

## Thinking Outside the Bud

Episode 404 - Charlene Estrada

<https://www.thinkingoutsidethebud.com/podcast/404-charlene-estrada>

### Charlene Estrada, Management and Business Consultant, Elevate Beyond

As a management and business consultant, Charlene helps cannabis companies build the right organizational and operational structures to drive business success through strategic alignment, employee engagement, increased productivity, and reduced risk.

Prior to her career pivot to cannabis, she spent 25+ years in the health care industry working to solve healthcare inequities and improving the lives of others.

Charlene founded Elevate Beyond on the premise that everyone should have safe and legal access to plant medicine because she believes health care is human right, not a privilege.

As a trusted advisor in the cannabis industry Charlene continues to champion affordable and equitable care and thinks plant medicine will play a transformative role in our societies' health and wellness.

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## EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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**0:01**

You're listening to Thinking Outside the Bud where we speak with entrepreneurs, investors, thought leaders, researchers, advocates and policymakers who are finding new and exciting ways for cannabis to positively impact business, society and culture. And now, here's your host business coach, Bruce Eckfeldt.

**0:31**

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**1:06**

Welcome everyone. This is thinking outside the bud. I'm Bruce Eckfeldt. I'm your host. Our guest today is Charlene Estrada. She is Founder and Principal consultant at Elevate Beyond, we're gonna talk about the world of cannabis and the world of management consulting in the world of operations and what it takes to really run a successful cannabis company. I think we're kind of getting into this period where it's no longer just how much THC you can produce in your cultivated flour and get it to market right. There's complexity that is now kind of coming to bear on really operating successful cannabis businesses and really kind of knowing what it means to have efficient operations have strategic operations and really kind of build in scale as this industry continues to evolve and continue to expand. So I'm excited for this conversation, excited to kind of hear what Charlene is running into in terms of cannabis companies. She works with what she's learning what she's seeing and aware of that cannabis industry is going so with all that, Charlene, welcome to the program.

**2:00**

Thank you so much, Bruce. I'm looking forward to this podcast.

**2:03**

Yeah, it's a pleasure to have you on before we kind of dive into the world of cannabis and things you're doing today. I would love to get some background. How did you get into management? Or how did you get into cannabis? What's the story? Absolutely. Well,

**2:15**

first and foremost, I spent 25 plus years in Health Care Health Tech. And during the pandemic, I really had time to reflect on am I still passionate about what I'm doing? And ultimately the answer was yes, I still am driven by wanting to solve healthcare inequities, access to care issues and improving people's lives. That's why I got into what I do. But I was no longer satisfied with how I was doing it in terms of my career through traditional health care, pushing pharmaceuticals, and I really wanted to reinvent how I did that. And cannabis as a longtime

consumer was something that I felt very passionately about. Because one, I feel like health care is a basic human right, not a privilege. And I think that plant medicine is going to transform and revolutionize our health and wellness industry. And I want to be part of that I want it to be part of ensuring that everyone that needs it has safe equitable access to cannabis and plant medicine. And so that's what drove me to make a career pivot all say this, this late in life in my career, I just turned 50 and my career pivot was few years back. And you know, I read so much on LinkedIn, oh, if you've been in corporate America for more than 10 years, you know, you're too out of touch to become an entrepreneur. We're all sense. Yeah. And so here I am.

### **3:34**

Yeah, I'll fight that one. I'll fight that comment as well. So I'm curious, given the experience that you've had kind of outside of cannabis, what drove you, you know, inspired you to really kind of get into cannabis in terms of I mean, obviously cannabis is a fairly complicated and has a long legacy. Like, how did that I guess decision kind of play out for you? Was it super clear and slam dunk? Were there kind of conversations you had around? Like, should I do this? What does this really mean for me professionally, like how did that play in terms of making that decision?

### **4:04**

Oh, it wasn't clear wasn't clear cut. When I knew I wanted to make a career pivot. I hired a career coach. And we went through all of my passions. So I was everything from I'm I'm a closeted, Political Junkie. So we went a pathway went down to political strategist path. I love it. I love interior design. We went down interior design path, and I love cannabis. And eventually, after numerous assignments, conversations, it kept coming back to cannabis. And she just told me check Charlene. She's like, we keep coming back to this. You know, what's stopping you from moving forward? And I just I said, You know what, nothing, nothing stopping me from moving forward. It was coming out of the green closet. Of course, being in corporate America for as long as I was. It wasn't something that I readily shared with folks that I had been a user since I was 16 years old. So my whole my whole adult life, and it was just I think taking that first step and sharing with colleagues and friends and family that I was going to pursue a career in cannabis was really kind of the what was stopping me, I think mentally. And then once I got over that hurdle, it was building a network. It's starting from ground zero, basically building a network and a whole new industry, learning about it. I mean, as a consumer, that's one thing, but learning about the industry and the complexities in the industry. That was a whole other ball of wax. And so really just kind of soaking it all up attending as many events, attending as many webinars, meeting folks attending conferences really helped me start to understand and appreciate the industry, the complexities and the patchwork of regulations that are that we have to face every day in this in cannabis.

