

SCOTT BELSKY



BEHANCING CREATIVITY



EPISODE 89

BEHANCING CREATIVITY:

ENTREPRENEURIAL INSIGHTS FROM
THE MASTER OF MAKING IDEAS
HAPPEN

Paul Fairweather 00:01

Scott Belsky Welcome to the common creative podcast.

Scott Belsky 00:04

Thank you both for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Chris Meredith 00:06

Scott, really excited to have you on the show. Thanks so much for joining us.

Paul Fairweather 00:10

So Scott, if we could just quickly start off by you giving us a quick part of history about your journey about how you landed where you are now?

Scott Belsky 00:18

Well, it certainly starts in the basement of a house in Newton, Massachusetts, where I found myself always going to what I called Scott's creativity area to make and Thinker Away, it was where you had all these kinds of objects from these, this place called the recycled store in Boston that sold you basically bags full of crazy stuff that you could just make stuff with. And then I had my first apple, two G's down there, and the rest is history. I founded a company back in 2005, called Behance. With a mission to organize the creative world at work. Behance is now around 42 million creatives around the world showcasing their work and getting attribution and connecting with collaborators and getting opportunity. And then that company was ultimately acquired by Adobe in late 2012. But during the process of between the founding, and or acquisition, I became a student of what made creative teams productive or as most struggled and wrote a book called making ideas happen back in the day all about that. And always had been kind of motivated by my frustration with how many amazing creative minds there are in the world, and how few ideas actually see the light of day and get scale. And so that's always been my passion in my career. Ever since coming into Adobe, I've basically been here with a small hiatus in between for about 10 years, trying to enable creativity, democratize creativity, and also raise the ceiling and what creative pros can accomplish. And so did that for five years as Chief Product Officer and most recently as Chief Strategy Officer and head of all design and emerging products for the company?
Scott,

Paul Fairweather 02:03

just, what's it? What's the difference? Between, you know, like, bootstrapping, and being, you know, a senior person in such a big company like Adobe, although Adobe is obviously focused on creativity. Can you sum that up at all?

Scott Belsky 02:19

Yeah, I think that, I think that there. There are as many tensions and frustrations as an entrepreneur working amidst anonymity, ambiguity, uncertainty, as there are in big companies working amidst bureaucracy. And whenever you're in a big company, and you say, you miss the small company more, and whenever in the small company, you say, gosh, I just wish people knew we existed, you missed the, you miss the big company, the reach the go to market advantage, you know, the platform that you can sit on to share new things. So having seen both, you know, I've learned that they're both great. And



they're both hard. And so I try to make the most of both, I think, at Adobe, those who work with me would probably say that I'm a bit of the entrepreneur in the company, you know, I do try to instigate a lot, you know, I do help develop the narrative of where we're going and why and, and I do try to get people aligned, you know, around the company. And I also am a champion of some new technologies that, you know, oftentimes start in the lab or in a white paper that I, you know, try to do my very best to clear the path for

Chris Meredith 03:27

Scott, I'd love to hear more about how you balance these two themes in your life, which is on the one hand, entrepreneurship, innovation. And on the other hand, this sort of look back at the way you work, and this, this broader idea about making things happen. And you know, how you get through that messy middle. And that sounds almost like an academic pursuit. Think about Sir Ken Robinson, for example, people who like university professors, so how do you balance those two? I'm sort of impressed, I suppose that you're able to do both. But my question is, how do you balance it? How do you avoid yourself going down one rabbit hole or the other?

Scott Belsky 04:05

Well, first of all, I do feel like everything in my life kind of connects. I'm actually very inspired by this right here. This is the Disney business model hanging on my wall behind me, for those who can't see, but you know, I always loved the graphic that Walt Disney made for the vision of his business, which showed how everything connected you know, the characters in the stories drove merchandise, sales and merchandise sales, drove people wanting to see the movies and wanting to see the movies make people want to go to the theme park and being at the theme park meet when people want to, and it kind of just continued to be a cycle of different different pieces. And I do think, you know, they look at my life now as an investor and advisor to entrepreneurs as a, you know, someone who has a day job, you know, within a company like Adobe and I also write a newsletter called implications, you know, I'm always trying to find the connections between these things. And and I'm also trying to Uh, trying to test not only what we make, but how we make, you know, I get fascination out of AB testing ways of working, you know, new ways of taking note and ways of tracking actions, new ways of running meetings, cancelling meetings, you know, I'm a bit of a, I'm a bit of a student, you know, and all of those things, and I love tinkering with those parts of the equation as well. So, you know, the way you say it, it makes it seem like it's many different things. But in fact, the way I see it is it's, you know, this amalgamation of the same thing.

