

Podcast 7: Three Ways to Get the Most out of your Conference Notes

The time is now to architect a life of excellence. What will we do, what will we become? We decide today! This is LearnDoBecome Radio! Let's move onward and upward together.

APRIL: Hello, this is April Perry and welcome to Learn Do Become Radio! I'm here with my husband Eric, we're excited to talk today about conferences.

ERIC: Hello, everybody! We are excited about conferences because conferences are awesome!

APRIL: Eric has come up with a really fun title. You want to share it?

ERIC: You want me to tell the title now or later after you've described where were going with this? Because in this episode were going to share amazing ways that you can get more and do more with the conferences you attend. We don't really have an official title for it but I've come up so far with "Killer concepts to crush conferences in which you collaboratively congregate."

APRIL: I love that dear!

ERIC: Yeah you did. You're like, "Don't waste time on such a long stupid title and don't end it with a preposition. So I took..."

APRIL: You took the preposition out.

ERIC: I took the "at" out. That's why I have a few more things that don't want to have the alliteration. Or we can shorten it to "Killer concepts to crush conferences."

APRIL: Alright so the main reason why we're recording this is because I personally had a problem where I would attend conferences and then I would take fifty pages of notes and I would get five hundred business cards and I would come home and do nothing with that big pile. Because by the time I got home, my family missed me, I was tired, I had stuff to catch up on, and I was totally overwhelmed and felt like I wasted my time.

ERIC: Yeah. Post conference reality let-down syndrome.

APRIL: I did.

ERIC: You have these high plans and aspirations and you come home and reality kicks you in the head.

APRIL: Right.

ERIC: And says, “Welcome back, it’s Friday or Monday and here’s the real world.”

APRIL: Right. Because when you’re at a conference, whether it’s for business, whether it’s for school, whether it’s for church, you typically are inspired. You’re meeting people who are sharp, who are incredible, who have great solutions for you. And while you’re there, totally out of your environment you’re thinking, “Oh my goodness, I could just be like that” or “I could be amazing.”

ERIC: “I can see with such clarity!”

APRIL: It’s true.

ERIC: “I can move forward.”

APRIL: Okay.

ERIC: “I have dreams”

APRIL: How many times do I call you from conferences and say, “Eric, Oh my goodness this is amazing! I’m so excited!”

ERIC: I’m going to record those phone calls from now on.

APRIL: Right. Because then I get home and I’m tired, I’m discouraged, then you say, “April, but you called me from the conference so happy, what happened?”

ERIC: Everything’s amazing! And everything is amazing. It’s just I think we lose sight, because, we come back and yeah...reality, the work, the stacks, the piles, the emails, the things our family needs.

APRIL: And it’s never as easy as you think it’s going to be to implement the vision.

ERIC: Right. And I think things always take twice or longer than we think it will. So it’s this idea of being able to be crystal clear on what you’re getting out of the conferences. What and how you want to implement.

I was just recently in a conference a couple of weeks ago in San Diego and it was a great conference. I actually really appreciated the fact that the organizer at the end stood up and said, “I want you to look over your notes briefly, I’m actually going to give you a few minutes. I’m going to stand here quietly and you’re going to look over your notes and you’re going to pick the one thing. If there’s one key thing that you can start working on and do next week when you get back. Even if you accomplish that one thing only, it would make the most difference, what would it be?” Because if you don’t do that, otherwise the world will come right

back at you, knock you off its pedestal and you won't be able to really remember or focus on anything.

APRIL: Yeah.

ERIC: But what we are going to talk about are three very simple tips that go beyond that. It gives you an ability while you're going through and taking notes to kind of set yourself up for success to really come back and take action on a number of things that you feel are important or things that you learned and wanted to act on in a very kinds seamless, almost effortless way.

APRIL: Right. And I started doing this a few years ago and honestly, it has transformed my conference experience.

