

Mark Bidwell

How leaders can stop taking up space and start making space for innovation

Speakers:

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

Mark Bidwell

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello Everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the innovation and creativity summit 2017, I am very happy to have mark Bidwell with me today, Mark is the CEO of BC platforms and the CEO of innovation eco system and also the host of innovation eco system podcast which is one of the best podcast out there on the subject of innovation. Mark its wonderful having you here

Mark Bidwell: Thanks Nick and thank you very much for your kind words about the podcast

Nick Skillicorn: So for people who aren't aware of you or who don't know about the podcast before can you give us a brief background to how you got into innovation

Mark Bidwell: Yea I mean I have been innovating in large organizations even though that wasn't my job title for twenty years, starting with British petroleum and ending in a company called Syngerta which is the largest integrated agric space here in Switzerland and I have always been interested in innovation, I have always been interested in how can you achieve growth by doing things differently within the organizations. And that's what I have made from my career, I have been doing that for twenty years and recently I came out from syngerta where I was running a two billion dollar business as you mentioned earlier on to be chairman of about a seventeen year old start ups, called BC platforms and also top make available the resources that I used in my corporate world, to make them available to individuals on a broader platform which is giving birth to the innovation eco system essentially.

Nick Skillicorn: What is the innovation eco system?

Mark Bidwell: At the moment it started really as a passion project, when I came out of the corporate world, I thought about writing a book and then I realized that books take a long time and the model. The publishing model is broken anyway and so I thought what is the more effective way to make resources that I use available to people very easily and so I landed on the idea of podcast and so I launched a podcast and I was very lucky to get some amazing guests earlier on my journey, to be honest I didn't even know what a podcast was two to three years ago, so I was kind of learning and making those mistakes, but it's a podcast where we interview chief executives and leaders in large organizations, thought leaders someone like Lisa Bodell who is actually part of this great summit you

are putting together and the third group is outstanding people from the world of science and sports and we talk to these individuals about leadership innovation and change and I think it's that combination of my experience having done this for large companies most recently as the executive of BC company, plus outstanding guests plus a really relevant subject which is innovation in large companies this isn't the west coast sort of breathless tends to like innovation, this is large mature companies that have risks of extinction if they don't figure out how to innovate and avoid this disruption, these Kodak moments I think that formula has resonated quite well which is why we are getting such great feedback from people like you and most of our listeners around the world

Nick Skillicorn: One of the things I am keen on is talking about with you today as you mentioned is innovation in these large very well established companies the ones that we always think they are the dinosaurs, they struggle to innovate, I would like to get some sort of sense of how you approached innovations when you were working in this large companies.

Mark Bidwell: Well, I mean the first honest answer is that I did everything wrong in the early days, I made all the mistakes in the book, I began to figure out there are some certain things that you can do that will make all the difference so I will give you an example. Most of the time when we try and innovate, we ask people to do it on top of their day jobs and we were unable to create the space for them to actually step back and reflect on what opportunities exist for them to do things differently and this could be incremental innovation or could be step out innovation. The first thing that as a leader that is really important is to create that space for your team and also for yourself to actually reflect and look differently at the problem. I think the second piece is equally important is to ask different set of questions, I mean recently I was in a world of agric business and I knew nothing about that industry, what I was able to do was I was able to learn from other industries, I was able to learn from people who know were doing things differently and applied that to that organization, so I think it's about mindset, it's about looking at the world through a different set of eyes if you like. The third piece again for which I think was actually most profound insight for me, typically you bring in consultants, you have teams of people running all over the place they come up with great ideas, they present them, succeeding the management. I have been involved, you are leading these teams on the client's side and soon as the CEO and the board accept the proposal, you know lets go and then the real hard work starts because there's been no buy into that process. So I am hugely supportive of the idea of co creating with people the solution, because the moment you get everyone on the same page and then you take your proposal forward to the organization for sign it off and once that signs off that is the point where execution flows, implementation flows almost seamlessly and so you have created this shared accountability for the solution and this shared value for the solution which means implementation is far far easier so I am a huge supporter of implementation as a way of doing business because ultimately that means your improvements and innovation are going to be far more robust and they are going to survive the evidence and the ups and downs they go through as you take them through the implementation. So creation for me is number one, creating space for actually having accommodation is number two and then looking at them differently through different lenses which is really what a lot of our guest talk about on the show which is number three.

