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## Paying it Back While Looking Forward Helps

### A Restaurant Chain Thrive During Covid-19

Steve Sanduski: From being the youngest person to ever win the Polo US Open at the age of 16, to being chosen to portray the honorable Chief Osceola in his senior year at Florida State, and ride renegade onto sold out college football fields in front of 90,000 screaming fans, to being the co-founder of Bolay, a fast-growing restaurant chain in Florida, today's guest has been riding a rocket ship for the past 20 years. And then the pandemic hit, and the restaurant business came crashing down.

Hi, everybody. Welcome to the CEO Coaching International podcast. I'm your host, Steve Sanduski, and my guest today is Chris Gannon. Chris is the co-founder of Bolay, a fast, casual restaurant group based in Florida. In today's show, Chris shares the highs, the lows, and the pivot from defense to offense as he and his team battle back and are finding a way to thrive in one of the hardest hit industries from this pandemic. With that, please enjoy my conversation with Chris Gannon.

Chris, welcome to the show.

Chris Gannon: Yeah, Steve, thanks for having me.

Steve Sanduski: Well, I'm excited here to have a conversation with you, and you happen to be in an industry that has been hit extremely hard here with the pandemic. You're in the hospitality industry, you have a number of restaurants all over the state of Florida, and so you've really been on the front lines of trying to deal with the situation. And so I think we're really going to learn a lot here in terms of how your organization has handled this, and some of the lessons that you've learned, so excited to have that conversation.

But before we get there, I'd just love to go back in history a little bit and hear about your story. So you do have a number of restaurants right now, so what originally got you interested in starting your own chain of restaurants?

Chris Gannon:

Yeah, so you can go pretty far back. I mean, I was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, and if anybody's ever visited New Orleans, you know that it's the good times roll. It's hospitality at its finest. It's making sure that no matter what, people are having a good time and eating great food with bold flavors, with tons of heritage behind it. And so that was always in my blood. One of servers, Emory from Galatoire's, he's still there, and the server's been there for 40 years. There are not many other restaurants out there that have a server that's been there for 40 years. That's someone that is just dedicated their craft, and that's always been kind of instilled in me as a young man. And obviously, my father is a legendary restaurateur with his creation of Outback Steakhouse, and so I was born and raised in the industry, and really, really enjoy serving people.

I was a professional polo player once upon a time. I get to travel the world and meet and eat in some of the greatest restaurants of all time and just experience cultures in Argentina, Spain, London, Italy, Mexico, and so on and so forth, and not only that, throughout the United States. So I have a big horizon, I've seen a lot of restaurants and meeting a lot of people in the restaurant industry, which is such a beautiful industry. And then I got back into it with my father and we decided that I was ready to start my own. I was ready to go create our own and gave it a whirl.

And I'll never forget it, because my dad and I were on the phone late at night, and he said, it was so simple, and it was just, "Let's do it." And it was that moment, that entrepreneurial spirit where do we go take a loan and sign our lease and put all of our eggs in a basket and go for it, and it was just that moment of, "Let's do it," and put our nose to the pavement and started working. Within six to eight months we had the concept. My wife and myself and a collaboration of my best friend and some other friends came up with the name Bolay. We wrote it on a napkin in an airport, and it just kind of rang. We created it and made it up, the five-letter word that doesn't mean anything. We made it our own because it's impossible to find a name now that's not already taken or hashtag this or hashtag that. And we had a line out the door the first day.

I used every marketing concept or knowledge that I had. I was a partner at an ad agency once upon a time. And we pulled all those resources together with a great chef and great food and a great team from... I was in the fine dining aspect of the business. I managed casual dining, and I also managed fast food. So I got to have my hand in the three different sectors of the restaurant industry, which I feel is an asset to our company because we take in the fine dining, ladies and gentlemen, serving ladies and gentlemen, and just that dedication to quality and excellence. But then you use the speed of the fast food, and the need of speed for people. So you combine those and you've got the fast casual industry, and our goal is to be number one in the fast casual industry.

So yeah, that's kind of how we got Bolay off the ground, and the first one did really good, and then we said, "Let's open another one," and never planned to

open up a chain of restaurants. It just started flowing. It was like this reacting from the hip. Everybody said, "What was your business plan?" Well, my business plan was to open up one great restaurant at a time, and we just put so much heart and dedication in, and four years into it, put our head up and we had 15 restaurants in four years.

