

## **BW\*F Andrew Culp Transcript**

**Andrew Culp:** [00:00:00] It begins with, you have this steel, and it's this piece that's chosen, but it's raw, it's, it's unformed. The vision the blacksmith has for what that steel will become determines the process. And that exact same piece of material can either become a butter knife or a battle ax depending upon the vision that the blacksmith has.

And so, beginning with the end in mind it is so critical towards this formation process of what's a strong young man.

**Tim Spiker:** What does it sound like when someone is passionate and courageous about developing others? Well, you're about to find out. I'm your host, Tim Spiker. And this is the be worth following podcast. On this show we talk with exceptional leaders, thinkers, and researchers about what actually drives effective leadership across the globe and over time. I love exposing business leaders to leaders in other fields, and that is my, [00:01:00] “Happy New Year 2024” gift to our be worth following audience because the person you heard from a few moments ago is Andrew Culp.

Andrew is the founder and principal of the Anvil Academy, a learning community that is focused on mentoring boys through the messy and formative years of middle school. Andrew has been a leader in the field of education his entire career, starting as a teacher. And moving through several different contexts to the one he finds himself in today.

That is, in an unconventional, yet extraordinarily intentional learning environment. Andrew leads young men through what he calls, Mind on, Heart engaged, Hands Dirty Experiences, looking to help shape the next generation of young men who will become leaders in their vocations, communities, and families.

During our conversation, Andrew shares about their process for giving middle school boys [00:02:00] real responsibility. You'll feel his passion for developing others, and you'll hear an amazing analogy that not only gave his school its name but has significant implications for all of us as leaders regardless of our time of life.

But first we begin by hearing an excellent example of leadership that Andrew had at home growing up, which was not only positive, but also included a mindset that Andrew decided to let go of later on in life as he came into his own as a leader.

**Andrew Culp:** I think origin story, you have to start with family of origin. And you know, in, in so many ways I've, I've apprenticed under the leadership style of my father for, for better or worse. And I would say a lot of it is for better. But growing up in a family where my dad was the superhero. And even in some ways continues to be, but I remember just growing up and, and he was always being positioned into places of influence and [00:03:00] leadership and aligned with his gifting and passion both in church world and in business world and within our family. And even with our extended family was just someone who seemed to be one of vision that led to influence that led to impact in whatever sphere he was in. And so, I saw that as a kid, and you just see all the shiny parts of it. You see everything that's, that's, man, your, your, your dad is killing it. And then you get older, and you see there's a lot of complexity behind that.

You know, I think about, I've actually asked him about his leadership style. He experienced starting in a company at the kind of lowest rank and working his way up to president of the company. And I just said, well, what, what were some of the things that, that drove that? And I remember he used the words I led by walking around.

And I said, well, you know, what do you mean? And he just said, I think we would call this leadership through presence. I mean, he was a presence driven leader that to sit in the C-Suite office was not [00:04:00] his home base. It was with those he was leading, walking alongside, engaging in the day to day with always with vision, always with influence, but very much an incarnational presence within the organization.

**Tim Spiker:** Well, that's fascinating way to start to say, hey, this is what I got to observe growing up. Now, as you get older, you actually have explicit conversation about it, but go, go back a little bit further to this time when maybe we didn't have words or language, but you're just experiencing this, you're, you know, you're a teenager and you've got a dad who you've got the, you know, the, the benefit of hindsight at this point, but what was it that you got to experience there in the home growing up that, that made such an impression with you?

**Andrew Culp:** There were two parts. One was There was always this, this expectation that you were going to be a contributor into whatever community that you were a part of. And I think that's something that was [00:05:00] an unspoken piece, but that when you show up and you're present within a community, you don't always have to be the loudest voice in the room and the one who has the title of leader, but you come with a mandate to give, to share, to impact influence never as a passive receiver, but an active engager is

something that I think we never talked about, but was just something that was gleaned. I think that the downside that of that though is what we didn't have were intentional conversations around failure. And so, I only ever saw my dad with the Superman logo and the cape on.

And as a kid, that's what, that's what you want to see, right? You want to see your dad as the superhero. And, and what I have since come to learn, not that, not that there were defects in his leadership, but that we all have that, right? That we all have these areas of weakness or blind spot. And I think as I was [00:06:00] really in the early stages of my career, trying to navigate new leadership opportunities, I had the wrong mindset of, well, I just always have to know it all and do it all and be the guy who is succeeding and up into the right guy. And that's just not the reality. It was what I viewed in my dad. And I think it's been in years since that through a conversation and questioning, he's been more willing to share, here were the hard parts and here were the places that I made mistakes and here were the struggles. I wish that that was more a part of the conversation along the way, not just in retrospect.

