

Alison Dean (00:09):

Theorem is the leading innovation and engineering firm for the Fortune 1000. We design, build and deliver enterprise-scale technology solutions and are very excited to present the Breakthrough podcast, an ongoing series where we interview technology leaders to share their experiences and perspectives on what's next in tech.

Alison Dean (00:37):

Welcome to the breakthrough. I'm Alison Dean, VP of operations at Theorem. And today we're talking with Dr. Joseph Cevetello. He is a Fulbright scholar, Harvard graduate, and currently the chief information officer for the city of Santa Monica, California. Joseph, sent me his favorite quote (here it goes my French) by Antoine de Saint Exupéry, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood nor assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the vast immensity of the sea." So hello, Joseph.

Joseph Cevetello (01:11):

Hello, Alison. Compliments on your French pronunciation. Very good.

Alison Dean (01:14):

So I have to ask, what does that quote mean to you?

Joseph Cevetello (01:16):

If you really want to inspire people and bring out the best in people, you really need to let them figure out how to achieve whatever their vision and their desire and their inspiration is. My definition of leadership is showing that you have good ideas, new ideas, and not being afraid to voice them up the chain of command. And that leadership is totally different than authority. I expect all of my staff to be leaders and to come up with good ideas and to challenge me. What I can do as the head of my organization is to exercise my authority, to support those ideas. So I want them to exercise leadership, and I want them to challenge me, to exercise my authority to support them. And I think the way that you do that is not to say, "Okay, there's the wood, there are the nails, go build this thing." You say, "Well, look at the beautiful sea out there. Don't you want to be out on that?" They'll figure out a way to build the best possible that you haven't even thought.

Alison Dean (02:14):

I'd like to think that I try and do that as a leader myself. So I also want to talk about the role of the CIO for a city and Santa Monica is certainly a popular one. What does a typical day in your life look like?

Joseph Cevetello (02:30):

I spend a lot of time trying to understand the needs of my customers. And the funny thing for me is, it took me about a year to convince people that they were my customers in many

cases. The word customer isn't really used much in government, but as far as I'm concerned, our citizens are customers. So I spent a lot of time trying to understand what they're trying to do. And I often get invited to meetings to think about things that don't involve technology at all. And that to me is where I feel like I know that I'm adding value. That they're inviting me because I can help them think about things because I can ask questions and add value. Not because it's about technology, but because it's about being in it together, it's about coming up with good ideas and it's about trying to craft the best solutions.

Joseph Cevetello (03:16):

So I spend a lot of time doing that probably more than most CIOs I know. I spend a lot of time with people. I have regular coffee klatches or coffee chats with my colleagues on a rotating basis. It's a lot of thinking through problems with people. And then, of course, there's the Karen feeding, keeping the lights on, talking technology with my team or others. But I think the majority of it is really just being a strong partner and helping people to think through challenges.

Alison Dean (03:47):

I like that. When we talked, I think it was about a month ago. We talked a lot about the strategic planning that you were responsible for when you started in your role and how that really helped when everything in the pandemic hit. And so I really do want you to talk through what that looked like.

Joseph Cevetello (04:04):

Happy to. The thing about strategic planning is people don't often think of it as the engine behind the innovation where they don't necessarily think of it as an exciting or even sexy undertaking. But to me, I've been fortunate in my career to be involved in a number of strategic planning processes and projects in mature organizations that have done it for years and have done it well to an organization that was brand new Greenfield and they didn't even have a strategic plan. And I've done that both as a consultant on the outside to organizations and also as somebody within. I understand the power and the strength of strategic planning, if done right. So to me, there are some core attributes of a good strategic planning process. Obviously, it needs to align to the organization's strategic plan because if it doesn't, you're in trouble. Funny how some people miss that one. And also make sure that it reflects the organization's vision, mission and values.

Joseph Cevetello (05:02):

But then I think there are three important things that I think really speak to what happened during the pandemic. The first is a really good strategic plan that gives you flexibility. Flexibility in the sense that you're able to pivot and innovate if you have clearly defined outcomes and goals in your plan. The second aspect that I like to emphasize is capability,

meaning that you have developed or are developing the knowledge and skills within your organization to be able to deliver on those outcomes and goals and that you have those clearly defined so you know what you need to focus in on. And then the third is capacity. Capacity to me is about knowing what your priorities are, knowing what's important to the organization, and then saying, "Okay, we're being asked to do 150,000 things, but these are the core things that you've asked us to focus on. Therefore, we're going to align our resources to that, and we can focus and do good work on those things, flexibility, capability, capacity."

Joseph Cevetello (06:05):

And what happened during the pandemic was, we were engaged in the strategic planning process two years previous, where we had 75 people in a strategic planning process that took six months were a lot of workshops. When I first wrote this idea that the consultant that helped me out with it, he said, "75 people in a strategic plan? How about just you and me write a strategic plan?" I said, "That's not going to work. That's not going to be the collaborative plan I want and that's not going to be transforming."

Alison Dean (06:31):

Right.

