

Mike Brown

How different perspectives and strategic detours can affect innovation

Speakers:

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

Mike Brown

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello, everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the Innovation & Creativity Summit 2017. I'm very happy to have Mike Brown, the founder of Brainzooming with us today.

Mike, it's wonderful to have you.

Mike Brown: Thank you, Nick. I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today and the whole audience.

Nick Skillicorn: No problem. So for people who don't know about you or Brainzooming, can you give us a bit of your background and how you eventually ended up in innovation?

Mike Brown: Yeah. So I started off early on a small research company, worked for about 18 years at a company called Yellow Transportation. Basically did international transportation based in the US, a lot of US work as well doing strategic planning and market research.

And inside the company, I had a great opportunity. We had tripled in size at one point. We had gone from about 3 billion to 10 billion and got charged with working with all these competitive companies that we bought to help them be better marketers, be more strategic. But I was told you can't tell them what to do because we all compete.

So I looked back the things that we've done over time and thought, "Well, if I can go in and ask them questions about the business, about their customers, about their marketplaces, they know about that. And if they're down on really good paths, cheer them on and build off of those ideas. And if they're down on bad path, well gosh, we could use a different perspective or creativity technique or a different way of thinking about things and look at it this way."

So I wasn't really telling them they were wrong. I was just giving them more opportunity to look at things a different way. So from that and getting to do that a couple hundred times inside the company and just seeing what worked and what didn't work. That really created

what became Brainzooming. So we rolled that out from what had been an internal department into a business in 2009.

And the Brainzooming blog had predated that by a couple of years where they actually started to write about what we were doing. And that was the start. And I had been very excited to be able to go beyond transportation and start to use the same kind of techniques in other industries and for different size companies as well.

Nick Skillicorn: What exactly is Brainzooming?

Mike Brown: It sort of depends based on where people meet us. For some people, they think it's a blog and that's all we do, write typically 4 to 5 times a week not so much about us but more about here's the process and techniques and what we do. So I tell folks, "If you want to put it together and go do it, almost everything we do is out there. We got 2200, 2300 blog posts by now that cover that."

For other people, we look like maybe a more traditional consultancy but at the heart of that is all about collaboration and reaching out to customers or to employees or audiences and getting them to help shape what strategy is.

To other people, we look like social media folks because they have seen us on Twitter or they have seen us through Facebook or the blogs and they think that's what we do.

So I always tell people maybe because what we do get developed on the client side of business, it doesn't look like a traditional agency or maybe even a traditional consultancy. When we did this stuff, I was around 365 days a year so people didn't like it or it didn't work. I had them in my office complaining about it. So we've really tried to focus on ideas through plans all the way through implementation and hopefully provide some value and some ways to reach out to audiences that maybe businesses haven't had the opportunity to do before.

Nick Skillicorn: So let's talk about innovation today. And we had a good chat before we started. What we're going to talk about today is all about perspectives and how they affect innovation. So can you give us a bit of an insight as to how you think different perspectives are important in how innovations perceived in the company?

Mike Brown: Yeah. I mean I think a lot of the traditional models of business were as you rise up in a company and you've got a senior management group, these are the people who are most qualified, have the best handle on everything to set strategy. And a lot of businesses have been really successful in the past with that. And a lot of businesses are still successful with that approach.

A lot of managers, a lot of leaders though and maybe leaders more than managers, see though that 4 or 5 people sitting around a boardroom may not have the best perspective across the whole organization or there are things that they don't know or even that they're

maybe insights that exist in their customers or with their employees that would benefit the strategy that they are setting.

So, what we try and do and what we encourage people to do is start to reach out to those other audiences that have a sense of the brand or have a sense of what's working and engage them in strategy in a way that makes sense for them, and to highlight that. The easy route would be to say, "Well, these people in the boardroom are considering what should our vision be for the future of the organization?" The easy route is go out and ask somebody on the production line, "Well, what should our vision be for the company?" And you get blank stares because I'm on a production line. I don't think about division for the company.