Nick Skillicorn: Is this all based on the fact that you said you made all the mistakes in the book, did you actually do these wrong when you started out

Mark Bidwell: Yea, I remember earlier on, this was back in the mid nineties and I think Jack Welch from GE came out with this article destroy your business and it was all about, this was a note he sent out to all the managers at the GE, he said your job now is to destroy your business because if you don't someone else will do that. I remember going to the CEO of a company I was working for which is a global consulting firm and suggesting we do that and I read exactly the same memo and pushed it out, it was from me,, it wasn't from the CEO, so there was no buy in from anyone at all and I just burned a huge amount of goodwill in the organization without actually thinking through how do you influence people, how do you move people, it's just an example of a really basic mistake which in hindsight even embarrassing to talk about, it's so obvious but I learnt that lesson. I mean influencing how do you actually get the buyer, how do you persuade the decision do people at the top of the organization as well as people doing the work in the heart of the organization is a lot of a challenge and many times I am sure you hear this as much as I do, the kind of frustration that frustration that people have on how do I persuade people, how do I get resources, how do I get senior managers to really understand what we are doing, that's a very common refrain from a lot of people deep in the trenches to actually how to innovate and how to move the needle in the organizations.

Nick Skillicorn: What's ironic is quite often even the companies that say that innovation is one their primary goals and business drivers, they are still suffering from that exact problem, the management might vocally say yes we want new ideas, we want to try out new things, we want to encourage the culture where innovation can thrive but business as usual is still always the priority.

Mark Bidwell: Absolutely, I followed public companies quite a lot and my favorite company I mean , I follow Berkshire Hathaway which is an interesting company with warren Buffet's company and one of our guest is he biographer of a Berkshire Hathaway which is a mismatch, well there are forty or fifty different operating companies in that business but this is a hugely innovative organization and each of these individuals running if companies are very innovative and I think what he does, he doesn't do any quarterly, I mean they publish quarterly earnings but there is no guidance support to the markets. The number of companies that don't offer any guidance to the capital markets if they are public companies you can count on one hand, I mean the other big one is unilever and it takes a hugely braced individual, a leader to actually say to wall street you know we are not going to give you quarterly guidance because we're focusing on longer terms. So there is that huge pressure in that or large publicly held companies anyways as to you know continue to deliver quarterly earnings and really you know the whole conversation around innovation, the analyst aren't interested in that unless its delivering revenue today or certainly in the next quarter, so that's the pressure a lot of people are under.

Nick Skillicorn: And how do we address these pressures, how from your experience and the insights you get from your guests can we start building a culture where innovation is more accepted and this long term thinking is more accepted.

Mark Bidwell: Well I think it's not easy and there all these wonderful stories of companies like this sort of the twenty percent rule of Google, I mean in actual fact in large mature organizations none of these is easy and it's not as simple as you got half a day or a week or whatever to go off and come up with these ideas, I mean I am an anthropologist by training so I tend to believe that culture is number one source of competitive advantage long term. So in syngerta which was as you know operating in an industry with very very long life cycle, so this is in inner world of agriculture, so no