Joseph Cevetello (06:31):

So those 75 people created a strategic plan for the city. And that plan is a public document because after all, we are government and anybody can find it on our website and it clearly states what our outcomes, goals are. And we also measure them. We have metrics measuring them. So it's all public. So if we're not delivering on them, you're going to know. That's all to say three things that came out of that process that we were focused on that allowed us to be ready for the pandemic. One of our outcomes was designed for digital-first, the second was to strive to be cloud-first and mobile-aware. And then the third was anytime, anywhere secure. So you can see they're all related to cloud-based computing, ubiquitous computing, being able to work from anywhere at any time. By the way, when I came to this organization four and a half years ago, just about everything was on paper was a shocking revelation for me. Santa Monica has always been known as an innovative forward-thinking city, especially around mobility and sustainability and what we've done for the environment. But when I showed up and I saw paper everywhere, I thought, why do we have so much paper? Let's just say that what came out of this people said, "Yeah, we got to get rid of the paper."

Alison Dean (07:46):

Yes.

Joseph Cevetello (07:46):

The other interesting thing is when I arrived in the city, we had practically no laptops, everything was a desktop. We had no wireless network for staff. We have free public wifi.

Alison Dean (07:56):

Right?

Joseph Cevetello (07:57):

We had no wireless network for staff. And so I said, "Look, if we're going to meet these goals, we need to transform what we're working with." And so we went from a 99% desktop-based wired environment to 90% mobile laptop-based. And we were doing that because of the flexibility, capabilities, and capacities it was going to allow us to have. So it just so happens that in February of last year, we were about 85% done with that, having the city have laptops, all the people who work and needed them. And then it just so happens COVID hits. So I'd like to think that I was pressing about the pandemic, I clearly was not, but what it allowed us to do was literally overnight, you went from having about five people telework in the city to literally within 36 hours, we had 750 people.

Alison Dean (08:51):

Amazing.

Joseph Cevetello (08:52):

And when I say teleworking, I mean, really, they had a city-issued device, a laptop that they had at their home or wherever they were, securely connected through VPN with the exact same experience as if they were here on site. And I think we were the only city in the LA county area that we're able to do that, that quickly and that fully, it just fit really well with endemic. And we were really able to just go from no telework to almost complete telework and be very productive in doing that. So none of that would have happened if it hadn't been for the strategic planning process.

Alison Dean (09:26):

Right. The strategic planning process that you did, was the outcome of that also the telework policy that was developed? Because I know we talked about that too, how it was like a long one and then you condensed it down to 10 pages.

Joseph Cevetello (09:39):

Yeah. That's an interesting question. Underlying all this when I was building out the technology capabilities, the city has been the place where you came to work and you had your place of work and you were here. So when we started pushing the boundaries, the city said, "Well, we have to put together a telework policy." So like many cities, we put together a very heavy, some might call robust telework policy that was about 45 pages long telling people all the things they could do and couldn't do. And what we had to look out for. And by

the way, nothing against any of my colleagues or anyone, but it was really focused on ensuring people were going to continue to work.

Alison Dean (10:12):

Okay.

Joseph Cevetello (10:12):

So they are on the things we had in place, the pandemic hit. And it was very clear that people were working just as much. In fact, I think a lot of my staff were even more productive. And so the funny thing is the whole telework policy, that 45-page doc just got forgotten. Nobody ever paid attention to it. We were too busy going through an economic collapse. Unfortunately, we had a significant reduction in force in our city of 30% and just dealing with all the crazy things of the pandemic. So nobody bothered to check whether what was fitting to telework.

Joseph Cevetello (10:43):

So now that we're coming out of it and thinking about it, what will the world of Santa Monica work look like post-pandemic? We went back and looked at that thing and we were, "This is way too heavy-handed." So we pretty much stripped out a lot of it. And it's about 10 pages now, which in my opinion, I wanted to bring it to two, but there's a lot of things that need to be in it obviously, but it's a lot leaner and simpler. And by the way, nobody doubts for a second that people can be just as productive remotely as they can be face-to-face.

Alison Dean (11:15):

It's refreshing that it's at least trending in that direction because I think that there have been a lot of senior executives that were very resistant to the notion of people working remotely and what that would look like. And so I do think we're trending more positively in general because of everything that happened last year. Because you are a community of CEOs with all these neighboring cities. I am curious, how many phone calls were you getting? Because I'm sure most of your CIO friends knew of this plan that you had been working on for a couple years. And so what did that all look like?

Joseph Cevetello (11:50):

I'm new to government and I was fortunate to make some good friends quickly in government. I have some great friends throughout the LA area. Some of them knew about my plan. I think some of them wondered why I spent so much time and energy and involve 75 people on it. And then when we were in about week two of the pandemic, they were calling me up saying, "Do you have any extra equipment? I can't get my hands on laptops. Everybody's sold out." And I said, "I deployed all my equipment. We're good. We've been planning this for years." I did my best to try to help and support my colleagues. We did exchange some of the processes and applications that we're reusing and they eventually

got up to speed and they were all able to catch up. But ironically too, by being so quick to do it, our council challenged us as well because they wanted to continue to have council meetings and they wanted to have live public comments.

Joseph Cevetello (12:41):

So we had never done a virtual council meeting before. And then suddenly within two weeks, we were holding council meetings and they wanted to let people have the ability to comment and attend the meetings just as if they were here. And so, because we already had that other thing out of the way, they were, "Well, can you do this too?" And I was, "Yeah." Okay. And we did it. And I think, again, we were the first city in the county to have virtual live interaction, public comment meetings. And we've been doing it for more than a year now. I guess, having that plan and being so far along, allowed us to do that as well.

Alison Dean (13:13):

Yeah. You've inspired, I'm sure many other people in the county. Sarah Richardson, who is SVP CIO at Tivity Health, was recently on the podcast. And she has this question for you: "How has the pandemic changed in organizations plan to make investments for their IT workforces? And what does it look like over the next 24 months?"

