

Ep102 - Interview: Kevin Chesters, co-author of The Creative Nudge, on why great creativity requires discomfort, not consensus

MichaelAaron Flicker: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge the gap between academics and practical marketing. Every week we sit down and go deep behind the science that powers successful marketing today. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're thrilled to welcome Kevin Chesters, strategist, author, keynote speaker with many insights into modern marketing.

We couldn't be more excited to have him here. Let's get into it.

So Kevin, welcome to Behavioral Science for Brands. We were having a really fun, interesting conversation before we hit record, which we're going to try to pull into today's episode. But before we get started, if it's okay with you, I'd like to just introduce you a little to our listeners.

You can make sure I've covered it properly and then we'll get into today's conversation. So [00:01:00] Kevin, you are a marketing strategist. Co-author of a bestselling book, the Creative Nudge, simple Steps to Help You Think Differently, which uses behavioral science, especially nudge theory to explain how small changes in behavior and mindset can unlock creativity, innovation, and more productivity.

And as I prepared for your appearance today on our show, I would say you have made quite a mark on the industry at this intersection of creativity, strategy, understanding human behavior. You've worked at Ogilvy, why didn't Kennedy, Saatchi and Saatchi and many more. You are a regular contributor to the Marketing Society Campaign, the Drum, and many other industry publications.

You are. We are lucky when we can see you on a keynote and you're here today to join us at Behavioral Science for Brands.

Kevin Chesters: I am indeed. Thanks very much for having me.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So our [00:02:00] listeners love stories, Kevin. When did you first get introduced to the advertising and marketing industry? When did you first start thinking about applying BA psychology to marketing?

Kevin Chesters: I mean, they are, they're two slightly different questions. I mean, in terms of when did I first get acquainted with it I tend to be a little bit bloody minded and rather stubborn, which I get from my mo my late mother. So I wasn't kind of sure what I wanted to do for a living. But I did know I really wanted to be a journalist.

When I was a kid I really like, was really into history. Current affairs really wanted to do that. And as you all know, people often think and Ken Robinson, who was one of the first people actually sort of really sort of made me think about behavioral science talks a lot in one of his original TED Talks about easy it is for children to be discouraged.

And [00:03:00] I around the topic of creativity, of course, which is the most watched TED talk of all time. And I went to see a journalist when I was about 19 years old when I was at university on one of those career evenings. And I, I went, I sort of steeled myself and I got my question in my head and I went down to see him and I've got all my courage and I sort of said, oh, could you tell me.

Like, you know, your best piece of advice for like me becoming a journalist, 'cause I'd love to be a journalist. And he said, well, which one of the two university newspapers do you write for? And I said, neither of 'em. And he went, well, you've got no chance then to, which of course, as, as the son of a nurse and a mechanic who didn't work in business or anything, I just thought, oh, well there you go.

Clearly I've got no chance because I'm told by some random garden guardian journalists some evening about this. So the following day I went to our careers advice at university and back then there [00:04:00] was no internet or anything, so about 1993. And you had to do this computer program where you typed in what you were into, and I was, and I was into

Richard Shotton: mm-hmm

Kevin Chesters: then what I'm into now.

So I typed in that I was into human behavior. I really liked people. I was quite curious as to why people did things. And I really like sort of watching telly and the media and film and all this sort of stuff, and it spat out two careers. Here's a sliding doors moment. It spat out two careers for me.

The first one was advertising and the second one was publishing. Talking to books. I didn't know what publishing was and was too embarrassed to ask the person in the careers service. I didn't know. I literally had no idea what publishing was. So I decided to apply for advertising agencies. And I applied I got turned down by a couple [00:05:00] and I'm quite stubborn, so I just kept going.

So, so I think it was slightly accidental. All of my friends at the time reckon that the reason I went into advertising was because I was too lazy to get past a in the careers directory and didn't wanna be, didn't wanna be an accountant

Richard Shotton: handler.

Kevin Chesters: Advertising was second. I reckon after that I was, oh, geez, I can't, can't be bothered.

But I mean, how did I first get into behavioral science? It's interesting, probably watching TED Talks would've been first.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mm.

Kevin Chesters: And then I went to the TED Conference every year for 10 years in Vancouver. And, and so I, so I saw. 1300 TED Talks live over, over 10 years. And quite often I would see like, you know, people talking about nudging and, and people like casts.

You know, you, you see these people talking and, and they come across their [00:06:00] names. And so that was probably the first time I got into thinking because really, and my co-author Mick, who I wrote the creative Nudge with, you know, he, he like a lot of creative people, really likes behavioral science because essentially it's just a codification of what they already know.

Really, really good creative people who understand human behavior kind of instinctively know this stuff. And then what will happen is they'll look to somebody in glasses like me and say, well I think it's this. And I'll say, well, I think you'll find that's the arch. And they'll go, alright. And what it really is is

explaining what is actually sort of fundamentally quite common understanding around human behavior.

But you're able to put a scientific experiment. Yeah. Or a name to it. So, so Ted was one, and then the other one was of [00:07:00] course my first creative director when I was 23 years old was Rory Sutherland. So Rory and I were friends back when I was a sort of pointless, underpaid grunt of an account handler. I was put on a committee at Ogilvy in 1997, called the Work of the Web Committee to convince the whole of Ogilvy that the internet was going to catch on.

And I had to like take creatives to see like cyber cafes and stuff and to show them the internet. And Rory was the exec sponsor of that committee. And even though he was ludicrously senior and I was ludicrously Junior, we bonded over our shared love of the most ridiculous corners of the internet. So often he would phone me if he had half an hour free to go.