ERIC: Now quick back story. April and I attended a conference, our first one together, maybe two or three years ago. And we went up there, you know, I'm sitting there with my computer taking notes, I have it all organized in Evernote, I had the name of the conference, name of the speakers I could go back and search by topic, speaker, kind of by context.

APRIL: Which is helpful because you can find them to this day.

ERIC: It is. It is extremely helpful that they're all right where I need them. And I got quite a bit out but I didn't organize things like April does. Because I'm constantly learning new things as far as organizing and note taking and just some of the stuff that she does. It's pretty amazing how her mind just thinks like this. So I got quite a bit out of it but then I go sit right next to her and I'm like, "Oh my goodness!" It's like I maybe I'm doing a fifth, a tenth of what she is doing then she comes home and she just crashes. She does ten times the things I do with what she got from the conference and I'm like, "I got some pretty notes over here."

APRIL: Well okay. But it's not about how much we do or how fast we work because we are essentialists and we're trying to do the right things. But I will say this has helped me to be really productive.

ERIC: Absolutely. She's got a simple system she's been using for a long time and she's going to share here. And I've started to adopt some of the elements of it, the ones that fit with the way I do things. And it helps dramatically to be able to kind of identify key things and key ways to pull out the nuggets and put them into practice to our benefit.

APRIL: Yes and I like that you said that because everything that we suggest here today may not work for everyone else but I think it gives ideas and you can think, "Oh

okay I can adapt it to fit my personality or my style.” So alright we’re ready for number one?

ERIC: Yeah.

APRIL: Number one is to: Identify your questions, the problem that you want to solve before you get to the conference. Have them totally identified and ready. So I usually take notes on a spiral notebook one you can buy for fifty cents at Target. Something totally simple. Sometimes I...

ERIC: Oh great! Now you’re letting it out! We went to this conference and I have my laptop, and you have a wire bound notebook.

APRIL: Either works dear.

ERIC: And you’re still crushing my by ten times.

APRIL: So really though, it doesn’t matter where we take the notes. I sometimes do the notes in Evernote if I feel like it but I like writing with paper, that’s kind of fun for me-so simple.

ERIC: I like the digital approach because while I’m sitting there with the presenter, I like to write as fast as I can and get as much as I can.

APRIL: Yeah.

ERIC: Sometimes you might be in just an absorb mode and you just kind of type more slowly but if they’re saying some really impressive or important stuff (unless there’s a recording of the conference you’re at) I like to try to get all that I can and then try to sift through it later. It makes you exhausted after two or three days. But I think April’s approach is more: just go in a little bit more relaxed and just write down the key concepts that stand out to her, something she wants to take action on. Is that accurate?

APRIL: Yeah. So okay as far as your questions, I usually come up with about three to five questions. I’m thinking if I can get answers to these questions by the end of this conference, it would be well worth the energy and time to attend.

ERIC: The time and money to be there.

APRIL: Right. And so I’ll maybe write down, okay, “How can I invest more time reading?” or “How can I make this part of our business work better?” Or if it’s a parenting conference, “How can I help this particular child with this particular challenge?” I mean the more specific you are, the better.

ERIC: Right. I think the questions might naturally come, most people are signing up for a conference based on kind of their industry, the work their doing, or kind of some professional or personal need. There's a reason or desire why you want to be at that conference or speaker or set of speakers. I think as you look at that and say "Why am I going, why is this important to me?" Kind of thinking about the conference in terms of the goals or objective you're hoping to get out of it. If you articulate those a little bit or even just mentally kind of conceptualize them, it will help you identify what questions would help you get to those conclusions.

APRIL: Yes. And that helps you in choosing which classes you attend, where you sit at lunch, who you're going to speak with in the hallways. I mean there are a lot of different elements that go into this, who you might go out to dinner with that night, or you might meet up with. And so I feel like the more clear you are in what you want to get out of the conference...

ERIC: Right. It gives a little architecture and purpose to how you spend your time through the whole conference.

APRIL: I like how you brought the word architecture in there.