Steve Sanduski: And then as you were thinking about that first restaurant, some people would say, "Well, I'm just going to open up a restaurant with the kind of food that I'm passionate about." Or other people might say, "Well, I think there's a particular niche in the market here in Florida..." or wherever it is that you start the restaurant, "where, I think there's a real need for this type of food." So as you were thinking about that first restaurant, what kind of thought went into what kind of food I'm going to serve here? Or what were the main variables that you were trying to optimize here? Was it a particular type of food? Was it "I just want to be in fast casual and then I'll figure out the food"? What were the key variables where you said, "This is the number one most important thing I'm thinking about with my restaurant"? What would you say that is?

Chris Gannon: I would say when we went to California we spent about two weeks out there and saw the bleeding edge of what's coming, and I really wanted to serve a food that we enjoyed eating. I don't go to fast food chains. I don't really eat that food anymore, and I hope nobody else does either because it's not the best thing for you. And casual dining, with the service component, was just very complex, and I don't know if people wanted to sit and wait for that long, so it was the speed, it was the way of life. I guess I'm kind of a millennial, if you will, I'm 37, and realized that it's just a fast-paced world.

So I wanted to serve with incredible flavors, what I was bringing that New Orleans heritage, we wanted to serve great food in a fast environment, but also make it nutritious. Also make it to where when you ate the food, you felt great. Four or five, six hours later, not just right after you had the food coma or you start yawning, because as you know, later in the afternoon you still need to have some fire in the belly to finish out your day strong, and you can't do that if you don't have proper nutrition.

I love race car driving, if you don't put the best fuel in that car, that car's not going to win. For all, he doesn't put crappy fuel in their engine, they put the best of the best, so if you equate that to the human body on how much food translate into your mood, your workload, your productivity, it just translates into everything, your health, your wellbeing, and so if you're going to do that, your body's your number one asset. People spend all this money on exterior, but put some focus on the interior, and that's kind of what our motivation with Bolay.

Steve Sanduski: And then, so you open up the first restaurant, you're having great success with that, and then you open up a second, and a third, and a 14th, and then the 15th. What would you say was one of the smartest things that you did in building the

business from one restaurant to 15? And then I'm also going to ask you what was... I don't want to say the dumbest thing that you did, but what was the most important lesson that you learned that, "Gosh, I wish I would have known this ahead of time instead of having to learn it the hard way" as you were building from one restaurant to 15. So let's start with what do you think is the smartest thing that you did along the way to have that kind of fast growth?

Chris Gannon:

Two great questions. First, surrounding myself with wonderful people. I've always believed in teamwork. Teamwork makes the dream work. And every time I've ever... I was the second youngest kid to win the US Open in polo, and I learned that from my father. My father was dedicated to having the best people around him and go win. And if you don't have the best people around you, you're not going to win. You might come in second. You might come in third or fifth, but you're not going to win. And we at Bolay believe in winning. We're a very winning spirit, very competitive company, and putting winners on the team.

That's what I've always done. It's like the greatest coach, Bill Belichick, or Bobby Bowden, or Steve Spurrier, all the legendary coach, Coach Jensonowski, all these legendary coaches, the Bills' coach, they were dedicated to putting the best team and finding strength in weaknesses, so that was something I focused on, and continue to try and pride ourselves on, taking a lot of people with wonderful industry knowledge that also knew how to look at the problems that I've never experienced.

When you go from one to three to five restaurants, a lot of people can do that, you start getting above the five to seven restaurants, you need to have systems and processes in place to really help navigate the unforeseen things that you're going to have. When you're in the restaurant business, it's a people business. When you got a lot of people, you've got interesting situations that arise. So, I would say that was the number one thing that I did based on watching my father and being a student of watching him grow his business.

And the biggest mistake, that's a simple one. Real estate would be one, always be a lot more dedicated to spending time at site selection and picking the best of the best sites, and not wavering and being able to say no more than yes. And getting your sign package down right. Oh, wow, that's still an expensive lesson. Getting your name, your tag line, your colors, all that, just spend the money up front and get it right, because once you start putting those signs up on those buildings, they're expensive to change. That was a learning lesson that we're still learning, still continue to learn from. But hey, it's been a journey. It's been a beautiful, wonderful journey in the amount we've learned.