Chesters, come up and [00:08:00] tell me about some stupid websites like I love cheese.com, where you could do a psychological experiment with the American Dairy Association and it would tell you which cheese you were, which out of interest I was Monterey Jack. But then years later, obviously Rory then and I, our pass would cross.

I left Ogilvy in 99, but our path would cross at things like, you know, industry events. We ended up judging things together or talking on panels. And then when I went back to become the CSO of Ogilvy in 2016, this thing called Ogilvy Change was a sort of nascent department trying to work out what it was really there to do.

And there was this sort of small conference they'd started organizing called Nudge Stock, and Dan was there at the wonderful San Tatu may, you know, may rest in peace. You know, these [00:09:00] guys. And I started working with with them and, and so that's again, so Rory and I reconnected and that's when, when I met Mick and we got really deep into how to apply.

Behavioral science really to the concept of creativity. Now, when I say creativity, I mean, you know, because Mick is one of those very clear creative directors who understands that, you know, and has a very clear point of view that creative is not a job title. And creative is not a department creativity in the pursuit of the news.

So he and I then sat down to try and work out, well, how do you get, how do you get more creativity into the world? And why is it so hard?

Richard Shotton: Yeah. That point you mentioned around Mick taking issue with [00:10:00] advertising, defining creativity as a, a job title. What, what do you mean by that? 'cause that comes up a few times in, in the book.

What, what's the issue with that and what can people do instead?

Kevin Chesters: Well, it's a bit like if people think creative is a department, then they abdicate all responsibility for doing any of it. It's a bit like if you go back 30 years and people started inventing digital departments, which meant, oh God, I don't have, I don't have to think about the internet or anything to do with it.

'cause digital is a department, it's not a behavior. And so let's be very clear, everybody is creative because we have the inherent human ability to solve problems. Everybody isn't a creative, so, so you still need very specific practitioner executional skills. Like you don't want people like me doing your art direction, believe me, right?

I mean, but the thing is creative. If you look up the word creative in a dictionary, it just says [00:11:00] new, different, original. And I'm always quite astounded when I hear particularly chief executives. In front of like a company or shareholders or the city or a journalist say that phrase, they'll often say it.

They'll go, oh, well I'm not the creative one. I'm not very creative. These are the creative people. And you go, right. Would you admit in front of shareholders, would you say, oh, I don't think I should be distinct or different. I don't think we should be innovative. I don't think I'm very good at being original.

You go, well, you must be a bit shit at your job then, mate. And if I was you, I'd get someone better. Because that's, that's all we mean by that. Mick and I, that creative. Now, I wrote about three pages on this when we were writing the book. And then Mick, anyone would think he was a multi-award brilliant writer, just distilled it into one sentence, which was, you know [00:12:00] you, you can bring creative, you can bring creativity to any field you are.

Even if it's just a big muddy field. Do you know what I mean? I mean, you can be a creative farmer. Do you know what I mean? It's you, you can be, you can be creative, you can think differently. You can think, is there a new and better

way of doing this compared to everybody else? And that's all we're really talking about there.

Is there a new and better way of doing this?

Richard Shotton: Yeah. On that. And so, slight, slight tangent, you said the danger of thinking creativity is a job role is it means that 95% of the company gets aggregate responsibility. Yeah. Is there a danger from having a behavioral science department in a company, do you think that potentially does the same thing that, you know, we leave it up to a small select group of people to apply these principles and don't think that actually it's just a general insight into changing behavior.

Kevin Chesters: Yeah, I think it's a good observation. I think. [00:13:00] I think like anything, when it's a new concept. Then people sort of, you know, I mean, I, I I can remember when Ogilvy Interactive, you know, as a department was two people. One of those was a freelance. Yeah. And that was quite late, that was 1998. You know, I mean, burners Lee had written his paper like seven or eight years before, you know, it wasn't like the internet was new, you know?

And, but at that point, you know, you, you would find experts because what happens with anything new, as you know, Richard, is humans are quite scared of it. Because back in evolution, anything new is gonna kill you or, or at least give you quite a prominent physical scar. You know what I mean? So so your tendency when you see something new is to run away from it.

So you know what happens is when new things come along. First off, most people are quite scared of them. And then what tends to also happen when new things come along is the [00:14:00] charlatans come along. And I don't mean the band, you know what I mean? People come along and try and make money out of people's fear or ignorance.

And so I think behavioral science, what happened was in the early days, you know, obviously, you know, you have you know, there's a couple of books and you're reading Dutch, you know, you're reading these things. You go, right, how interesting. But I mean, it was codified as a science, you know, behavioral economics with, you know, Daniel Kahneman and stuff.

And, but really, I mean, all it really is, is a sort of catchy title for a lot of experiments were done to explain, well, why do people do that? You know? And so I think what happened with and certainly, I mean, no, could be change

was an interesting example of this. You know, people sort of going, okay, well we'll ask Ogilvy change to come and explain all these [00:15:00] things.

Now, obviously it's quite useful if you've got people like Sam Tatum, you can go, oh, well there's this experiment done by, you know Hedwig Von Reor in the late twenties, or, oh, oh, I think you'll fine, Kev. That's ambiguity aversion. It's what Sam, it's you know, so if someone's done it and concentrated on it, that's quite useful.

But I think that in terms of the sort of fundamentals of it,

Richard Shotton: mm-hmm.

Kevin Chesters: I mean, you know, really, I mean, if you do, like what I traditionally did for a living, like most of my career, 25 years, I was a, in the strategy department, right? Which again, isn't really a department strategy, you know, I mean, what's our objective and what are we gonna do to arrive at it?