Chris Meredith 05:28

I guess there's a lesson for everybody there, which is to kind of study yourself. I noticed that I'm doing this. Why is that? And is that? What is that? A good takeout for the credit, study yourself? What are you doing? What aren't you doing? Why are you doing this?

Scott Belsky 05:42

I'm really into that, you know, I get curious, you know, I, I don't like the flattery, or what I like, is the criticism. I love it. When people say to me, Scott, when you did that, that didn't really come through, you know, that didn't really resonate, you know, I love I mean, feedback is like this incredible goldmine of, of knowledge about yourself, it's, you know, I feel like so much of success for creative people, is figuring

out the disconnect between what's in your brain and what people are hearing and seeing. And, you know, when it's a very, it's a very difficult margin to remove, because it's painful, you know, it's like, it's criticism, it's, it's, it makes us feel uncomfortable about ourselves, it makes us second guess ourselves, and, you know, taps our concerns that we're a fraud, and that we're, you know, that there's nothing there and, and yet, when you understand and can, um, you know, expose all that's in that margin in between, you know, you really can understand exactly what the story is, it's coming across, I'm obsessed with that.

Paul Fairweather 06:46

I see. And I suppose that's, that's very interesting, you know, that you've ended up in Adobe, because, you know, that's their primary focus isn't giving, giving people tools to be able to visually express themselves better, so that, you know, people can understand, you know, what's in one head to another head.

Scott Belsky 07:03

That's an interesting point, Paul, I feel like there is a consistency there. I believe that all humans, you know, have this creativity in them. And I do believe it comes from things that are hard to verbalize, you know, whether it was childhood traumas, or feeling different for some reason, or, or, you know, life experiences that made you see things differently. That made you pay attention to mistakes of the eye, and that sort of thing. And then it's just friction to get it out, you know, you have these ideas, it's just, you know, whether it's industrial friction, like you don't have access to the industry to make this screenplay happen, or actually have a, an agent to make this book come to be or whether it's, you know, friction of skill sets, you know, gosh, these tools are so hard to use, or, you know, I downloaded, you know, I downloaded Premiere Pro, and I don't even know where to start, how am I ever going to make this movie. So if you can remove that friction, you unlock more native human potential. And you know, and that's also, by the way, why I'm so bullish and excited about the age of AI, because whereas some people think it's going to replace creatives, I actually think it's going to unleash creativity.

Paul Fairweather 08:15

Can you expand a little bit on that?

Scott Belsky 08:21

The way I've started to believe it is that in some ways, creative expression is a box, right of the creative expression that actually yields you know, goes out to human people, the stuff that people create. And the box has a floor in the sense that it's hard to express creatively, you know, and have the schools, the skills. So there's always been a floor to like, you know, it's hard to get into it, right. And then there's also a ceiling, it's like, there's only so much I can do because I only have so much time in a day. And I only have so many skills. So there's only so much I can actually do at a quality bar. And what I think AI is doing is two things. One is lowering the floor, so that more people can access it. Because you don't have to have as many skills, you don't have to have as much money. And you don't have to have as much training. So more people are now becoming creatively confident. And the floor has gone down, which makes the box bigger, right, the floor goes down. And then the ceiling is gone because now you can achieve more with less time and with less skills. So for example, if you're a motion graphics artist you are an illustrator. For a writer, you know or business thinker. You now can actually video edit, you

can now make an animation, you can now use your prompts and ideas to develop something and illustration to show rather than tell. And so that ceiling of what you're capable of is gone up and so when you have the floor, go down, have a box and you have the ceiling go up with a box, you have a much bigger box and that's what's exciting about creativity these days.

Paul Fairweather 09:57

What about the walls? What about the walls? So that's that, that is a fantastic analogy. We've had a series of people recently focusing purely on AI. And that's a lovely thing. And I think it's interesting because, you know, you say, you know, the question I was going to ask you, excitement or fear, as, you know, two sides of the same emotion. So you're definitely on the, on the excitement side.