ERIC: No, honestly it's a framework right? If you go into a "Hey I'm here for a conference for work...I've got to be here for three days.. I'm here to just get away from a colder climate to get to a warmer area and hangout in the hotel and you know...have some fun."

APRIL: Have a break or something.

ERIC: Yeah, I think a lot of people conference attend that way. But if you're expected to come back with something tangible, something meaningful, going down there, just thinking briefly "What is it I want to get out of the conference? What are the key questions if I could find the answers will make it worthwhile?" It doesn't take that long, it might be just a ten or fifteen minutes exercise, on the flight or on the drive down.

APRIL: Or even in the morning introductory session you can put those together. But, the earlier you do it, the better.

ERIC: But it will help you frame like April said, what sessions you attend and who you're talking to, during, after, and you know, in the kind of reception or type of events in the evening, just where you're investing your time and your energy.

APRIL: Okay, so that was number one which is essentially to begin with the end in mind, right? The number two is that as you take notes you want to have a specific set of symbols that you have pre-defined that you're going to use in your note taking.

Now obviously if you're writing on Evernote the symbols might look a little bit different than they will if you're writing in a notebook. But I'll just explain the ones that I use in a notebook that really could easily work.

ERIC: So you have about forty-two symbols that you use?

APRIL: I have five. Five symbols that I use and I used to make a little legend now I've just been doing it for so long I don't need a legend.

ERIC: Now the legend is committed to memory.

APRIL: I totally have it memorized but this is what I do. So first of all I have a question mark with a circle around it. That means this is a question that I need to think about later. Because some of the best speakers are the ones who ask the best questions. And a lot of the best questions are ones you can't answer in a minute; ones you really need to think about. You know, "What am I really uniquely prepared to teach?" Or "If I were to put together a seminar on this topic, what would I want to convey in that seminar?" Right? There's a lot of different questions. Or if it's a parenting thing, "Ooh, how can I spend more time enjoying the moments with my children?"

ERIC: So it could be a question that comes from the presenter or it could be a question that you thought of that you want to come back to. So it could be theirs or yours, but just write it down and put the question mark with the circle around it to remember to come back to.

APRIL: Yeah. So you can put together a list of questions (and we'll talk about what we actually do with that). Alright, then if something I hear is a first priority if it's an idea that I think "I can implement this this week. It would take me twenty minutes to make a huge difference, this needs to be top priority as soon as I get home." I put just a little arrow next to it. And then I know I'm not going to put an arrow next to everything because everything can't be a first priority.

ERIC: Do you put a circle on the arrow?

APRIL: Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. It depends. I actually use purple markers. I'd do a color for each one of these.

ERIC: Don't confuse it...

APRIL: We won't talk about that now but just have an arrow of some sorts. However you would like it to look. That sound good? Alright. Then I would have stars just for great ideas. Things that I thought, "Ooh I love that, not a first priority, but something I'd like to consider and come back to later." Then I have a little

picture of a book, for books I want to read. You'll often get great suggestions either from the people sitting next to you, or from the presenter, or as you're going through a lot of times conferences are selling books while you're there. Write those down. And then the final one is brackets. This is where I put together things that I want to talk to you about, usually when I get home. A spouse...

ERIC: You speaking to me as your husband.

APRIL: As my husband.

ERIC: Not as a listening audience.

APRIL: Yes, or a business partner. Because a lot of times when you're going to a conference, you're representing a team, you're representing a family; you're representing other people who are part of your life. And so when you get home from a conference, they don't necessarily want you to sit down for three hours then say, "Hey can I tell you everything I learned at the conference! Let's walk through class by class and then I'll just give you a rundown!" Because I tried that one time with Eric and you didn't like it so much.

ERIC: I don't know what you're talking about.