Joseph Cevetello (13:36):

I think what's going to happen in the coming years is what's been happening for the last year. I think digitization is going to increase and accelerate because like many organizations, we had to let a significant number of our staff go and we're not doing any less. We're doing just as much. And I think everybody looks to technology to pick up that work. And so many organizations we're accelerating our digital efforts. We're focused more on how we can put things into digital workflows to free up our staff's time to focus on higher-value work. If nothing else, it's also going to continue to accelerate the idea of mobile ubiquitous technology. It's going to accelerate the move to the cloud.

Joseph Cevetello (14:25):

We've been moving to the cloud for a while. Not quite at the pace I'd like to, but we kept it going during COVID and once we're out of it, I'm sure we're going to even move more quickly. But I think digital initiatives and digitization are the things that are going to be really front and center in any IT plan right now. And I think, hopefully, that will mesh well with allowing people to do higher-value things and do the things that only humans can do that automation can't do right.

Alison Dean (14:55):

Right. So take us into the next question. What do you think is the most crucial aspect of a city's IT strategy?

Joseph Cevetello (15:05):

Yeah. The most crucial aspect, I think—having one.

Alison Dean (15:09):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (15:11):

Nothing against my colleagues and my peers, but most cities that I know of in this area do not have a robust strategic technology plan.

Alison Dean (15:19):

Okay.

Joseph Cevetello (15:19):

So I think having one and having one, that's not something you create and sits on a shelf. I purposely wanted our plan to be public. When I first told my management staff, "We're going to make this public and everyone's going to be able to look in on this." They looked at me, "Is that such a great idea?" And I said, "Well, it's going to keep us honest."

Alison Dean (15:37):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (15:38):

We're not doing what we shouldn't be doing, then I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do. I think having one, having one that's public, it's great to say, "Let's be cloud-first and mobile aware." But how do you measure that? Right?

Alison Dean (15:49):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (15:50):

There are all metrics you can come up with, but what's one that has meaning that actually reflects the value in that. That's the key thing. I think having a plan, having it be a public document that is living that gets updated and that you have metrics and report on.

Collaborative, it needs to be a collaborative plan. It can't be applying what you create as a CIO and say, "Here's my plan." The city needs to be collaborative.

Alison Dean (16:13):

Okay. And then I'm also curious from a city's perspective, what the temperament is to engage outside consultants versus hiring more people on internally? And obviously, it varies

depending on what the project is or what the scope of work looks like. But I guess in your seat, how you generally approach those two options.

Joseph Cevetello (16:37):

Santa Monica, I think until this pandemic, had never really had an economic crisis. Santa Monica was always known as a well-run city. Believe it or not, up until the pandemic, we had the largest financial reserves of any city in LA county, including the city of Los Angeles. And we'd never had gone through layoffs. So this was a big, big, big thing that happened during the pandemic. So what's going on right now is we don't have money. We're not pulling in revenues like we used to and we still need to get work done. It's a very charged environment right now about how you do things. And there's not a lot of appetite for working with non-city employees right now. But fortunately, we've been able to figure out how to get by without having to do that.

Joseph Cevetello (17:28):

Again, I think if you placed your bets on the right technologies and you were moving in the right ways, you can be in the cloud and have services and support provided by the cloud, but not necessarily hire somebody who's not a city employee. So most of these didn't go through what we went through with our layoffs, because we were heavily impacted by tourism. Santa Monica has three pillars of its economic health. One is tourism. The second is retail. And the third is businesses who are here and oftentimes are on our fiber services, but tourism disappeared. And by the way, retail had been disappearing for years anyway. So you take two pillars out and then you get hit with a pandemic and it's a perfect storm.

Alison Dean (18:11):

Right. I think different government entities, depending on what state you're in, their approach to like having an RFP process for certain things. And I think it just depends on the union environment in that state. So now that things are reopening and we're hoping to approach some level of normalcy, what do you think going into the office really looks like moving forward?

Joseph Cevetello (18:33):

Well, that's something that I'd say for the past two months, we've been talking about what does reopening look like? And I'm part of a small group of what we call the internal services, HR finance, myself, city, manager's office, city attorney's office, trying to figure out what this means. So just a couple of thoughts. One, what's rather interesting, I was here yesterday and I was talking to one of my colleagues about, what is it going to mean to come back and how we're going to have to help put together scaffolding to help people understand what it means to be here now? And I thought that's so interesting because we went into the

pandemic, nobody knew what it would mean to be constantly working from home. We'd all worked here and now we have to figure out what it means to work together in a place again.

Joseph Cevetello (19:16):

It's fascinating to me about the nature of learning and how people have to develop that. So I think it's very clear to me that it's not going to be what it was before the pandemic. We've shown that people can be productive. We've shown that some people don't need to be here all the time. Some people may never need to be here, but we're a city. And since we serve the people, that's probably not as likely as it would be in some private companies. But it's very clear to me, our staff who work for me, who would commute two hours each way to come to Santa Monica. And when they would tell me their stories about spending hours and hours and hours in traffic, I always thought, "My God, I love having you as an employee, but why are you doing this?"

Joseph Cevetello (19:57):

And the fact that they've been able to have that time and spend the time with their families and by the way, use some of that time, those four hours that they're normally in the car, give me one hour of work. That's great. That's one more hour of work I would not have. I think we all understand that we're going to put together some type of flexible, enhanced working schedule that will allow people to be here when they need to be.