Scott Belsky 10:25

I am and, and when I get confronted with people that say, No, you know, creative jobs are gonna go away, or people are gonna have to hire fewer designers. You know, my response is simple. First of all, engineers have become more productive every year for the last decade or two decades, probably. And yet, people keep hiring more engineers. Why? Because if you can get more out of every engineer, every year, you end up wanting more engineers, because you want to make more products, and you want to make better marketing, and you want to make better quality experiences, right. And so you just, you desire to do more things across more flat forms, and more formats like with more ingenuity per person. And I think the same thing is with the creative world, you know, if I have five designers on my team, and now I can tap 30% more ingenuity per person, then we can explore formats across more platforms, and we can try more experiments and we can make more products. And so, you know, unless I'm a, you know, a private equity owned business that's being squeezed for cash, no one has any interest in more products and more possibility, you know, I'm going to want to hire more creative people. So I do think that's what's going to ultimately pan out.

Chris Meredith 11:39

I think that's a really interesting insight. Because this idea of kind of, I think one of the implications of AI things being automated thing is that it challenges us as human beings and of what when we add value, what do we do, and I think what that suggests is one of the kind of another last resort, the places where we can really thrive is in our creativity. And even though AI can do things that look like creativity, you know, we ourselves are the ones, I think the only people that can do it. So really, it really challenges us or maybe democratizes the idea that we're all creatives, we can all express ourselves, rather than just having that department in the agency be the ones who do that for you.

Scott Belsky 12:22

I think that's right, because I do think that there will be 100x more people creating because of the floor going down. And I think that the quality of what's coming out from the pros, the people who dedicate their lives to this, the bar goes up, because that ceiling, you know, goes up, but I think you make another point around the human role in all this. And I think we would all agree that the creativity that is effective, is the creativity that moves us. And, and so, you know, any brand or anyone can flood the zone these days with content, I mean, you can use chat GPT and write 100 articles in an hour about one concept that you guys have, and you can trick the search engines and you can flood the zone, so to speak with content, but the stuff that will really move me, you know, and make me want to share it

and make me think about my life, you know, and and engage me in a more deeper way, you know, that comes from soulfulness. And that, I think, is a truly human endeavor.

Paul Fairweather 13:27

Is that the connection? I love that I've written this down on IPP the ingenuity per person, as a new as a new marker. Look, I often talk about, and I don't know, if you find the same thing, Scott, but we're probably not because you're you know, but often when Chris and I talked to the corporates, you know, they don't understand creativity, love the idea of it, but they're scared of it. So I often use the word in the worry of being clever, original and inventive. And I think, you know, here in this country, you know, our founding people, you know, had an incredible amount of ingenuity, you know, to live in the heartland. And I think the same applied, you know, to the Native Americans as well, in terms of, you know, the ingenuity that they had, you know, to survive and to, to really, you know, really strive really flourish, you know, in that in that in that company. So I'm interested in this in this idea about that, really, what it's about as it's allowing people to AI is allowing people to express themselves better, you know, as you say, to democratize it, that now, you know, and I think there's it's just a wonderful thing, because this is what we're all about, about allowing people to express themselves and to get the ideas out there. You have any idea where it's gonna go? Like, do you in terms of the technology that you're dealing with? Do you do you have a vision like, anything you can give us a view on To the future?

Scott Belsky 15:02

Well, I think the few things that I think about a lot are going to happen. The first is that I think creativity is the new productivity. I think that the way people used to stand out at work was by getting more done more quickly. And I think that the way people will stand out at work going forward, much like they stand out on social media and in school will be through their creativity, like a novel way of expressing themselves. And, and that has a lot of implications, right? That means that we can't confine art class to an hour every Friday, it has to be, art has to be integrated into all parts of the curriculum. And the next generation of students need to be outfitted to express themselves visually in compelling ways in order to be successful in their jobs, we have to totally rethink education. I think it also means different tools need to be deployed throughout the enterprise, you know, just like Microsoft deployed Word and Excel and PowerPoint, you know, in previous decades, as productivity tools to help people be successful. And of course, I'm biased here because I work at Adobe. But I think, I think you're gonna have to deploy creative tools throughout the organization to help people express themselves. And that was the way that that was the founding sort of vision of our product, Adobe Express was the idea was like, We got to give everyone the ability to make an incredible infographic or make a video for their peers to convince them to do something. So I think that's another implication, you know, of creativity being the new productivity. Does that make sense? Yeah.

