Inside The Minds of CXOs Transcript

The Partnership Decisions That Make-Or-Break Growth With Eric Turnwald & Tejal Patel

Introduction

[0:12] Keith Titus: Welcome to Inside the Minds of the CXO. I'm Keith Titus, and it's a pleasure to host this conversation.

In this premiere episode, we're exploring a topic at the heart of enterprise growth: how partnership decisions can make or break business success.

I'm joined by two incredible guests, Tejal and Eric. It's great to have you both here.

To kick things off, I'd like to start with some context. Over the past decade—and especially in the last three to five years—the role of procurement, strategic sourcing, and vendor management has become increasingly important at the executive level. Chief Procurement Officers and strategic sourcing leaders now play a significant role in shaping and executing enterprise strategy.

The challenge, however, is that while bringing in partners can accelerate growth, too many vendors can create complexity and confusion. How do organizations move from vendor sprawl to outcome-driven partnerships?

Section 1: Why Partnerships Are Becoming Strategic Growth Drivers

[1:27] Tejal Patel: Since leaving my corporate career to build my own supply chain practice, I've seen this challenge across many organizations. Companies often have partnerships with dozens of vendors, but "partnership" can be a loosely used term because those relationships aren't anchored to a clear business strategy.

Today, leaders are asking a different question: "Help me define my five-year strategy first, then help me identify the partners that can support each phase of that journey."

That approach is very different from trying to fit existing vendors into a strategy after the fact.

Sometimes that means making difficult decisions. You have to walk away from certain vendors while doubling down on others. The key is building relationships that align with your company's long-term growth.

One of the biggest struggles I see is deciding which partners deserve greater investment and how to tier suppliers in a way that genuinely supports business growth.

[2:36] Keith: Partnerships seem to be moving beyond transactional relationships and becoming central to growth strategy.

Specifically, when we think about outsourced sales and revenue partnerships, why do you think this shift is happening? What's driving organizations to view partners as strategic growth accelerators rather than simply service providers?

[2:53] Eric Turnwald: A major factor is increased cost pressure and the need to manage budgets more effectively.

Companies are asking themselves an important question: Where do we truly need in-house expertise, and what capabilities can we successfully outsource?

It's about balancing what you continue to build internally with what specialized partners can deliver more efficiently.

Another driver is speed.

Growth happens much faster when you work with a partner like MarketStar that has already built successful SMB sales organizations or customer service operations for companies facing similar challenges.

Rather than hiring an entire leadership team from scratch, you're effectively purchasing years of experience and proven operating models. You gain access to experts who've solved these problems before, allowing you to focus on your product and business outcomes instead of building every capability internally.

[3:44] Eric: That's really what's happening across the market.

Technology companies are increasingly focusing on building great products, while partners like MarketStar bring decades of expertise in building, managing, and scaling high-performing teams.

When those strengths come together, the conversation becomes:

"How do we combine the right technology with the right people?"

That's where our role begins.

We bring the right talent to the table and collaborate with our clients to determine what the operating model should look like—combining proven best practices from similar organizations with the unique needs of each business.

That's where the real value is created.

Section 2: Designing the Right Partner Strategy

[5:17] Keith: As organizations pursue growth, vendor sprawl often becomes an unintended consequence. Companies move quickly and think, "We need a partner for this, another for that, and another somewhere else."

From your perspective, how do you balance speed and innovation while ensuring you have the right number—and the right type—of partners for your stage of growth?

[5:43] Eric: That's a great question.

Early on, it's critical to find partners with the expertise you're looking for because they help accelerate growth much faster than building those capabilities internally.

Over time, though, you reach a point where consolidation becomes the better strategy.

Rather than managing a large number of vendors, you identify the partner that's most invested in your success—the one that's innovating with you, collaborating closely, consistently delivering against KPIs, and aligning with your company's culture and values.

For example, if you have different vendors supporting different regions, there often comes a point where it makes sense to expand your strongest partner geographically instead of continuing to add new vendors.

I still prefer running two vendors during a transition period. Maintaining some overlap gives you flexibility while reducing risk. But ultimately, growing your best-performing partner has always been my preferred approach to consolidation.

[6:56] Keith: From a partner's perspective, we always appreciate when prospective customers engage us early and focus on outcomes rather than activities.

