re going to do that. Or I can also trust that when you say you’re going to learn this thing that you don’t know how to do, that you’re going to learn that too.

So for me, it didn’t really click to me that that was an indication of what I’m actually going to be, the more responsibility that I’m going to be able to get, and I just never put those two things together until I became an owner, and specifically until I started running the apprenticeship. So what I say to my apprentices, “I don’t care what time we start. If you want to start at 11, just tell me and we’ll start at 11, but then be in your seat at 11. It could be 12. It could be 2 p.m. if you want. I’m happy to agree to 2 p.m., but please be in your seat at 2 p.m. because that sends me a signal that I can trust you, and if I can trust you with the small thing, I can trust you with a bigger thing. I can trust you with paying you for a project or paying you a lot of money for a project or giving you a lot of responsibility on a project.” So I feel like that all kind of builds up. The same thing with the way that I dress, I love wearing ripped jeans for some reason. [Laughs]

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**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]



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**Dan Mall:** And I remember always getting yelled at for going to meetings in ripped jeans, and I just never understood what the big deal was. I'm like, "You know what, like I'm more fashionable than anybody else in that meeting."

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** But it wasn't about that, it was just about courtesy and respect and things that I didn't really understand until that. So now, like I try to dress nicer because I think there are people that take leads from me. And if they perceive me as being sloppy in my dress, then maybe they'll perceive me as being sloppy on their project, and that's not the thing that I want to communicate. So at the risk of me being a little bit uncomfortable, more uncomfortable with the way I dress, I would rather do that to set my clients at ease that if they have a certain perception or have a certain perception that they want. Now, I'm not going to go out of my way to please somebody if their perception is wrong. I'll try to reset those expectations instead, but I understand the value of that now.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I think professionalism, it goes hand-in-hand with sort of maturity.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah.

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** And the more experience you have, the longer you've been doing something, and like you said many times, I completely relate. I do not think I respected my employer, not like a person. I loved my boss, but like the employer, the institution, I don't think I respected it.

**Dan Mall:** Right.

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**Emily Lewis:** And so I didn't care about what I wore and I didn't care what time I came in, and I didn't care if anyone was affected by it. [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** Oh yeah.

**Emily Lewis:** Because I was young and cocky and just didn't care. [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** It's so different now.

**Lea Alcantara:** I feel like that transitions nicely to the next question we have. The fact that the web is I feel like inherently a very casual place compared to other industries. It's very natural for all three of us to be like, "Yeah, just jeans and a t-shirt all day every day."

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** But with that in mind, it becomes possibly difficult for some people to recognize the difference between a social and a professional setting, but is there actually a difference, especially if you're at work?

**Dan Mall:** I mean, that's a really difficult question. I mean, I think that's what our industry is struggling with now just in general. Like at surface value, it's easy to be casual because our job doesn't require us to be stuffy. We don't have to wear suits and dress up very formally to do what we do. We sit at computers all day and we slouch. We look at Facebook. We tweet.

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** Like those are things that are frowned up in "formal" work environment. I'm working with a very corporate client right now, and I went in for a meeting a couple of weeks ago and the day before

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the meeting, the CMO sent us an email to tell us that it was okay to come in business casual to that meeting. I was like, “What are you talking about? I’m going to wear jeans.” [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** But even in mocking up their leadership page, and I just put placeholder images in and have some like whatever, like hipster CEO and all the casual like tech companies. And she was like, “This is unacceptable, like we would never look like this, like this man’s face isn’t even shaven.” I’m like, “Oh man, that’s crazy.” So I think at face value, it’s easy to be like, “Oh, we’re a casual industry,” but I think there’s a difference between casual in attitude and casual and ... like cavalier about the type of work that we do.

So I don’t know if you guys know it, but for me, that I’m a big proponent of value pricing, and that inherently is a thing that kind of helps me understand what I’m doing on a project. So regardless of the pricing methodology, I don’t think this is forum to talk about that, but understanding why people are hiring me and writing a proposal to that and then trying to follow through on that if I win the project, something like that becomes, “They’re hiring me because their company needs to make money, otherwise, they’re going to go out of business.” And so my work is potentially going to help them stay in business. That is not a casual thing, and I don’t want to treat that casually because I feel like it disrespects the person who’s hiring me.