Chris Meredith 16:37

Question from the world of corporate organizations, is there a risk that it's very threatening, because what you're suggesting is people should explore and create and what business needs is people to can't do what they're told. And that's that, you sit at your desk in your department, read your job description, and do what you're told. And, this idea everyone explores, and I think I saw a quote from you in, I think it was in total Titans, Tim Ferriss book, and he said, it's a lot about getting lost. And it's really important to have that that challenge to yourself when you're not sure where you are, which is a great experience

as an adventurer, but if you're in a business, if you're a company trying to do something doesn't get you end up with chaos, they want to say, I'm being creative, I'm exploring, I'm trying this stuff. Well, hang on, we got stuff to do you

Scott Belsky 17:28

Here's the thing. You know, I always like to say that. You know, when it comes to a process in a company, you know, a leader of a process doesn't just practice the process, the leader changes the process. And that's, I think, true for every function in a company is you're always seeking to improve and change a process to make it better. It doesn't matter if you're in accounting, or in procurement, or any other part of it. The question I have sometimes is how do you convince people to change? And as you both know, its story. Its narrative, it's, it's, it's telling something, it's marketing, it's merchandising change. And so if, if the future accountants and procurement officers and staffing are ultimately going to use AI, in their discipline, then what are they going to do with their time? What is going to make them successful in their careers? And my bet is that it is the convincing people to change, you know, it's the improvements that they're going to drive. So, yeah, a limitation

Chris Meredith 18:37

is our own ability to be flexible or inability to absorb the ideas. That's the limiting factor.

Scott Belsky 18:44

I think that's right. And so that's, you know, that that would be my forecast is that all these leaders, and people within these functions will have hybrid roles where AI will do half of their role, and the other half of their job will be more around the iteration and the improvement.

Chris Meredith 19:00

I've got this idea, and you can have this for free. Scott, isn't the kind of AI that can kind of watch what you do in a good way, observe you and go, Hey, I can do that for you. Or did you know you're, you're doing something silly, you keep repeating this, and there's a shortcut or there's, so there's, it's like you're telling your assistant to liberate you to do the stuff that you want to do. It's interesting how Adobe is a huge part of my life. I think Lightroom is the first piece of software I use each morning. And it's there without me even noticing it. It's not like it's kind of a piece of software. It's just something I use as a lovely tool. I would love to hear about your own approach to creativity, and whether for you it's something you are you expressing yourself through what you do at work when you're when you're away from work, you just need to chill out or there's another side to you is there An artist or a musician or a singer, or what Scott Belsky do a lot of work. And guess what I'm asking?

Scott Belsky 20:05

Yeah, it's an interesting question. You know, I think that at work, creativity comes out in bouts, you know, periods of time where I'm asked to develop the strategy, you know, and I love it. That's when I'm working. The hardest part is when I'm working to develop a new strategy that's ultimately a narrative of what's changing in the world around us, and how do we describe and encapsulate that? And then what are we going to do to solve these new problems that we'll face? And how do we use design to show rather than tell that, and then develop a narrative that everyone gets aligned around and heads nod across functions, and then people can kind of allocate resources accordingly. So that's a version of my

creativity, I would say, in the workplace, but I love writing, you know, my, my monthly discipline of pumping out a newsletter under, you know, called implications that, yeah, that's a very creative discipline for me. And then I also have lots of ideas that I'm always capturing, you know, in there for as weird things as characters for some novel, I'll probably never write to, you know, to other ideas for businesses and products that I would want. And I just, you know, I think it's an art in and of itself, right to have these ideas. And to think about them.

Chris Meredith 21:20

It's essentially, we had two seasons on the show, all about the neuroscience of creativity. And, essentially, you mentioned working in bouts, we've learned that the kind of human brain needs very specific conditions in order to be create, it's not something you can do it and I would look at on Monday morning on, you need to be in a positive frame of mind, you need to be the right people, you need to be surrounded by nature. So the idea of working in ballots as a kind of, there's a moment when you're highly effective, and creating something new. And then there's other moments when you gathering ideas, and

Scott Belsky 21:56

for me, I just always have to love it. You know, when I find something that I get really fascinated by, I can actually get creative pretty quickly. But when I am not, when I don't love it, or I find it really annoying, it's hard for me.