And what we encourage organizations to do is go out and ask those folks questions that they can answer and provide a way for them to provide those insights. So you can go to somebody on a production line and say, "Well, what do you say that we're screwing up? What isn't working that we're trying to do?" And they can answer that question. Or, "What are we doing that seems to be working but we should be doing more of it?" And they can answer that question.

So, I've had that conversation with a lot of managers where they said, "Well, we need to set the strategy inside the boardroom." I was like, I get that. I don't want the person on the production line to set the strategy for the company. That's not their job. That doesn't make sense. But in setting the strategy, you're going to be a lot smarter and wiser and probably have better results if you're bringing your perspectives in because they see things that you don't see.

So we really encourage them to think about, look at your audiences. Understand what their perspectives are, what they can answer, where they can contribute, and involve them in really meaningful ways to do that.

Nick Skillicorn: Is there a danger though of when you're just speaking to people about what's working, what we could do better that you end up with just a list of incremental small innovations? And the people – the top of the company, they should be looking a bit further ahead.

Mike Brown: Well, it's interesting because we often start with people with a grid that looks at what's the degree of real issues in the company, performance issues or financial issues, or whatever it is. And then on the Y axis, what's the perception of those issues? How widely are those recognized?

And based on where they're starting and where they want to go to, yeah, it may be in the upper right, we need a total transformation. There are fundamental issues going on and there is a really wide perception. So we've got to transform.

I think in a lot of cases, at least with clients that we run into, they've been very successful down the path that they can't even see a different way of doing things. So, we try and meet them where they see some success but also challenge them to look further.

I think you're right. The way that we approach it in going from incremental to bigger thinking or further out thinking, we try and deal with the exercises and the questions and then the audiences that we're speaking to. I think the worst thing that a management group can do if they – we need dramatic change is to go around and start asking for what's the next big idea because it's similar to the vision question.

You can almost see the wheels go off in somebody's head when they're asked, "What should our next big idea be?" Like, "Well, I have some ideas but I'm not sure they're big ideas. And if I say it and it's not a big idea then people are going to laugh at me and then I'm going to not look good in its meeting and no, I don't have any ideas. I'm not sure what we should do." And it shuts down.

Whereas, we find, if we ask bigger questions that either challenge convention or challenge what an organization has done, people will start to fill those up. We published the question and updated the list the other day of extreme creativity questions we call them, that we've seen it time and time again when you start to ask these questions, people get the bigger ideas. And one of those was, what could we start breaking right now that would force us to do things differently?

Well, people probably have a sense of, here's some of the roadblocks that we've had and here's what we could start to get away from and answer that. So that can get you to some of those bigger ideas.

I think the other way is, and we'll advocate this a lot of times in how you bring customers or clients or people maybe who aren't clients into it, is going to lead user interviews. And I'll tell companies and we did this at the transportation company I was in, go find the companies that are pushing you the hardest. They're asking for demanding things. They seem to be ahead of everybody else in the expectations that they have. Their expectations are going up faster. And go talk to them not about the future but what about today. What are they doing today? Because it's easier for them to talk about.

If you pick the right companies that are ahead of the rest of the industry, you'll get a pretty good sense of where the industry is going. We used to do this in transportation and we'd find these lead users and we could go talk to maybe 25 or 30 of them and say, "What's happening today or in the next year? Come back to fill those answers." And there was the next 36 months and we watched it happened multiple times. We didn't have to ask about the future. We could start to find that pattern.

So I think to your question about how do you get to the bigger disruptive ideas? I think part of it, it's the questions, part of it, who you asked those questions of. And then you can almost sort of dial in how disruptive or how far out you want to be based on those two variables.

Nick Skillicorn: Who then actually gets involved in making the innovations happen? Because it's one thing to figure out what the right questions to be asked are and the ideas to address those, what about actually delivering innovation?

Mike Brown: Yeah, great question. Yeah, I think there a lot of different processes that would work. We were talking to somebody recently in a public accounting firm and they had a sense of we need to be more innovative. And I actually saw the person had articles that they had highlighted that they've written and they had come to the conclusion that let's get innovation team together and we'll get a small one because we don't want a lot of folks because we wanted to be actionable but maybe 5 or 6 or 8 people and we'll get them together and have them come up with new ideas.

