



Ambition to Impact powered by Climate Impact Partners

Episode 2: Avoiding Burnout and Building Resilience with Chris Gaither and Liam Mulvihill

Hannah Blackmore: Welcome to Ambition to Impact, a climate action podcast powered by Climate Impact Partners. In today's episode, Liam Mulvihill, our HR director, talks to Chris Gaither, an executive coach helping sustainability leaders find sustainability within their jobs, knowing all too well what can happen when this is missing.

Chris spent nearly two decades counselling senior executives, overseeing global storytelling initiatives, and building teams at Apple, Google, and the LA Times. He didn't take a career break for almost 20 years, resulting in burnout, and in late 2017 he quit the corporate sustainability job he loved at Apple.

In what he calls his mid-career reboot, Chris reconnected with all the things that mattered to him. And working with an executive coach, he discovered his purpose - to help others discover and unleash the best version of themselves too. This saw Chris co-found Regenerous, an organization working with senior sustainability leaders and their teams to help make work easier and happier.

If any of this sounds familiar, then today's episode is the one for you. As we talk to Chris about how, in the fight to stop the planet from burning, sustainability professionals can avoid burning out and build resilience. Let's delve into his story from ambition to impact.

Liam Mulvihill: Hi Chris, welcome to Ambition to Impact. We are absolutely delighted that you can join us this afternoon. I'm really excited by the opportunity today to talk about resilience, talk about burnout, talk about one of the most, important issues facing HR, facing our industry, facing the human race as well. So absolute pleasure to host you.

Before we start, I should say, how are you doing?

Chris Gaither: I'm doing really well, thank you Liam. Climate impact partners is doing such important work and I'm really delighted to be with you again.

Liam: Fantastic. So, I've been fortunate enough to hear a little about your story, but it would be great if you could talk us through how you've ended up in the executive coaching space, how you've ended up specializing in this important area and especially with the sustainability focus.

Chris: Thank you for asking. You know, some people begin doing environmental work because they feel a deep connection with the planet and they craft their whole, their whole career around

that. I did the opposite. I just stumbled into climate work into environment and social impact work, and I couldn't be more thankful that I did.

For me, it happened in 2013, a little bit over a decade ago now. I was working at Google on the communications team, and I was leading Google's global privacy and security communications. So, I was spending a lot of time talking about, this very business critical topic for Google, and Apple approached me and said, "we are creating a position".

They were bringing together, for the first time, under one director level position, all of their corporate social responsibility communications. So, part of that was their supply chain responsibility work and a big part of that was their environmental work. And they said, "by the way, we've just hired this woman named Lisa Jackson," - who was President Obama's EPA administrator - "and we want to start talking much more about the work we're doing. And even more importantly, building on our very quietly achieved progress. And really create a world class environmental program."

And I said, "I don't know anything about that, but I love learning". Before I worked at Google, I was a journalist for a dozen years. And so, I love diving into topics and learning things. And I ended up saying yes to that role. And it has since become my life's work. You know, I think of myself in many ways as a climate person first, that my primary job is to support people like you and your colleagues who are doing this really essential planetary healing work.

And the way that I happen to do that in many cases is through executive coaching, through writing, through team coaching, workshop facilitation, and public speaking. But it all really has the same intention behind it - to help the people like you who are doing this extremely challenging work do it with more ease with more grace, with more effectiveness because it's really easy to get weighed down by the heaviness of the work. And we all need all the support that we can get.

Liam: Fantastic. Your breadth of experience is awesome and it's inspiring to think about the companies and work that you've touched, but you've also had some personal experience of burnout yourself and the actual topic.

Would you be okay to elaborate on some of that? Because this work has touched you personally.

Chris: Yeah, I'd be happy to, you know, sometimes we go through really dark periods in our lives, and we feel like we're never going to come out of them and then when we do, we realize they're actually the stories that shape who we are.