So I think there’s a difference between appearing casual and dressing casual and talking casually. I think that all of that stuff is good, but I think a lot of us are in serious businesses, and people do hire us because we have a skill that helps them in a way that they can’t be helped on their own, and they



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can't do it on their own. And I don't think that that's a casual thing. I think it's a serious thing. I think we can have fun doing that, but fun is different than casual.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I agree with that. I was just thinking, Lea and I attended this conference last month, and one of the rules was business casual and asked Lea, I'm like, "What the hell is business casual these days?" I don't even know. This sounds so immature and juvenile and I can recognize that now, so I guess that means I'm growing, but I didn't want to do that. I'm like, "I wear jeans." Do you know what I mean? Like I'm comfortable in jeans, like I kind of got this dumb attitude in my head, and then I was like, "Wait, you are going to this conference to meet other business owners that might be your clients. You need to dress the way they're expecting you to dress, the way they're asking you to dress. Get over yourself." It's funny because even though I've only been working for myself for five years, I've been working from home for over ten and you really do have to kind of catch yourself, realize that just because that's the norm for you in your environment doesn't mean it's acceptable in other environments, and you do have to bend.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah. I mean, I think it goes back to looking out for somebody else, right?

**Emily Lewis:** Exactly.

**Dan Mall:** For me, if I had my own choice, I would wear a t-shirt and jeans and sneakers everywhere. That's my favorite outfit. I have many of them, and I will continue to wear it. [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** But that's me, that's what I want to do. So if somebody else wants me to do something else, I'm happy to have that conversation with them and I should be willing to do that. Otherwise, I shouldn't be willing to meet with them in the first place or go to that thing. I feel like it's a self-



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selection mechanism. If I don't want to dress business casual to business casual conference, I probably shouldn't go because maybe that thing is not for me. Maybe I don't fit there intentionally, and I think that's okay, like that's fine if that thing is not for me. I mean, Lea, to your original question about like how do you know the difference between social and professional settings, I think it's very tricky to know the difference, and so for me I just default to professional, like nothing is a social then, like what is a social setting for me is like hanging out with my kids at the park.

Like that's what this profession is for me, it's the way to be able to spend time with my family, so anything that's work related is professional, and anything that's not work related is not professional. I feel like it's definitely a black and white line and there is a lot of gray area, but trying to make it more black and white for me at least lets me know how I think I should behave.

**Emily Lewis:** I think that's also important to apply particularly at like conferences and stuff where you're in a professional environment, but it's very social, especially after-parties or dinners and things like that. Again, I feel like it's something that I didn't know earlier in my career, but I now understand very clearly. Even when you're having cocktails afterwards, that's a professional environment. You need to behave as such, and your peers should behave as such as well.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, exactly. I mean, one of the things that remind me that those are still professional events, like you go to a conference and then you go on to an after-party, that's a professional event. You know why, because I can write it off on my taxes, right?

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Dan Mall:** So if I can write that off, that means I have to act professionally because it's professional. [Laughs] So I just try to keep that in mind, "I'm going to deduct this check. This dinner that I'm going



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out to with a bunch of friends, it is a tax deduction. That means it's professional. That means I need to act professionally. That means there are certain jokes that I may make with my friends that I'm not going to make in that setting." Even though it might be okay, I'm just going to default to not doing that because it's more professional for me to do that.

**Lea Alcantara:** So at the end of the day, a lot of it really is context because it's funny that Emily mentioned the conference we went to and the business casual ... but when we actually attended, everyone had a different interpretation of what that meant.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** So we had women wearing like flowery maxi dresses but with a blazer, and other people like full on suit and then other ones where they did wear jeans, but we were in Texas so it was kind of like, "Oh."

**Emily Lewis:** Dark jeans. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, yeah, exactly, with like cowboy boots, but then they have a blazer. It's as if once you put on the blazer, whatever outfit you wear...