Steve Sanduski:

So, Chris, let me just go back for a second here on you said one of the smartest things you did was really try to surround yourself with the absolute best people, having a wonderful team. How did you select for that? How did you identify those people, and how did you structure the company or the culture or the

ethos or the mission so that the kinds of people you wanted were actually attracted to coming to work with you? How did you do that?

Chris Gannon: We look for passion first and foremost. Obviously, we want people that are committed, and one of our mission, our pillars in Bolay is we're dedicated to the recruitment of knowledgeable and committed team members. And I really say that, and we don't have employees at Bolay, we have team members. I always equate everything back to athletics and team because that's what I know in building a great team. And they've got to be committed and knowledgeable, and so that's been a goal. And I tell you, when we go to conferences, our team instead of huddling together the whole time, we're at a conference to go network and meet people, and find our next great team member. And you should see our team just run off in many different directions. "I just met so-and-so," and bring it all back. And that's what our company is, almost to a fault sometimes.

We're chasing the next shiny object. We need to slow down because we're constantly trying to find the next greatest offer, the next greatest tool to help us get better. That can be a little distracting. But, finding the right people is an art, and I'm not saying that we are the best at it, but I know that our team is top notch, and I would put them up against a lot of teams in major corporate environments. What we don't know, we learn quickly. What we lack, we surround ourselves with. Any holes, we're very quickly to admit our hole, our weaknesses, and we're very humble.

And I think when you add all those combinations of humility, hard work, passion, perseverance and team work, it's a recipe for some pretty amazing things to be accomplished.

Steve Sanduski: And then as you're looking for these people and you're going through the interview process, the checking references process, as you look back, I'm going to imagine that you misfired once or twice in perhaps a key hire, is there any lesson that you learned in that hiring process where you said, "Here's a mistake that we made when we were trying to hire people," and now this is something that we look out for.

Chris Gannon: Yeah. I think the interview, the questions, and obviously that's one of the things that I'm working on right now with my CEO coach from the CEO Coaching International, which is a great organization. Steve Bebis is my coach and wonderful human being. And just working on the questions and the depth, how many times you ask "why?" and reading Dee Ann Turner's book from the chief people officer from Chick-fil-A, and just how inspiring she has always been. That's one of my favorite books, and Dee Ann Turner is just a magician when it comes to hiring. And I would say in addition, she's an artist is more the term on selecting people and that process.

And so, studying great organizations on how they select people, and why, and what they select for, we try to be students and study that as much as we possibly can.

Steve Sanduski:

Okay. All right, so let's switch gears here a little bit. So, now you've got the 15 stores, the 15 restaurants. Things are looking really good. You're dialed in. You've got the systems in place. You've got the signage in place, and sky's the limit. And then the pandemic hits. What was that moment like when you, maybe you and your team looked at each other and they said, "Oh, my goodness. This is serious. We're probably going to have to shut down." Did you remember... what was that moment like? And then walk me through what happened in the days and weeks after that in terms of how you turn this thing around.

Chris Gannon:

So I knew it was going to be difficult. I don't know why. My brain just personally kept going to the worst case scenario black hole, deep dark. I mean, it was just a roller coaster. There was some days we'd talk with our banker and it was perfectly great, and then the next day, it was like, "Oh, God, we got to prepare to liquidate assets and go." It was just getting worse and worse. And then got worse and worse and worse.

But it was just difficult to come into the office every day and you had... I understand what it's like to be the president of the United States at the end of the day. I was always taught that they have to make the most difficult life decisions about is it a bad... two outcomes, bad and worse. And that was how it was every day for a good two months from the office. And that takes a toll on you. But I will tell you, it was getting on the Zoom calls with our entire restaurant group every day or every couple days to touch base, and it was seeing all of their faces. They would say, "Why are we doing so many Zoom calls? We don't need it." I needed it. I needed it because I needed to see their faces on what we were fighting for. I needed that passion, and every single one of them had their family or a mortgage or some form of responsibility, and we went to fight for them.