And I challenged them on that. I said, "That's just another different version of 6 senior partners sitting in a meeting trying to come up with what you should do next." I said, "You wind up putting the onus on them and pointed the whole organization at them." They're going to solve our innovation questions. They're going to tackle it and make it work. And I said, "That's not very realistic." They may come up with ideas but it's going to take the whole organization.

So we're in the midst of this but trying to step them back through the process of lay out a direction that you want. Where do you want to take the organization? Is that a revenue growth? Is that types of services you're offering? Use your management group to articulate that to the organization and then start to ask them these questions that they can participate in of, "Well, how do you think we're going to get there? From your perspective, I don't need you to solve the whole thing but what are some of the steps that you see?"

And then you use that innovation team to actually own it and help move it forward because you do if you – innovation isn't necessarily naturally occurring in most organizations where it's just going to bubble up. Somebody is going to own it and somebody is going to drive that process. But I think that's where the team could be more effective than simply shutting them up as a think tank and knock on the door and, "Have you guys come up with the ideas yet?" Well, no.

So yeah, I think we're very much in a lot of organizations, it's process-based and it's going to benefit from being as inclusive as possible. Steve Jobs at Apple, did he need that? No, because he was basically that visionary and sort of all those pieces rolled into one. And you've got those leaders out there.

So the type of things we advocate aren't necessarily for them because they have no need for it. But for most organizations, they don't have that particular leader or leadership group that has that clarity of vision and also clarity of what the marketplace is looking for.

So, I think some of these ideas helped for the 98% of organizations that are in that kind of situation.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. I think something that a lot of companies really struggle with is figuring out what the strategy really should be. A lot of them will either think, "We need to base it all on perfect evidence and therefore we need the data to back up any decision we make." And then other ones are the ones that are a bit more willing to think, "Well, something might happen. It might not happen but we need to be ready for it either one way or another."

Mike Brown: Yeah. And that's why I think – I don't know if that means we're generalists or centerists or whatever, but I'm sort of leery of both of just sort of randomly let's let everybody just go off and do whatever and I'm also leery of over controlling it and have every answer. You're not going to have that.

I mean I think the best approach is set up situations where you're willing to take on risk, where you know we can try this and it may not work and it's not going to kill us but we're going to learn from it and that will make us better and we'll go on to the next thing.

And going back to that grid I was talking about, for organizations that don't have a lot of issues but they have a perceived need to change, a lot of times we recommend you set up an experimentation path. You're going to make a conscious set of experiments over the next year, 18 months. And you know that some of these are going to hit and some of them aren't but that's OK.

The whole just random – I guess I'm too much of a corporate strategy guy from growing up to say, let's see what happens and let people run wild. I'm a believer in like you said, set that vision, set the direction, and then let people figure out maybe some of the best ways to tackle that or make that happen and bring it to life.

Nick Skillicorn: And I think that's one of the things that we can help with today. Actually, giving people some insights into how you work out what the strategy should be using some question techniques. And I think you called them strategic disruptor techniques. Is that right?

Mike Brown: It's strategic detours.

Nick Skillicorn: Detours.

Mike Brown: Yeah. If you think about that – if you drive the way to work every day, you sort of can check off and not really think about it too much but if a detour, the road is closed or there's some damage that is being repaired on the road, all of a sudden, you have to think

about, “Well, which way am I going? And is it going to take me longer to get to work? And what’s going to happen?”

Similar kind of thing I think with a lot of strategy exercises, the SWOT analysis, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. And a lot of companies that’s asked every year and people know what the answers are. And the answers don’t change so much throughout the year. But if you start to ask them differently, ask questions or give people exercises that they have to think about it, all of a sudden you now get to some different answers.

So as an example, one of the ones that we use in place of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats is we ask people to look out. Instead of looking to the future, we ask them to go out three years or maybe a new initiative or new project or 18 months, whatever the relevant timeframe is. And say, “Now, look backwards.”

And then one scenario assumed that we did was incredibly successful or successful beyond our wildest imagination. What were the factors that led to that? And now, people are sort of looking back, “Oh well, we had to do this or the economy had to stay good or these other things that are fantastic. Let’s capture those.”