Instead of asking, "What services do you provide?" the conversation becomes, "What business outcomes are we trying to achieve, and how can you help us get there?"

We're seeing organizations move beyond traditional service-level agreements toward outcome-based partnerships.

I'd like to explore that further.

A fast response without expertise or real value can actually create a poor customer experience. Speed alone isn't enough.

When you think about KPIs tied to growth—whether it's revenue retention, forecast accuracy, customer health, or similar metrics—how have you used outcomes and performance measures to build stronger partnerships?

[8:01] Eric: I love the concept of outcome-based partnerships.

Personally, I prefer outsourcing the outcome rather than prescribing every step of the process.

That approach allows both organizations to co-create the path to success.

The first step is getting everyone in the same room and defining exactly what success looks like.

For example, if the goal is to acquire 100 new customers during a pilot, then everyone aligns around that shared objective from day one. Once that's established, both teams can work together to determine the activities required to achieve it.

Those conversations benefit from different perspectives and experiences. Each organization brings its own ideas about what will drive success.

Then you execute, measure, learn, and adjust.

One mistake I see is becoming too attached to a handful of KPIs at the beginning of an engagement.

Instead, establish a few meaningful metrics that support the broader business outcome, measure the results, and then ask whether those metrics are actually driving success—or whether they need to evolve.

Early in the partnership, trust is equally important.

If both organizations are genuinely committed to achieving the same outcome, you don't need to manage the relationship through dozens of metrics. Instead, you trust that everyone is working toward the same shared goals while refining the measurement framework over time.

[9:33] Keith: If I were to summarize, I hear three key principles.

First, co-create the desired outcomes and business objectives.

Second, be willing to evolve those objectives as the partnership matures and circumstances change.

Finally, shift the relationship toward a value-based, outcome-oriented mindset rather than simply measuring activity.

When you approach partnerships that way, accountability naturally becomes shared responsibility rather than something owned by one side alone.

Section 3: Evaluating, Selecting, and Validating the Right Partners

[10:08] Keith: Enterprise purchasing decisions rarely involve a single stakeholder.

According to Gartner, most purchasing decisions now involve four to seven decision-makers, and for larger, revenue-impacting initiatives, that number can easily exceed ten.

Tejal, you've experienced this from both sides—leading strategic sourcing and procurement at Intel and now advising organizations as a consultant.

When you think about supplier tiering, partner selection, and modernizing the RFP process, what best practices help organizations navigate so many stakeholders and arrive at better decisions?

[11:00] Tejal: That's a challenge nearly every company faces.

One of the biggest issues is that many small and midsize organizations don't have a clear understanding of where vendor sprawl exists—or why it exists.

The first step is always to start with the "why."

Understand your business objectives first. Once you're clear on what you're trying to accomplish, you can evaluate whether your existing partnerships actually support those goals.

From there, I generally recommend having two to four strategic partners that are closely aligned with your long-term business strategy.

The complexity comes when organizations continue adding vendors without a clear framework.

It's not unusual to see a $20 million company working with more than 25 vendors, many of whom have overlapping responsibilities and inconsistent management.

My first priority is always to map each vendor against the company's business goals. That exercise quickly reveals where overlap exists and where partnerships can be consolidated to improve business outcomes while creating greater financial discipline.

Vendor sprawl rarely delivers financial efficiency unless it's managed strategically.

[12:26] Eric: Managing multiple stakeholders is one of the hardest parts of the selection process.

A common pitfall is placing too much weight on financial scoring.

Finance plays an essential role, but in many RFP processes they're heavily represented, which naturally shifts the evaluation toward price.

The problem is that vendors will almost always compete on cost.

That's why it's critical for the business leader—or the executive responsible for the function—to have significant influence over the decision.

They're best positioned to evaluate whether a partner has the talent, expertise, and operational capability to deliver the business outcomes you're looking for.

If a committee of eight people includes four representatives from finance or accounting, you have to be careful that every vote isn't weighted equally.

The people ultimately accountable for business performance should have the strongest voice in evaluating whether a partner can actually deliver results.

[13:42] Eric: Finding that balance isn't easy.

I'm sure plenty of finance leaders would disagree with me, but lowest cost isn't always the best decision.

That approach may work for commodity purchases, but you can't apply the same thinking to every vendor relationship—especially when you're investing in people, expertise, and specialized capabilities.