And it was seeing their faces what gave us the courage, and I keep saying that I'm a huge Suits fan. You look at that one scene that Harvey Specter and his quote is, "If you're backed up against the wall, you break that blank down." And that's how it was with us at Bolay. So we just got to work. We were here late hours at night every day, and we reinvented Bolay overnight. We reinvented our labor model, our food model, our ability. We cut every expense that we didn't need. We just got smart. We got real smart. But it was difficult, and we even found ways to still take care of people in the hospitality industry. I knew out there, there were way worse situations than ours. We had a bad situation. There's a lot of companies out there. But there was worse.

And so we gave discounts to all the local hospitality people in the industry, just to say, "Hey, come on in and get a meal on us because you might be let off."

And we'd feed the hospital workers. We believe that if you give hope, you get hope. We were trying to give hope as much as we possibly could. We were doing popup cooking events in local communities that people didn't want to leave their houses, so we'd bring the food to them. We just got creative.

And the team came together, and the most beautiful part about the whole situation looking back was that everybody did it in our company with smiles on their face, with absolute smiles, they did it with passion, and I'll never forget it for the rest of my life. And the other big lesson I learned through this was for four years we've been giving away food religiously to local communities. If a charity asks me, we very rarely said no to whatever the ask was. And it got to the point where my CFO would come in and like, "Chris, look how much we've given away this past year. This we have much we're making. This is how much we gave away." And you're like, "Whoa," when you see on a piece of paper, that's a lot. But I always believed in doing that because who knows one day when you might not... and you need it.

And there was one of my great mentors, Cody Lowry, he just wrote his book Schmooze, which is a great book. He used to always give people money. He said, "You just never know how bad their day is. You can't quit walking. Yeah, they got this or that, but you just always give." And I remember that never left me, and so we would give to every local charity. And during the pandemic, from what I can recall, everybody and their mother in the woodworks that we would help at some point or give them something came back to us and said, "Hey, how can we buy? We want to buy a catering package from you. We want to buy some food to donate to this school. We want to do this." And it was amazing when you give how it comes back, and you just never know if it comes back, and you don't give to have it come back. That was one of the biblical principles. You don't do that. But it's really nice when it does. Especially when we're facing complete shutdown.

And so, I tell you, that'll be a lesson I will always talk about, and I will teach my kids and grandkids and as many people as I possibly can that wonderful lesson I learned.

Steve Sanduski:

Yeah, I love that about giving and how it comes back to you, but you're doing it not because you know it's going to come back to you. You're doing it because it's a good thing to do. It's a right thing to do. I remember John Templeton, the great investor, he was asked one time what was the greatest investment he ever made. And people are thinking, oh, he's going to talk about some stock he bought at \$10 and it went to 1,000 or whatever, and he said, "The greatest I ever made was tithing. So for every dollar I gave away, I got tenfold or a hundredfold back." And of course that was not the answer that most people were expecting, but it's just exactly like you said, that the more you give, the more it multiplies, and the more it comes back to you. And you found that here in spades here during the pandemic, so I appreciate you sharing that story.

Also, at some point when the pandemic hit, you go on defense, and you gave some examples of some of the things that you were doing as the pandemic hit. But at some point you have to make a shift from defense to offense, and had you made that shift, and if so, what does offense look like now?

Chris Gannon:

Offense looks like seeing our holes, and I remember there we shut down every expense that wasn't... I mean, we paid every vendor we possibly could, and we did a great job. We made everybody whole. We paid all the bills that were keeping the program on. Then there's a moment when I said, "No." We were about to do a whole new technology launch, a new online ordering system that was going to cost a lot of money, a lot of time, a lot of development. And I didn't want our team to not have a project to work on, because we work on projects. Well, this is the most important one.

So, the moment it hit, I mean, literally within that first week, we doubled down. We said, "Let's keep going. Let's keep working on this IT project." And thankfully, it was probably one of the smartest decisions we made because as we came out of it, our new IT package, our new online ordering system, which just so happened that everybody's doing online ordering right now, it was just perfect timing, perfect timing of that wave, if you're a surfer, you've got to time that wave perfectly. I think we timed that technology wave perfectly. And I would attribute that to really helping us.