And for me, burning out of the work that I was doing became one of those stories. So, as I mentioned, I started working at Apple in 2013 and at first, I was working on the communications team, and then after about a year and a half, Lisa brought me to work for her directly and I was her director of strategy and engagement, and I took on a big portfolio of work for her.

Every morning I would wake up and I would say my primary job today is to make Lisa Jackson successful. If I can do that, then our team will be better. Apple will be better. The world will be better. Because she's such a big-hearted leader and so inspirational, I really threw everything I had into making her as successful as she could be.

And the work that I did for her was, it was really broad, I oversaw environmental reporting, I oversaw all of our stakeholder engagement, working with business groups, working with activist groups. I still remember meeting with Greenpeace early on and one of the leaders of

Greenpeace said, "you know, sometimes we will dance with you. And sometimes we will dance on you." And our job was to try to have them dance with us as much as they danced on us.

I really embraced the work fully and ended up falling in love with the mission of it. I loved the people so much that I worked with, and I thought I was going to keep doing that work for a really long time. And for me, the turning point ended up being Earth Day of 2017.

Earth Day is April 22nd, and I can remember so clearly that we had rolled out a giant campaign that I had overseen. We turned all the Apple logo leaves green at the retail stores around the world, we announced a giant circular economy goal for the company, that we didn't know how we were going to accomplish, we talked about our progress around 100 percent renewable energy, we introduced a new iPhone recycling robot - coincidentally named Liam - and we were so proud. We held a big event on campus for all of the Apple employees to both celebrate the moment and also inspire people to work.

Tim Cook, Apple CEO, stood up in front of everybody and said, "this is the work that we must do for future generations. We don't know how we're going to pull this off, but we have to leverage all of our ingenuity and our innovation that Apple is known for in service of this work". And everybody was celebrating, and it was a wonderful moment.

The problem for me was that I just was as depleted as I could possibly imagine. I wanted to be happy, people were high fiving me and hugging, and we were drinking beer and listening to music, but I just had nothing left. I just wanted to crawl into bed. And I had felt like that before, and every year around Earth Day, I had bounced back.

But this particular Earth Day of 2017, I didn't.

It just kept getting worse and worse, to the point where my body had terrible pains going through it, I had nerve problems in my feet and my hands, my back kept going out, and I had real depression that took me over. And I felt like I was in a deep cave. I often had to shield my eyes from my coworkers because I had tears coming into them because I just didn't know how I was going to get through the day. And so, I did the thing that was really frightening to me that I just knew I had to do, I left my dream job. I went into Lisa's office, and I told her that I was going to be leaving and I didn't know what I was going to do next.

I ended up taking some time away. It was an incredible privilege that I had that I was able to take some time away from work, and I just did things that brought me back to life. I just followed my instincts; I didn't really have a playbook for it, but I read poetry, I took creative writing classes, I walked my son to school, I volunteered at my local food bank, I began meditating and, and it just became a wonderful period of coming back alive.

Once I felt like I had some energy left to give I called my former executive coach from Apple and said, "Mary, I feel ready to serve again, I have energy again, but I have no idea what I want to do with myself." And we ended up beginning a body of work that resulted in the work that I'm that I'm doing today and, of course, there were twists and turns along the way, but it took me really burning out in service of planetary healing and really losing my own health in service of planetary healing, to realize how important it is that we care for ourselves as we're doing this work.

Otherwise, we really don't have the best of ourselves available and we need the best of ourselves individually, as teams, as organizations, as societies, as humanity to be able to address the enormity of the crises we're facing.

Liam: I just really want to congratulate and thank you for your authenticity in regaling what is such a personal story about burnout. And I feel that while many of the listeners won't be able to fully resonate with the extremity of what you experienced, I do know first-hand some of the symptoms and conditions that existed for you to end up burnt-out, and I'm sure people will relate to that and take strength from the way that you've bounced back and used it as a tool to inspire and help others.