**Tim Spiker:** It's like I'm paying you to build the bridge to the next section of our conversation. So that is that is a wonderful setup because, you know, one of the things that I really value about getting to visit with folks from different places here on the podcast is that while our audience is aimed at the business [00:07:00] community, I believe that there's so much for us to learn about leadership from all different sources.

And your heart's passion lives in the education community. And so, I want to dig into that a little bit. So folks have an understanding of where you're coming from and they got a little taste of it in the intro, as I talked about what you're up to, but I want to unpack that a little bit further and then come back to this idea of, well, perhaps there's an opportunity to be a little bit more transparent or a little bit leverage the idea of failure more because you've had the opportunity.

Now you're in a you're going to talk about education, but you're in a very entrepreneurial style of education, which folks are going to have a chance to hear about. And so, what I want to do is have them understand that context. Then I want to come back to this this idea of this transparency and learning from failure more overtly and how that's been successful or not successful for you as you've led [00:08:00] into this kind of entrepreneurial adventure with an educational system.

But all that requires us to understand a little bit more about what you're up to now. So, talk about this thing called anvil that has. Let your heart on fire that

you have been leading. I'm excited for people just to learn about this from a concept idea. I think it's gonna be a different kind of a different way of looking at education than many of us have been used to. So, share with us about that.

**Andrew Culp:** Well, let me do so by tying in the previous story with how I ended up in education. And so, my dad didn't start as a president or as a chief executive. He started as a biology teacher, high school biology teacher, and he spent the first years of his career doing that. He got to the point, though, where I'm one of four, and our family of six just wasn't able to be financially supported by the teacher salary. And he had to make a [00:09:00] hard decision to leave this arena of passion for him and move into the corporate sector mainly out of, out of a financial prompting which then grew over time into a mission and vision and kind of vocational passion.

But initially it was a, it was a financial decision. And so, I remember being in college and I was thinking about, okay, what am I going to major in? What am I going to focus on? And I had a similar kind of crisis of direction. Do I go into education, which is where I felt I passion and calling and conviction or do I move into a more of a corporate alignment where there was a much clearer pathway for financial stability and, and for an achievement.

And I remember having this conversation with my dad and he wasn't bemoaning the fact that he left education, but, but he, you know, was very clear that he saw in me the potential to influence [00:10:00] generations not just a bottom line. And so, of course you can do all of that in the business sector, but, but he saw in me and spoke into me this calling to not just teach students, but influence generations. And that really made, made this decision when I was in college to move into education. And so, I did that. I went to school for elementary education, and I loved it. I thrived. I was just kind of on fire for kind of reforming and refining the educational models that I saw and I tried to do that in my first jobs as an elementary school teacher was given great opportunity by the districts I worked in to design programs and develop programs from scratch. It was great, but it was about seven years into my professional journey that I ran into the exact same wall that my dad did.

And so, we had just had our fourth kid and I was kind of at the top of the pay scale. I was a principal at the time, and I was kind of trying to figure out how do these numbers work? And was, was, and we were living up in Metro New York at the time, and the [00:11:00] idea was, do I stay in the educational sphere, or do I leave and, and go into the commuter into Manhattan and try to figure out that, that corporate role?

And I knew that there had to be a shift for me. Now, not for everybody, but for me, because here was, here was the thing. One, it was financial. But two, I found myself in the position as principal where I couldn't justify the code of ethics and discipline model that I was supposed to be implementing and overseeing, and much of it I had actually authored, right?

And so, what happens when the school that you have been a part of leading and refining turns out to be a school that you don't want to send your own son to and that's where I was. It was like, I don't think I want my boy to be here and have me as his principal.

**Tim Spiker:** What do you say code of ethics? Unpack that a little bit. So, we understand a little bit more about. What you, and it's, it is incredibly, by the way, thanks for [00:12:00] your humility and transparency when you're saying, look, I, I helped author this thing and, and I don't, I mean, it gives so much credibility to the other things we're going to talk about, but help us understand a little bit about what you thought was off, maybe not as effective.

**Andrew Culp:** I mean, so something about being in education, there is very much a system, it's the battleship that's moving and to really make substantive change, I struggled to do that within the system and the idea of behavior and code of ethics being one of them and essentially what was happening is, as a principal of the middle school, I would have boys who would be working their way through the dean of students and the vice principal and I mean, it would end up in my office for discipline and they would end up there, not because they were malicious or hard hearted or, you know, quote, bad kids.

As I looked around, I saw [00:13:00] these are actually going to be future leaders and entrepreneurs and they're going to be culture shapers, but we're expecting them to follow a behavior plan in a classroom that all of these future skills that they have, and they're raw and they're messy and they're unrefined. But all of these things that are one day going to serve them and their families and their faith communities and the businesses they're leading, rather than be a conduit and a refiner of those, we were suppressing them and just saying, you know, essentially sit still, be quiet, you know, listen and learn at a desk for eight hours.

