

Cris Beswick

Creating a culture of innovation aligned to strategy

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

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Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview for the innovation and creativity summit 2017, I am your host Nick Skillicorn and today I am speaking with Cris Beswick, Cris specializes in working with CEO's and senior teams on how to build innovation led organizations by building future shaping innovation strategies, developing world class innovation leadership and embedding innovation capability into organizational culture, he is possibly best known for his book building a culture of innovation and today we will be speaking about what it actually takes to build a culture of innovation within your company and why so many companies fail at it, can you give us a brief background about where you started and you got into innovation

Cris Beswick: Wow yes, so I was originally trained as a product and industrial designer, so the foundations for innovation in terms of design thinking, design process, customer centric thinking etcetera, they have been with me for many years, so I started out as a sales of product and an industrial designer and from an entrepreneurial point of view or in contemporary language as an Intrepreneur I supposed I was a frustrated entrepreneur inside of the consultancy that I was working for at the time, in 1998 I quit and I started my first consultancy design consultancy in actually in the retail sector, working with clients like Sam grace and not care and Nokia and Marks and Spencer designing retail interiors and experiences. In 2001 I rebranded and re started that consultancy ultimately built a group of companies in the design and strategy sector between 2001 to 2008 and fortunately I exited, I sold out just before layman brought this crash in September and migrate to working on my own which is how I follow more CEO and now.

Nick Skillicorn: And your focus is now solely on innovations, specifically the sort of challenges that companies face at the senior leadership level

Cris Beswick: Yes , the majority of my work is working with CEOs and senior teams to help them understand just what it's going to take to build an innovation capability and to make innovation of a part of their competitive advantage and one of the requirements for that is democratizing innovations costs in their organizations and building the culture of innovation so it's called high level its very strategic and almost all my work is with those senior things to help them understand what they need to do and how they need to lead to build their innovation capability and culture.

Nick Skillicorn: Now it seems a bit counter intuitive in a way because every company seems to say innovations are the core of our business and we know that it's important , why I sit that so many companies seems to struggle actually getting value out of it.

Cris Beswick: That's an interesting question and you reference the statistics or the survey so to say, if you look at the stats depending on whether it's a survey of McKenzie or EY or Boston consulting, and we look at this stats and we see that the majority of a circle to ninety percent of CEO cites innovation as an absolute strategic imperative year, there is still real polarization or this connection between what senior teams are saying is important in terms of innovation and the actual activity and actual mistakes. Out of the those, the majority of the senior leaders think innovation is important, it's only a small percentage of those same people that actually have a live innovation strategy and innovation capability program and innovation coach program are actively in place in their organizations, so unfortunately there is still a huge amount of that can talk around and around innovation in organization despite everyone out there, and everyone listening will know how important innovation is in the world that we have to operate in. So it's so more of a frustration but it's a reality that most innovation practitioners and advisers need to help see and address

Nick Skillicorn: What do you mean by innovation strategy and innovation culture, is it just a chart or a word document that exists on the company's website saying it's important or how does it go

Cris Beswick : It's a really great question and thought specifically was process for the book that you mentioned when you introduced me, that how do we actually build a coach of innovation, what is the strategic approach, what's the road map, what's the frame work for starting on this journey, so when I talk about an innovation strategy, what I am talking about, what's the strategic plan of action and road map that an organization needs t in order that it shifts from where it is today to a point in the future where innovation capability is a genuine competitive advantage that the organization has and that innovation is happening by creatively solving problems using design thinking etcetera, entrepreneurship and intrepreneurship, all those ingredients are parts of what makes the organization do things the way it does on a daily basis. When I talk about innovation strategy, it's the planter of action for how we get an organization to that point.

Nick Skillicorn: I think the big word in that last sense was how you get into that point, I am sure there is a lot of people listening right now, they are screaming at you saying tell us more what it actually takes to get to that stage, let's assume you have got a company, it could be a multibillion dollar company but that is very immature but they want to improve their innovation culture, what sort of things do they need to go through even if they are not easy processes or they might face challenges, what do they need to go through to get that culture of innovation

Cris Beswick: None of these stuff is rocket science and one the recent stuff I originally wrote the book with John Derrick who is the co author say, my publishers contacted me couple of years ago and said look Cris, we have got thousand of books on innovation and we get requests for more content on innovation but we don't need you know the people that are asking for these stuff and the people that are requesting these books don't want another book on why innovation is important and if we are not going to disrupt all down, if we don't build innovation capability then our business is dead, etcetera etcetera. Everyone knows that now, we don't need to false feed anyone in that perspective anymore and the impresses for the book was people saying we get we have to do it but what the hell do we do and how do we it. So building good coach of innovation is the specific frame

work that we use with clients. So when reading the book you are basically getting the frame work that we actually use with live clients and it split of 8 chapters for this six stages of the frame work that sits in the middle of those eight chapters and the work that organizations need to do expands across those six chapters, to give everyone out there listening a really really quicker over view, the first chapter and the first stage is all about understanding where are organizations today in terms of its current innovation capability and what capability it's going to need to achieve the vision or the goals of that organization, so we talk a lot about innovation maturity and measuring that and we now have a specific live tool and assessment for helping clients measure their innovation maturity, something you may know and developed with wazoku so it's called innovation puts and the second thing is once we have un packed and we have got real strategy and the work that needs to be done to shift an organization's maturity level, the real key thing is up scaling and coaching senior teams and leadership teams on how to deliver the change required to shift an organization from where it is today to an innovation led future. So there is a huge amount of stuff we talk about in terms of innovation, leadership development and coaching managers to drive and inspire people to contribute to innovation etcetera etcetera and then there is the real practical, the pragmatic stuff that innovation requires, tools, processes, governance frame works and online idea management platforms if you are a multi site, multi employer organization. Then the second three parts of the frame work that we unpack then really migrate into the Hr role, so how do we then start to engage people in innovation, how do we inspire them to want to contribute, how do we change their working policies and practices, job descriptions, how do we change their performance appraisal and how we review them and re numerate them and reward them in incentives advise them around innovation etcetera. The six stage frame work compacts our perspective and our approach across all those work streams.

Nick Skillicorn: I think that the big challenge that a lot of people who have been frustrated by the innovation cultures in their companies though, we push back on you is, here we keep shouting that innovation is important and we know that it needs to happen but the guys at the top they seems to be dragging their heels a little bit, why do you think that happens.

Cris Berwick: Without mentioning any names, I have got several clients at the moment who are in exactly that position. One of the challenges with large organizations is timing and like most organizations, there is always re structuring going on, there is always strategic shifts that most of the parties don't know about; there is always development and movement in terms of management and leadership etcetera. So timing is always a huge issue for innovation and even more so when vicinity with the CEO floats the desire to build a culture of innovation. My push back with senior teams is there is never going to be a good time right, all businesses are busy, the vocal world we are living is always going to throw volatility and that uncertainty , so there is never a great time to do any of these stuffs, both the key to innovation and the key to starting that shift is small and in a utopia world the CEO or someone or a few people at that senior level who say do you know what, timing isn't great and the reality is that there is never going to be a perfect time, there is never going to be a time where we have got no issues, no tablets where we can then start to work on these stuff but we recognize that the world is changing faster than we are and innovations are capability and that cultural shift is something that we have to have. So it has to start with that senior level acknowledgement and then sponsorship and ownership of making that transition from yesterday to tomorrow. So yes it's all ways of challenges especially when middle managers, who from my point of

view are the most important people in this whole innovation gemstone, they are the gate keepers to innovation. They are typically the demographic in an organization who really see the value of what could be done if innovation becomes a core capability. So I do feel for them sometimes when they are pushing walls of repel on people at senior level that aren't listening enough but it does take that shift at the senior level to start this journey.

Nick Skillicorn: That's an irony and I see this with my clients. quite a lot is the company seem to be desperate for innovation when things are going horribly wrong and they realize that things need to change, it's a lot harder to convince someone whose business is doing fine that it's not going to be doing fine necessarily in ten years time.

Cris Beswick: Yes on all that mixing with strategic macro over view that the senior teams and the CEO's have, I have got a few clients at the moment which have several thousand employees globally they are a billion dollar or multibillion dollar businesses and the reality of conversations with those junior teams is their perception is that they haven't really got a burning platform that is causing them enough pain to want to focus their efforts on innovation as a solution to that pain. The reality is that there will be a burning platform out there somewhere, they either don't know what it is yet or its not realized and surfaced enough for it to cause enough pain but we know from history and we know from looking at all these sectors how global brands and real successful organizations like Nokia, blockbuster and a whole long list of organizations didn't own a fire burning platform early enough and didn't see that shift. We have got case studies and examples of organizations that fail to innovate and have now died and so senior teams don't need convincing that it's a real possibility, it's just keeping the corps and the wheels in motion today always take precedent until the pain becomes really significant but to your point the challenge is how that point it's sometimes a little bit too late to switch innovation on which is how they think it happens and fit innovation to be the panacea to the problems that then unfold.

Nick Skillicorn: And how do you then have these quite difficult conversations to convince someone in a senior level that it's this important, in your view is it the best idea to go in with a lot of research on current market trends or insight analysis with three thousand customers and slide desk this strategic consulting houses produced before any decision can be made.

Cris Beswick: As you can tell Nick, I am from the north of England, so we are also known to intend to take a fairly pragmatic approach to things, I could go into senior teams with CEO's as you have just outlined though intrinsic reports that have taken six months to do, arising scanning and upcoming trend and potential areas of disruption and etcetera etcetera. The reality is that majority of client that I work with is they already got that information, they are already pretty good at seeing things on the horizon, they have got huge amount of data, they are already used to big consultants for strategic analysis etcetera and what I found works amongst everything else is not trying to use that data and that intelligence to convince them that they really need to act now but actually just having a really down to earth common sense conversation and the common sense conversation about the world round us and how we see that world shifting and changing and the multiple examples of organizations like the Nokias of the world, like black breed, like the block buster's like the Kodak's organizations that they would considered peerless had fallen by the way side. If you actually have a really adult, practical down to earth common sense conversation with majority of the senior teams it takes it out of the business context and it's a keen to having good conversation about what the

world is really like with a group of mates over a beer. If you remove them from that commercial lands that they tend to look at things through and just have a really down to earth common sense conversation, most of the time the penny drops, this is the way of taking my approach and I have seen the team says, you know what yes maybe we should start to think about things a little bit differently because we are not really feeling any pain now, in fact we are doing well, we had a great last few quarters but the reality is that isn't a strategy that we can build the future for business on. I just take it slightly unconventional and counter intuitive approach to these things.

Nick Skillicorn: So let's take it to the next step further then, we have got the senior leadership group that has agreed that innovation is important and we want to do something about it but unfortunately not every company actually gets it right when they are trying to implement a culture of innovation or a strategy, what sorts of setbacks have you seen in your experience about companies that have done something wrong

Cris Beswick: So it's not uncommon for me to brought in to an organization that has already tried to do this and failed and in almost every circumstance, they have by passed the sequential sort of approach that I use which is establish the right strategy and then enable management and leadership teams to be able to convert that strategy into practical action. How do we actually bring that strategy alive on a daily basis then at that point, we try and build that into the organization's culture. I start to then push that across the organization. What typically happens is the senior teams will say innovation and our strategic imperative, we have got to start innovating and doing things differently, we need a culture of innovation, it can't be about a small select team it needs to be about everyone in the organization, let's just start doing some stuff out in the organization and the biggest shift when building a culture of innovation, isn't giving people new tools, trying new widgets, new creative thinking techniques etcetera etcetera, the biggest shift in innovation comes when you remove the existing barriers that stop people thinking differently, doing things differently and challenging the ways organizations do this today. The approach is where it doesn't work, hasn't worked, if not focused on removing those barriers, they purely focus on giving people new tools and techniques on what I intend to go in, its reverse and work on removing a lot of those barriers, they tend to be strategic, structural in terms of the organization and management and leadership style and behaviors so it's those things that we approach before we then start to look at culture.

Nick Skillicorn: One of the last things I want to touch on is that getting quite heavy into the management side because I have got the management consulting background, you do a lot of work with the senior leadership as well, in an ideal world all everyone in the organization would have all the time and resources, tools they need to do their best job in innovation but unfortunately most companies have a limited amount of time available for people, money to spend on projects, resources available how do you start allocating the limited resources available across a breadth of ideas

Cris Beswick: So the key thing to an approach like this, the key thing is to be very selective on ways on how you start the ball rolling and where you start it, so one of the key things that organizations get wrong, so back the back example that you talked about, most organization start their innovation journey by throwing out a challenge across the organization for people to submit or give them their ideas, we need more innovations so give us our ideas, tell us what we should be doing. The reality about innovation is it has to be much more strategic than that, innovation isn't about

asking for ideas, it's about posing challenges and problems and when you do that, you can be very strategic you can be very efficient and I always kick off an innovation program with a client by trying to solve some internal issues. So how do we get a small group of people or several small groups of people to solve some internal problems, not continuous improvement tiny stuff but significant internal problems that will either increase efficiency in the business or save it some money or allow it to prove that innovation has value and can very quickly easily return some kind of ROI. It just about being really selective with the time and resources pressure that you put on an organization when you start that innovation journey. The more and the quicker that you can prove that innovation has value and can deliver a return, what you tend to find is miraculously the more time and resources seem to then be available, The business finds those times and resources because it knows it's going to derive a return from that investment.

Nick Skillicorn: It's something that I see a lot in companies as you say they all set out a challenge to the entire company and they might use an idea management software solution and say right everyone log on and submit either whatever challenge solutions you have or just general ideas and there is nothing more disheartening than people realizing that nothing has happened with the input that they gave.

Cris Beswick: What we have to be careful with taking our approach is when you ask people for ideas, my instant reaction to that is ideas about what because we want innovation to be strategic, we don't want a thousand people stepping up to the challenge of give us your ideas because the majority of them would be almost very incremental or what should just be happening any way and what we don't want is really subjective zero values ideas like there aren't enough vegetarian options on the menu in the canteen and that's the typical stuff that you will get, what we have to do is be very strategic with innovation and pose a challenge or a problem that people can then submit ideas specifically about it. It's such a simple thing and it's not rocket science but it's one of the things that I see incredibly often in large organizations that are starting this journey

Nick Skillicorn: Cris its been wonderful speaking with you, we are coming up to the end of the interview now, but what I like to ask all the experts is if you had one piece of advice, one tip, one actionable insights that people can actually try out either this afternoon or over the course of the week to start getting some value what we talked about today what would it be

Cris Beswick: I have actually got a couple of things really, the senior teams just have a really practical pragmatic and external perspective, be really impartial to your organization about where you think you are today, I can't let that position of truth and it's a question of the CEO's to say no one is listening, you can be absolutely honest but just have a really honest conversation with yourself about where the organization is today, what its capabilities are for surviving in the future and genuinely what really needs to happen. The challenge that I see is most senior people knows what needs to be done but the challenge is so big and the shift is so big most of them don't want to openly voice and acknowledge that they know the size of the job to be done and therefore it doesn't get done because people shy away from that. The second thing is if you really want to understand innovation and you want innovation genuinely at the heart of your organization, as a senior leader you need to understand design thinking, so go and research and have a look at the value of design thinking and customer center thinking and the heart of innovation is the design process and design thinking and if you want as a senior leader to really understand how powerful innovation can

be, design thinking is the basis for innovation so go and research and have a view on how useful as an approach it could be for your organization not just for solving creative products or processes but actually for solving strategic challenges, it's a great approach and a great way of thinking to allow you to solve any business problem or challenge.

Nick Skillicorn: Thanks for bring here Chris and we are going to get links to the resources that you have recommended up on the screen right now to find out more about you and the thought leadership that you are interested in and what are the highlights of those that you think people should check out

Cris Beswick: Obviously anyone can connect with me on LinkedIn my name is slightly unusual and there is no H in Cris, so if you want to get me on LinkedIn or twitter or any of those usual places then just have a search for Crisbeswick.com, if anyone wants to email me they can email me cris@crisbeswick.com and my website is www.crisbeswick.com but in terms of resources, one of the things that I launched with a few other people in the innovation space is an innovation thought leadership called the future shapers, so check that out at thefutureshapers.com its completely free and there are some brilliant people there writing really good quality articles and topics around a multitude of challenges that people in the innovation space and senior leaders try to drive innovation face. I would encourage everyone to subscribe to that and follow some of the thought that me and the other contributors have got on that.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect, it's been wonderful speaking with you today and I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

Cris Beswick: Pleasure, Thanks Nick.