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Whatever else you wear is suddenly business. But I feel like a lot of the times how they're presenting themselves is also reflective of their business. If you are in the fashion industry, you wouldn't be wearing just a black and white pant suit. You need to be able to reflect the brand of your service or company or product or whatever. And this was an entrepreneurship conference with a



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variety of businesses, and when you actually went to their booths and stuff, then it all fit. It all made sense. But sometimes when you look at it as this giant amalgam of people, it just seems so random.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah. I mean, to me, like it comes back to accountability, right?

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Dan Mall:** So like the first two pieces, we have to have a standard and then we have to have a way to measure that standard. So when somebody says business casual, we haven't agreed to a standard yet. I appreciate when I see things like, "This is what business casual means: It means no jeans. It means ties and jackets for gentlemen. It means dresses in this style for women," and like those kind of things at least sets a standard. So if somebody shows up in jeans and it said no jeans, you're clearly in violation of that standard.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Dan Mall:** And then you can get whatever, kicked out or reprimanded, or whatever the consequence is for that thing. I appreciate that. Even sometimes it's more awkward to do that because you're like, "Wow, they're being really stuffy about it." But at least the expectation is set, you know?

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** Right.

**Dan Mall:** And that way you know how to behave. I went to a wedding a couple of weeks ago, and the people getting married said, "Here is how we would like everybody to dress. We want you to wear summer whites, and here's a Pinterest board of all the things that we would recommend you wear."



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**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] It's useful.

**Dan Mall:** At first I was like, "Well, that's really rude." And I was like, "Well, wait a minute, actually that's great because now I know exactly what to wear."

**Lea Alcantara:** Right.

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Dan Mall:** It made everything easy. So I think like just being explicit about that kind of stuff can solve a lot of problems. I think the same issue is happening in our industry about that code of conduct stuff at conferences. There are codes of conducts that are non-explicit. They say, "Well, we may do this if you do something like this." I'm like, "I still don't understand what I can or can't do." So I think like if that stuff becomes more explicit, then you can enact those consequences or rewards or anything like that. The reward being you can create the environment that you want to create and excuse the people out who don't apply to that. However awkward it is, just sort of saying what those standards are, I think is a better thing than not.

**Timestamp:** 00:49:51

**Emily Lewis:** So I think that's sort of a nice segue way to one of our last questions that we have for you, which is when someone is behaving unprofessionally, whether it's on your team or maybe it's a peer at an event, what do you do? Is there anything to do, or do you just let it happen?

**Dan Mall:** So the way that I try to deal with that is I try to talk to the person first one on one. If that doesn't work then – if it's a work environment – I raise that to the supervisor or whoever the manager,



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or something like that, is, and if that doesn't work, then I got to walk away. So I think those are sort of the steps that I take, and I learned that from people doing that to me.

I remember at the last agency I worked at, Big Spaceship, one of my friends is Jamie there, he wasn't my boss, he wasn't anything, but he was a peer of mine and one day he was like, "Hey, can I talk to you in the conference room?" And I was like, "Sure." And he pulled me aside and he shut the door and he said, "You need to stop being negative." I was like, "Excuse me?" Like, "What? What are you talking about?" He's like, "You are very negative on the project that you're working on and it is infecting everybody on your team. Everyone is being negative because of you. If you act positive, then everyone on your team will be positive, but right now, you're acting negative and everyone is acting negative about this project."

He was on a different team, and he wasn't my boss. Like we were technically on the same level of the totem pole in the organization like any of that stuff. But he was like enough of a friend to me to pull me aside and tell me about that. And that has always stuck with me that he did that for me because he was looking out for me. And so even though it came off as if he's scolding me, he was actually doing something really great for me. And so I try to take that approach with other people. If I have a problem with somebody, if I don't think someone is behaving the way that we've set as a standard, then I'll pull them aside and I'd say, "Hey, I have an issue with this. Can we work this out?" And if it doesn't work, then I'll raise that to their supervisor or something like that, and if that doesn't work, then I'll say, "You know what, I'm sorry, but I don't think that I can work on this project because we don't see eye to eye, and someone is going to lose out on this, and so I would rather you have your way and I'll walk away and I'll work on something else." So those are usually the steps that I take.

**Lea Alcantara:** What about if it's a client who's behaving unprofessionally?



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**Dan Mall:** Yeah, the same deal there. I've done the same thing where if somebody is behaving unprofessionally, I'll give them a call and I'll just say, "Hey, like this has been a little bit weird for me, like can we talk about this?" If they say, "No, we can't talk about it," and if they're obstinate about it, then I'll raise it to someone else. Maybe it's their manager or maybe it's their procurement department or something like that, and if that doesn't work, then I'll just say, "I'm sorry, I'm happy to recommend you to someone else that will work better with you in the way that you want to work, but this is not a good fit, like I'm not going to be happy with the output, and neither are you. There's no need for us to continue to work together."

I would rather lose money on a project like that than try to continue doing that project, because it will ultimately cost more in the end. So I would rather just suffer through while I don't have any other projects, or my cash flow sucks, I'd rather go get a bank loan than to suffer through a project like that.

**Emily Lewis:** What about when it's yourself? You described the situation where your colleague pointed it out to you, but do you think there were any cues that you had been not paying attention to that you could have caught your own unprofessional behavior before someone else pointed it out?

**Dan Mall:** I don't know. That's a good question. Probably, and so I think part of it was that I was just so heads down in that project and things were so hectic that I probably just didn't realize it. That's like one of the things that run rampant in our industry. We work really hard and sometimes we work really hard on really fast things, and so we don't have time to evaluate.

So, one of the things that I feel like I'm fortunate to do now is that I don't have a lot of production role on a project anymore, like I don't really do a lot of design or code or anything like that. I'm mostly brought in to do creative direction or something like that, so that I try to make that my role in the project. I give everyone else enough breathing room that they can do that for themselves, and that

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might mean like pushing a deliverable off. It might mean creating a little bit of extra time for someone. It might mean that I need to do their work for a day so that they have some time to breathe. And so like whatever that thing is, I'll try to do that thing, and so I try to look for that role, and if no one has that role, then I'll take it on.

So I think every team should have that, whether it's the project manager or the producer on that team, to create that space for everybody else. Whether it's a creative director or the owner of the company, I think that's really valuable because when you have your people working too hard, they're not able to see things like how much they're bringing the team down or like that they haven't eaten in two days, like that kind of stuff, there's no reason for us ... we make website, there's no reason for us to miss a meal. Like if you're a brain surgeon, maybe, but there's no reason for us to be negative or depressed or whatever because our jobs are to code and push pixels around in Photoshop and help people solve their business problems. I think like having someone that has a dedicated role of making sure that everyone on the team is healthy, I think that's a really important thing.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I can relate to that because right now I'm running on fumes and not a lot of sleep and it's because I'm working fast and furious to try and catch up on a deadline I'm behind on. And it does, it creates this environment where I've got blinders on. I'm not fully paying attention to all the other things going on. And I know it, but this is the first time I've sort of been in this situation. I'm kind of trying to be aware of it because I've got a lot of things that I'm juggling right now and I don't want to drop the ball on any of them, and I don't want to behave unprofessionally. And I still want to get the work done and I feel like for me, ultimately at the end of the day, you can only do what you can do in a given day. So I'm trying to remind myself of that, but recognize that I'm highly stressed



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right now, that I'm highly focused on one thing, and that I have to take the time to check in with Lea, let her know where I am and have someone to talk to about this.

**Dan Mall:** Absolutely. I mean, that's not good for you or your clients or anybody for you to be overworked on stuff. When I was younger, I did a lot of therapy and group therapy as well. My wife was in school for psychology, and we did a lot of that stuff together, especially when we were about to get married. And one of the things that has always stuck with me from the group therapy that we did was that with every period of exhaustion comes a period of depression, like whenever you're overworked, you start to feel bad, and it doesn't mean that you are depressed, but sometimes you're just like, "Oh, like I feel awful." And when you feel awful, it comes out in your work, whether you realize it or not. In the same way that like if I watch a ton of cooking shows, and when people cook angry, their food doesn't taste good. I feel like the same thing is true when you're angry and you're coding, it comes out in your code. When you're angry and you're designing, it comes out in our design, whether you realize it or not. So I think it's important for everybody to have like a good balance of things of rest, of work, of hard times, and of soft times. Like all of that stuff, I think it produces better work.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, I agree. I think it's hard to achieve sometimes, but if you're at least trying to make yourself aware of your situation instead of just blindly going through it, it can help a little bit. I'm feeling like because I'm letting Lea know where I am, because I'm keeping clients informed where I am, that I can just try and do what I can do today and not stress out too much, not miss too much sleep, but just kind of cut down a little bit. [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs]



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**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, and I would have to say those weekly check-ins like I had low-level anxiety before that because you're always kind of wondering like, "Do they know? Are they thinking we're not doing anything?" But we're still working, you know? [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** And then it's funny that like by us implementing something like a weekly check-in – and we don't write a novel.

**Emily Lewis:** Yeah, it's a couple minutes.

**Lea Alcantara:** Yeah, we literally go, "Here's what happened last week," to remind them what happened, "here's what we expect from you this week, and here's what you expect from us this week," and that's all it is. But just putting it out there gets rid of the anxiety that no one knows what anyone is doing.

**Dan Mall:** The last agency I worked at Big Spaceship, the CEO, Mike Lebowitz – he's like one of my best mentors that I've ever worked with; I learned so much from him – and every review that I would do with him, he would always say to me, "You're doing too much stuff like in your head like without anybody else knowing it."

**Lea Alcantara:** [Agrees]

**Emily Lewis:** [Agrees]

**Dan Mall:** And he was like, "Make the covert overt."

**Lea Alcantara:** Make the covert overt.



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**Dan Mall:** He's like, "I learned that from my therapist, make the covert overt," and so that's another thing that I always try to remember. Like if I'm doing something, even if it's a good thing and I'm keeping to it myself, somebody else should probably know about it just so they know what I'm doing. And if it's a great thing, they can look forward to it. If it's not a good thing, they could be like, "Hey, you probably shouldn't waste your time on that thing." So I could spend all day just stewing in my head about things that I think I should do or think I should be doing or not be doing, so just making it overt to everyone else that you're working with, I think is a good thing.

**Emily Lewis:** So last question, you mentioned Andy Rutledge's *Design Professionalism* resource at the outset of this episode, but are there any other resources that you would recommend to help improve one's professionalism?

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think there are really great books about things like leadership that I've been reading a lot lately. I find that it's really fascinating, and I learn a lot by reading about how other people are good leaders and are good professionals. Those are certainly great things. So the one I'm reading right now is called *Leaders Eat Last* by Simon Sinek. He's done a bunch of Ted Talks on like leadership and creativity, and he's written a lot of good books, so those are good.

On my docket to read is a book called *Turn the Ship Around*. I think L. David Marquet is the author. And it's about a Navy captain who talks about like how he led his troop in the Navy. Related to design, *Design is a Job* by Mike Monteiro. It's a great book in A Book Apart series. It's particularly good because you get sort of the flavor of Mike in the book as well – it's entertaining.

And then I think just in general, like I can't stress enough the importance of good mentors. If there's someone that you're like, "That person is a professional." I can't stress enough like just ask them if they could spend some time with you, like buy them lunch, buy them a cup of coffee and just be like,

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“Can you just tell me stuff about how to be a professional?” I think everyone likes that when someone comes up to them and ask them like, “Hey, can you teach me a thing?”

So I think email somebody and ask them, “Hey, can you just spend ten minutes with me on Skype and just talk to me about being professional?” I feel like that’s how I’ve gotten a lot of wisdom from other people is just emailing them and saying like, “I would like to have lunch with you. I don’t know about what, but I just kind of want to be in your presence for a while so some of that can kind of rub off on me.” So I think that’s certainly a great thing to do as well. Just reach out to people that you think are good professionals and just ask them for advice. I think people love giving advice out.

**Lea Alcantara:** Awesome. Oh, Dan, we can talk about this all day.

**Emily Lewis:** Forever. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** Forever and ever. But we do have to finish up, but we have our Rapid-fire 10 Questions, so our listeners can get to know you a bit better. Are you ready?

**Timestamp:** 01:00:02

**Dan Mall:** I’m ready.

**Lea Alcantara:** Okay, first question, Android or iOS?

**Dan Mall:** Ah, I just switched to Android.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** If you are stranded on a desert island and can only bring three things, what would you bring?

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**Dan Mall:** Oh, that's easy. Emily, Sidra and Charlotte.

**Lea Alcantara:** Awww.

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** What's your favorite TV show?

**Dan Mall:** Ever or right now?

**Lea Alcantara:** Well, both.

**Emily Lewis:** Either. [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** *Arrested Development.*

**Lea Alcantara:** Nice.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh, good one. What's your favorite dessert?

**Dan Mall:** New York cheesecake.

**Lea Alcantara:** What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?

**Dan Mall:** Musician.

**Emily Lewis:** What profession would you not like to try?

**Dan Mall:** Musician. [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** What's the latest article or blog post you read?

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**Dan Mall:** “Disabling comments – a debate that cuts to the core of online news” on Medium.

**Emily Lewis:** If you could have a superpower, what would it be?

**Dan Mall:** Flight.

**Lea Alcantara:** What music do you like to work to?

**Dan Mall:** Explosions in the Sky.

**Emily Lewis:** I have to ask, what is that? Is that literally a thing?

**Dan Mall:** Yeah, it’s like I guess post-rock, like ambient instrumental music.

**Emily Lewis:** Oh, okay.

**Dan Mall:** Yeah. I can’t listen to stuff with words.

**Emily Lewis:** I was like, “Wow, so like you only work on Fourth of July.” [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** [Laughs]

**Lea Alcantara:** [Laughs]

**Dan Mall:** Yeah. In one day I get a lot done. [Laughs]

**Emily Lewis:** [Laughs] All right, last question, cats or dogs?

**Dan Mall:** Cats.

**Lea Alcantara:** Nice. So that’s all the time we have for today. Thanks for joining us Dan!

**Dan Mall:** Anytime, thanks for having me!

**Emily Lewis:** In case our listeners want to follow up with you, where can they find you online?

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**Dan Mall:** I write on my website, [danielmall.com](http://danielmall.com). I'm also [@danielmall](https://twitter.com/danielmall) on Twitter, and the agency I run is called [superfriend.ly](http://superfriend.ly) or [@superfriendlyco](https://twitter.com/superfriendlyco) on Twitter.

**Emily Lewis:** Thanks Dan, this was a great conversation!

[Music starts]

**Dan Mall:** Thanks for having me!

**Lea Alcantara:** CTRL+CLICK is produced by [Bright Umbrella](http://BrightUmbrella.com), a web services agency obsessed with happy clients. Today's podcast would not be possible without the support of this episode's sponsor! Thank you, Pixel & Tonic's [Craft](http://Craft.com).

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**Lea Alcantara:** And thanks to our listeners for tuning in! If you want to know more about CTRL+CLICK, make sure you follow us on Twitter [@ctrlclickcast](https://twitter.com/ctrlclickcast) or visit our website, [ctrlclickcast.com](http://ctrlclickcast.com). And if you liked this episode, please give us a review on [iTunes](https://itunes.apple.com), [Stitcher](https://www.stitcher.com) or both!

**Emily Lewis:** Don't forget to tune in to our next episode when we're going to talk to Phil Smith about the Perch CMS including e-commerce with Shop and the new Perch Runway framework. Be sure to check out our schedule on our site, [ctrlclickcast.com/schedule](http://ctrlclickcast.com/schedule) for more upcoming topics.

**Lea Alcantara:** This is Lea Alcantara ...

**Emily Lewis:** And Emily Lewis ...

**Lea Alcantara:** Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

**Emily Lewis:** Cheers!



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[Music stops]

*Timestamp: 01:02:27*

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