Paul Fairweather 22:13

So you have to have that connection. Scott, I just wanted to ask if we haven't chatted yet, but you also founded 1999 You, which was a corporation, around getting stuff done. The whole idea of only 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration, you think you need to rename that given the AI? Is it going to be the 8020? You because You know we were going to be more productive? So you know, we can have 20% creativity or 20% inspiration?

Scott Belsky 22:43

That's a great question. And we retired the conference after 10 years, but if we restarted it, I do think that there's a, the equation has certainly changed. That's a good, that's a good? That's a good question. I mean, the one thing I would say, though, is that, you know, as you both know, I mean, the inertia that a creative person faces and just getting traction and pushing something forward and forcing themselves to make something and ship something. You know, a lot of that is psychological friction, that won't even be taken away by AI, you know, it will still be with us. And that's, you know, when I think back to a lot of the talks at that conference over the years, a lot of it was a lot of it was very psychological, you know, people overcoming their own self doubts and, you know, forcing themselves to, to share even when they didn't have sometimes the, you know, the assuredness that they can be successful.

Chris Meredith 23:37

It's interesting, that concept, because you're talking about creative confidence. And I wonder if what drives creators is that doubt you need that kind of sense of unease, and you need to kind of express ideas to see if it kind of reduces that conflict. So it's a difficult mixture, on the one hand to be confident,



but on the other ticket, celebrate and explore doubt as a way as a fuel for creativity. Yeah. I guess what I'm saying is, if we all become creatively confident we become less good as creatives.

Scott Belsky 24:10

Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah.

Chris Meredith 24:14

It's important not to have the answers. In other words,

Scott Belsky 24:16

Yeah, cuz it's funny. I, on the one hand, believe that creative confidence in humanity is probably highest when we're five years old. When everything we do gets put on a refrigerator, and we're constantly reinforced, you know how great we are. And then we realize that there's critics, we realize that there are skills that we don't have, and we lose our confidence. And I do think that that's where certain tools and AI capabilities can restore human confidence, you know, human creative confidence, as opposed to losing it and having it dissipate so quickly. But I also believe, to your point, that when you're doing something bold and new, and something somewhat provocative, something that society would typically shun before it celebrates we have to learn to gain confidence from doubt. You know, and I write about that and make ideas happen. This idea that a lot of people I interviewed reached a point in their careers where they learned to gain confidence from doubt. And when everyone was telling them that they were crazy, they realized that they were either crazy, or they were really

Chris Meredith 25:24

lovely. leads to a question I had about Behance. And you describe it as a sort of platform to organize the creative community. And I think it was founded way back, what is 2008? Something like that. But my question is, is that really? How did that idea of organizing the creative community come about? And was it really there at the start? Or was it a kind of improvisation? At what point? Do you realize this is what we're trying to achieve? Or is it? Is it all of improvisation?

Scott Belsky 25:58

With your hands? You know, I would describe it as a very mission centric, medium agnostic business from the very beginning, then the mission was always to organize the creative world, you know, and I would tell people, that was our mission. And they'd be like, oh, good luck with that, you know. But, uh, oh, that was what we intended on doing. But the way we did it was always through different mediums. So we actually our first product was an action pad, it was called, it was a designed set of pads and notebooks that helps people stay organized, and meetings, designers help them see more physical notebooks. It was a physical notebook, it was a physical notebook, we were in the paper products business. You know, for our first year, we, of course, the 99 new conference was a conference devoted to organizing the creative world and, and the execution side of creativity. And then Behance was an organizational platform for creative work, you know, it was really intended to just organize who was doing what, for what brand with what tools for what client and what region, in what sector of creativity. So we were trying to fulfill this mission of creating, organizing the creative world, but in many different mediums. I think that's why it took us a long time to be understood in the market, because people were like, you know, what is this company?