Alison Dean (20:22):

Right.

Joseph Cevetello (20:23):

And then to have time somewhere else, whether it's home or Starbucks or wherever they are, to be able to focus and do work. The challenge around that is there's a couple of things that we've identified. One is, do you do it in a pod environment? Do you have the same people rotate in and out on the same days? Do you have certain key central dates, like everybody has to be here on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday? We're a city, we're 24/7. So that doesn't make sense for everybody.

Joseph Cevetello (20:50):

There's also the question of let's imagine you, Alison, decide to work 90% from home and me, Joseph, I decide to work 90% here and we both have the same job. And then it comes time for promotion. And then I get promoted and you don't. Is that because you weren't around because the boss was here? These are really challenging questions that everybody's trying to figure out. And, of course, we're approaching it, trying to think through every single situation, because that's what we do in the city of Santa Monica. I think we'll get to the 90% and then we'll figure it out as we go along. I think a lot of it has to do with

people being open to trying things out and not looking for the moment where it doesn't work and then jumping all over it.

Alison Dean (21:31):

Yeah. Being open to the fact that there's a lot of unknowns right now and you just have to go with the flow. So you have a very interesting resume. And so I want to talk through the most impactful digital transformation or just transformational projects that you've been part of, what the most intriguing aspects may have been or what your biggest takeaways were, what that looks like?

Joseph Cevetello (21:55):

The first one that comes to mind is a macro huge project. And that would be KAUST. So KAUST is the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. It was established in 2009 actually. It was the first privately endowed independent university in Saudi Arabia that was mixed gender and where the laws of Saudi did not apply. In other words, women were complete equals. They could do all the things that men could do in society. There were female faculty members and they brought in faculty and students from all over the world. What was so amazing about that project is that in the back of my mind, the king at the time, King Abdullah, who passed away about two or three years ago, I think he really thought of this as a transformation for his society, that it was one of those accelerators to bring back the enlightening that was so important to the Islamic world and to become more open to women and involving them in society and becoming more “unquote Western” if you'd like.

Joseph Cevetello (23:07):

And so it really was a truly transformative project and on a scale that is just staggering to think about. It was a \$15 billion project. That's not an exaggeration and it was endowed, the king endowed with \$10 billion. So overnight, once it was established, it was within, I think one of the top six or seven, most highly endowed universities in the world. To work on something of that magnitude, was pretty awe-inspiring. I had never been to Saudi Arabia. I had never been to the Middle East and then they show up there and be brought out to a site which was north of Jeddah, which is the West Coast of Saudi Arabia in a little town called Thuwal where there was really not all that much, except for lots of desert and camels on a beautiful Red Sea location. And to build a fourteen square mile campus in the middle of nowhere and have to bring all the things that are associated with having a community.

Joseph Cevetello (24:04):

There were 2,500 residences built. There's a golf course. There's a Marine biology Institute, fire stations, all the water, nothing was there, you had to bring it there. And they did it. They did it in record time. It was most amazing to see. I think when I arrived, they were already,

probably three or four months into the building of it. And you could start to see this thing rise from the desert. And I think one of the most amazing sites I remember seeing was being there at lunchtime and seeing these lines and lines of workers marching through the desert, to the tents where they had lunch. At one time, it was claimed, 25,000 housing workers working on this thing at once. And by the way, they had more cranes in that 14 square mile area than they did in all of Dubai and Dubai was on fire. So it was one of these crazy things where you think, if you weren't actually there, I don't know if you could have dreamed it up.

Alison Dean (25:00):

Right.

Joseph Cevetello (25:01):

So anyway, I probably could go on for hours about this, but I think the amazing thing about it was the Saudis wanted to create the best of the best. And so I was brought in to help them create the IT strategy for the university. And this was a technology university. So akin to Caltech, we've more MIT resources, a graduate-only research institution that brought in really high-performing faculty and students. And they said to me, "We want you to build the best thing. We don't care if it costs money, as long as we get good value for it." If you just tried to sell them something that didn't actually add value, they did not like that. And there were a lot of people in that project who were trying to do that.

Alison Dean (25:44):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (25:44):

But if you said, "This is the best solution, and yet it also cost the most." Good, great, because the one thing they could not control this time, the king was already quite elderly at the time, they were worried they would not build the university in time for him to see it. And so they said, "Look, the one thing we cannot control right now is time. This has to move quickly." And so ridiculously in 14 months, they build a university from the King saying, I'm thinking about this to actually having the dedication and all these buildings on this 14 square mile campus was about 14 months.

Alison Dean (26:17):

So the takeaway for you then is anything is possible when you have the money and resources that you need.

Joseph Cevetello (26:24):

Wow. Yes.

Alison Dean (26:26):

But truthfully, it sounds like a lot of runway to really enact your vision. And as long as you were able to convey your vision in the most compelling way, you had that buy-in, it wasn't a challenge. You were being very honest and straightforward. And I mean, that's impressive. So I think the takeaway is if you can be convincing of what you need to do and people have the wallet for it, things can happen. Okay. So are there any other transformational projects that come to mind and perhaps any that you really overcame some struggles or you at least recall, there were some sticky points that you had to hit?