Then flipping around say, “Let’s go out the same amount of time 18 months or 3 years and look back in this initiative with a complete failure. It bummed. It didn’t work at all. What were the factors there?” And they go, “Well, if that happened, we could never do that or if this went this way, this wouldn’t work.” And you start to get those things.

And you get different answers there than if you had said, “But what are the opportunities and threats and what are strengths and weaknesses to make it happen?” I used that back in the transportation company. It was really the first time we used it. And we had a big push at that point of technology. Technology was going to be our saviour. This was before the dot com, the early dot com bust. And all we did was talk about technology, technology. And rightly so.

When we did this exercise though with leadership, when we came back, our make or break issues surface on both the opportunity side, the good side, and the bad side was our relationship with our labor union. It was like, “You know what? We have about 10 people on labor and we have 400 on technology. But we’ve said that labor is the make or break issue.” And we actually started – predated a couple of years of actually buying some of these other competitors to give us a little bit more leverage with the labor union and actually start to get some concessions and some things that allowed us to function better.

So if we had gone in and said, “What’s the most important thing to the company?” Technology. Yeah, it’s important. But asking the question a different way got us to the real underlying issue and a different way of thinking about the strategy.

Nick Skillicorn: I really like that concept of figuring out what’s really the heart of what’s going to make a change. And also, the sort of questions that helped shake up your way of thinking

because one of the things I've loved about this summit is we've had a lot of discussions with people studying creativity and how the brain operates. And more and more researches showing us that the brain is just very good at getting into patterns of what it know works and then just keeping the sort of the easy autopilot state there.

Mike Brown: And at times, it makes a lot of sense. I talked about it in a lot of workshops that creativity and innovation in the business is like a present maybe that you get for your birthday or for a holiday. It comes to you and it's wrapped really nice and there are bows and ribbons and it's beautiful.

But I said the only way to get to the really cool stuff inside is to tear that paper off. And conventional wisdom, this understanding of things have always worked this way is a lot like that. You can – well gosh, it's so pretty and it helps us. I don't want to take any risk of ripping it off. But it takes doing that to actually get to the ideas inside.

And some businesses are a lot more comfortable at doing that. I think you can use creativity techniques to rip that paper off for a while so that you can look at it in a different way but still with that backdrop of here's what's smart in our business because chances are, it's probably still going to be smart two months from now and maybe a year from now but with that sensibility that it may not be smart anymore at some point. And lets us thought about other ways of doing things or be trying some things ahead of the time it isn't smart anymore.

Nick Skillicorn: Now, before we started the recording, you and I had a quick chat and we were discussing some of the techniques you used when you're working with these companies. One technique and set of questions I really like which I'd like to talk about now is this concept of figuring out what's safe and reliable in a company and asking what would happen if something would have gone wrong with that?

Can you tell us about that sort of example?

Mike Brown: Yeah. So we have a set of what we call extreme creativity questions. And those actually came from when I made the move from corporate to being out on my own. I'd always tended to work with really great creative geniuses and I was sort of the guy who were like, "OK, I get what you're doing. Let me go implement it."

And then when we started Brainzooming, I realized I needed to be the guy with those ideas. But I was like that's not necessarily how I've grown up in my career. So I realized instead of looking for the big ideas, the key was develop questions that give people a lot of room to explore and push beyond conventional boundaries.

So the one you were mentioning was we just had published this. This idea of what could we start breaking right now in the business that would force us to basically turn our backs on where we've been and start exploring new territory? So that's a question that you're basically giving people permission to say, "You know what? You don't have to think about today and

keeping today within the scope of this question and all stuff and what would you start to do?"

Now at the end of that, you may have things that are so wild and so crazy, you can't go do them all. But then that's where you've at least pushed people into thinking about things that they would have gotten to and you can start to retch those back and say, "Well, what new places does this take us that we could start or if we did 25% of that, what would it look like?"