And some of that was just the failure of the education model. And again, I take responsibility for a lot of that, but I didn't know how I could change that within the system. And so, I began to think specifically around these boys and some of it was personal because I have four children. Three of them are boys.

My oldest was kind of encroaching on this stage of life. And I began to think if I could create [00:14:00] a space. That was environmentally and relationally, academically, spiritually, from an activity side, bodily, if everything, rather than try to suppress all of these impulses, actually was a place to curate them and refine them and multiply them.

What would that look like? And I gave myself the, the invitation to begin dreaming about that. And that's really where this idea of the Anvil Academy was first birthed. It was in a place of discontent on a recess duty playground in New Jersey, where I just began to think, I don't think I can with integrity walk in this role the way that I feel I need to.

**Tim Spiker:** So, I cannot necessarily speak for every person that's listening out there right now, but right now I feel like I am on the edge of my seat in a movie about to hear the thing that I am [00:15:00] dying to find out about what our main character is up to, because what you've said is so compelling. I mean, that's why, that's why movies and great stories are compelling because there is an important problem to solve and a protagonist that is trying to figure it out, and usually there is some kind of system or problem that is fighting against them and their desire to make this good thing happen.

So, you're on a, you're on the bench in New Jersey and you're saying, I don't think I can stay here and keep doing this and here comes the dream of Anvil. So, with this wonderful setup that you've given us.

**Andrew Culp:** Here's what happened. It was we looked around and we wondered, can we do this in Metro New York area in North Jersey?

And the answer in retrospect was, yeah, we probably could have, but my two sisters in laws lived down in the North Atlanta region. In Alpharetta and, and so we were down in [00:16:00] Alpharetta on a Thanksgiving break and we were there and, and spending the week in, in Alpharetta there was nothing special about Alpharetta, but, but I began to explore and see all sorts of non-traditional learning communities that were finding life and finding roots here in Metro Atlanta.

And at the time, these just didn't exist up north. There wasn't the, the kind of political structure or the educational or even cultural structure for this. But down south in Atlanta, there seemed to be an embracing of non-traditional hybrid based learning communities that partnered with families where other schools at times tried to usurp the role of the family.

And I've seen that in schools where the school becomes what they believe to be the primary caretaker and, and the character developer and the academic kind of hierarchy and, and that always kind of began to rub me a little bit the wrong way. We were like we were stepping on the [00:17:00] toes of a role.

That for thousands and thousands of years wasn't being primarily played by a system or an organization, but was done within the role of a, of a mom or dad or, or grandparents or aunts and uncles. And, you know, what we've called homeschool having been a part of, you know, up through a master's degree in educational system, you always looked at the homeschooling families like they were the, the denim jumper wearing weirdos who were kind of.

You know, but I began to see, know that there is a very different model and to have to the humility to say for all of my education and training that that there is actually something that that is a golden and rich and valuable about this. And, you know, again, not for everybody, but for a certain subset who are looking for this, that this can be not just an alternative way to educate but a, a better and a more holistic way to educate was really a [00:18:00] mental model, a paradigm shift that I had to go through over a couple of years. But we ended up moving our family, packing up and coming down here one, to be close to family, but two, to really explore this emerging educational model that, that was blowing my mind as a leader of a learning community.

**Tim Spiker:** So, you make a big move, you bring the whole family. You come to the greater Atlanta area. And as you kind of fast forward into your story a little bit, here you are Anvil Academy is a thing. You can go check it out online. You guys have been at it a little while now. Walk us through what that educational system looks like today that you've helped develop and stored now as listeners probably have picked up the focus here is specifically and uniquely on, on young men which is Anvil's focus. So, this is not to say obviously that young ladies don't also need their unique [00:19:00] educational pattern, but you've been, you've been called to the male side of the equation. So, tell us what Anvil looks like today.

How does that system work? What does it look like you talk about? A very holistic model of education, not simply academic, but a number of other elements as well. And you've built this into, you know, the word that comes to mind in education is the word curriculum. But I know that that anvil is so much more than the word curriculum, or maybe what we would say is that involved in the curriculum is so much more than a textbook. And so talk about what it looks like today and how it operates. Give us, give us a picture of it.

**Andrew Culp:** In your model, you talk about journeys and excursions. What we say is that the middle school years really are a three-year wilderness journey.

**Tim Spiker:** As a parent of a 14-year-old at the start of that, I can, I just like to affirm you in, I do feel like I [00:20:00] have just walked in, like I took two steps in the wilderness and I turned around and somehow I'm in the middle of the desert. I don't know how I got here in two steps, but what is going on?