Joseph Cevetello (27:07):

I'll give you a recent one here in the city. And one that's a little bit smaller and scale, but I think equally impactful in many ways. When I took this job about four and a half years ago, the city manager who hired me, took me to lunch. And he said to me, "One of the biggest challenges I have, one of the biggest challenges we have in the city, it's homelessness". He goes, "The city of Santa Monica does more than just about any other city in California to try to ameliorate and reduce homelessness. We spent a lot of money. We spend a lot of time, but I don't know if we're doing the best we can and I know we can do better. And he goes, "I think the technology has a role to play in this." I'll give you an example. Any particular day, there might be a homeless person in one of our parks and that person might be asleep and the citizen might go by and see that person and think that perhaps they're not alive and they'll call the police.

Joseph Cevetello (27:59):

"And so the police will come out and respond and they'll go to that person who turned out just to sleep, not dead. But the police then leave, that person is free to be there, so they'll go away. And then maybe that person gets up and goes to another part of the park. And then somebody else will call, think that there's something going on, and the fire department responds. But again, the fire department responds and talk to them. If they're fine, they don't want to get any help, we'll leave them alone. And I think particularly that person might elicit seven responses from the city, fire, from police, from our Human services team. And the thing is nobody has a comprehensive overview of that. And so the police know what they do. The fire department knows what they do. Our Human Service teams know what they do and our community partners know what they do. But we don't necessarily have a great comprehensive view of it. I think technology can help with that. Do you think you can help?"

Joseph Cevetello (28:47):

And I say, "Wow, that's a big challenge, but I think I can do this thing." So I spent a lot of time talking to the people who work with the homeless, my human services colleagues, and I knocked on a bunch of doors in the city. And one of the doors that I knocked on was the Milken Institute. And the funny thing is I went around there, I said, "Hey, did you do much work with the Milken Institute?" And people said, "No, not really, I think they are in our city." Now, I was the newbie. I just knocked on doors and I got to meet a guy and he met with me

and I told him what I was thinking about around homelessness. And he said, "I think I know just the group." So he put me together with this amazing startup called Akido Labs that was connected to USC Health.

Joseph Cevetello (29:26):

And they came in and met with me and I described my problem. And they said, "So we know how to do this. We did this for Czech Medicine." We often think of hospitals as one unified data score, but they're not.

Alison Dean (29:40):

No.

Joseph Cevetello (29:40):

There're many databases with information and they have many different roles. Nurses need to know some information. Radiologists need to know some surgeons, physicians, administrators, all need different views into very personal information. And so they had built a system, an app-based mobile-based system that would allow people based upon their role to see the information that they needed to see and nothing else, but giving them a greater comprehension of the entire situation. So they said, "Yeah, we can do this." We sat down, we spoke this out, amazingly Akido said, "Look, we'll even do this and develop this app at no cost to prove to you that it'll work.

Joseph Cevetello (30:18):

And then they set about it. Now the biggest challenge and what was the challenge around this project was we're a city, which means we're very concerned about safeguarding privacy, and some of the databases we're talking about here regarding homelessness or some of the most sensitive that we have in the city. The police have their Criminal Justice Information systems, which are highly restricted and deletions. To me, the fire department, basically most of the work they do is respond to health and safety issues. And then our homeless team uses something called HMIS, Homelessness Management Information System, which is a county system. Again, very controlled. And so what we were asking them to do is take these three very controlled systems, free the data up so it can be exposed to people, but only allow the people who needed to see the data that they were allowed to see the same.

Joseph Cevetello (31:08):

And they said, "Technically, it's a no-brainer for us." But legally, process-wise, procedure-wise, it was a bit challenging. So, fortunately, I had a great, great city attorney who I pitched the idea and she said, "We'll work on it because I got a lot of concerns." But we all agreed that the primary focus was going to be opt to preserving privacy and the integrity of that data for the individuals. And so that challenge took us about a year. It took

the Akido waiting in the wings helping to guide the discussions, but just to work through all those corny details from a legal standpoint, from a process standpoint, from getting those different data scores that speak for one another and allow them to speak to one another. That took about a year. And I was pushing people hard. I was pushing the city attorney's office hard. I was pushing everybody hard to say, "How can we do this?"

Joseph Cevetello (32:01):

Everybody involved in this project and the city stuff was amazing. And I have to tell you, I think there were some doubters at the same time, but it actually worked. When we did implement it, it's had a real impact in people's lives. And the other important aspect of the system that I think was important for me, because I didn't want to make it yet one more thing for people to do. My requirement was that it would take existing data and not require the police or the fire department and human service team to do anything more than what they do now. But it would feed into a system that would give them greater perspective.

Alison Dean (32:32):

Okay. So once all that data was in this new system, couldn't there have been conversations from a change management perspective to say, "All right, you don't have to do anything more. We want you to do the same thing, but you're now just going to do it in this new interface that all of us now have access to. And you're still only going to see the things that you're meant to see." It sounds like these other systems are or should be a thing of the past.

Joseph Cevetello (32:54):

Actually, it's a good question. But from the start, we've never wanted to do that because the police system, the Criminal Justice System that they use, they do a whole host of things.

Alison Dean (33:05):

That's true. Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (33:06):

Everything from booking procedures to unit, that's how they do the work. Now, if I said to them, "You've got to completely change this," then it would have gone nowhere. And plus, they don't need to change that. That works well. Same thing with fire, same thing in human service. That's why I wanted to say, I want to build an interface that was common that would allow all these people to look at the information, pulling from those things, but wouldn't require them to do anything different. And I think the other important thing here, and this is the reason why this worked, in a very thorny environment, privacy and data controls is that the Akido app itself doesn't store any of this data. It's just a window into these databases that pulls the information that it needs to and presents it to the individual based on the roles. They don't have the data we do, we completely control. And that was the other important thing to ensure privacy. You don't want to let this data out of your shop.