But these extreme creativity questions, it's fun because we'll actually do it in a workshop where we ask people very conventional questions and we'll get incremental ideas and then we'll start to ask them the meaty questions and all of a sudden you can tell the excitement in the room, there's a lot more laughter. It gets noisier because we've given them the freedom inside that question to start to explore a lot more.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. I like this concept of exploring and sort of challenging the way things currently run in the company. And you and I, you told me a story of what you talked about with a company recently, a movie analogy which really sort of sums that up quite beautifully.

Mike Brown: Yeah. So, we've been talking about some of the stuff we do as pretty conventional, basic, fundamental things. But at times, clients will come to us and maybe they have a business book that they like or they want to do something else and we don't have an exercise for it so we'll create something.

So in this case, we were working with a state forester in the US. And he had read the book about black swans which the idea that the internet or 9/11, these events that happened, good or bad, but they fundamentally changed the dynamics and you can't anticipate them. And he said, "As a state forester, we're subject to a lot of things that could go wrong or could change." And he pointed to an adjoining state where they had done a controlled burn over a course of a weekend. It had gotten out of control. Some homes were burned down. I think some people were killed. And within a couple of weeks, the state legislator had defunded the forestry bureau.

He was like, "If something like that happens, what do we do?" So we looked into the book and played around with it and said, "Well, OK. By definition, you can't anticipate them. That's probably not the way to go. But a lot of time, what kills organizations or kills initiatives are the basic things that somebody forgot about or seemed like they were working and they didn't."

So, as I was pondering that, I thought about a scene from the original movie, *Ghostbusters*, where the ghost busters are on top of the sky scraper and they've been told that whatever the first thing that pops into their head is going to be the thing that destroys them. And Ray, I think it was, thought of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man because he goes, "He's so safe. I loved him when I was a little kid. He could never do anything to harm us." And all of a sudden, there was a 200-pound Stay Puft Marshmallow Man who is going to kill them.

I thought, you know what, that's basically what we're doing here is let's give them exercises to say, "Well, what's working right now that you don't even think about anymore or what's out of sight out of mind or what are the things that seemed to be going well but if they didn't would start to cause problems?"

Those types of questions they could answer and really go to town on of here are the things that we just don't really focus on but have the potential to either be really good or really bad for us. And then we have them build mini plans around what would happen if those things happen.

So between *Ghostbusters* was the front of that and the backend of it actually came from Rudy Giuliani interestingly enough who was mayor of New York at 9/11. I saw him speak at one of our conferences and he said, "We didn't have a plan for what happens if two planes hit the World Trade Center but we had a lot of smaller response plans and our challenge that day was how do we piece these small plans together to address this cataclysmic event?" It's like yeah, I'm going to put those two things together.

Interestingly, both came out of New York, *Ghostbusters* and the Giuliani example, and gave them away as an organization to anticipate what some of those big things could be and then be ready for them.

So yeah, some of our things are traditional and some of them come from movies, TV shows, reality shows. We'll pull from anywhere to help people think about stuff.

Nick Skillicorn: Mike, it has been wonderful speaking with you. One thing I like to ask before we finish the interviews with all the experts is if you've got one tip or one actionable insight that people can get some value out of by trying out this afternoon or this week, what would you recommend they try?

Mike Brown: I think the easiest one is the next strategy meeting or creativity meeting or innovation meeting you're going to, drop your list of who you would traditionally invite, you would typically have there. And then go and invite two other people that you would never think inviting to that meeting, maybe an emerging leader in the organization, it may be the person who challenges every idea. Those are the people who are going to come to the meeting and just be natural instigators, natural disruptors of your thought patterns.

And they'll get benefit out of it. They'll get access. And you'll get a chance to see them. So that's really easy. Just find those two people who you wouldn't typically invite to that meeting and invite them. Get them involved.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. And we're going to get links down to your resources below the video here. Can you just let people know what they'll find if they'll go there?

Mike Brown: Yeah. In Brainzooming.com, we've got over 2,000 blog posts about what we do and not, "Hey, you can buy it from us." But, "Here's how you can go use these approaches. Here's how you can build on them." We've got ebooks on innovation and strategy. So again, you can take this and start to make it very actionable in your own organization. That's all at Brainzooming.com.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. Mike, it has been wonderful having you here and I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

Mike Brown: Thank you very much, Nick. Take care and good success with the summit. Thank you.