It's sort of the fundamentals of business. But, I think the the thing with behavioral sites and all that was people, it's [00:16:00] sort of the fundamentals really of why, you know, curiosity so rabbiting. But the first question you ask, any strategies for the first question you should always ask if you're on a project, you know, even if someone's asked you to do a eulogy or a best man speech, the first question you ask is who's in the audience?

Who talking to know what you're doing? And so understanding the audience, their motivation, how they're gonna receive the words from you, why they're going to either do something or not do something or do more of something or do less of something. You know, understanding that is like first principles of communication.

Now obviously, what behavioral scientists understand. Good ones. You know, like, you know, I mean, I've worked with, you know, how you in this cohort, Richard, you know, and, and Dan, you know, Bennett and the, the really smart ones is, you know, they've sort [00:17:00] of really studied it in depth. So I think if it is a bit like a minor and a major, major, it's a US university.

You know, you can minor in something or major something. I minor in behavioral science, I major in strategy. I minor in behavioral science. So you know, I've read about it. I've written a book about it, you know, so maybe I minor in it a bit more than a lot of people, but, but if people major in, you know, they've actually spent their careers, they spent all their time in it.

People like yourself, rich, you know, like I always think you ask, I like to ask those people first, you know, because I go right, well, they're achieved base level of understanding. It take most people quite a while to. But I think I, I think back to the original question, yes, I think it is dangerous to have it as a department because I think as a business person or as a strategist or as a client lead, understanding [00:18:00] the fundamentals of human behavior, I would say is pretty 1 0 1, isn't it?

In terms of how you are effective in your job.

MichaelAaron Flicker: You said people fear the new and, and, and I think that's come up in your, in your writing. Why do you think people fear the new so much? And, and maybe equally as important, what can you do about it as folks that wanna be creative, that want to make change, that want to try new things?

Kevin Chesters: Well, I think it comes down to like almost the simplest lesson of evolution. I. Which was, you know your brain, you know that meme, you had one job, you know, you only had one job. You know what I mean? I mean, your, your brain has one job. It only has one job and that's to keep you safe and alive, right?

That's all it's trying to do all the time, permanently scanning for threat in order to edit out the extraneous, to focus on what might harm you. [00:19:00] So your brain has one job, by the way, which also as an aside, is why your brain absolutely hates you because you spend all your time putting it into situations where it's immortal danger and it can't get out of your head, right?

So you are just walking it perpetually into these situations. It can't get out. It's like a nightmare for, but but your brain is trying to keep you alive. So if you think back 50,000 years, pretty much everything you came across that was different or new was a pretty significant threat. You know, and in the days before the police or Tinder or Waitrose, you know, you're sitting there going, right?

There's no police force. So I can't, how do I stay safe? There's no supermarkets. How do I eat? There's no Tinder. How do I procreate? Your brain's sort of got to try and get rid of everything so we can focus on the really important bit. So when it sees something new, I mean, you [00:20:00] know, you'll know this as well as anyone rich.

When your brain sees something new, your it, your brain screams three words at you. When it sees something new, you will die. Right? That's, that's what's screaming at you. And, and your brain doesn't like you dying because like I always say, it's not Minecraft. You can't refor, do you know what I mean? It's like, so it's sitting there trying to keep you alive, so it doesn't like new.

And it's classic, if you think about it. I mean, you wanna put it in a different way. It's like any phobia therapy. It's neo phobia. Fear of the new, fear of the unknown. You know, I mean, as we know, we, we, we fear the unknown more than we fear the known bad, as we all know, right? So, so the unknown, you know, the wardrobe monster, fear of the dark, all these irrational things, which actually are quite rational when you think about it because if you can't see anything there, it's probably a good idea to assume there might be something bad there.

[00:21:00] And certainly that's what the reason we all exist is because of the cowards who thought there was something there and sort of hid back. And then the big brave one back in the day probably charged forward and got eaten by a mammoth. So all of our, all of our coward genes sitting, running through our veins are all the ones who ran away from the new.

But this is the thing, what creative people understand. Is when you get that feeling, that fear, that terror that, oh my God, in the modern world, which is what's replaced the mammoth, is shit, am I gonna get sacked if I do this?

MichaelAaron Flicker: Yeah.

Kevin Chesters: What, what true, creative, brilliant people understand, this is something that Mick really helped me to understand was when you see that and you feel that fear, what you should do if you're a creative person is run as fast as your [00:22:00] little legs will carry you right into that thing.

Because what your brain is telling you is you've seen something different. Now, your instinct would be to walk away, particularly in a big corporate environment where you don't wanna take any risk, but that tingle is an identification that you've seen something new or interesting or different. So that, that's all I really mean by fear of the new is very.

It's very natural. It's quite funny, isn't it? Because the amount of times I talk to people and they sort of go, oh, I'm just so anxious at the moment. I'm so anxious, I'm so stupid, I'm so anxious. And you go, yeah, mate, I sort of get it. I mean, the world's a bit of a shit storm and what else is going on? And they'll go,

oh, well I sort of, you know, there's a lot of a restructure going on at work where we going, right?

So you are anxious and you are currently sitting in a set of circumstances that are quite anxiety inducing. If you weren't [00:23:00] feeling anxious you'd be a psychopath. So I think that maybe feeling anxious in a situation that's anxiety inducing is an incredibly natural reaction. Now, everyone's gonna feel anxious.

The question is how are you going to manage or react to that stress? And it's exactly the same with creativity. When something new and different, maybe even a bit left, feel weird, maybe completely bonkers gets put on the table as a suggestion, you go, okay, well the fact that I'm recognizing this is completely different to the category or anything else that's gone before doesn't necessarily make it right, but it certainly doesn't make it wrong.