**Andrew Culp:** I love the idea of, of wilderness and all throughout history, you know, all types of thinkers and, and writers and sages have, have pondered the idea of, of the wild spaces. And so, so much about the idea of wilderness resonates with, with who I am and what I desire, but also this really unique period of life and, and, you know, call it between 10 and 14 this, this middle school age is when so much is happening, certainly from a bodily side and hormonally, but also from a, a brain science piece. Researchers will tell us that, that this period of time outside of the first year of life, that no other time in life is the brain going to be growing and developing and expanding and [00:21:00] be as malleable as during kind of these, these years of, of adolescence, specifically middle school years It's no wonder that these years feel so disorienting because literally the biology is different, you know, three days from now, what it is now.

And so, what I think I finally have found a way and a pathway, then all of a sudden, I try to do the same things. And these same things that worked three days ago are no longer working, even my, from, from a coordination side. And then, then you put everything where you think about. Culturally having to navigate just the, the wildness of culture and really what feels again, like the wild, wild west of, of who am I why am I valuable, where do I belong, you know, all the identity pieces that we're just, we're just in this, this wilderness space.

And so, the idea of trying to be guides in the wilderness for not just the boys, but for their families and to curate a journey that goes from the end of boyhood. [00:22:00] Into the beginnings of manhood and not do this as a compartmentalized experience or something that happens in Boy Scouts or in a church group or, but something that is integrated into their profession, which for this stage of life, they're learning and their academics and their growth is their profession.

And so, we say, well, why do we kind of sit at a desk and then try to do this, this manhood work in other spaces. What if we integrated all of it? And so that's what we've tried to do is actually not do anything new. We've tried to harken



back to how formation has been achieved for thousands and thousands and thousands of years.

Right where boys of this age would start to apprentice with their fathers or grandfathers or elders in the community in the workshops or in the fields in the marketplace, they would be given real responsibility, real work to [00:23:00] do that had a gravity to it, and they were given real tools to work with that had a danger to them, and they were actually trained in these pathways to be contributors to within a community, we took that model and infused it into the learning process. And so, it is a hybrid school, boys come for two days a week. So, they're in a cohort of 100 students, right? 50 students are within their cohort, but they walk for three years with this cohort of students. And they're in History and their science is integrated, a trades-based hands on carpentry and blacksmithing and animal husbandry, their physical fitness, what you know, what we might call gym class, we call their adventure class. And so, they're outdoors, they're, they're in the wild, they're, they're doing all of this body work, but they're doing it in wild spaces outside.

And so over three years, they're walking through the chronology of human history from very much a 20, [00:24:00] 000 foot perspective, but, but from creation stories up through modernity, we walked through that over three years. And then we, we do believe that, that the Christian scriptures have so much to say about this manhood journey and formation.

And so, we parallel the historical history with, A biblical redemptive history and work through Old Testament and Gospels and New Testament over those three years. And with that as the guide, we say that everyday boys their mind is going to be turned on, clicked on. They're going to be curious.

They're going to have to answer that question. Why do I need to know this? Right? Their heart is going to be engaged. It's going to be drawn towards big things, but ultimately every day they're going to come home sweaty, they're going to smell, they're going to have dirt under their fingernails and they're going to be exhausted.

And if that's what school looks like for these three years, then we think ultimately, they'll look back and it's, it'll be a gift, a formational gift for taking a first strong step into manhood. [00:25:00] Right. We're not under the belief that we're going to graduate eighth graders who are these super mature men, you know, walking in the fullness of manhood, but they'll know the trajectory to head on.

They'll have the musculature, both bodily and just in terms of who they are, they'll have the muscle memory to take that first right step into manhood. And we think if we can exist to do that, then we're doing something unique, but also incredibly important in the world.

**Tim Spiker:** Let's talk about, there were two words you put together in the midst of that, that uniquely got my attention.

And you said real responsibility. And when I look at the world at large. And we think about the development of young people in particular. Real responsibility is not something I would necessarily say that we see in, in [00:26:00] drives out there. And you mentioned some very physical things. I did hear the word blacksmithing in there, which is not something you hear every day here in the first world 2023.

So, talk to us a little bit about what giving. These young men, what does it mean to give them real responsibility and how, and how does that play out? Because as soon as I hear real responsibility, my next thought is real consequences. And so, talk to us a little bit about how that real responsibility shows up in the educational model of Anvil.

**Andrew Culp:** Well, I'll pair those two things, the blacksmithing and the real responsibility, because I think, I think they're, they're intimately connected. Right. So, if you think about a traditional classroom, you have projects that you're doing, you have homework that you have to be responsible for, you have to have the executive functioning to plan out your schedule and organize your locker and collaborate with others.