And also our people. We were really on the look for some wonderful people, because I know that there's a lot of great talent on the sidelines, and we've got a viable business that's going to weather this storm. I know in my heart I believe it. I've seen our team adapt and overcome. I reached out to some close military friends. I have a good friend of mine who's a SEAL Team Six guy, and he just gives me courage and hope, and says, "Chris, you're not looking down the bale here. You're in business. This is easy." And you just hear those little snippets of advice and you're like, "Hey, this is easy. This is business. We're not out there in Afghanistan fighting to survive."

Those little bits, every little bit helps. Even at the top and you're a leader, you're still a human being, you still have emotions, you still have an up and down roller coaster. And putting that wind in everybody's sails is so very important.

Steve Sanduski:

You know, and you've got it doubly hard being the leader of the organization. So not only are you under tremendous pressure personally, because this is your baby. You founded this business, and it's all on the line. But then, so not only are you dealing with that, but then you've got all the people that you're responsible for, all your team members. And so, how do you... I'm not going to say 'separate' those two, but how do you deal with both the fact that your team members are looking to you to be strong and optimistic through all of this, and then you trying to be that person yourself with all of the responsibilities that you have?

Chris Gannon:

That's a tough one. Again, I go back to that Harvey Specter quote, "When you're backed up against the wall, you got to break it down." I've been in some pretty big tournaments and polo and this or that, and you're at that final moment where you've got to put it all on the line to win, and you just find this... You just know there's something deeper in you that you pull out. And some have the ability, like you look at Michael Jordan, one of the greatest of all times, he was able to pull it out almost every game. And some can pull it out sometimes, and some can pull it out a lot.

I feel like our team, we just had to pull it out. We had to dig deep, and we dug deep, and we found it. I had incredible encouragement from my father, and he gave me a couple pieces of advice as we first started this. And one of them is what... a question, I have it on a little piece of paper near my desk, and it says, "What could I have done better? Who needs positive reassurance? What decision did I miss? Who can I consult with? And who can I inspire?" And so every day I would come in here and I still use it, and I look at those questions and I tried to make sure that when we were making decisions in the pandemic that you're going to be judged for your decisions, and so make sure that those decisions can last 20, 30 years and not just in that little moment of panic and fear.

And knowing that your role is the leader. If you're a leader, you better put your big pants on and show courage. But I also through it too, there was definitely a lot of moments, especially on our Zoom calls with our entire company, I was extremely transparent. I was honest with the team. They saw the fear in our eyes. They understood that this was difficult, this was real. We all have our leaders who have turned into grill cooks and dish cooks overnight just to keep their flow. I have a director of construction turning in to be our painter.

Everybody just stepped up. It didn't matter what your title was in Bolay. It was, "What can we do to keep this ship afloat?" If there was a hole leak in here, five people jumped on it to put it out. If we were about to ride around over here, 10 people jumped on to steer the ship. And we just constantly bound together. And when you have a team that does that, it takes the pressure off of me. I'll tell you, that's the honest to God truth, and I keep going back to the word 'team,' because it's the team. When they were so amazing in how well everybody came together with such humility and didn't care what their title was. They just got it done. They patched every hole in the ship to keep us afloat.

And with that, you build a faster ship, and our boat is fast right now, and we're ready to keep weathering the storm. Really looking forward to getting everybody back in offices and back to normal life, get through this ridiculous election year, and get back to business of taking care of guests and inspiring teams, because we're not going to let this little speed bump derail our mission of inspiring our team and our guests to be the best versions of themselves through our extraordinary culture. And yeah, if I didn't get a PhD in restaurant business, we're getting it now, that's for sure.

Steve Sanduski: Yeah, that's for sure. I love those questions that your dad had shared with you. I think those are fantastic, and that you're going back to those on a regular basis during this period. Sounds like it's been super helpful for you. So as you think about some of the changes that you've made during the pandemic, what are some of the changes that you think are going to continue post-pandemic that might even lead to faster sales than you even had expected going into the pandemic?