'cause the first thing that makes it is different. Which you know, certainly the communications context as we know from everything from recognizing the new and the distinct and the different everything from Von Rest or all the [00:24:00] way through to, I keep forgetting whether it's P 300 or P 600, but whatever that thing is that goes on in the brain but this is the thing, you know, recognizing it, it's perfectly natural.

To want to run away from creative solutions. It's just not very wise.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. I, I really like that. Almost a

Kevin Chesters: Yeah.

Richard Shotton: As an opportunity.

Kevin Chesters: Yeah. And I think it was the fundamentals that Mick and I sort of understood when we were putting the book together, the first book together was that, but creativity is good. I'm not having a debate with anyone. It's been completely proven. Right. The creativity is amazing. It is, right.

It's been proven in every context [00:25:00] to be the way to succeed, to make you happier, healthier, wealthier as an individual, you know, to make companies succeed. Right? So, I'm not having a debate. I always find it really funny when you're asked to sort of come and. You know, oh, can you come and make the case for brand or make the case for creativity?

I'm like, well, no one's asked for me to make the case for Gravity or, you know, make the case for the fact the Earth is round or make the case for not sticking my head in a shark's mouth. Do you know what I mean? I think this is settled law. Do you know what I mean? I think people have sort of understood this is a good thing.

But I think it's, the thing that Mick and I came to understand was that it's good, but it doesn't happen. So why, you know, in the sense that, you know, we all know going to the gym will make us fitter and healthier, but we don't go, we all know eating burgers will make us fat, but we still do it because it's like, why?

[00:26:00] And that's when we came to realize, you know, that a combination of sociology and biology, you know, nature and nurture stops you from adopting the new. Okay. Well, like any phobia, like anything like that, how do you overcome it? And unsurprisingly, you know, you overcome it with, you know, you change attitude by changing behavior, not the other way round.

So those nudges that we started to talk about and understand, whereas, okay, it was natural to Mick because he's a world class multi-award creative. You know, Mick has got more lions than Longleat, you know, I mean he was like getting Grand Prix, you know, when I was just about working out how to sharp up on my pencil and, but the thing with him is to him, it's completely natural.

So he's like, hang on a minute, why can't everyone do this? So that was when he and I sat down to work out, well, what are the lessons? What do you have to do to be more [00:27:00] creative? Why does human behavior stop that? Okay, so what can we do to overcome it? And that was when, you know, we sat down and we worked out all the little changes you can make.

And now, you know, I do a lot of, I mean, it's, it's been fantastic. I do a lot of traveling all across the world. You know, this year's been, you know, us, Turkey, Iceland, Hong Kong, New Zealand, you know, to go and, 'cause everybody really wants to do it. Everybody wants this ability to think differently and come up with new answers, but they struggle.

So it's quite nice to sit and work through the nudges with people.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. One of the. Bits in the book. I love You said everyone wants to do it, but not everyone, or not every organization is achieving the level of creativity they want. One of the issues that you identify is time, pressure, being an of creativity.

Yeah. [00:28:00] How can you, how can you stop that happening? How can you avoid people rushing it?

Kevin Chesters: So the weird thing with time, right? It's about time. We talked about time, right? Because it really, time is, time is a really big part of this, right? In fact, Dan Bennett and I used to talk about this a lot back when I worked at, at Ogilvy with him.

First off it on. So everybody thinks they haven't got enough time, right? That's not true.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Kevin Chesters: Everybody thinks time is speeding up. That's definitely not true. I checked on your behalf last week. It was exactly seven days long and every day was 24 hours. Seriously, it's not speeding up. I promise you.

I've checked so. So time isn't speeding up, but technology might make us think it is a little bit, and we are not. The first thing is humans have this really, really ridiculous inability to prioritize things. So mostly if you prioritize things correctly, and by the way, if you work in a job, prioritize your to-do list, not [00:29:00] based on what's important to you based your to-do list, based on what's important to your boss, who has the most direct term effect on your rental mortgage.

So prioritize against his KPIs or her KPIs, not yours. But work out your, so most of the time we just got, there's 17 things on the to do list. You go right, probably 10 of them. You really don't need to worry about this week. So you've already halved your to-do list. So first off, it's prioritizing what's important.

That will help you get more time. But so.

There are lots of things you can do. And by the way, you know, not to, by the way, when you work for yourself, all you do is turn into a spiff. But, you know, I run courses on how to create more time in a world that's speeding up. So should anyone be listening and want me to come in that feel free. But but there are lots of things you can do psychologically or physically to [00:30:00] give yourself more time.

I mean, you'll know, you know, there are lots of simple behavioral science things around chunking around gold gradient effect around all the things. Again, nar there are all sorts of behavioral science principles that enable you to make

the most use of your time, but they're mostly around reframing because, I mean, I won't give it all away, but the question I always ask people, if you want to reframe how you feel about your to-do list is when was the last time you asked someone shit to do something for you?

Right. So if you've got loads on your to-do list, it means you are really good. It means you're really in demand, right? And what did everyone want to be at school? The popular kid, right? So if you've got really big to-do list, well done. You son, you are the one with the cool locker. You are the head of the plastics for mean girls.

Do you know what I mean? It's like this is [00:31:00] really good, right? Anyway, so time, first thing is you just have to give people time. And this drives some people, particularly finance directors up the wall. I mean, creativity, as Rory always says, the problem with creativity is it's inefficient. You'll probably crack that world class problem in 10 minutes, but you've got no idea when those 10 minutes are coming.