APRIL: Well one time after I came home and I said, "Hey Eric, look at these conference notes, you want to talk through them?" and you looked through my fifty pages of notes and you said, "How about you give me an executive summary?" And I thought, "That's a great idea except I don't have an executive summary." So I didn't really know which parts to tell him. So what I did the next time I went to a conference is I just put in brackets on everything that I thought he would really want to know.

ERIC: So you do the brackets as you're writing things out during the session or at the end of the session do you just quickly look over and say, "These are the key things I would share with somebody?"

APRIL: Sometimes it's both. Sometimes the speaker will say something amazing and I think, "I've got to tell Eric about this." So I bracket it right then. Other times at the end of the session I just kind of look at it and I think, "Okay, anything else I need to add? Oh yeah I think this actually might be good to share with Eric." Right? So at least at the end of the class but it doesn't have to be right in the end.

ERIC: Right.

APRIL: Okay? So those are my five symbols, really really simple. But what I do is I go through and I just make sure that the symbols, I mean there won't be that many,

they'll maybe be six questions, maybe five arrows right? I mean I don't have tons of symbols all over. But I am able to have the notes really organized so anything that doesn't have a symbol next to it is just kind of fillers. Stuff that wasn't that important to me. Maybe interesting if I want to go back and find it so that's great.

Alright so step number three is to put together a "take away sheet." And this kind of is the executive summary. Now when I go to a conference, I actually sit down before I get home (so whether it's staying in the hotel or the conference area for another few hours and you know to have a later flight, or sometimes it's on the flight home, or sometimes it's just before I get in the car to drive home, whatever it is). But I don't do it after I get home. Because that's where you totally lose your mind because you walk in the door and everyone says, "Hey!" and then it's all a mess or whatever. So at least some point after the conference is over, before I step into my regular life, I sit down with a sheet of paper, (we actually have a template for you at LearnDoBecome. You can print this out, you can have your own copy). But this is what I do.

One section is the "To do as soon as possible." So I look through the things that I mark down, then I think, "Okay obviously my first priority items are all going to go there for the most part, right?" And then if there's a question to think about, I think "Ooh this question I need to think about this week. This is a really important question." Or this is the book I'm going to order on Amazon, you know right away or whatever it is. Look through all of my symbols and I pull out what are the things I want to do as soon as possible. Like this week if possible.

Then the next sections are things to consider in the future. So this is where a lot of the great ideas go, maybe some other books to read, this is where I also put down people that I've met instead of just having a ton of business cards that I have to go through later. I keep only the business cards of the people who I really want to connect with. So some of them might be under "As soon as possible send an email to so and so." Right? Or "Follow up with this person." Considering the future, same thing. You can just go through these categories, of the things you've taken notes on and put them in there "To consider in the future."

And then at the bottom, I just have a whole section of "Great ideas, quotes and thoughts." Just other things that stood out to me. A lot of times the benefit of a conference is that you have a mindset shift. Where you realize, "Oh I really could do this." Or "This really would change my life" or "I love this quote, it was very inspiring." And I think when you can pull those out and have them there to remind you of what you felt while you were at the conference that's going to be really helpful.

And then just what I do at the very bottom, we just had a little list of when you're going to review it. So I actually set on my calendar, I put calendar reminder triggers on my calendar saying okay I'm going to review this tomorrow at some point when I get a little break, look at the sheet and then I'm going to come back in a week, in a month, in 3 months, in 6 months and I actually put that in my calendar to go back and look at this executive summary.

ERIC: So for any given calendar, your conference summary, you actually set a calendar trigger?

APRIL: Yes.

ERIC: For each of these five periods of time?

APRIL: Yes.

ERIC: So you just came back from Conference X tomorrow you're going to review Conference X, a week from today you're going to review your Conference X.

APRIL: Yes.

ERIC: A month and three months.

APRIL: Yes.

ERIC: So it's just kind of keeps you circling back around, "Is there anything else outstanding that I want to implement in the six month mark that I haven't done yet?"

APRIL: Yeah.

ERIC: Wow!

APRIL: Because there comes a point where now you go to a new conference and...