### **5:43**

Yeah, I'm curious because I speak to a lot of people who are, you know, either have gone from other industries into cannabis or thinking about coming into cannabis from other industries. And, and, you know, there's this kind of professional, you know, as you said, kind of coming out of the green gloves that you don't cut

professionally. And then personally as well, like a lot of folks, you know, there's some navigating to do in terms of personal relationships, family relationships, getting into the space, where did you find that you had to navigate that any friction, any surprises? Any you know, pleasant surprises are not pleasant surprises around as you start to identify that, hey, look, I'm working with cannabis, I really share with cannabis. What happened for you in terms of some of your professional and personal relationships?

## **6:21**

Interestingly enough, I there's huge interest from my ex health care colleagues, but they won't share it publicly on social media. But I get a ton of emails, private DMS, asking, inquiring, and then there are some I mean, they all all say when I made the career pivot, and I was leaving, I had several teams. And so like I said, during the pandemic, everything was virtual. So instead of having a big going to a party, they had like a big going to a zoo. And someone asked me like, Well, what do you you know, why are you leaving? What are you going to do? And I said, I'm, I'm making a trip into Canvas. And I got all these high fives and claps in the in the Zoom meeting. And so there was definitely support. But there's a lot of folks that are interested but aren't yet comfortable, the stigmas still alive and well, and not wanting to outwardly share support, or interest or even curiosity. And then, as far as my family, they were very supportive. I do remember when I told my parents, we were at lunch, and gosh, I think my, my father almost fell out of his chair, and my, my mom with her mouth was left out, you know, on the floor. But after I, you know, I collected myself and I explained to them kind of the reasoning behind it. Because I truly believe in plant medicine, I know it helps improve the lives of others, I do believe it's medicinal, they were 100% behind me, because they know that I don't do anything, just on a whim. This was something very thought out very planned. And then when I started to share it with broader friends, relatives, family members, I got a lot of support, it's still kind of a also a touchy subject with certain more conservative family members. But they all respect my decision. Yeah,

## **8:03**

thank you for sharing that it's really helpful, because I think a lot of people either have had to go through similar experiences or are worried about that. And, you know, I always tell people that, yes, there's always a risk, and you're gonna have to navigate some of those things. You know, it's also I think it kind of a test of your relationships. You know, like, okay, like, why are you friends with certain people? And what is the judgment? And where are they in terms of their own evolution around this? So, in terms of professionally, I'm curious as given the vast experience you've had in, you know, in other professions and healthcare? What were you able to transfer kind of directly into the work that you're doing in cannabis? What were you able to kind of transfer with modification? And then what just didn't transfer at all for you as you got into cannabis?

## **8:44**

So excellent question. What transferred for me is I knew that my skills and my experience were transferable in terms of strategy and planning, leadership and team development, change in project management, all of those things are needed their industry agnostic, what I needed to change was my approach to them. Because

cannabis being a new and emerging industry, working mostly with startups, I couldn't come in with a lot of structure and rigor, it turned my clients off, I needed to be more agile and adaptable and nimble and be able to pivot when they needed to pivot. And so that was one of the things where I knew my skill set was transferable. My approach needed to be tweaked. And what's not transferable is having a sense of, I'll say that even consistency, just every day is a new day, right? Managing kind of in the chaos, you have to be able to deal really well with ambiguity and be able to navigate and lead through ambiguity. And so for someone that has been in corporate for so long, and you kind of know, the landscape, the environment, there's more stability in a lot of corporate positions that are out the window. You just have to forget about all that and just go with the flow. Oh, roll with the punches and figure it out as you go along.

### **10:03**

Yeah, no. And so you made this professional decision to get involved in cannabis like, where did you find kind of purchase? Or what was your kind of entry point? Where did you start? What did you learn how things evolved.