They might be in three weeks. So I think we saw all that stuff from papers, from Harvard and stuff. Your ability to think. Is reduced drastically under a too tight a time pressure, which is why I always say no one should do anything in a workshop unless they're a woodwork teacher. Because you know, when you get into workshops and really tight timings, people get really worried.

They won't come up with an answer. So the first plausible answer they hear, they all run towards, and then convince themselves with confirmation bias over the next two hours that it's a work of genius when it isn't. It's just the first [00:32:00] thing someone thought of, which also just as an aside, is the reason that my most despised phrase in the world of marketing is the phrase best practice.

Because it's never best practice, it's just a lazy existing answer to stop you having to come up with something yourself.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Provocative, Kevin, provocative to say the least. Whatcha

Kevin Chesters: gonna do? Unless Sweary, mark Ritson. There you go. What are we doing? There you go.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So if, if, if, if best practices are lazy, answers and workshops are mostly confirmation bias that everybody runs to the easiest first

answer. Could you lay out for everyone who is interested in doing really impactful, great creative work?

What are the things they should most focus on? Or what, how should they set themselves up to do good work?

Kevin Chesters: Well, weirdly, [00:33:00] it starts with the simplest thing in the world, mate. Mick and I sat down for a long time, so we've both been doing this for more than 30 years, right? In the communications industry, you know, him on one side, me on another.

But equally, I've been a client as well. He and I have run an agency together, which we sold. You know, we now work separately, but we started off just going, okay, what is. Like we've all been involved with great people making great work. You know, Mick was at BBH and then at Haas, you know, I was at Wien and Sarchi's and we've all worked with brilliant people.

Okay, well what is it? Because we've all got there. Like everyone's looking for this holy grail. And before you get into any sort of structures and people are always looking to industrialize creativity as if somehow there's like a sort of five Chevron alliterating process that somehow will like give you [00:34:00] creativity.

And, and by the way, if there ever was one, no one's gonna tell you what it is. They'll be in a hollowed out volcano somewhere in the Caribbean, auctioning it off, starting at \$10 billion. But the key thing that you need to get to a brilliant creative answer is the ambition to want to get to great creative.

Most people don't have that ambition. There's nothing wrong with it. Most people just want a kind of seven out of 10 answers so they can go home, which is why AI exists. And that's what most people want. Creativity is hard. Coming up with something new is hard, even in a brief, you know, if you think coming up with an, a creative answer is hard, coming up with a creative question is also hard.

You know, so it's hard, you know, what happens most humans, when most humans are, sorry? When, when, when [00:35:00] most humans are presented with something that's difficult, they sort of just sort of give up. And so this is the thing. It starts with, do you genuinely want to come up with something different? Now, I remember years ago.

I won't say who they were, but I was working on a client. I was working with a client that was a bitter, you know, a drink, you know, bitter, kind of bitter, right? And all they kept saying in all the meetings was, well, why, why can't we have work like that John Smith's work that John Smith's works?

Brilliant. And I was going, okay, so let me just have a quick look at the mandatories. You've put on the brief. The first mandatory was we don't want to be a northern cliché. I'm like, right. Well, everybody in those ads are like northerners going, no nonsense, whatever, because you are insisting that I put a drinking shot in for five seconds of every ad plus show all the cans in all their formats.

I said, [00:36:00] and I showed them the last ad that had been done and it was. It opened up with and they said they wanted to be premium, not, you know, like every day. I'm like, right. So the ad opened up with John Smith opening with PK opening a door saying, I don't care whose it is, it's floating. So you've got a northern man talking about someone taking a shit in the opening two seconds of your ad.

The product shot at the end was someone slinging three cans on top of a washing machine, which you saw for about a second. And what that made me realize is the majority of people covered the outcome of great creativity, but aren't willing to put in the effort. And it's like the kind of people who buy, buy slimmers tea.

Do you know what I mean? It's like they don't want to go to the gym and actually put in the effort and work hard. And do the stuff. It's not complicated. Burn [00:37:00] off more calories than you put in and you'll lose weight, eat less, move more. Everybody knows what to do, they just don't do it. And if you want to get to really good creative, yes, there's lots of things I could tell you about and Mick could tell you about.

And we run lots of different sessions. Never workshops, sessions with people. Right. But it, that's really what it comes down to. Do you really want to make different interesting work? 'cause if you do, people are gonna come for you. And that's a risk. You're gonna have to stick your head above the parapet.

You're gonna have to disagree with people. You're gonna have to have people thinking you are unreasonable. You're gonna have all these things that all great creative people had all their lives. You're not being unreasonable. You are just not agreeing with everybody. That's the different thing.

Richard Shotton: When, when, whenever I, pick up a book. I always like a good smattering of, of, of quotations through the book. [00:38:00] And yours delivered in, in, in spades on that one. And the quote I liked most was the one about unreasonableness. So I've got, I've got it here. It's the George Burn of Chore one. Yeah, yeah. Reasonable man adapts himself to the world.

The unreasonable one persist in trying to adapt the world himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man. I love that. 'cause it's one of those attributes that if you normally heard some described as unreasonable, you would think that's a, a slight on their character. But your argument here is this is something that we should encourage in certain degrees.

Kevin Chesters: I mean, that is, that's been mixed philosophy all his life. Right? What I think is very interesting about that quote, of course, which, which leaps out at you in 2025, is that it's perfectly possible to be an unreasonable woman as well. And it's actually harder to be an unreasonable woman because of various damages that happen within society and within, certainly within the ad industry.

But I think the thing with unreasonableness, like I say, is what it [00:39:00] is, is it's lazy people who don't want to bother to come up with a new answer telling you you're being unreasonable and therefore your desire to want to fit in social hurts. You know, we've all seen the ash experiments and various things, you know, the desire to want to fit.