ERIC: I didn't know that.

APRIL: Oh you didn't?

ERIC: Now I just got something there.

APRIL: I have it in my calendar, yeah. And so that way, I'm consistently going back to those conferences that were inspiring, that were really helpful. Remembering those ideas and evaluating my progress. Thinking "Oh, how have I done?"

ERIC: Well it's actually pretty helpful because you going through this exercise, you're distilling down all the nuggets into one sheet, but your context, your structure,

your life circumstances will have changed at the one, at the three and the six month mark and there might be new technologies that would come out. There might be new information, you might be in a different place from a position at work or even financially. Whatever it might be. Where some of these things that were just down the road, ideas or thoughts. You're like "It's time for that one now."

APRIL: Right. And I do save my conference notes, so whether it's taking photographs of my handwritten notes and keeping them in Evernote, or I type in Evernote. I do keep all my conference notes generally in Evernote so that I can access them wherever I am and I can just quickly do so. I take a picture actually of this sheet so at the end of- like I went to a conference last year in Arizona, I took a picture of my executive summary, and kept that in Evernote and then I could go back and just review it there.

So essentially that's what I do to every conference. And now when I say, "Okay, I'm going to this new conference!" I know it's worth my time. I know it's worth my money. I know I'm going to go there with a specific list, and I know I'm going to be paying attention and taking really good notes using my symbols, and I know before I come home I'm going to have an executive summary ready to implement that I will be reviewing the next day, then the week, month, three months, that type of thing.

So I feel really excited going to conferences because I know I'm going to get a lot out of it. Now I'm still improving, it's not like "Ooh I'm just fantastic!" You know nothing like that, but it helps me to be able to feel more excited about the possibilities and the opportunities there and my mind is open because I have a place to put things, right? I just don't think "Ahh I'm so overwhelmed. Don't tell me anything more." I actually am ready and open and I can take a lot of notes and not feel overwhelmed by it.

ERIC: Ah yes it's a great approach. I mean I definitely kind of model some of the things you've done and I'll probably use the time sequence and the calendar triggers to go back to conferences we've been in the past. You know one of the things I was recently in a conference, when the presenter, the organizer actually came up on the last day and he said, "Before we close this thing out I want to invite you to look over your notes. I'm actually going to give you two or three minutes, I'm going to stop talking and I'm just going to stand here. I want you to go over all the notes that you've taken and I want you to identify at least one thing, one significant thing you're going to do, you're going to put an action that would actually make a big difference in your life or in your business." And I was kind of

impressed by that. Because I've rarely been to conferences where somebody will say, you know, they'll stop talking, give people...

APRIL: Give people some quiet.

ERIC: ..Introspective time because that's where I think the great connections, the great kind of insights or inspiration comes to figure out, "Okay therefore, what? What am I going to do with this?" And so the idea that you know you can take that time, and I really like what April says, the ride to the airport, on the flight home, you know it's just sitting on that conference for an extra hour just to distill down on everything that you've got into something. This is the framework. It's an approach. Feel free to do whatever works best for you. But you really want to leave that conference with an actual plan. Something concise and simple and clear so you don't lose it all. You don't just set it aside you don't get the benefit for which you spend the time and energy and the money. But I think if you do this, you're going to see a tremendous results in these conferences or other meetings you're attending, truly move your life in the direction you want to go.

APRIL: So are we excited now, have you decided to go to more conferences with me?

ERIC: I am so excited to go to more conferences with you and just watch you kick my can...

APRIL: No. We're going to have fun together.

ERIC: I'm trying to close the gap, maybe I'm only going to do five times or three times as much as I do now.

APRIL: So if you would like to download your own template to be able to make your executive summary, just come to learndobecome.com/episode7. You can download your very own conference template, you can come check out my symbols, you'll be able to see a picture of the symbols and how I use them on my notes. And we would love to be able to have you join us at [learndobecome](http://learndobecome.com)!

ERIC: Good luck!