What's quite intriguing about the next bit of your journey, Chris, is the focus on sustainability. And you say that first you are someone who wants to help with climate change, an environmentalist, and an activist in that space. But the burnout and resilience work are translatable across any industry. What was the motivating factor behind working specifically with sustainability professionals, and what are some of the specific challenges that come working with our industry?

Chris: There are a few reasons why I work with sustainability leaders. The first one is that they tend to be lovely people who I really enjoy spending time with. They are big hearted. They are really connected to nature. They tend to be very open and curious people and they want to make a difference in the world. So selfishly, I just like hanging out with them.

The second reason is that it has become a real extension of my own sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in the world to support those leaders. If I use my time at Apple as an example, I did not know how to, and do not know how, to strike solar contracts, power purchase agreements. I do not know how to re-engineer the manufacturing process, to reduce the carbon emissions of the aluminium casing on the Mac book; I don't know how to do any of these things, but I do know how to help the people who are doing that work be more effective in it.

And that's the kind of impact that I want to make in the world. So, aligning my personal why with the why of my clients makes me feel much better and it invites the best forward in me.

And the third reason why I really love working with sustainability leaders is that they are, by nature, systems thinkers who pay attention to watersheds, coral reefs, and forests and other dynamic complex living systems.

So, there's a bit of a judo move that we are able to do with our company, to work with them, where we help them remember that they have all the answers that they need already within them, because they, as an individual, are dynamic, complex living systems. Their team is a dynamic, complex living system. And since they're already experts in making intelligent interventions into a system in order to change that system for the better and improve its health, they realize that they can do the same for themselves and for their teams by leveraging the expertise they already have.

And it's a really beautiful moment to watch them discover over and over again that the answers they're looking for are not outside, they're inside. The environmentalist and author Paul Hawkin, he's the author one of my favorite books 'Regeneration', and he likes to say that the climate crisis is not a technology problem, it's a human problem, and that really resonates with me. This is really about looking at the world in a different way and changing ourselves from the inside as

individuals, as organizations, as societies to create in a very different way than we have been, that has gotten us into this mess in the first place.

Liam: Something you said really resonated there about the judo moves.

I think taking the topic, which is complicated and kind of dark and personal and still leaving people with practical tools that tap into their personal preferences and ways of thinking is incredibly powerful. Could you touch on a couple of those tools that you try to impart on people to bring the possibilities to life?

Chris: Sure, I'm a big believer in the power of metaphor and in storytelling so I'll probably lean into a few metaphors rather than tell people what to do.

One metaphor that I really love is the idea of doing energy audits. The industry has become excellent at analyzing the efficiency of buildings but why do we somehow think that buildings are more worthy of our attention than we are? We can do energy audits on ourselves to find out where are we leaking energy, where we are gaining energy, and how we design our lives to maximize the creation of energy and minimize the draining of it. One little tip, that I did not invent, but I like to work with my clients on and I've done myself, is to do an energy audit of your diary or your calendar for the week.

What that might look like is that every time you have a meeting, every time you do a task every time or you have a conversation with somebody, you make a little mark next to it - you can do an arrow up, which signifies my energy increased by doing this or you can have a little equals sign, which signifies my energy was about the same, or a down arrow that says I drained my energy from this task.

And you can pay attention to the trends and start to notice what are the things that are filling me with energy and what are the things that are draining my energy. And then just start to shift the ratios a bit, you know, even doing five per cent or 10 per cent more of your activities focused on energy creation can make a really big difference in how you look at the world.

Another one that I'll share and it's a bit more poetic than that, is one that I learned from working with an organization called X - it used to be called Google X, it's Alphabet's innovation lab. It's where self-driving cars were invented and they're working on really remarkable projects, including many climate-related projects. And what I learned from them is they have a way of thinking about innovation, and one of the examples that they use really draws on the wisdom of nature. How can we look at nature to remember ways of being that will serve us well?