one has managed to make crops grow faster in the fields so that you have these annual circles and you have these you know research and development cycles of 15 to 20 years and clearly to enable you actually build the culture or to flip and for your pipeline to be kicking out really compelling products or really compelling business solutions if you like or new business models. It does take a lot of heavy lifting up front to be able to do that. So I mean let me get specific for instance, what I think the first piece is how do you as a leader, let's assume an individual leading a team, be it a commercial team, a development team, be it a team of scientists, how do you actually lead that group, do you as a leader, do you take up space or do you create space, so that's the first really important distinction because most of us as leaders we are trained to come up with the answers, to give answers, to give guidance but that doesn't work in the world of innovation because often as a leader you might be very good in coming up with the question but actually you are going to be very short of answers. So how do you create the space for these kinds of conversations to happen, how do you make it comfortable and safe for employees to explore the unknown so I think you know I would say all start with the individual as a leader also I would say even though you are not a leader to some of the people listening to this in the summit, even if you don't have a team of people working directly for you, the question I want to ask is how are you actually, what kind of inputs are you receiving, how are you looking at the world, how do you go out to explore the unknown, what kind of conversations are you having with other functions in your organizations or with customers or potentials. Are you having conversations that that are going to explore opportunities or are these conversations going to shut options down. This is very very behavioral, this is a cultural attitude, this isn't about coming up with a new software, here is a new business model that we are going to do, here is a new business model canvas that we are going to do, this is more around behaviors as individuals in large organizations and to create these conditions, if you are running one of these organizations it is really very hard and the other piece that is important is many of these organizations they are looking for the signal and as a leader of a function or as an organization of a team, you are going through this cultural change that is required to build these capabilities of innovation, they are watching what you do and it's actually there is a connection between you, are you consistent between your actions and your words or that goes all the way up to the organization, the company that I used to work for, a couple of things that the senior management did, they were very very different, so I will give you an example we used to read for the executive committee which could you know an executive member could have said in a hundred pages of pre read which is basically a book, it will take a whole weekend to work through that, the new CEO came in and just tore them up and said okay maximum 55 pages pre read and so that was great in a huge amount of space that was signaling that the top of the organization is willing to do things differently. It's a very complex subject which is dependent on the organization context but from my experience, it all starts with how you show up as a leader or as an individual in an organization.

Nick Skillicorn: It sounds like there are two audiences that we are talking to today, one is the people who are actually the leaders, they are the CEO and the other ones are people who are trying to convince the leaders and the CEO's that something needs to be adjusted at least or perhaps change out right. Let's talk about those two separately for a minute, let's talk about the people who are experiencing frustration, they are trying to get the right messages up to ladder to convince people to invest more in an environment where innovation is going to thrive, what sorts of insights do you have around helping that happen.

Mark Bidwell: It's a great question because as I said earlier on, one of the things that I did when I came out of the corporate world, I wanted to make available resources that I used that enabled me to avoid some of the mistakes and stop making the mistakes and also enjoy some of the success. So the whole idea of how do you actually tell stories, how do you influence an organization or someone, how do you shift someone from their position to your position. The leader in the world in this subject is a guy called Robert Giannini, who wrote the definitive book called influence, going back to Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett picked it up and gave Robert Gianini shares in Berkshire Hathaway which I think is currently trading at 250 thousand dollars each, Robert Gianini is a master of persuasion right and he has written a new book called persuasion, which explains exactly that, how do you persuade someone around to your, when you are asking for money, and I went in to ask for probably five hundred and fifty million dollars which is a huge capital expenses program, at the depth of the financial crises in 2008, now I rounded up to give me six hundred million dollars, what Robert Gianini said is you should say give me five hundred and ninety million dollars because that demonstrates that you have done the math and you are very very clear about exactly what you want, it's a very simple example of how do you actually influence someone around to your way of thinking. These are the dark arts of influence which clearly needs to be used in an ethical way but there is a number of things that you can do that seem counterintuitive but really make a big difference, I think the other piece, many of you might have come across Simon Sinek who talks about the power of why I think bringing the personal story into it, you know why you are doing this and why you are committing to this project and putting it obviously in terms of the audience, that's another thing which I think is really important. We just closed one of the companies you mentioned Bc platforms we are in a fund raising exercise at the moment and by the time this has come out, I am hoping with a close up, we talked about why the why investors, put yourself in the shoes of the other person you are addressing and address them and talk to them in their language. Get a hand full of things, I will strongly recommend this is one of the most influential book I have ever read, persuasion by Robert Gianini, to give you a sense of what are the forces of words you can harness in the service of you getting your message across to anyone, be it trying to get a date or trying to get five hundred million dollars from an executive committee and everything in between.

Nick Skillicorn: I mean getting the buying, a lot of people think that the idea itself is the way that you convince people that are why they always get so frustrated when the idea is rejected or their request is rejected. What you are suggesting is everything around how you communicate what you want and what you need, it's just as important.