### **10:14**

So first thing I did was start to build out a network because I didn't really have a cannabis network. So I built my network. And like I said, through the pandemic, everything was still virtual. So there wasn't a lot of like, live events in person meetings. So everything was really online, webinars, conferences, read a ton, you know, signed up for newsletters, networks, everything about that. The biggest thing I think that helped me was very early, often finding two really great mentors, one that is also a consultant and executive advisor, and someone that's an educator. And so being able to have those mentors really helped me navigate and my growth and experience about the industry, and how to apply my skill set was invaluable to me. And I do believe that it helped fast track my ability to get my foot in and start to get clients. Now getting the clients was the hardest thing getting my first client was the hardest thing I did have to do some pro bono work really got more active in LinkedIn and posting and really sharing kind of my knowledge and my my background. But once I got that first client, they were happy with my work, you get word of mouth referrals, your network starts to learn about you. I've gotten clients through my network as well. And so that for me was the the toughest part was just hanging in there long enough to get that first client.

### **11:36**

Yeah. And in terms of where you found you could really help these folks where I guess where they needed help where it overlapped with your kind of skills and experience and background? What did you find you're actually helping them with? And how is that? I guess, what's the value for the clients that you work with?

### **11:52**

So where they think they need help, and where they actually help are often two different things. You know, when I first meet with a potential new client, I'll ask them, like, in terms of their business maturity, where do they think they're at? Do they need help stabilizing the business operationalizing the business or optimizing it? And they'll say, oh, no, we're definitely in the operationalize, optimize. And so for me, that means operationalize there. They're starting to do Lean process starting to do process improvements. Standardizing things optimize is we want to capitalize on our strengths and our opportunities for new market capture new product expansion, whatever that may be. When I get in there, I realized that they probably aren't as stable as they think meaning they probably don't have a clear mission or vision. And when there's one or two co founders and a small team of like five or 10, people, they can get away with not having that. But as they grow, and they need to scale. If they don't have anything anchoring that team down, it can become messy. And so convincing them that to really be able to exponentially grow and scale, they need to build the right foundation, the right operational Foundation, the right organizational Foundation, and that sometimes takes them back to let's talk about roles and responsibilities. Let's talk about what is your mission and your long term vision? What is your strategy? And what's your plan to get there. And a lot of times, all that's new to them. And they've just been kind of building the plane as they're flying it and didn't have some of that. Now, all of that sounds very administratively heavy, and burdensome. And it can be a turn off to folks who just want to go, I just want to produce I just want to execute. And so that's where when you talked earlier, you mentioned earlier, what do you need to do to tweak these things. This is where I have think of more agile, nimble ways of being able to deliver these things, but not go overboard in terms of documentation or bureaucracy, because they want to be fast. They want to get to market they want to start to, you know, build their business or grow their business.

**13:58**

Yeah. And what have you noticed? I mean, any kind of things that you've noticed about cannabis companies in terms of the sort of general industry struggles that you tend to run into a lot?

**14:09**

Well, I think the patchwork of rules and regulations from state to state is really difficult, right? It's hard for you to build a national brand, when you've got to do it uniquely in each state. The other thing a few years back when we had low interest rates and capital was plentiful. We all we had to do was have kind of a I'll say half assed pitch deck, and we were given money now, things have changed that that I'll say sense of optimism a few years back 2019 2020 has gone into a little bit of a disillusionment. And investors now really want to know how are you going to be spending this capital, I want to make sure that you guys have a clear plan of exactly how am i How am I going to get my return on investment? Yeah, exactly. That's right. And so it goes back to them. You have to have a really clean pitch deck. And what does that mean? You have to have your financial projections tightened and buttoned up, you have to have realistic projections. I mean, before it was like, Oh, we're gonna grow, you know, millions over the next six months. And so a lot of it goes, it's back to the basics, honestly. And those companies that are able to really be thoughtful about what they want, how they're going to get it, this is the strategy that execute the strategy, the planning, and then being able to execute on it are the ones that I see are going to end up coming out on top. But it's it's really, I'll say, difficult right now, even for those companies that did all everything, right? If they're not sustaining through their own profits, if they're still

relying on capital funding, it's a little scary right now I have a couple clients that really feel like from month to month, they're assessing what what they can and can't do.

**15:50**

Yeah. And what parts of the industry do you find yourself working mostly with cultivators, processors, retail dispensary, all of them were Where are you kind of landing?

**15:59**

Retail? So I've got a couple retail, and then branded marketing and some research and development. Yeah. And CBD as well.

**16:07**

Okay, interesting. And so is there any part of this market that you are most interested in or kind of applicable to like, just the nature of the challenge? Your kind of background, right, like, is there areas that you find yourself drawn to in terms of the cannabis world?