We'll make you go eventually. Oh, well, you know what, you know, if I'm being unreasonable, then please tell me. You know? And, and I think it was always one of the things that always stuck in my head when I was researching the book was the Alfred Sloan thing, the management guru from the twenties. And he always had a thing in his, his board meetings where he was like, board, we all agree.

Yes. Right? Why can't we? Very good then. Can it? And he'd send people off, you know, if you agree that quickly, it just must be a very easy answer. And therefore it can't be different or challenging because you wouldn't have agreed that quickly. And my, my favorite story, I think on unreasonableness was always that Lady Gaga thing of [00:40:00] so, you know, when she went to that gala wearing a dress?

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Kevin Chesters: 50 pounds of raw meat. And there's a, there's a fantastic podcast with the designer of that dress. Actually 50 pounds, by the way. I don't mean that's how much it cost. That was how much it weighed.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Kevin Chesters: And you know, and suddenly you are going along to a gala and you're putting on like a sort of outrageous dress and you wanna stand out.

You probably think you're being pretty unreasonable. And then someone turns up dressed like half a butcher's shop, you know what I mean? And like, you're going amazing. But you could think it's unreasonable, but it's not really, it's kind of like just you look at someone like Gaga and it's like, wow, you know, the level of incredibleness.

And whilst by the way, once I've got that on Gaga, I have to say I'm utterly obsessed with Gaga at the moment and go back and read March's edition of [00:41:00] L. My friend, Lottie Jeffs, who's an amazing writer, wrote this incredible cover story on Gaga from March, and genuinely just go dig it out of a recycling bin or go buy the back.

Honestly, if you want to understand how you're not being unreasonable, you're just not going along with what everyone else does in order to follow your creative ambition. Gaga is a fantastic example of this.

By the way, I apologize. I'm a bit shouty. I've got a bit, I've got a bit of a cold, so I can't really hear myself. So if everybody's going, I quite enjoyed that podcast. But Christ or my, I had to turn it down about four volumes. I really apologize.

MichaelAaron Flicker: We were having a discussion yesterday and the guests said that all Americans are generally excitable and shouty, and I thought.

Maybe we're okay with that. It Representative American on the call. So Kevin, you're in good company [00:42:00] with at least a portion of our listeners. Not a problem. Not a problem.

Kevin Chesters: It used to happen during lockdown because like my wife and I have been together for 30 years and but obviously she doesn't do what I do and we've never shared an office or anything, so and she doesn't work anymore.

She quilts and, but basically what happened during lockdown was for the first time ever I was in the house and that one, well, one the dog who sleeps in my

office used to basically stay for about two hours of zooms and then slink off 'cause she just had enough of listening to me. But my wife would always walk past the door and go.

Christ, Kev, who are you shouting at in there? And I'm like, shouting. Just, but just passionate, you know? Anyway, yes. So I've try, apologies if I'm shouting. Also, if I'm hectoring, I apologize. I just kind of like, honestly, there is nothing I feel more passionate about, apart from my dog, than creativity, you know?

And because it will save us all. [00:43:00] You know, Deb Bono said, you know, it's, it's the key to all progress. He also said, it will make you happier, give you a happier life. You know, creativity will make you happier, healthier, and wealthier. The thing that really stuck in my head the most, and this happened post the book, was UNICEF identified creativity as one of the five core skills all children will need in the future.

The World Economic Forum identified it as the number one skill that businesses will need. Then you're going, sorry. If you can get UNICEF and the World Economic Forum to agree on anything, I'm gonna say that's probably right. And, and I came to realize that what creativity, and Mick and I talk about this a lot, what creativity does for humans is it enables you to endure the unendurable, adapt to the unthinkable, and overcome the insurmountable.

[00:44:00] And it's essentially the thing, it's why war pandemic and natural disaster are the three biggest drivers of human invention. Because at that point, you haven't got all the time in the world at that point, you aren't relaxed. It can just come up with 3000 different answers. At that moment in time when you've gotta come up with a vaccine and you've got four months, not four years, then you don't have the ability to go.

We'll just do the best practice, won't we?

Richard Shotton: True. But then that's a bit of a paradox, isn't it? 'cause on one hand we've got time pressure being anathema to a creative, but then we've got the other bit of what's it necessity is the, the mother of invention. How do you kind of square those two?

Kevin Chesters: I think the

Richard Shotton: contradictions

Kevin Chesters: people, it's giving people enough time.

'cause don't get me wrong, like every time I say to like a client, oh God, you know the, the Harvard Business paper that says creativity is reduced by 45% under a tight deadline. [00:45:00] So what would you want, Kev? What unlimited time mate. You know, I've got a deadline, I've got like shelves I need to fill. What's the matter with you?

You're clown. Do you know what I mean? But it's, it's sort of, it's having enough time. I dunno if you've seen that wonderful YouTube video where someone's given a brief to draw Spider-Man and they give, they give it. Oh, literally it could give cut up first. But basically they, given. 10 minutes, one minute and 10 seconds to draw Spiderman.

Right now it's 10 minutes. You, you know, you're not sitting there like DaVinci in like agony and the ecstasy sort, spending 20 years painting a ceiling, you know what I mean? He could have done that quicker. He could have done that. I mean, I, I, I've had workman around here in London who've been like, probably a bit longer than that, but, you know, but I think he could have done it a bit quicker.

But the but 10 minutes is not long. But if you watch that, you know, in a minute it's [00:46:00] recognizably Spider-Man, but you can see the panic 10 minutes. What's interesting in 10 minutes, it's not a huge amount of time, but the person who's drawing it doesn't pick up their pen until about 90 seconds in and two minutes from the end they start shading and putting up.