And that's, that's all [00:27:00] beautiful, right? And that's real responsibility for this stage. But what are the real consequences immediately for not doing those things? You know, we know what the long-term consequences are because we see it play out over someone's relationships and profession, right?

But I think a lot of boys in this stage struggle to see, well, why does this matter? And what are the real consequences? If I don't do my math homework, okay, I get a zero. Do I care? Does it matter? And we want to build in this, these, these kind of intrinsic value sets of, yeah, you need to get this grade, or you need to get this percentage.

Because at some point you have to play the system when you get, you know, older. But I don't think that's what this three-year window is for. Right. And so, you think about what's real responsibility, real responsibility is taking a forge

that has propane fire that's flaming, you know, at 800 degrees and you have a [00:28:00] railroad spike that you have all your safety and protective gear on, but you're working with a partner and you have to hold this glowing orange hot railroad spike on an anvil so that your partner can start to draw it out with hammer blows, right? You're holding something that that in a millisecond if you are irresponsible or you do not show up in the way that you need to, you could put that kid in the hospital. You could put yourself in the hospital, right?

The real responsibility in that is that, hey, I am trusting you with your safety, with his safety, with things that are incredibly dangerous, but it's not irresponsible to put a kid in this situation if you have trained them well, if they recognize the gravity of what they're doing, and their responsibility to themselves and others.

And so, every boy knows if I don't approach this and attend to this in the way that I need to, there are real [00:29:00] consequences to myself and to others. And to see the way a boy approaches that task versus a task of, I got to write this five-paragraph essay, it's a completely different approach to think about, am I given, am I being given something that has real power? And of course, we know there's power in words and power in language and power in thought, right? And ultimately the pen is greater than the blacksmith forge. But in that season of being a 12 year old, I know exactly what's riding on me doing my work in the right way in this season to talk a little bit about the, the who, not what, what they're doing is an outworking of who they are, right?

So, no one is going to walk out of Anvil. Winning a forged by fire TV show competition as, as a master blacksmith. Right. But who they are and, and how they approach others and how they focus on others [00:30:00] and who they are in terms of developing a strength and a soundness within them, all of those things are being crafted so much more than their actual blacksmithing skills as they try to take a railroad spike and make it into a knife.

**Tim Spiker:** Tell us a little bit about, I'm just imagining, you know, I see this forge. I see, you know, groups of young men working on these things. It's almost like, you know, I'm the human drone in this story where you're kind of flying around over top.

Watching these teams work together, handling these items that are dangerous, but in a responsible way, you have, you have had the opportunity to develop these experiences and put them into kind of a consistent execution and watch numerous groups of young men respond to those, that real responsibility, what are, what are some of the stories that have come out of that?

And maybe it's not specific to blacksmithing, because I think this analogy holds for a lot of things [00:31:00] that you're doing. How have you seen, you know, what are some of the things that you've seen young men with regard to responding to being you used the word, you know, handed something powerful that really, that, that matters. What, what have you seen?

**Andrew Culp:** Well, within, within the blacksmithing analogy, I'll stay there because that's who we are. And again, we're not a blacksmithing school. It's just a, a tool that we use, but it's the motif that really draws out everything. And so, you know, if, if, if I can just kind of broadly talk about that and then I'll answer your question about what do we see with boys?

So, the whole reason that the Anvil Academy exists is, is for the sake of being formed into a strong young man in the way of Jesus, we make that distinction. But for that process to take place, it begins with you have, you have a raw material, right? You have this, this steel and it's this piece that's chosen, but it's raw.

It's unformed the vision. The blacksmith has for [00:32:00] what that steel will become determines the process. Right? And that exact same piece of material can either become, we say, a butter knife or a battle ax, depending upon the vision that the blacksmith has. And so, beginning with the end in mind is so critical towards this formation process of what's a strong young man.

And so, one we have to identify. You know, what is healthy, responsible, strong, young manhood, and how do we lay out those attributes? And then there's the process you walk through, and so the process begins with an anvil. And I talk about this all the time. This process is true for middle school boys. It's almost more true for middle aged men, and I would say for anyone in a life stage of growth.

But you have to have the standard along which your life is being formed. And so, what's going to be the thing that's faithful and strong, [00:33:00] that's immutable, unchanging, that I know when my life bumps up against this thing, I get shaped. This thing doesn't move. We're all looking for this in life. And I think middle school boys are specifically looking for what is going to be that thing that I, that my life will be shaped against.

And so, in the blacksmith motif, it's the anvil. Right? And then there's lines and there are curves, but there's a steadfastness to the anvil that you take this piece of steel, and you place it on the anvil. And it's along those lines that the shaping happens. And so, first question is what's going to be the standard?