Chris Meredith 27:17

Like, just looking back, good thing, there are plenty easier groups to try and organize it and maybe engineers or accountants would be easy to organize. But Craig's the very last group you'd think,

Scott Belsky 27:29

right? creatives, typically where their disorganization is a badge of honor. So they resist it a little bit.

Paul Fairweather 27:36

I'm thinking of that ad, whether they're herding cats, on the horses, and I can't remember who the ad is for but yes, that's amazing. Chris, sorry, you're gonna

Chris Meredith 27:49

now, I was just wondering, what about your own personal space is your room, we can see in the background, bookshelf and things? Are you a super organized person? Or if you could, if you could see here is yes, Calvin even got posted. Anyway, I'm not an organized person. It was about yourself. Are you one of these people? Everything's in straight rows?

Scott Belsky 28:10

Yeah, well, you know, it's funny I, I wrote about this idea of, you know, all these people I interviewed for making ideas happen either reclassified as doers, or dreamers, you know, in the dreamers, always went to bed at night thinking about what's next and what can be done. And they were typically sort of more disorganized and all over the place, because they were always focused on the next great idea. And then doers were the opposite. You know, they were always going to bed happiest when there were no new ideas. Nothing was taken off track, everything was on plan. And they hated last minute ideas to make things better, because they just wanted everything to be as planned. But then I classified a third type of person that I described as the incrementalist because they had this weird, innate ability to rotate from dreamer mode to do or mode to dream and road to Doer mode. The problem with those people is they create too many damn things, and none of them ever scale. And they struggle because they will get frustrated, like Why couldn't this have been bigger? Why couldn't this have been bigger? You know, and, or why didn't this get ever better? And I classify myself as an incrementalist. Like that's my struggle is I go through these dream roads and Doer modes and dreamer modes and Doer modes, and as a result of that, a lot of the things that I want to make big in this world, you know, I feel I move too fast from it. And I need to round myself out with people with the opposite tendencies so that they can kind of keep me in check and, and you know, be the yin to my Yang, but I think that's how I would describe my desk you know, is that I go through periods of time where I'm immersed in this dreamer mode and it's a little bit all over the place. And then I go through this intense organizational mode where everything gets audited and organized and cleaned and I can't work unless I'm, like, absolutely organized.

Chris Meredith 29:51

And can you choose which mode you want to be in or does your body just do it for you?

Scott Belsky 29:55



Yeah, the body. I think my body does it for me. I think it's where my Mind is at its what the phases and you know what I've come to believe that actually teams you know, especially new product teams and startups, in some ways, you're the orchestra conductor of a very similar motion in a team where you kind of go through periods of, of imagination, and then you go through periods of a very, very intense execution and, you know, and staying focused and organized then you kind of open the aperture again, I do think that's, that's the realistic, best practice.

Paul Fairweather 30:32

SCOTT I, I want to show you know, this quote, but there's this famous quote by Sarah Bach, Monash. The world needs dreamers and the world needs to do as for what the world really needs, dream is to do so and I think, you know, that's probably the, you know, the income incrementalist, as you call it. And, look, I know that you're a very busy man. So we could, I'd love to talk to Chris and I would love to talk all day with you all night in your case, but unfortunately, left to pull it into a close let you get on with your evening.

Scott Belsky 31:08

Let me say one thing, which is that I think the takeaway I have from your quote, is actually that it's a team effort. You know, and, and I just think that a lot of us creatives, you know, are introverts in many cases. I certainly am. And sometimes I retreat into my own cocoon. But the best work I've done is because I've met met with and worked with, you know, people better than me, you know, and people who round out my opposites and that's, yeah, that's what that quote really yes to me dreamers that do is like you need to tear Fantastic.

Paul Fairweather 31:38

Well, that's a great insight. Scott Belsky so much. Thanks so much for being a guest on the common creative. We took a while to get this one organized. So certainly well worth the white good thing has come to those that wait.

Chris Meredith 31:53

Scott, thank you. So great pleasure to talk to you. I'm now a subscriber to implications. So I look forward to receiving those needless to say,

Scott Belsky 32:00

excellent. Well, thank you, Chris. And thank you, Paul, I appreciate it. It's an honor.

Paul Fairweather 32:04





Scott Belsky (Special Guest)



Paul Fairweather - Co-host



Chris Meredith - Co-host



Two Common Creatives