So what you have is the time to think about what you're gonna do. Then the time to augment it. And that's what's happening. You're not putting yourself under extreme time pressure and then in 10 seconds, I mean, it's still recognizably Spider-Man. It's just crap.

Richard Shotton: Yeah.

Kevin Chesters: I mean, so, you know, I mean, fine if you just want Spider Man, you know what I mean?

It's, it's just shit though. I mean, you know. So don't do that.

Richard Shotton: I'm intrigued by this video. 10 seconds. My drawing would not be Rec wisely human, let alone.

Kevin Chesters: Oh, by the way, recognizably

Richard Shotton: Spiderman,

Kevin Chesters: he takes 12 seconds, but he's given 10 seconds. So

MichaelAaron Flicker: another parable [00:47:00] of working with great creatives. It may take a little longer than even the time clock allows.

So Kevin, if we want to help people create cultures of creativity, how would you guide us? What should leaders do? What should colleagues do? How do we create better cultures of creativity?

Kevin Chesters: It always starts with leaders, right? You know, as we know. I mean, the negative form of that being, you know, the, the fish rocks from the head, right?

So if you don't, if you don't, so

creative means new. It means doing new and different things. Right? Now, if you are trying to escape from a maze, okay, here's an analogy for you, but if you're trying to escape from a maze, it's unlikely that the first corridor you walk down is gonna lead you out of the maze, okay? Otherwise, it would be a pretty shit maze or you would a corridor, the right.

So what you [00:48:00] normally have to do is walk down here, oh no, look, there's a hedge. I'll walk back 50% and then go, oh, oh, look, oh no, I'll come back and I'll go. And then eventually, after trying this, trying that and failing a couple of times and not quite getting it right, you'll find the right answer. So it's beholden to all leaders to make people feel like they can try things and do things and do new things.

Right? And that's even, that's even truer in, I'm very conscious of my privilege. I'm a white male, Oxbridge educated person who had the word chief before his title for 15 years. Right. In that sense. Yeah, of course. Now let's say you are, you know, a young kid, a young girl from a you know, an Asian family or something, grown up in Elton or wherever, right?

If you've had to work twice as hard. To get that position. It's easy for some Burke like me to come in and go, yeah, go [00:49:00] chaotic. Yeah. Lucky break. Eggs. Go. Alright mate. You know, I had to work really hard to get, you know, so it's beholden for leaders to create conditions within which people think, I'm not saying, oh yeah, fail.

Fail and all that. What I am saying is create the conditions where people feel that if they try something and it doesn't work, it won't be stigmatized.

Michael Aaron Flicker: Yeah.

Kevin Chesters: And far too many corporates, you know, are quite happy with just doing the same thing over and over again. So I think the conditions first off is leaders.

And by the way, as I always say, when I'm doing these sessions for people, I'm not talking just about the chief exec. You know, let's say you work in an ad agency and you are an account manager, quite a low position, really, you'll probably manager a grad and an account exec. You can create the conditions within your own team, within your own department, within your own opco, because you know, I hear it too often, oh well it's the network.

It's a bullshit, mate. You know, I've seen this happen a [00:50:00] lot actually, just to mention two companies, you know, two big behemoths. You know, people going Proctor and Gamble, Unilever, you know, oh, it's Unilever, it's big, it's all right. Well, who owned Dove, you know, who did? Brilliant. You know? And they go, okay, it's Proctor and Gamble, right?

Who owned Old Spice? You know, it's possible if you create the conditions within certain parts and even the biggest organizations to do great stuff. So that's what I would say. It's beholden to all leaders to create the conditions where creativity can thrive. But then the other side of it. Is, as I say, you have to have the ambition.

The last nudge in our book is JFDI. Right? Now the reason it's JFDI, and we don't use the swear word, is Mick had never sworn in front of his mom and said he wasn't starting then. So generally he wasn't sure that his mom wouldn't read the book. So, so he didn't wanna swear in the book. But it's, the thing is, you can try and help [00:51:00] people, you can give them advice, you can explain the science, you can enable them, you can put all the things in place.

But if you don't have the ambition to want to do something new and different, which, look, I don't not be a tosser about this, some people just want to go in and pick up the paycheck and go home and whatever, and there's, there's nothing wrong with that, that's fine. Right. But, but don't moan, you know, if you genuinely want to do something new and different.

Then you have to have the ambition to do that. And then the match of that is you have to have leaders in an organization that creates the conditions within which that can thrive. And all good leaders, all they are is like good farmers. Farmers don't grow crops. You know, that's nature, that's science, that's chemistry, whatever.

Right. Farmers create the conditions within which things can thrive and, and that's I think, the two things. You've gotta want to [00:52:00] do it and you've gotta create the conditions for it.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. I, in terms of that former part, creating the conditions, do you have a, a specific example of, of someone that, a brand or a, you know, smaller scale, a team leader who's put practical things in place that have created that, that, that.

Kevin Chesters: One of the most successful teams I was ever part of was the management team at o and m, which was myself, Charlie Rudd, Mick, and a lady called Claire Donald. Amazing. Former head of production at Google. And we took over a pretty broken thing. And when we left, it was pretty broken again. But for the time we were there, you know, I would say a leader, it would be, it would be Charlie Rudd, who was one of the most amazing leaders, you know, great guy, you know, from, from the most junior to the most senior.

What, what Charlie enabled in people, which just made them feel that you can try things and you can do things. And he would, [00:53:00] he would never stigmatize people for trying to do something brilliant and it may be not working out. And Mick always talks about this thing about hate six. Number six. Right. By the way, I did that with one hand.