With people-based services, quality matters.

The lower the investment, the lower the level of talent you're likely to receive.

The best cross-functional procurement teams understand their distinct roles.

Finance should focus on commercial negotiations, pricing, and contract terms.

The business leaders should determine whether the value being delivered justifies the investment.

When everyone understands those responsibilities, better decisions are made.

[14:50] Keith: I can already picture the scoring matrix.

You've got evaluation criteria down one side, stakeholder weighting across the top, and suddenly the CFO carries one weighting while the CRO carries another.

That certainly creates some interesting dynamics during the decision-making process.

Another major factor influencing partner selection today is AI, automation, and digital transformation.

How much importance do you place on a partner's ability to combine human expertise with artificial intelligence when evaluating potential partners?

[15:46] Eric: For me, it all comes down to collaboration.

AI only delivers value when both organizations contribute to it.

The client's engineering teams need to provide product knowledge and data, while the customer-facing teams contribute operational insights. That's how AI models become truly effective.

Because of that, I care less about how impressive a vendor's AI platform appears and more about whether they're capable of integrating with our teams and working collaboratively.

If a vendor can't work with our data, our systems, and our internal teams, then the technology alone has very little value.

I see many vendors promoting impressive AI capabilities, but when you look at the actual engagement model, there's no plan for involving the people who will train, refine, and improve those systems.

Successful AI requires all of those ingredients working together.

Without collaboration, AI capabilities alone shouldn't carry much weight in the evaluation process.

[16:51] Tejal: I actually don't think AI is the strategy.

AI is a tool that supports the strategy.

For growing companies, automation is incredibly valuable because it improves operational efficiency and helps organizations scale more effectively.

But you still need people to develop the strategy, make critical decisions, and drive long-term growth.

Automation should complement those efforts—not replace them.

The key is understanding which operational tasks can be automated while preserving strategic planning and high-value decision-making for people.

Today there are dozens of companies offering powerful automation platforms at increasingly lower costs.

But without knowledgeable people feeding those systems with the right data and direction, organizations simply accumulate more information without generating better outcomes.

That's why successful partnerships require both intelligent technology and experienced people working together.

Section 4: Finding the Right Partner: Due Diligence, Culture, and Long-Term Fit

[18:11] Keith: Once you've established an outcome-based partnership model, the next challenge is twofold: finding the right partner and sustaining that relationship over time.

Eric, based on your experience, what tools or approaches have you found most effective when evaluating potential partners?

[18:24] Eric: I used to think about this when I was at Reddit, where I was responsible for about nine different business units.

I pictured each business unit as its own garden box.

If you want to grow tomatoes, you have two choices. You can start with seeds, build everything yourself, and accept that it's going to take time—and probably several unsuccessful attempts along the way.

Or you can start with a healthy, mature plant that's already been cultivated by someone with expertise.

That's how I think about vendors.

A great partner has already developed the capability you're trying to build. Instead of starting from scratch, you bring that expertise into your organization to accelerate growth.

But selecting the right partner is only the beginning.

That plant still needs resources to grow.

Too often, organizations assume that once they've outsourced a function, the partner owns everything. In reality, the partner controls only part of the equation.

Using the gardening analogy, the vendor may provide the plant, but your organization still provides the water.

Without ongoing support—whether that's product training, sales enablement, marketing alignment, engineering support, or executive engagement—even the strongest partnership will eventually struggle.

I've seen relationships deteriorate because the internal team assumes the work is now someone else's responsibility.

The opposite is true.

As the partnership grows, your investment has to grow alongside it.

If a partner starts by supporting a small customer base and eventually scales to thousands of customers, they'll need more experienced talent, stronger enablement, and deeper collaboration from your internal teams.

Successful partnerships become more collaborative over time—not less.

[20:33] Keith: What I'm hearing is that long-term success depends on finding a partner that can evolve alongside your business, supported by shared investment and ongoing collaboration.

But how do you determine upfront whether a prospective partner is actually capable of growing with you?

[20:58] Tejal: In many cases, the vendors participating in your selection process are already known quantities.

You may have worked with them before, seen them in other business units, or have some understanding of their capabilities.

That context certainly helps.

The bigger challenge comes when you're introducing a new partner to stakeholders who have no prior experience with them.

In those situations, customer validation becomes incredibly important.