An example that they use is an insect called a tiger beetle, and a tiger beetle is one of the fastest animals around. For its size it can run faster than just about anything else. It's remarkable. In fact, it runs so fast that it's processing capabilities in its brain can't keep up with its limbs. So, what it does is it decides, intentionally, where it's going to go and then it runs its little heart out. And whilst it's running, its ability to take in new information essentially shuts down and it arrives at its destination where it has to pause and look around and take stock and say, where am I now? What's here? What information do I need to take in? And now I'll choose again where I want to go from here.

And at X, they talk about consciously creating tiger beetle moments because we all feel like the tiger beetle so often don't, we? That we're running so fast in our lives, we're running through our

work so quickly that it can be easy to forget to pause and take stock of where we are and make a conscious choice about where to run next.

So, that's one thing that your, your listeners may bring into their lives and start to play with a bit, incorporating some of these tiger beetle moments into their lives.

Liam: For those leading teams, organizations who have direct reports, I think the emphasis is clearly to focus on your own wellbeing and the tools that you need and audits, etc. But how do you create an environment where tiger beetle moments are the norm, or you start to build a culture where some of these behaviours, new habits, and new muscles can come to life? Because there is an individual responsibility, but then also an environment that we can create, so how do leaders bring that to life?

Chris: I'm so glad you asked that question, Liam, because it points at something really important. When I became a coach after I left Apple, I started talking more frequently about the irony of my situation, which is that I was spending all day talking about corporate sustainability and planetary sustainability, and I completely forgot to cultivate my own human sustainability. The more that I talked about it, the more I heard from people who are working in the field who said, "I thought it was just me", "I thought I was the only one who was dealing with this" and they felt really isolated. They felt afraid, they felt alone, and they felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to fix it on their own, and they were suffering quietly.

What I've come to understand is that burnout is not an individual failing, viewing it as an individual failing is a bit like when there's an oil spill going and finding one of the pelicans that's covered in oil and that's suffering there on the beach and saying - "hey, why don't you try some meditation? Hey, why don't you do things that that will make you feel better?" - because it's your responsibility to take care of yourself. No, it's a systems problem. And leaders are creators and manipulators in a positive way of systems - creating the conditions to thrive, creating the conditions for resilience is a shared responsibility and as a leader of a team, there's very much the human element of it.

I don't want my people to be to be suffering. I don't want them to be getting sick. I don't want them to be struggling with mental health challenges because I care for them as individuals. There's also a strong business case for it, right? If your people are burning out, they're going to leave like I did and it's expensive and time consuming to replace them.

Institutional knowledge goes with them, and we can't move any more slowly than we're already moving on climate action, because the timelines are too urgent. So, we need everybody to stay in the game and keep their knowledge there. And there's also a planetary reason for doing this as well, which is that we need everybody to be at our best.

I think it's maybe helpful to take one step back and name the characteristics of burnout, because some of them might be a bit surprising to your listeners:

The first one is very well known - it's exhaustion. When we work really hard, we get tired, that's a natural byproduct of work. It's when we don't allow the stress to move through us and to dissipate and we stay in that state of chronic exhaustion that it really becomes a problem. So that's the first marker of burnout - exhaustion.

The second one, however, is more surprising - it's cynicism. Cynicism is feeling distant from the work, maybe things start to feel far away, you start to feel pessimism, you don't really see

possibilities anymore and it can be really hard to dream up new things for yourself, for the world.

The third one is inefficacy or a lack of effectiveness; when you're burned out because you're not bringing your best to your work, you're not able to do your finest work.

And so, if you think about the tasks that are in front of us, we're trying to re-engineer business, we're trying to re-engineer societies, and to shift from a very extractive way of doing business that has landed us in this mess in the first place and we need to shift to a regenerative way of doing business and a regenerative way of working together in societies.