Chris Gannon: Yeah, so the business model as a whole is pretty same. Our dine-in business is gone. I would say technology is going to be the forefront, our labor model, and also just a lot smarter about what you're spending money on. It's so easy when you're a growth company, and this is one of the things if you were to say, looking back on it, you try and justify all these expense that you're doing because you're a growth company and it makes sense, and to do this and to spend money on that gimmick or that marketing avenue. And you realize that it doesn't matter. Just keep it in your people and keep it in the food quality. You focus on those two things alone, and the guests will come because they know your people are wonderful. We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen, and it's truly a pleasure to serve our guests.

And so when you have that within a humility, and we're honored to serve our servicemen and we're grateful that guests use it to come to visit us versus any other place of business that they can. And just the real, the focus on technology and the speed, and the dedication to cleanliness. We were always dedicated to cleanliness. We're just putting it all on social media now and in every email, but we've always been dedicated to an immaculate environment inside the restaurants. We try to look at all of our health inspections and surpass those, because we believe that we can do better than any state-mandated code can give us.

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. All right, Chris, well let's just wrap up with a couple more things here. One is I always like to ask if there's anything else that you want to share here, or is there a question that you wish, "Gosh, Steve, I wish you would have asked me this question because I'm dying to say this." So anything along those lines that you want to share?

Chris Gannon: Yeah. Always pay it back. I would say I read a tremendous amount of leadership books, and talk to a lot of people, and hear seminars. I take a percentage of every single one of those, and I combine all those percentages to great decision making in my camp. And I always, any time someone pulls me aside for business whether it's good or bad, I try to give it, because someone gave that time to me, and I believe by lifting each other, we make this whole business world, and our world a better place just by helping each other out.

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. All right. Let's jump into a few rapid fire questions as we wrap up. So first one is we love books around here, so what's a favorite book that you read, and that you recommend?

Chris Gannon: One of the greatest books I'm reading right now is Excellence Wins by Horst Schulze, and he is the founder of Ritz Carlton. And so you learn a lot about the way he dissected and empowered his people, and believed in the teamwork and his people. So I'm very inspired by his book.

Steve Sanduski: Yeah, yeah, I've read that one as well. Great book, and we'll make sure that we link to that in the show notes at [ceocoachinginternational.com](http://ceocoachinginternational.com). How about a leadership trait? Is there a leadership trait that you think brings success?

Chris Gannon: Listening. I'd say listening. God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Use those ears. Listen. Take it in. You don't have to be the smartest person in the room, but really truly listen to be dedicated to voice of your guests, voice of your team, and listen, and use those two ears.

Steve Sanduski: All right. And then since we're talking about a leadership trait, how about a leader? Is there a leader that you can think of, either someone that you know personally, or maybe someone that you admire from afar that has had a big impact on you?

Chris Gannon: I don't know him personally, but I've always been a big fan of President George Washington, a guy that was able to lead the country and start the greatest country, I believe, in the history of the world. And with him and the founding fathers, what they were able to set up with our constitution and all of our bill of rights, and everything that has outlived them by many, many years, and hopefully will live for many, many generations in the future. And he paved the way to create a better union, and I've just been in awe for someone that could just start something from scratch. We've all started business from scratch, but he started a nation from scratch, and that's pretty impressive.

Steve Sanduski: That is indeed. All right, final question here. How about as your company grew, was there an activity that was really hard for you to let go and let someone else do instead of you?

Chris Gannon: Yes, our social media, and I would say our social media/brand voice. It wasn't the posting that I missed, because that was a lot of work, but it was the engagement I had because it was a great way to connect with your guests and hear a one-to-one relationship with exactly what's going on, which I'm still dedicated. I try and read as much as we can, but as you grow bigger, it's a lot more difficult to hear every single comment, question. That was a tough one to let go, but we have a great team who's doing an even better job with it than I am. I just miss the listening part.

Steve Sanduski: Well, great, Chris we're going to wrap it there. Really appreciate you taking some time here to be on the show. Congratulations on what you've built there, and just the hard work that you and the team are doing to get through the pandemic here, and to be able to thrive on the other side of it.

Chris Gannon: Absolutely. My pleasure, and hopefully it might help. If I help one person out there who might be listening, we've done our job.

Steve Sanduski: Yeah, well, I'm sure you're going to help many more than that. So appreciate that. Thank you, Chris.

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