Alison Dean (33:58):

Right.

Joseph Cevetello (33:58):

So it's a good question, but I knew we could never do that.

Alison Dean (34:02):

It sounds like a fun project.

Joseph Cevetello (34:03):

It was, and by the way, I'll just summarize it by saying the day I knew it had a real impact was it took a while to introduce people to it. It took a while for them to get used to using it. But once they were using it, there's a story that one of our people in human services felt about. It used to be that when a homeless person was arrested for whatever reason, and by the way, I can tell you from having done plenty of ride-along, our police department does not want to arrest homeless people if they don't have to, but if they're being belligerent or causing a problem, they have. When a police officer arrests somebody, it takes them off the street for quite a while and you have to go through this whole booking process.

Joseph Cevetello (34:37):

What would often happen is that this person would be booked and put in our jail here. And they might be there for two days or so. When we put this application in, because we had the community partners involved, when a particular individual was arrested, it was put into the app. And within minutes, one of the community partners who worked with this person knew about it. That person showed up at the jail. And even before they completed the booking, that person said, "This person is a person that I worked with. They have some issues that I know about. I can deal with them." And that person didn't have any time in jail.

Joseph Cevetello (35:15):

And what that person said at the time was, "I'd been in jail and I've been arrested many times. And none of my family has ever shown up to bail me out or to help me out. But you were here before it was even complete. And that is the first time in my life that's ever happened." That's the type of stuff that makes you tear up a little bit and it makes you feel like, "Okay, maybe we did a good thing there."

Alison Dean (35:37):

Right.

Joseph Cevetello (35:37):

And by the way, the app is still being used today, we're expanding the use of it. Akido has gone on to other cities in the LA county area, they're using it. We were the testbed, the innovation lab for it. And it's expanded out.

Alison Dean (35:50):

Sounds like something that most cities could benefit from just because I'm imagining there are many disparate disconnected systems that many cities utilize and having a view of everything in one place. Every city could use that. So well done. Okay. We talked about privacy and the implications of privacy with a lot of the projects that you've done already. What about the approach to cybersecurity for a city and ensuring things are secure?

Joseph Cevetello (36:17):

Cybersecurity. I think again, table-stakes talk about the CIA triad, confidentiality, integrity, and assessability. Obviously, that's all there. I think what's unique to a city with cybersecurity, they're two interlocking things. One, all of our data, all of our systems, everything we do, it's the people's data, the people's system. It doesn't belong to us. We're giving this in service of Santa Monica. So it's public, but that also means you have to state regulations, for example, Criminal Justice data or HIPAA data. So there's that incident. It's public. We're supposed to use it to serve the public, but we also have to think about how we save data. And then the flip side, the other important thing that I think is unique to cities is protecting people's privacy. We're a government. We are a country founded on a healthy distrust of government. We take very seriously the idea that we're protecting your privacy. People have this idea that I know everything that goes on in the city and every transaction, I couldn't and I don't. And even if I could, I wouldn't.

Alison Dean (37:20):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (37:23):

My former city manager, the gentleman I told you about the homelessness challenge, he really wanted to extend this out to understanding all the interactions that any particular citizen had with our city. It always made me uneasy. And I was always on the other side of it. I think he'd always say, "Well, I want to be like Amazon. I want to be, when you, Joseph, login, we say, you're there. I know that you had a parking ticket when you played last week. And I know when you paid your water bill, and I know what sports you love. Everybody loves it with Amazon. Why can't we do the same thing? I want to be like the Amazon of cities."

Joseph Cevetello (37:56):

And I said, "I get it. But Amazon doesn't have a police force. We have a police force and people are going to be suspicious." And this pre COVID, and people are going to be suspicious of the government having that awareness about what they do. And the other way I think about this and this was a conversation that had a number of CIS, especially my good friend, Kevin Greg. There's a lot of talk about smart cities and how we could use technology to improve things. How can we have cameras and know what people are doing? And we take very seriously the fact that we don't want to do that. We don't want to be a surveillance state. We don't want to be a surveillance city. We don't want to be what Tucson or Zubov would call involved in surveillance capitalism.

Joseph Cevetello (38:40):

And then people always call out all the right things that are going on in say China. And they say, "Well, in China, the government knows where you are and who you're interacting with. And you have video footage." And to me, I call that not a surveillance state, but that's a sinister state. That's not where we want to be. That is 180 degrees where we are. And some people talk about, why is smart city technology progressing so slowly in the United States? I think it's because we're emphasizing privacy, protecting people as opposed to surveilling them and control.

Alison Dean (39:16):

Right. Did you watch the Social Dilemma on Netflix?

Joseph Cevetello (39:19):

No.

Alison Dean (39:20):

I'm giving you homework now. And then I'm curious what you are going to tell me about that.

Joseph Cevetello (39:22):

Okay.

Alison Dean (39:25):

Okay. The world of education has been a huge part of your life. So we've talked a bit in the beginning about leadership, but how has that informed some of your leadership style?

Joseph Cevetello (39:36):

I have a love of learning and education that's why I became an educator and spent so much time in graduate school and in that world. Most of my career in technology has been in higher education.