What's the standard that we're seeking to align our lives with. But then anyone who's done any sort of blacksmithing you take a piece of cold steel, you place it on an anvil and you start banging it with a hammer. All you're going to do is you're going to scuff up the metal. You're going to, you're going to vibrate your wrist and hand, and you're going to think like, nothing's happening, no change is happening.

And so, you know, oftentimes that's where we are in life is I know the standard. I know the shape I [00:34:00] want to take. I know what I need to do, but man, I'm getting pounded from all sides and I'm not. I'm not being shaped. I'm not being formed. And so, the key to it is, is what is the fire in your life that's making you malleable?

And I think this is the thing that is just as, as important for us walking through these middle years. You know, we start to, to kind of solidify who we are and get entrenched in our ways of being. Where are we inviting fire into our lives to keep us soft and malleable? And that can be all different types of influences, but what is the thing?

And it could be your learning or your coaching. It could be a spiritual endeavor. And then lastly, somebody has to pick up a hammer and start whacking away at this thing and actually doing the formation along the lines of the anvil. At the Anvil Academy, we say this is, this is a group of teachers, it's coaches, it's moms and dads, it's pastors, it's elders.[00:35:00]

We intentionally give them a hammer in our lives and say, I'm going to trust you to form me. And some days it's with the sledgehammer. I mean, some days the blows are just heavy and I'm just feel like I'm getting beaten from all sides. Most days, it's a little ball peen hammer that's tapping away and slowly forming me along those lines of the anvil.

And so, who is the community that you are entrusting your life to, to do your shaping? And so, that's our process. You know, there, there's, there's more to the process. There's the hardening, there's the sharpening, there's the sheathing, all these things. But I'll tell you, the answer to your question.

What do boys want more than anything? They want to be the battle ax first of all, right? They don't want to be the butter knife. They want to be the battle ax and they want to take that, that railroad spike and they want to be done with the shaping, you know, in 10 minutes [00:36:00] and we say, you know what, it's actually going to take you two weeks.

Where you just have to come in and you're just going to be drawing this thing out for two weeks. They want to be done right away and we say, no, that's not how formation works, right? There are these times in our lives of epiphany and times of really fast transformation, but the majority of life formation happens with slow, oftentimes painful, methodical work over time.

And that doesn't always resonate with the heart of a middle school boy, but I think understanding that and recognizing that my shaping is going to come through day in, day out, hammering that slowly forms. That's what's going to endure as they think about growing into men who will be leaders of their families and leaders of their businesses and communities one day.

**Tim Spiker:** I so appreciate you drawing all of that out to kind of walk us through the stages. I think any of us listening, [00:37:00] whether, you know, in those teenage years as a young man or middle aged male or female, it doesn't matter. This idea of forging and thinking about what is the standard against what am I going to be measured?

What do I want to be measured against? What's the fire that's making malleable? Who is my fellowship of the hammer that I would, that I would trust that has wisdom? These are all really wonderful things for all of us to think about, not just middle-aged boys. But now, now you promised you were going to also share what you have seen.

So, I want to hear it now that you've laid it out for us in this kind of wonderful analogy, what have you seen as, as young men are invited into a process that is long and difficult. When you said, hey, this is going to take two weeks. I immediately thought, yeah, we're in 2023 and I can order something on Amazon that might be on my doorstep by the end of the day.

Let alone all the things that we have access to immediately through [00:38:00] the internet. So, it's such a counter cultural, but it's a reality. It's not a countercultural concept. It, the formation of people does take more time in, in almost every case, but there's some very minor exceptions, but in almost every case, it does take more time.

And so, I was thinking, Oh, wow, this isn't immediate. This isn't the click. This is going to take time and that I need that coaching as well. But what have you seen as you have put young men through these experiences?

**Andrew Culp:** I think one of the, the mantras that we talk about is that time tells the truth. Oftentimes our first glance at something we're drawn and middle

school boys even more so, we're, drawn to the, to the shiny, to the big, to the attractive. And it's, it's easy to keep that up for short periods of time. what's difficult is to sustain something like that over time. And so just one of the things we've seen is, is that, you know, we, we put boys in position of mentoring and leading [00:39:00] other boys.

And you know, we all come with different personalities and different wirings. And when I think about who are the, who are the people that I want to give the hammer to and be my fellowship of the hammer What I've learned and I've come to learn this is oftentimes the person who I initially desire to be in my fellowship of the hammer as I do long life together with someone it's rarely those people that that are shiny and bright and, and, you know, most attractive immediately, right?

It's people who have, who have shown themselves to be I don't know, long suffering and faithful in our lives. And I think as boys try to figure out really what one of the things when they step into mature manhood, who is going to be the community that I surround myself with and who will I give the power of formation to in my life.