When I led strategic sourcing teams, I relied heavily on conversations with existing customers through my professional network.

I'd ask them to walk me through their experience—not just the results they achieved, but how the partnership actually worked.

We also expected vendors to present detailed case studies and answer in-depth questions.

Those discussions helped us distinguish between a polished sales presentation and genuine operational capability.

I'm sure vendors occasionally rolled their eyes at the number of questions we asked, but customer references and authentic case studies gave us the confidence to recommend a partner to senior leadership.

[22:36] Eric: I completely agree.

The second thing I always look for is the opportunity to experience service delivery firsthand.

Whenever possible, I want to visit the operation, see the teams in action, and observe how work is actually being done.

Meeting operational leaders is far more valuable than simply talking with sales representatives.

You learn a tremendous amount by seeing the culture, observing how teams collaborate, and understanding how they serve their customers.

Those site visits tell you whether the organization truly aligns with your culture and operating model.

It's one thing to hear about a capability.

It's another to see it consistently delivered.

[23:40] Keith: From a partner's perspective, I always appreciate when prospective customers ask to speak with current or former clients.

We're fortunate to have a broad network of customers, and when we make those introductions, we expect them to be completely transparent.

That transparency also reflects how we approach the sales process.

We want customers to understand both our strengths and the areas where we may not be the best fit.

[24:21] Tejal: That's exactly what I look for.

Whenever a supplier connected me with a reference who described everything as perfect, I became skeptical.

No partnership is flawless.

The conversations that matter are the ones where customers openly discuss the challenges they faced, how issues were resolved, and how the relationship adapted over time.

I want to hear the good, the bad, and everything in between.

Understanding how a partner responds when circumstances change tells you far more about their long-term value than hearing a list of successes.

Those are the stories that help you determine whether a partner can truly grow with your business.

Section 5: Sustaining High-Performance Partnerships

[25:16] Keith: There are inevitably times when difficult conversations have to happen.

You've agreed on the outcomes, you're measuring performance, but the results aren't being delivered at the level either partner expected.

Tejal, based on your experience managing strategic vendors, how do you approach accountability reviews and help partnerships recover when expectations aren't being met?

[25:41] Tejal: In my experience, those conversations become much easier when they're built on a strong relationship.

We worked hard to create an environment where everyone was honest and transparent about what was happening.

I'm not going to pretend those conversations were easy, but they were rarely contentious because everyone came to the table with the same mindset.

Sometimes we'd acknowledge that we missed our targets.

Maybe we expected to achieve a certain level of volume over the next 30 days, but we underestimated the resources required. Some team members underperformed, others had to compensate, or perhaps our bench strength wasn't ready when we needed it.

Those situations became learning opportunities rather than opportunities to assign blame.

It all starts with trust. When trust and transparency exist between partners, difficult conversations become productive discussions focused on solving problems.

Without that foundation, those same conversations quickly become adversarial, with threats of moving the business elsewhere or assigning fault.

The difference is that, with trust, both sides are comfortable saying, "We made a mistake," and then working together to fix it.

[26:59] Keith: What role does executive sponsorship play in building successful partnerships?

How important is executive involvement when selecting—and ultimately sustaining—the right partner?

[27:12] Tejal: Executive sponsorship is incredibly important, but it has to be balanced.

Sometimes executives naturally gravitate toward suppliers they've worked with before because of positive past experiences.

While those relationships can be valuable, they shouldn't automatically determine the outcome.

The executive sponsor still needs to trust the procurement team, strategic sourcing leaders, and finance partners to evaluate the market objectively and identify the partner that's truly the best fit for the business.

Once that work has been done, executive sponsorship becomes extremely valuable.

In larger organizations, I actually found the most successful partnerships were often driven by leaders one level below the executive suite.

Those leaders tend to be closer to the day-to-day strategy. They're rolling up their sleeves, building the roadmap, aligning internal teams, and developing supplier relationships that directly support the business objectives.

Executive sponsorship matters—but successful partnerships require both executive support and operational leadership.

[28:34] Keith: Let's shift our focus to sustaining partnerships.

Once you've selected the right partner, what does it take to keep that relationship successful over the long term?

Eric, I know you have strong opinions on this.

[28:47] Eric: It starts with resourcing.

Once you've signed the agreement and decided to move forward, the real work begins. You have to plan the onboarding experience carefully.