Alison Dean (39:47):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (39:48):

And I'm an adult age group. I'm a person who's always been involved in professional development activities or consulting or constructing activities or environments that allowed adults to come together and gain something great information. So ironically, when I decided to become a CIO, one of my big concerns was I always thought of CIO as people just worried about cybersecurity and maintain ERP system. But then I realized if I constructed the right environment, I could help create the right container for learning and development and innovation that you could do that in any role. And so that's how I view my role right now. There's a very overused aphorism, viewing any situation as a learning situation or any environment can be a learning environment. It's absolutely true, but you have to give them the confidence to be able to voice what they want to do. You have to be able to listen to their longings and consider that. And you also have to be able to say, "Thank you for the idea. It's not my idea." And a lot of people have problems when it's not their idea attaching some significance to it.

Joseph Cevetello (40:52):

I don't. I think I get my biggest charge when I see people learn and grow and develop. Just today, we had a retirement party for somebody who's been with the city for 30 years, and I've only been working with her for four and a half. And it was a really wonderful gathering. And what was wonderful about it, there were 75 people in this Teams meeting. Some of us were here and some were not. And I was very honored to be asked to speak and I spoke at it. And then in the end when she spoke, she said something that really had an impact on me.

Joseph Cevetello (41:24):

She said, "I remember when, Joseph, came to the city four and a half years ago. And I remember the first time he talked to our organization and he said two things I'll never forget: One, he said, "I will help you maintain a work-life balance. That's vitally important. And I'm going to emphasize that." But then, Joseph, said, "I'm going to push you in ways that you may not like." And she said, "And you did. And you pushed me in a way that I didn't think I could do the things you asked me to do, but I was able to do." That made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside because I thought, that's what I try to do. I try to say, "I'm going to push you and hopefully you take on that challenge and then break these off."

Alison Dean (42:04):

Okay. So you're going to be remembered by the people that report into you for being someone that has pushed them. And they've learned things because of it?

Joseph Cevetello (42:13):

Hopefully. Hopefully, push not pushy.

Alison Dean (42:18):

I like that. What projects are you especially interested in as you continue on in your career?

Joseph Cevetello (42:23):

I got one that I really interested in getting started. Never having worked in a city, I had never experienced permitting systems before.

Alison Dean (42:32):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (42:32):

Primary functions of the city is to provide permits, buildings inspections, et cetera. I have to say in our city, every other city I know, the permitting system, the actual heights will be electronic systems that are in place to support permitting are definitely wanting. A nice way to say it. They exemplify everything that I think is against our strategic plan, their legacy, their on-premises, they're closed, they're expensive. They have a terrible customer interface. So that one has been one that I've been trying to get to for a long time.

Joseph Cevetello (43:10):

And we're getting started on that because we really do want to transform the citizen experience of permitting because I have to tell you when I walk around and I tell people I worked for the city, or I run into friends or I'm somewhere, I can tell you, 95% of the time somebody comes up and was, "My God, I've been waiting so long for this permit." I started going into the details and I say, "I know how bad it is and I'm trying." And so my goal is to completely transform that process. So that it's customer-friendly, that it's quicker, that it's lower barrier of venturing, that it's more digitized, that it's easier for our staff and that ultimately you get what you need as a constituent faster, hopefully, cheaper. That's the next big challenge.

Alison Dean (43:55):

That sounds exciting. Okay. So what estimated delivery time have you put on yourself for that?

Joseph Cevetello (44:00):

So I want to do this within 12 months.

Alison Dean (44:03):

Okay.

Joseph Cevetello (44:03):

I'm going to do.

Alison Dean (44:05):

All right. You all heard it here, 12 months and we're going to log into those systems.

Joseph Cevetello (44:10):

It might even be sooner.

Alison Dean (44:11):

I like it. Okay. And then to segue from interesting projects, what about future innovations that you are excited about or where you see things progressing? I think you can take that broadly, but I'd also be curious, the innovations that you're excited about from a city perspective.

Joseph Cevetello (44:29):

So one innovation that I'm excited about is geospatial data and geospatial awareness. We just implemented a brand new app, which we're calling the City of Santa Monica app, which basically combines what traditionally is called the 3-1-1 app where you report something like a pothole, along with us pushing information to you about the city, combining our website. We have a really strong GIS and we have some very expensive maps in the city that are in GIS. And so we're incorporating that into the app. But what I think is really exciting about that is when you have GPS spatial awareness in your apps, it just provides such a tremendously better customer experience. The fact that I open up this app, it knows where I am. I can take a picture of the pothole. I send that request in and I can see perhaps there's already been five other people who reported that pothole. So maybe I don't do it, or maybe I do it to emphasize it. From the back end of it, our staff can see it, we've got 20 reports about this pothole, we got to get on it.

Joseph Cevetello (45:26):

I think geospatial data is a fascinating one. I'm also concerned about it from a privacy standpoint because again, I emphasize that. And so I want to be sure we don't tip over into the world with surveillance state, but I'm mostly optimistic about that. The other one that I think is really important is augmented reality.

Alison Dean (45:46):

Yeah.

Joseph Cevetello (45:46):

Augmented reality would be awesome for a city application. That's one of the things we're talking about. It's, wouldn't it be great to go by a construction site and hold up your city of Santa Monica and see what that building might look like when it's finished and who the landlord is? Who the developer is? Who you could contact if you wanted to be in that building when you're right there outside the building, rather than have to come to city hall building? I think augmented reality is another interesting one that we are chipping away at.

Alison Dean (46:11):

I like it. And what about a breakthrough that you had recently?