If you think about the enormity of that task, and then you try to imagine doing it from a bedrock of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness, you can see why avoiding burnout is so essential because we can't dream up new solutions the way that we need to when we are burnt out. So, I think it's for all those reasons why I like to remind people that burnout is not an individual responsibility alone. Yes, there are things that each of us can do, that we can take responsibility for, managing our own wellness and our own energy, things around resilience, creating boundaries, incorporating healthy practices to keep ourselves healthy, but it's a systems challenge.

What I found, is that the most important starting point for a situation like that is simply to notice and to describe. What's happening in the system that we're part of? It's when we keep quiet, and we don't talk about what we're seeing that the weight of it starts to get very heavy and people feel like they're suffering alone because we can't solve what we aren't willing to talk about.

Liam: I think that's a really good point, observing it and talking about it. It is a difficult topic, but we need to address it thoughtfully, with larger systems, organizationally addressing it, and really acknowledge its impact, I think it's massively important.

So, it's January, it's cold, it's dark, we want to kind of create some optimism. We've spoken a lot about some of the real negative ways that this shows up, exhaustion, cynicism. It would be fantastic to talk about where your work has moved the dial, when you've worked with leadership, and you've worked with individuals, and you've addressed some of the systematic factors that contribute to organizational burnout. Where can organizations get to? What is the art of the possible in this conversation? Because I do think it's really important to leave people with a message that we can work through it, and we can find a way to deal with this existential crisis in a way with optimism and energy. So, could you talk through some of the work, some of the things you're really proud of in how you turned individuals and organizations around?

Chris: I live in California for a reason, Liam, which is that it's not always dark, it's sunny here. So maybe I'll try to bring some of my California sunshine out to those who are listening to this in a cold place.

One thing that innovation of all varieties has taught us is that the way that things are right now doesn't need to be the way that things will always be. Humans are remarkable at changing when they choose to do so. One of the things that's giving me strength right now, as it feels some days like the world is falling apart around us, is a reminder that in order to rebuild in a healthy way, we need to fall apart, right? We need to disassemble in order to reassemble.

So, some of what we're all feeling may be a natural byproduct of the systems that have taken hold, no longer working, no longer serving us and starting to come apart so that we can rebuild from within them. You know, I think there are a few ways that we can really tap into energy and resilience to keep going on this and I have a huge amount of fun and excitement and joy when these things come out in the people and the organizations that we work with. One, we already talked about, which is practices - working together as teams and starting to name some of the of the challenges and some of the symptoms of those challenges can be really helpful. Some of the teams that we've worked with, pick funny words that they'll use like raccoon or broccoli, you know, something like that when they see a behaviour that they've chosen that they want to remove from their relationships. Whenever that behaviour shows up, somebody will raise their hand and say broccoli.

And it's just a reminder in a way that makes everybody laugh that this behaviour has shown up and it gives them a chance to start to shift away from it and to start to embrace ones that work better for them. So that can be a team practice.

Individual practices can be as simple as just remembering how powerful it is to breathe. Breath is a magical tool that is always available to us. Any difficult news that we get, any challenging meetings we go into, any big task that we're asked to do or step into, like going and standing on stage or giving a big presentation or coming onto a podcast, you can take a few breaths and that reconnects you to your center and it dials down your nervous system. And so much more is possible when you remember to do that. So that's available to us.

And then the last one that I'll maybe mention that has been, I think the most moving one for me when I work with clients, is the ability to really deeply connect into the why of the work. What I often find when I work with sustainability leaders, especially when they're exhausted, or when they're feeling cynical is that they have allowed a huge gulf to appear between the reason why they came into this work in the first place and their day-to-day experience of the work.

What that might sound like is someone might say, "I started doing this work because I grew up in a family that valued going out into nature, we would go canoeing, we would go camping and I wanted to protect the natural environment and I got this amazing job. And now I spend all day in meeting rooms and in spreadsheets" and they're wondering why they don't feel the love for the work anymore. And that's not surprising. So, one of the things that we do is to really go back to their roots and find ways to bring that very present into their day to day.