I remember when we expanded our partnership with MarketStar and brought on an additional 50 people.

I flew out personally to make sure the IT team was prepared and everything was ready before the new hires arrived.

When you're onboarding that many people simultaneously, even small operational issues can create frustration and undermine confidence in the partnership.

That's why it's so important to think through every resource that's required—not just from the partner, but from your own internal teams.

Once people are onboarded successfully, your partner can do what they do best. But those first 90 days are critical.

Whenever possible, someone from your organization should be present throughout that period, providing guidance, removing obstacles, and reinforcing alignment.

[30:01] Eric: Long term, I believe organizations should have dedicated employees embedded within their partner's operations whenever the scale justifies it. I recognize that isn't always practical.

If you're outsourcing a team of 20 people, it doesn't make sense to relocate a full-time employee to another state.

Instead, have someone travel regularly during the first few months—weekly if necessary—then transition to monthly and quarterly visits as the partnership matures.

Once the operation grows to 100 people or more, that's when having someone on-site full time becomes worthwhile.

At that scale, you're managing significant revenue, larger teams, and much higher expectations.

Sustaining those outcomes requires continuous collaboration, not occasional oversight.

[30:51] Keith: What role do vendor scorecards and business leaders play when you aren't able to maintain a regular on-site presence?

How do you continue evaluating performance, culture, and the health of the partnership while ensuring the right level of support remains in place?

[31:22] Tejal: That's one of the biggest challenges, especially when budgets limit how often teams can travel.

For us, success depended on having a strong internal program manager who genuinely believed in the partnership and could bring everyone together around a common purpose.

One of the things I appreciated most after partnering more closely with sales and marketing organizations was their emphasis on regular video communication.

Coming from an engineering and manufacturing environment, that wasn't part of our culture.

But those frequent video calls became a game changer.

We held meetings with teams across different locations, spent time getting to know one another, and even incorporated simple team-building activities.It may have felt a little cheesy at times, but it created real connections.

I also give credit to the shift toward remote work, which pushed organizations to embrace more collaborative ways of working.

When your teams are spread across multiple countries, you simply can't rely on travel alone to build strong relationships.

That's why a dedicated program management team becomes so important.

They create the bridge between organizations, maintain communication, reinforce accountability, and help both teams feel like they're operating as one.

Section 6: Leadership Takeaways

[32:55] Keith: This has been an incredible discussion.

I think anyone responsible for partnerships, procurement, or vendor management will walk away with practical insights—not only on how to identify the right partner, but also how to build relationships that create long-term business value.

Let's finish with a lightning round.

Tejal, I'd love your top two takeaways. Then, Eric, we'll hear yours.

[33:26] Tejal: My first piece of advice is simple: build a relationship before you choose a partner.

Don't select a vendor because of a polished website or an impressive sales presentation.

I completely agree with Eric—go spend time with them. Get to know their people, and leverage your professional network to understand what it's really like to work with them.

Those conversations will tell you far more than any proposal ever could.

My second takeaway is to develop your business strategy before selecting your partners. Don't expect vendors to define your company's strategy for you.

Come to the table with a clear vision of where your business is headed, then identify partners whose capabilities align with that strategy.

The most successful partnerships support a well-defined business plan—they don't replace it.

[34:12] Eric: I'd add one final reminder: these principles apply regardless of geography. If you're evaluating a partner in India, go to India.

If your teams operate in North America, spend time observing the work during North American business hours.

Wherever your partner is located, don't lose sight of the value of seeing the operation firsthand.

Nothing replaces in-person collaboration when you're trying to understand how an organization truly works.

[34:36] Eric: And if travel is difficult, think creatively.It doesn't always have to be you making the visit.

Send someone from marketing. Send someone from engineering. Send emerging leaders from your organization.

The goal is to create meaningful connections between the two organizations.

Those experiences build trust, create shared understanding, and help everyone see both the opportunities and the obstacles standing between the partnership and the outcomes you're working together to achieve.

[35:07] Keith: Tejal, Eric, thank you both for such a thoughtful and insightful discussion.

You've shared practical guidance on everything from selecting the right partners and managing stakeholder alignment to building trust, sustaining performance, and creating outcome-driven relationships.

I'm confident our audience will find these insights valuable.

Thank you both for joining us.

[END]