**16:22**

Yeah, I definitely feel like retail, branding and marketing are more where my skill set fits of what I would really like to learn more about is though, in the cultivation, that's where I'm least knowledgeable, and where I would really like to know more about it. And I've had, folks when I first started in the industry, they said, you know, you need to go work on a farm go trim go work in a dispensary. And I was not opposed to that. I thought, well, you know, what, started to go pitch it. And I thought it doesn't feel right, because I know I'm going to only go there for a month or two, to get a better understanding to understand. And is it fair for them to train and onboard me when I know I'm going to be here for a couple of months. And so I found alternative ways to really understand what the consumer wants, what my client or my customer issues are, what their pain points are, what keeps them up at night, or where are they stuck. But the one area I haven't really been able to learn much about isn't cultivation, it is something very interesting to me.

**17:24**

Yeah, yeah. No, it's It's one of the things I've learned about cannabis is, it is so multifaceted. There's so many different aspects to it, whether you're kind of in the core plant touching kind of chain, or until and certainly products and services. I mean, there's like you can get into tech, you can get into plant science, agriculture, or there's like, you know, medicine or there's so many different angles to this stuff, what I guess any interesting

kind of experiences and working with some of the different markets in terms of the different states that you've seen, particularly interesting kind of developments or markets that you think are doing particularly well? Well, I'm

**17:56**

here in California, and so I've worked with mostly California companies. But you know, we've been we were one of the earlier states. And so right now, we've kind of feeling like I said, that kind of sea of disillusionment. But then I see on the East Coast, you know, my sister lives in New Jersey shields and Hoboken, and she works in New York, over there, just the enthusiasm and the sea of optimism that's happening right now. And so the dichotomy between the two is interesting. I oftentimes will join webinars or virtual events on the East Coast. And it's just a completely different look and feel right now. They're, they're in that early honeymoon stage, and very excited. And so I wouldn't mind working with some companies over on the east coast that have that because I've been kind of mired in the reality of what happens after that. And so that's, that's interesting to me. The other thing that I find interesting is this whole us against them, this was one of the first things that was really obvious to me, between all say, Legacy operators, and folks coming from different corporate or professional backgrounds, as you know, routes versus suits the channel versus the Brad's whatever you want to call it.

That was the one of the most obvious things to me. And at the end of the day, we need each other, we really do if we want to truly have a thriving industry, we need each other. And for me, that's it's building that bridge, and really having, you know, respect for those legacy operators and wanting to help them that really was, for me, when I first started, my main focus was, I want to I want to be able to help some of these folks that can't get their foot in the door, help them build and scale a business where they're going to be successful in doing what they love to do and help and let them lean on me for me to help them do things that maybe they're not as comfortable familiar with. And so, for me, I really did notice with each state, they go through a very similar I'll say lifecycle, it's super excited. The opportunities there and then kind of the reality here So then you go through this trial disillusionment. And now I think we're bouncing back. So in California, what I'm noticing is that craft cannabis is starting to make a resurgence. And I have a client that does research, development and marketing. And they're really starting to work with some up in like Humboldt County in the Emerald triangle. Some of those craft cannabis cultivators that they know how to grow good weed, but they don't have the capital or the know how to market and brand it. And this company wants to really help them find that bridge to the right retail or dispensaries that are going to really support Sungrown craft cannabis, give them some shelf space really make that a predominant, you know, focus of the dispensary. And so that's startup I'm working on. And I'm really, really excited about what they're going to bring to market.

**20:51**

Yeah, I guess what are the big issues that you kind of see in the industry? Or, you know, if I gave you a magic wand, and you could change some things around the cannabis industry? What would you change? Why, what would really help us, you know, grow and scale this business? Well, I



**21:02**

think first safe banking, you know, safe banking has to pass. I think federal legalization. I know, there are a lot of folks that talk about rescheduling versus de scheduling, knowing how the government works. I don't think that they're going to completely D schedule it, I think it will be a rescheduling. And I think that comes with a whole other host of concerns and issues. But I also think that it's a step in the right direction. And so for me, the biggest hurdles are around the federal office a rules and regulations that make cannabis so prohibitive to be thriving industry. That's I'll say, externally, internally, I think some of these cannabis companies are their own worst enemies, because they really don't spend the time to truly plan and develop a business that they're going to want to grow and scale at, they're so eager to get to market with their product or with their services, that they just want to immediately go. And then once they start to grow, they realize we didn't put the right infrastructure in place to scale. And then they're left with a really hard decision of how are we going to figure out how to scale? Do we scale? Or do we have to be acquired in order to scale and that's oftentimes where a lot of the merger and acquisition, you know, activity comes in is these poor, distressed companies have gotten themselves in a position where they have to make those tough decisions. We don't have the capital, the financial capital to scale as we've grown, and we're kind of stuck. Yeah, we have to make that hard decision, or we, we have to do some kind of strategic partnership to stay afloat. And so I don't like when that happens, but I'm seeing it more more often.