I'll give you an example of a leader I worked with who runs a climate mitigation, carbon sequestration project. When we started exploring his motivation for this work, and what makes this worth it for him, he flashed back immediately to a time when he had been in Alaska with family, and he could remember so clearly the feeling of standing in a river fishing, and he could feel the power of the river around him. It was rushing past him, and he was standing tall in this river and feeling the earth moving around him, feeling the water moving around him.

It was such a place of comfort and meaning for him that he remembered that feeling is always available to him. So now, before he gets up on stage to talk about the work that he's doing, or before he sits down with an important partner to talk about the status of the initiative, he closes his eyes, and he brings the river back. He remembers that feeling of standing in that river with wild nature all around him, and he allows nature to fill him up in order for him to be able to protect nature.

It's a beautiful thing when you think about it, right? Allow nature to help us help it by remembering how wise it is, how beautiful it is, how powerful it is, and how resilient it is, that when we get out of the way and we stop these practices that are harming nature so much, it will bounce back. And we are the same because we are nature.

When we stop the practices that are harming us, we will bounce back.

Liam: Thank you, I find that connecting to the purpose, being close to the impact, being close to nature, in my own experience are energizers for the organization. The more we talk about the impact on the ground, the more people that go to visit the impact on communities through reforestation, clean cooking, the energy level increase is palpable - I can totally support that from my own experience. And then the Simon Sinek connecting to why, I think is a bedrock as well of any company strategy, vision, mission as well. And I think that's something that our CEO is really focused in on, which is to create improvement for all life on earth.

So, I think those are two really important points, connecting to the impact and connecting to the why and that's that we certainly try to bring to life.

We would love if you could tell us about someone who you follow, who you admire, who you know, who has really taken their ambition through to tangible impact and why they inspire you?

Chris: There are so many people I could choose here. All my clients inspire me so much. Just being able to sit with them as they do this work really fills me with joy and energy. I will pick someone, maybe a bit at a distance as I've never met her before, but I feel like I know her because of the way that her words move me, and her name is Joanna Macy.

She is, I believe in her 90s now and is an ecologist, a Buddhist practitioner and an author. She writes beautifully and speaks very beautifully about this period of time that we're in right now, called the great turning.

The great turning is this shift from an extractive way of organizing societies and businesses to a regenerative way of organizing societies and businesses. The way she describes it is it's still unclear whether we will succeed and that can be paralyzing and that can also be deeply motivating. But the way that she talks about this work is filled with poetry and one of my favourite ideas of it that she shares is that our love for the world and our pain for the world are flip sides of the same coin.

So, every time we feel pain because we witness the destruction that's happening to the world, because we see the injustice that's happening to so many people, we can remember that we feel that pain because of our love. Because of our love for the world, because of our love for fellow humans, because of our love for the natural habitats, and that feeling pain is not necessarily a bad thing. It's a reminder of how much we love.

So, whenever I'm feeling worn down by this work, I usually turn to Joanna Macy's books like *Active Hope*, and others, and a few videos that I found online where she's speaking on stage. I listen to her talk about how we can do this, and I listen to her recite Rilke poetry on stage and it fills me up.

So, your listeners can't do wrong by checking out Joanna Macy and letting her fill them up with energy and passion for this work.

Liam: Amazing, thank you. Real inspiration, even in the struggle. So, thank you so much, great chat, thoroughly enjoyed it. I think there's some lovely takeaways there in terms of tools, the personal audit, the metaphors that I'm sure people will think about more and be inspired by.

So, I just want to say thank you so much from Climate Impact Partners for joining us today and I look forward to hanging out soon.

Chris: It's been a real pleasure. Thank you so much.

Hannah: Thank you for joining us for today's episode of ambition to impact. We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did and are left feeling inspired. Be sure to subscribe to our podcast on your favorite platform. So you never miss an episode. And if you found today's conversation valuable, please consider leaving us a review.

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