Encouraging them to think about community from a long perspective as opposed to the immediate. I'm not trying to in [00:40:00] any way pigeonhole people or, or, you know, cast a judgmental net. That's not what I'm doing at all, but, but asking can you be and will you be discerning about who you give influence to in your life?

And oftentimes in this season, it's friends that they surround themselves with. And so, who, who will you invite to be a mentor? Who will you invite to be in your group of formation? And if there can be a wisdom that's developed in this season, we think that benefits them greatly over time.

The other thing is just much more practical is What does hard work look like, you know, living in this place of immediacy, I'm willing to do short bursts of hard work if there is the immediate payoff, but it's a lot harder for me to think about I'm going to be working on this thing and having to put in sweat and in hours, and I'm not going to see that payoff.

It's going to be deferred [00:41:00] for days, for weeks, for months, even. Again, where is that being curated in our culture? And I think if there's a place to practice this and it becomes normative that I know that I can find joy and fulfillment, even if there's not an immediate payoff, I think these can become

the leaders of, of the future, because they're going to have an internal wiring that just isn't commonly curated among their peers.

And I don't think that's a little thing. I don't think, I mean, you've talked a lot about hard skills and soft skills, but can you, can you think about leaders who have, who have had those attributes, who have had the long view and who have been willing to do the hard work over time and not chase the immediate payoff?

We've now graduated a group of kids and they're, they're now in high school and college. Cause we've been doing this for seven years [00:42:00] now. And occasionally there's a place by us called the Avalon. I'll be out and I'll see one of, one of my kids, you know, and he inevitably he's on a date with some girl and there's this awkward interaction where like they don't really want to say hi, but they kind of want to say hi and this is just a strange interaction. Whenever this happens, my first question is, never academic. I never want to know about, hey, what were the attributes of such and such a president or tell me about the Sumerian culture, right? I'm not asking them about what was the process of blacksmithing or, or I asked them about them.

I want to know about how they are, who they are. What this relationship is like, those are the things that matter to us. And I think the academic piece and the, the skills piece, the trades piece, they're a conduit for these boys becoming who they're going to be as men in the future. And, and that's where we really try to align all of our [00:43:00] energy.

**Tim Spiker:** Such good stuff for us to think about even as adults. And so, as we wrap up, let's talk about what you see ahead. What's next for you? What's next for Anvil? Where are you heading? What do you have on the horizon? What are some of your hopes as you move this vision forward?

**Andrew Culp:** Anvil in a place, I mean, we said we're a small learning community by intention. You know, we have 50 students in a cohort of 100 students in the in the program. And we have a waiting list that we can't even begin to put a dent into. And so, we've begun to ask the question what would it look like to generously share? This anvil model with like-minded learning communities and we're in the process of as a board of figuring this out.

Not how do we just plan a bunch of more schools, but how can we share this? There are people who are doing this in pockets all over the world. Right? Anvil is, it might be innovative in our little community, but there are people who are [00:44:00] rethinking and redesigning and doing this incredible work.



We're just one little piece of it. And so how do we create a network of those who are aligned missionally, who have something to share and offer one another. And so, developing. What we've begun to term the Anvil Alliance, where we can share curriculum, we can do the work of coaching we can begin to help others extend their influence, specifically in the world of middle school boys, because it is my conviction that every community in America needs something like the Anvil Academy.

Every community doesn't need an Anvil Academy, but they need something like an Anvil Academy. And we have something to speak into that. And so, we've, we've begun to talk with other leaders and began to offer what we have and begin to mature that for the sake, not just of a hundred boys in Forsyth County, Georgia, but how do we share this with, with really the world?

**Tim Spiker:** What about for you? You're heading this [00:45:00] thing up. And as we look forward into 2024, as you were you know, launching into always what these next steps are. And you think about Anvil Alliance are there some things for you personally that you look forward to in the, in the coming year?

**Andrew Culp:** This idea of choosing to put our life on the anvil just continues to resonate with me and give birth to lots of thinking. You know, the phrase comes from Noah Webster, the dictionary pioneer of the American language and his 1828 dictionary. He talked about this phrase on the anvil, this colloquialism, this idea of, man, I am in this process of active formation.

And so I've taken that idea of what is it, what would it look like for not just middle school boys, but for us as men, women, as leaders to choose to lay our lives on the anvil for the sake of formation. I'm putting a lot of thinking and design into that in the process of, [00:46:00] of writing a manuscript and designing a series of talks and, and opportunities for coaching others into that role. And so, a lot of what 2024 is going to look like is, is putting meat to that skeleton and then beginning to, to share with other communities.

**Tim Spiker:** I love having guests on the podcast that are not strictly from the world of business, even though business leaders are our primary audience, I just think there's so much for us to learn from other places in the world, whether it be athletics or in this case, education. There's just so much that we can glean as leaders. And if we ever cut ourselves off from learning from spaces outside of the context in which we lead, I think we really do ourselves and the people that we lead a disservice.