**22:42**

Yeah, yeah. It's just a challenge that kind of making these decisions, you know, how much how much energy you do put upfront in terms of investing in scaling strategy versus just getting to market.

**22:51**

And it is a balance, it's definitely a balance that we have to look at and think what is right for them. It's no one size fits all, each. Each company, each client is different.

**23:01**

Yeah. I'm curious, given your background and healthcare space, like we're How do you think healthcare companies, even just kind of the medical kind of establishment, the medical community, like where, where is the evolution of this from really kind of adopting or embracing or integrating this into standard healthcare practices?

**23:20**

Ah, that's a good question. So spending so much time in the health care industry, they are one of the most most risk adverse industries, because they are dealing with matters of of life and death. And people used to

joke when I would tell them that but it's true. I mean, health insurance companies, you know, if they screw something up, and your health card tells you you're ineligible on January 1, and you've got life saving cancer drugs or life saving drugs, and you can't get them and you can't afford to pay out of pocket until that screw up gets resolved. That's a serious issue. And so I think the healthcare industry is a ways off in adopting medical cannabis. But I've seen glimmers of hope. So, recently, I read an article that spoke to there are diagnosis codes that health insurance industries use to cover medical expenses. When a doctor prescribes something or does a medical procedure, there's a diagnosis code that they submit, and the health insurance company looks as as covered under this patient's plan, etc. And if so, they'll pay on behalf of the patient. And so the fact that they're actually now creating diagnosis codes for specifically for cannabis, as plant medicine is is really encouraging to me. The other area where I think is going to take a long time, even probably longer than health insurance companies to cover some of it is around just the medical profession in general starting to incorporate plant medicine into medical education and medical schooling, and they're not I don't think they're going to readily do that on scale. and mass until there's enough empirical evidence and research to show that yes, it is truly a treatment for X issue, disease, whatever. And I think that's still a ways off. But more and more medical professionals are starting to be curious about it.

**25:20**

Yeah. Yeah, I think it's just fascinating to see how the health insurance companies, the drug companies, you know, how the whole industry is kind of responding to this and how they really have different approaches or their different motives. And I guess behind the scenes, and there's, you know, adopting or not about doing or embracing, you're not embracing cannabis and some of these other cannabinoids and stuff. So it's fascinating.

**25:42**

Absolutely. I mean, unfortunately, you know, we've got alcohol, tobacco and Big Pharma. The lobbyists there have a stronghold on much of what our our government and our representatives will do will pass will propose. And that's going to continue to be a barrier. And a lot of folks are really fearful that once pharma sinks their teeth into cannabis as an industry, it's going to destroy it. And I think in the future, there will be kind of a divergence to separate paths truly like medical research being done, where they may be able to extract, cannabinoids or certain very, you know, isolated items that will be able to treat specific conditions. And then those more I'll say, for recreational or therapeutic use, where it's the whole plant and consuming in however you want, it's not going to be through the medical route. And I think it will kind of split and we'll have, we'll see two different paths for cannabis.

**26:41**

Yeah. Charleen there's been a pleasure if people want to find out more about you more about the work that you do, what's the best way to get that information?

**26:47**

Absolutely. They can go to my website, [elevatebeyondconsulting.com](http://elevatebeyondconsulting.com). Or also, like I said, I'm very active on LinkedIn, Charlene Estrada, all one word, they can find me there as well. Great.

**26:58**

I'll make sure that the URL and the handle for LinkedIn is in the show notes so people can get that trilling. Thank you so much for taking the time today. It's been a pleasure.

**27:05**

Absolutely. Bruce, you have a good one.

**27:07**

That's it for this episode of thinking outside the bud. Be sure to subscribe using your favorite podcast app so you don't miss our future episodes. See you next time.

**27:17**

You've been listening to thinking outside the bud with business coach Bruce Eckfeldt. To find a full list of podcast episodes, download the tools and worksheets and access other great content. Visit the website at [thinkingoutsidethebud.com](http://thinkingoutsidethebud.com) and don't forget to sign up for the free newsletter at [thinkingoutsidethebud.com](http://thinkingoutsidethebud.com) forward slash newsletter.

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