I needed to add that. But the you know, six outta 10, what uses that to anyone, you know, do one outta 10 whilst you were aiming, you know, you were aiming, you were aimed for 10 and it messed up and it's a one. That's fine. That's good. So I would think, yeah, all, all the best leaders I've ever worked with, you know, had that, you know, Mick, in a creative context, Charlie, in a sort of business and organizational context, my first boss, who's a lady who's no longer with us, a lady called Louise Mulford, you know, she did it for me, which was just, I always remember a day, the first time ever I went into a meeting and she said, oh, I was really junior.

I was like, 22 or something. She went, you are presenting the creative [00:54:00] today, Kev. And I was like, what? She's like, she said, you are doing it. And I'm like, I can't do it. She's like. Why? She's like, well, I said, well,

surely the creative director should do it. Or, or you should do it. What, what, what? You know, I, she's like, you have been in every single meeting, you have had every conversation, and you have worked all the hours on this.

What is it? You think I know that you don't? And I was like, yeah, but what if you, she said, look, try and imagine it. And I always thought, I've never forgotten this on any team I've been leading or been part of since. She said, do you remember when you learned to drive a car? I'm like, yep. She said, okay. You had an instructor next to you with dual controls.

She said, you drove the car. You drove the car, and if at any point you thought you were about to hone that car into a large lorry. He could hit the brake. She could hit the brake or stop the car, said There is nothing that's gonna happen in this meeting [00:55:00] that I can't step in and stop if it's going wrong, but it won't go wrong because you'll be able to do it.

And it was the first time in my life I'd gone into a meeting there, there could be a tremendous punchline here where the, the client fired us and sacked on me. But no, no, it was you know, but genuinely, I, but I went into that meeting with the confidence that I could do it and the knowledge someone believed in me, but, but the safe, the trapeze artist's safety net of knowing that if it went wrong, there was someone there who could put it right.

And I think every good leader I've ever had, you know, all the bad, and I could, I could reel off quite a few bad. I've been very lucky in my career. I've had fantastic bosses, great colleagues, but like all of us, you know, I've worked with or for the odd. And the bad, the bad leaders were the ones who just, you know, it was all about them.[00:56:00]

You know, it was all pushing themselves forward. It was always about being creative destroyers rather than enablers. They were always the problem spotters, not the problem solvers. And I think for me, again, it's all about creating the condition. You're gonna do something new that's gonna be scary for you and for the person on the other side of the table hearing it.

So you've gotta create these conditions whereby you make it easy for people to do new things and even easier for people to buy new things. And I think the biggest understanding of that is where most agencies go wrong, is they think that their job is finished when the client buys an idea. Now ideas are too a penny.

Anyone can have ideas. Making them happen is the hard bit and, and it's understanding that when the idea goes into a client organization, it's gonna be even [00:57:00] scarier, right? And so it's like how do you nurture and manage that kind of nascent little early chick you know, of an idea and make sure it doesn't get stomped on by the big boots of mediocrity that happen with people who you know, would just rather go home earlier.

MichaelAaron Flicker: This is a lovely spot to take. A final question, Kevin. This has really been a fascinating, interesting, compelling, intriguing conversation. If you had to leave the listeners. With one final comment on what you hope they will take from our conversation, what you hope they'll take from your work. What would you leave them with so that they can turn off our episode and really go and do something with our conversation?

Kevin Chesters: So I [00:58:00] probably would. He says

Richard Shotton: I would read Yeah. From my,

Kevin Chesters: oh, hang on a minute. How did that get in there? No, it would be, it would be our friend Edward De Bono. And it's the first quote in the book, and it's probably the first thing Mick and I wrote down when we started writing this. And it's creativity makes life more fun and more interesting.

And if you think about the world and you think about everything that people are facing, and you think about those 18 months when everyone had to sit doing zooms in their bedroom and you know all the rest of it, you go. Even if you think of nothing else, right? Who would not want a more fun, a more interesting life?

And the other thing to that would be Deb Bono's next sentence, where he said that creativity is the key to all progress. And it's really obvious. It said one of those sentences, it's very [00:59:00] easy to throw away, but you think about it and you go, right? So if somebody asks you a question that there isn't an answer to, right?

That's an extraordinary challenge. So how will there ever be an ordinary answer? You have to have an extraordinary answer to an extraordinary question. You have to have a new answer to a question that hasn't been asked. You know, you're not gonna find, if you think about it like the old days, you're not gonna find a new world with an old map.

You're gonna have to draw the map. And so I think that would be all that I would leave people with was, look, if you want a more fun and interesting life and you want to go forward, you're gonna need creativity. Not a creative department. You're gonna need creativity. And just to say the one thing I discovered, I used to present and say every job's creative, every job's creative.

'cause every human is [01:00:00] creative. And then I discovered that there is a job where you can't be creative. Now you can be innovative and you can be new. You can't be creative and that job is accountancy. 'cause if you tell people you are a creative accountant, it means you are a criminal,

MichaelAaron Flicker: not good.

Kevin Chesters: So whatever you do, if anyone's listening to this and you're an accountant, do not tell people you are a creative accountant.

You can say, my creativity is innovative. I think new and differently and the way, whatever, but just don't say that.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Life lessons for all of us. Kevin, thank you for being with us today. For those listening at home, Kevin is the co-author of The Creative Nudge, simple Steps to help you Think Differently on Screen, not just in English, in multiple languages.

Kevin, thanks for being with us today. And for the [01:01:00] listeners at home, if you found this interesting, if you found it engaging, please share with colleagues and friends who we get value out of it. And until next time, I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Thanks so much for being with us.

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