So, I'm so excited that we are able to have Andrew as a guest today. And I think the things that he share apply to leadership in general, not only [00:47:00] to middle school boys. So, let's talk a little bit about a few things as we get ready to sign off today. First, I just want you to notice, Andrew. What does it mean for a leader to have such passion and purpose? Where does it lead them?

How in depth does it cause them to be as a strategist, as a thinker? As we listened to Andrew's story unfold? That's something that just screamed at me, which is the value of having a really clear purpose. What does it give us as a leader from an energy and a capability standpoint? I think you hear that just oozing out of Andrew at every step out of every pore.

Another thing that I noticed that I think is something for us to take away is he's specifically talking about leading middle school boys. And what does it mean to help them take those initial steps in the manhood? Well, and yet there's a bigger [00:48:00] principle there that I take away from hearing him talk about that.

And that is, are we as leaders meeting the people that we are leading where they are at? I realized that's probably my English teacher would probably not be happy with me ending a sentence with the word at, but I think it's worth thinking about. Our responsibility as leaders. One of the biggest responsibilities we have is to increase the capability of our organizations.

Whether we're talking about leadership in the executive suite or closer to the front lines, we need to be developing others, both as contributors and as leaders. And what you heard in everything that Andrew was talking about was meeting middle school boys, where they are at in their lives, where they are at in their thinking, where they are at in their maturity.

Now he challenges them. He brings them forward. He calls them up. But he doesn't ignore the context of their own lives, [00:49:00] their own development. In fact, everything that they do at Anvil is predicated on the time of life that these middle school boys are in. But we as leaders can do the same thing. We can think about the time of life, the perspectives, the experiences that the people that were responsible to grow and develop, and we can be intentional about meeting them where they are. We might wish that they had all of the executive experience that that some of you have, but they don't. And so, how do we help them get there? And if we're thinking about folks at the front lines, we might wish that they have had that first great leadership experience.

But truth is for many of them, they're just now stepping into it. So how do we meet them where they are? How do we help them take those steps? Not based

on where we wish they were, but where they are. And how do we be creative and willing to step into that space and be with them? I think Andrew models that [00:50:00] wonderfully.

And maybe it's very obvious that that would happen in the educational system, but I think it can happen for any of us in business at any level to say, how do I make sure that I'm taking into account the context of the individuals that I'm growing and developing? I think Andrew models that for us so well.

Having shared those things I want to end on the three big questions that Andrew spent some time talking about, and I want to apply those to us as leaders. He talked about the process of forming young men, but I think there is so much for us as leaders to take from this as well. And the first big question that he came in there with is the idea of the anvil being the standard. It is the thing that these young men are shaped against and Andrew talked about the idea of the standard. What is the standard by which we want our lives as leaders to [00:51:00] be measured against?

He also talked about the need for fire. He talked about making that metal malleable. And I thought it was very interesting as I think about some of the challenges in my own life. Currently as a leader, whether it be in our business or as a husband or as a father, what is the fire? And immediately as I was hearing him say that I was thinking about some of the challenges that I have and thinking of it as the fire that makes me more malleable so that I can be better shaped into my, into my greatest capability. All of a sudden, I immediately had had a different perspective on those challenges.

So many times, I just want the challenges to go away. Maybe you do too. I want that issue to not be there. I want that to be done. I want that to be off of my plate. But if I look at it instead as the fire that is making me malleable so that I can be shaped into something more than I currently am. It gives me a totally different perspective. And frankly, it even gives me the mindset of [00:52:00] opportunity, opportunity in my own life to become a better leader, to become a better husband, a better father. And so, I was really challenged in the best possible way. As Andrew was talking about the fire, what is the fire in my life? What is it that's making me malleable?

And then finally he turned his attention to the hammer. He talked about the fellowship of the hammer, who are the people. The other people that we are saying, yes, I trust you, you are wise, and I want you to help shape me. And this is particularly important for leaders because we can neglect our own development.

We can, we can invest in others, but we neglect the fact that we need to have people in our lives shaping us just as we bear the responsibility and the opportunity to shape the development of others. So, this idea of the fellowship of the hammer. As Andrew talked about, it is a [00:53:00] question that's not just important for middle school boys. It's true for every one of us. That is a leader at any level of the organization to be asking as well. And so that leads me to the question I want to leave you with today. And that is this, who is in your fellowship of the hammer? This is Tim Spiker reminding you to be worth following and to follow us wherever you receive your podcasts.

If you've heard something valuable today, please share our podcast with your friends and colleagues. And if you're up for it, leave us a five-star review. Thanks for listening.

[00:54:00]