Joseph Cevetello (46:15):

I think one of the big breaks we had was that connector. I've already talked about that. I'll give you another one that was developed in a public-private partnership as well. Santa Monica was ground zero for dockless scooters, micro-mobility. That started in Santa Monica. And by the way, we had no idea this happened until one day I remember walking down the street with the head of planning and we saw this thing and I was, "What is that?" He was, "Yeah, never seen that before." And then suddenly, they were everywhere causing havoc. People were riding them on sidewalks. People were getting injured. We had very strong concerns about safety issues. It was really a Wild West when scooters hit our town. And then our council responded by putting together a pilot program and inviting an RFP process to have companies respond and to have more or less the ability to operate in Santa Monica for a period of time.

Joseph Cevetello (47:09):

So we had four companies that were awarded that, but nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the first year and a half was people riding them on sidewalks and behaving badly and people getting hurt, and people being fearful of them. So we were trying to fix this with how we would designate screens and setting up special lanes. And then, of course, trying to enforce it through the police and giving people tickets. But that only goes so far. So I thought, what if there's some technology solution for this? So I heard about this group in Cal Poly called the DX Transformation Hub. An amazing group that is a collaboration between Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo and Amazon. And they take public challenges. You throw out a challenge to them and they'll take it on. And then they will develop a solution, no costs. And when they're done with it, it will become a public domain solution. So I threw up this idea, can you stop scooters from operating on sidewalks? This one, that's an interesting challenge.

Joseph Cevetello (48:07):

We went up there, a team from the city, putting public works. My mobility team, ISP spent the day with them in a workshop which followed the Amazon invasion process. They came down here and spent a day with us and then they went off. We iterated on what it would

look like. And they said, "Okay, we think we can develop something". And I think the amazing breakthrough wasn't something we did. It was the work that they did, actually, one guy named, Casey, he's an amazing guy. I think he's 21. And he was an intern at Cal Poly. He was an MIT student and they gave him this challenge. And originally, they thought, well, it's next-generation GPS, because the problem is GPS is only accurate, I think within four feet. And that's the width of a sidewalk. That's not going to work, that doesn't tell you scooter's on a sidewalk from the street.

Joseph Cevetello (48:55):

They said, "We think next generation is going to be within nine inches. So maybe that'll help." Well, they tried that out and it didn't work. But Casey, one guy by himself within a week figured out another solution and it solved the problem. And it was the most amazing thing. He figured out how existing parts, which cost all 90 cents made in the same factories in China that made these scooters, figured out a way to with GPS and an accelerometer to get AI that he had programmed to learn what the rhythm of a sidewalk was as opposed to a road.

Alison Dean (49:31):

Wow.

Joseph Cevetello (49:32):

And that it would learn the sidewalk rhythm. And it knew when you were on the sidewalk and when you were on the sidewalk would automatically slowly shut down the scooters. And I'll tell you one of the most rewarding days of my professional career was how we invited these scooter operators in the city to our library. And we had Casey beam in from the MIT and show them the solution. And I just remember watching the expressions in the crowd and it was everything from, "That doesn't really work." And then he said, "Well it's right here."

Joseph Cevetello (50:01):

And then of course they came up with, "Well, it'd probably cost a lot of money." Casey said, "It cost 90 cents." And they said, "Well, it's probably going to cost us a lot of money." DX stuff said, "No, it's public domain." And then we brought them out on the sidewalk and we let them ride this thing. And sure enough it worked. That was a wonderful day.

Alison Dean (50:16):

He's hired!

Joseph Cevetello (50:17):

Yeah. Thank you, Casey. One amazing guy. By the way, just about every company wanted to hire him on spot. And he said, "I'm just a sophomore. I think I need a little bit more time."

Alison Dean (50:27):

Well, it sounds like he'll be doing fine once he graduates. Well, wait, did he graduate yet?

Joseph Cevetello (50:32):

Probably this year.

Alison Dean (50:33):

Right. The time has come. Is there anything else that you'd like to cap us off with or have we set it all?

Joseph Cevetello (50:39):

We had talked previously about ideas or what's some of the best advice that a mentor ever gave me.

Alison Dean (50:45):

Sure. Yeah. Let's dig into that.

Joseph Cevetello (50:48):

I think what I think about ties into my idea of learning opportunities and understanding people. I think the best advice that I've ever gotten is to meet people where they are. And I think for the longest time I didn't do that because I just thought everybody thought like me, and wanted to always do the best and work the hardest and challenge themselves the most. And then one of my mentors in graduate school said, "Not everybody's like that. You're around people like that, but in the real world, not everybody's like that." I think at first I was, "Why aren't they?" But then I learned to appreciate it. And I realized that, if you meet people where they are and you let them know that it's okay where they are and you help them find that push, they're going to get to where you want them to be anyway. That's something that I have always kept in mind. And I think it's made me a better manager, a better colleague to people. I've learned a lot from that. So I think that's something I can offer.

Alison Dean (51:44):

Every day is a new day for all of us. Well, I thank you, Joseph. I appreciate all of your wit and wisdom.

Joseph Cevetello (51:53):

Thank you. I've enjoyed this conversation.

Alison Dean (51:55):

Thank you for tuning into the Breakthrough, brought to you by Theorem. Make sure to hit that subscribe button and leave us a comment. You can find us wherever you listen to podcasts and for more great content, follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Breakthrough pod that's, breakT-H-R-U-P-O-D. I'm your host, Alison Dean. This was the final episode of season one. I hope you enjoyed them all. We'll be taking a short break, but stay tuned as season two comes back on September 2nd. We will see you then.