Mark Bidwell: A big mistake I made was believing that just because I thought it was a good idea then everyone I spoke to should also see it as a good idea as well, and you get religious about this and that is a very arrogant way of thinking about it, because the idea that they have might just be as valued, that actually might be far more robust than your own idea and yet when you come up with a new idea and you get terribly excited about it, you take it personally if people reject it. So it is that sort of arrogance that I approached this problem a long time ago, a few years back, I approached it with this you know I am right and everyone else seem to be wrong. I kind of soften my approach now because that didn't work with us to go

Nick Skillicorn: It is very similar to what I talk a lot with my client which is around understanding perceived value and the simplest way that I always describe it to them, no one you talk to is interested in what you think about your own idea, especially your customers or your manager, they

are always going to have their own value frame work within which they see everything that included a lot of things that you don't care so much about and that is why you always get this resistance when you are speaking to people about something as you say cared very deeply about, they won't say you don't care about how important it is to you, they just care about what they see in it themselves,

Mark Bidwell: yeah so I am building on that point of me, it's very profound, the number one question I think one should ask in this conversation and ask it from a place that you really wanting to know the answer, is what do you want, until you ask that question, people won't genuinely think, and most of the time we go in without really getting offers and we get more and more frustrated. The first you know if you go in by saying what do you want, give the person a chance to express what they want and tell your message to that with that? It unlocks everything, it's just a powerful question what do you want and most of the time we take things for granted and people don't really give a damn about what you know about until they think that you care about them and that's the key thing, that was a huge insight for me and to be honest with you I only learned message a couple of years ago, so that's for those of you at the beginning of their careers listening to this, that's something I wish I had known about a long time ago

Nick Skillicorn: Let's take a step up the ladder now and talk about the people who are in these leadership positions and want to build capabilities of innovations and the culture of innovation, I know you have had several of these people on your podcast speaking to them about what they are actually doing underground to achieve this, can you give us some insights as to what they are doing, the sort of challenge they face and how they have tried to overcome them.

Mark Bidwell: Well I mean, we hear this statistics, I think on your website you talked about something like four percent of innovation activities actually succeeding, I mean you know the numbers, I have always any kind of mergers and acquisitions and any kind of culture change, you normally hear two thirds of these things fail, only one third of these things actually succeed and I think one of the reasons for , a lot of that is it comes back to what I said earlier on this co creation, a number of companies that I have talked to have got very very strong purposes and those purposes are very clearly articulated not just to the external market to external world but more importantly to their employees and you know their values, their mission statements, their purposes is why do we exist and the companies that do this really well is not just a PR exercise, they get every single employee to actually ask themselves what does this purpose statement mean for me, you are just creating a hugely powerful wire that's almost like a magnet which pulls every one towards this bigger purpose which is why the organization exists and then this is important because people who don't buy into that almost like not just intellectually but also viscerally and emotionally, people who don't buy into that purpose, they get spat out of the organization because they just, they no longer, you know they reach a conclusion that this place isn't for me so they are left with other people who are totally committed to pursuit of that purpose and then Syngerta the company I most recently worked for, the purpose was bringing plant potential to life, bringing plant potential to life, was a very powerful purpose statement , what that means is that as you hit the invert you know air pockets that are associated with any kind of innovation activities, you can see your way through the other side, through the air pocket or over the ditch or whatever the analogy you want to use to the other side, it creates this laser focus of the organization and also north star in terms of yes we are doing this in service of the bigger purpose, I think the companies that do this really well haven't got a really clearly defined purpose and one that everyone in the organization has internalized almost

viscerally or certainly, emotionally that's one of the things that I see companies doing really well. I would argue the number one thing, obviously the second piece is around the management behaviors, so other behaviors you are our leaders, to use the language that I used earlier on, other leaders of the company taking up space or other creating space. What does that mean in the executive suite, often people who have got there got there by providing answers, by knowing everything by biting a level of uncertainty of what the future looks like but as we know, you know this better than anyone, innovation entails stepping into the uncertainty, dealing with ambiguity and that's really hard for the executive suites that have spent most of their lives proving if that they got all the answers and they are in control of their environments to actually let go of that and create that space at the top of the organization which then filters them down, that's really hard for a lot of people to do, very few people actually are able to do that, make that sort of leadership transition.

Nick Skillicorn: So if you have got one tip, one actionable insight that our viewers can try out in the short terms either this afternoon or this week to start helping build either their own capabilities or their company's capabilities, what will you recommend they try out.

Mark Bidwell: Nick it's a really good question, like I said earlier on, a lot of what I do is based on things that I found working, so in this theme of creating space, let's stick with that, I have talked about it several times. I have found that one of my early guests, this individual, a guy called David Allen who wrote this book on personal productivities, called the arts of it is getting things done the art of productivity, I would say this is possibly the most important book that listeners can get along side influence, I am hedging my bets a little bit to actually create space in your typical working life, to actually to begin to explore some of these new ways of doing business, what Allen talked about is having this thing called a weekly review where you carve out an hour or two or whatever at the end of every week, we can do it whenever, I tend to do till 11 to 3 o'clock on a Friday creating space to actually explore new things, to expose yourself to creative ways of thinking of different types of people, to different types of industry, so my top tip is look in your calendar, create your space to explore something new to have a different type of conversation, with a different kind of person or go to a different place or just look at the world differently. That begins a process, it unlocks your curiosity, it begins a process of more diverse ways of looking at the world and magic happens if you start doing that and especially if you do it on a regular basis.

Nick Skillicorn: That sounds perfect. One of the things I am so keen to talk to you about, is you also see new ways about sort of building up innovation capabilities, in something that you and I talked about offline and I think it's something that people will find interesting as well, it's this concept of building up a sort of group of people, a sort of mastermind group of people, or try and build something together is that right

Mark Bidwell: I mean you are referring to the innovation leadership circle which was the group that I wished I had access to when I was innovating in this large companies, many leaders out there as well as entrepreneurs who are listening to this feeling quite lonely, they are thinking the challenges they are feeling are unique to them and no one else is facing or has been through those challenges, the truth is quite the opposite, there are many people doing this kind of work and a number of these individuals as a result of listening to the podcast said to me how can you work with me mark, we will like to work with you and what we did was we created this group of between six and eight individuals and put them in this environment called the innovation leadership circle, so these are

Executives, the CEO, heads of divisions, Heads of functions in large organizations and we have this process called eco system learning where basically we threw a very structured process, we are able to help them accelerate their innovation agenda and we have some tremendous results and we do it both offline and most importantly online because all these people are running around the world running businesses so they don't have a huge amount of time to get together in a room. So its streamlined to time efficient for these individuals and the results that people are getting are extra ordinary so we have run a pilot, we have closed that out , hugely positive feedbacks from participants, so we now rolling this out so we are going to do probably we will have it for several dozens of people around the world maybe up to a hundred by the end of this year, maybe not for everyone but for those of you who are listeners who do have aggressive innovation agendas and they want to tap into this ecosystem of experts that I have created in a way and unlock the blockers to that those innovation agendas like sorry then this seems to be something that is really resonating and getting fantastic results. So we will put some information out on it on the program about the program which individuals can look at to eventually see if it's of interest to them

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely, we will get a link down to where people can find out more below this video, as you say, it's not for everyone, I know a lot of the viewers here some of them are very much at the start of their innovation journeys, some of them are entrepreneurs, some of them are students or people just interested in their creativity, this is more focused on people in larger established companies with sort of more established rules

Mark Bidwell: I mean people with big challenging agendas that they want some help on, they can't , the traditional models of bringing teams, they don't have that, they don't have the resources or they are fed up with that because those models are not working anymore, this is a different way of doing it but you know as I say the results are getting tremendous, we have had people who are probably at the start of his career and he brings a huge amount of value to the broader group and then we got people who are at the top of their game, a CEO of a four thousand group person company who is also getting enormous value but if it's not for everyone, we are also exploring if can we take this concept to people as you say are maybe don't have such aggressive agendas or such large agendas or who is early on their career. We just get this process of building up these services to people

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect, I recommend anyone if you feel this might be of interest to you then you should check out the link below and you will find out a bit more about it. With that being said mark, unfortunately we have come to the end of our interview, I just want to say thank you again for being part of it and sharing your insights in this summit.

Mark Bidwell: I must say I am really looking forward to hearing what feedback we will get in the value that we are able to create for participants of this summit. Thanks for thinking of me and looking forward to working with you again

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely.