

One Knight in Product - E181 - Daniel Stillman

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SPEAKERS

Daniel Stillman, Jason Knight



Jason Knight 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show. I'm your host, Jason Knight, and on each episode of this podcast, I'd be having inspiring conversations with passionate people in and around the wonderful world of Product Management. If those sound like the sorts of conversations you want to be a part of, why not lend us your ears and come and join me and some of the finest thought leaders and practitioners in the world on <https://www.oneknightinproduct.com>, where you can sign up to the newsletter, subscribe on your favourite podcast app or follow the podcast on social media, and guarantee you never miss another conversation again. On tonight's episode, we ignore Elvis Presley's advice and have a little more conversation, or rather a conversation about conversation design. What on earth is conversation design? Are all conversations designed, whether we want to design them or not? How can we make sure we're fostering psychological safety in our organisations and designing the right kinds of conversations to have with our colleagues? And is it possible to debug our conversation of operating system and make sure we don't crash and burn in the next big meeting? answers to all these questions and much more. Please join me on One Knight in Product.



Jason Knight 01:11

So my guest tonight is Daniel Stillman. Daniel is a coach facilitator and conversation designer who says he wants to help drive change through dialogue and hates sheep dipping organisational transformations. Now, as someone who grew up in the countryside, I'm gonna say that can't be all that baa-a-ad. Daniel started out life handling video cassette tapes, but he's now aiming to help people have blockbuster conversations and help organisations, leaders and teams get better at talking to each other and optimising for conversational impact, given some of the people I've worked with their desired impact could well just be getting people to stop talking to them. But I'm hoping to get some tips tonight on how to break the ice. find common ground. Hi Daniel, how are you tonight?



Daniel Stillman 01:46

Well, I really appreciate that you talked about my first job which involved some difficult conversations we can get into at some point, but I'm doing great. I'm really glad to be here.



Jason Knight 01:57

I'm glad to have you. I hope you weren't talking to the sheep. But I did have to ask for the record. What is a sheep dip organisational transformation.



Daniel Stillman 02:03

So sheep dipping, you may have seen in the field, like just actual sheep dipping is when you take a bunch of sheep and you sort of walk them through a solution, a literal solution of you know, some sort of fungicide or bacteria side or what have you that like, treats them. Sheep dipping org transformations are ones where we dip people in a solution, which might be like, oh, let's give them agile training. Let's teach everyone a product mindset. Let's teach everyone Design Thinking whatever the de jour what I would say, conversation design is like the model the theory. And you and I both know, right? What happens after those is some thing but not enough, often not a lot. There's a difference between talking and action words and deeds. And there's a big gap between and all the people who go through such a cheap dipping experience. And the length. Basically, there's research on this, I've written an article about it, I can we can put a link to it, where we talked about like, what's the minimum viable transformation. And the studies show, there's a couple of great TED talks on this, where it's like, it actually only takes like 3% of the population fully engaged in the change to create the change. Whereas often I've definitely heard people saying, like, no, we want everyone to have this. so on so forth. So I think cheap dipping is where like you just like, hey, we're gonna do a one hour workshop for everybody or a webinar. And like, that's just not enough. There's just not enough. We know this.



Jason Knight 03:42

Yeah, there's that whole adage about people just effectively suffering through the course or suffering through the certification or whatever, just to kind of get through it, and then immediately forgetting it as soon as they leave the room. But I also do have to say, I did grow up in the countryside. My best friend did once fall into a sheep dip tank. So I'm well aware of the perils of sheep dipping.



Daniel Stillman 04:01

Well, here's the thing, sheep dipping works. Sheep dipping works, because it is a literal solution. But I think, a one hour webinar, where nobody's like, I mean, this is where I talk about conversation design, right? It's like where there's no dialogue, there's no simulation, there's no reflection, there's no, hey, let's come back in two weeks and talk about how we did. There's no commitment, there's no peer coaching. There's no structures and systems have conversations in place to like, actually ensure that the conversation doesn't like just die off, but keeps going.

We want to start a conversation about agility, but we don't put the energy into continue the conversation about agility and to me that's like, clearly a waste of time and money and every bet everybody who's in those situations, knows it.



Jason Knight 04:52

Yeah, gotta check those boxes, though. Gotta check those boxes.



Daniel Stillman 04:56

Yeah, yeah, but I'd rather not engage in sheep dipping, because it's it because I, I don't I'm not gonna lie, I've done it. We've all we've, if there are consultants listening like we've done it, but I've just chosen to like, say to clients like, hey, what's the last time you really got value for money out of this? And then let's do something differently instead.



Jason Knight 05:16

Makes a lot of sense. Well, we could talk about the ins and outs of sheep dripping all night.



Daniel Stillman 05:21

We could! Next on One Knight in sheep dipping.



Jason Knight 05:25

Now that would be baa-a-ad. Anyway. So you, as discussed in the intro, you're an executive coach, your lead facilitator, you're a conversation designer, the conversation factory. So yes, I know all of those words individually mean, but what are you, yourself, specifically working on day to day at the Conversation Factory?



Daniel Stillman 05:44

Well, I mean, mostly conversations. So yeah, look, my theory is that we're all conversation designers. I mean, like you here, Jason Knight, like you sent me a survey with some basic questions. That's a way of designing the conversation.



Jason Knight 05:56

Don't give it away!



Daniel Stillman 05:57

Well, I mean, look, I mean, we could have an agenda and agenda is a design for a conversation. Right? And not having an agenda is a design for a converse. Improv is a design for a conversation, right? I've coached leaders on this where it's like, Oh, do you have a plan for your one on ones to get the most value out of them? And some people just their mental model, they're designed for the conversation as well just rock up and see what's what's going on. And you know what, like, there's nothing wrong with that. And there's other people who are like, no, no, there's four questions I asked every time. Like, how are you on the whelmed to underwhelmed overwhelmed? Spectrum? What's keeping you up at night? How can I What can I get out of your way? And they're like, these are my questions. And so they have in their minds are designed for it. And so to me, I think that is one way to look at designing conversations. You can think of it as like stakeholder management, all the people who like try to get all the cats herded. Sheep dipping, we can also talk about cat herding, right? The people who herd cats who have the mental models for change management, I would look at it as well, I'm really trying to like, shape the conversation in the organisation about blank. And I think that the lens for me is once I start, you start to look at conversations that way. It just gives you a new lens. So for me, like I came from industrial design, to product design, to, you know, product design for me, God, like 15 years ago now just meant physical products. And when I met my first digital product designer, I was like your design products were you talking about? Because it was very early days in product design, interaction design HCI, all of that was just sort of emerging. And I was like, okay, so wait, that is product design. But then people said, no, no, we're actually doing service design. We're doing experience design. And I think each of those lenses on what it is that we're doing, changes how we do it. And I remember the first time I heard someone use the term conversation design to describe their practice of creating facilitative experiences for senior leadership teams, so that the conversation inside of the organisation can change. I was like, What do you how do you design a conversation? What does that even mean? Like because I know how to design spaces. Right? I studied that in school, like, I know how to design interfaces, because I studied, I went to like lots of interaction design conferences, like and there's rules and guidelines, there's best practices for all of these types of design. But when it comes to conversation design, like we've all been to show of hands in podcast land, like how many meetings have you been to that are just God awful or useless, or a waste of your time? And that's where I think the distribution of yeah, this is Jason is counting on his fingers. He's run out of fingers. And this is where I think the distribution of skill intelligence and expertise in conversation design is sorely lacking. Now, I mean, problem is Jason, I started this idea of conversation design and decided to write a book about designing conversations in like 2018. And then like, voice user interface became much much more on the ascendant and in 2019 2020, people were like, oh, so like, Alexa, like you do Alexa skills. And I get, like so many recruiters trying to, like, sell me on like remote voice user interface projects. And that's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about every day you are in conversations with people and you either know how to shape them well, or you don't. And to me, I think like nine times out of 10, the coaching conversations I have with leaders are there against a wall on a very challenging conversation. And I say leadership is the skill, the ability to create the conditions for a transformational conversation to create a breakthrough where, like everyone's stuck, and we can help people get unstuck by asking the right question by offering the right insight, but in service of what we want to create more of, that's a very long tirade about, about all this stuff.



Jason Knight 10:01

That's good, though, because it means that you've answered all my questions, and we can all go down the pub. There's obviously plenty of stuff to dig into there, much of which we're going

to dig into in the next handful of minutes. But, yeah, I wanted to also talk about I mean, you kind of alluded to it, slightly, your background, but you've gone into industrial design, you've got product design, you're now in conversation design. And you kind of alluded to the fact that you'd kind of heard the phrase conversation design elsewhere. And that really then sort of leads into my next question, which is, how on earth you got into this stuff, man? You talked about having some ropey meetings and some bad conversations yourself in the past. But what was it that actually got you into this as a trade? And yeah, made this your passion?

D

Daniel Stillman 10:44

Well, I mean, like, I again, I think, in the same way, that there's a lot of ways to apply the thing. So for many years, I was working as a when I guess in the UK, you might call like, being a trainer, right? Where I was doing a lot of sheep dipping transformations on design thinking. Because I honestly, I'm still a true believer and lover of design thinking as a really powerful way of, you know, it's a big arc of how to design a conversation, divergent, emergent, convergent, like, discover, define, develop, deliver, like, it's such a great arc of a conversation from, what's the problem? What's the insight? Who is this really for, like all the product conversations, right? And the question for me was like, Where in the value chain? Do I want to exist? Because I did a lot of those experiences. But one of the things I realised was, I'm sure you've had this experience, where people are like, Oh, the wrong people are in this room.



Jason Knight 11:42

Yeah, normally it's me.

D

Daniel Stillman 11:44

The right people are not in this room. They're like, Oh, senior management should be here. Why isn't why aren't they part of this conversation? And that's something that happened to me for years where I was training, middle managers, even senior managers, and they would hit walls, they would come back, then the coaching conversations would do these group coaching conversations. And they would say, like, you know, I'm trying to draw more in my meetings and my boss's, like, What the hell is this poster you just made? Like, where's the PowerPoint deck? Right. And we all know, universally speaking that PowerPoint is the worst way to create a space for creative thinking. And but there's a lot of organisations that are stuck in like, Oh, this is how we have conversations we PowerPoint at each other. Right? Yes, sorry. I can see this is bringing up trauma for you...



Jason Knight 12:30

No, it's just as interesting because it feels to me and I've certainly been guilty of this myself in the past. And in fact, even did a presentation today, which had a few bullet points in it. Almost that the PowerPoint, to your point about being the conversation. There's like the PowerPoints almost the skeleton of the conversation that they put up on the screen, and they kind of just talk about each bullet point as it comes up in kind of animated fashion. Yeah. And to be honest, those are the good ones, because actually, the bad ones are like a wall of text. Which is a little

bit different to the thing that you're talking about. So people are having to try and understand all the texts and read all the texts whilst you're talking about something to decide or that or, yeah, something going deep on one part of it. And they're trying to kind of basically taken two completely separate sources of insight at the same time, if there's any insight, even in Naomasa, being a kind of a drummer having to play two hands separately, but it's a very hard skill. It is. And I guess, what you're gonna say is that you've got a solution to that.

D

Daniel Stillman 13:29

Well, I mean, that's, like, that's a whole other conversation. Like, obviously, I think Amazon's approach to like, or, you know, the one pager or Matt LeMay, who I, you know, I know, you know, like, you know, the one page one hour rule, I had him on my podcast to talk about his one page one hour manifesto, and the idea of like, can you just explain it one page, spend an hour on it, because the the the Amazon like, six pager is actually a 40 pager that it takes somebody like days to do. And I think that's kind of insane. But to go back to the question of like, my pathway and conversation design, at some point I realised, before I met the people who talked about their work as conversation design. There were a group in Australia called Second road. They got acquired by Accenture a few years ago, I had realised that what I was doing was facilitation, I had this name that sort of appeared in the ether of like, Oh, I'm facilitating, and I started to realise I can teach other people how to facilitate because design thinking without facilitation is actually pretty poor. I'm thinking of all the worst words to use, like flaccid, impotent, it's like it's not effective, right? You need its to you need the yin and yang, of not just the map, but somebody who can be the Wayfinder in that map. And I really loved teaching people those skills. But I think for me, one of the things I realised was, it was often the way training is done the way given the way facilitation is done is it's kind of transactional. You'd come in and you do a half day or a couple of days or you do a week long sprint And, and I'd really struggled with. And for all the consultants out there, I don't think this is a very unique challenge of really developing a deeper relationship with my clients of like, not just coming in, and being a fly by night, pun intended. And there's two halves to the the benefits me to be in a deeper relationship with my client, because I get to see the impact, I get to learn more about how things really work for them. So I can be more helpful, but it's also more financially sustainable to say, Well, look, you've got a juicy problem, like I know a workshop isn't gonna solve it. So let's talk about what would it look like to work together for a quarter and see if that works. And then let's commit to a year. And so for me, that looks a lot more like, that's why executive coaching works for me, because it's less, it's more relational and less transactional. And it's also because of the work that I've done. I've been in a men's group for the last four years, I've been co leading a men's group, I coach and teach men's group skills, which is like facilitation, but on, on mushrooms, I guess basically, it's a much more, you know, instead of just facilitating, like, what we what we are going to think and do, it's like how we feel and the way we are. And because of my own interest in that other type of work. That's where I was like, actually want to design conversations that include the inner work as well as the outer work. And that's where working with founders and leaders a lot of impostor syndrome, and like, my business has been like x for the last decade, but I really liked my business to be like, Why for the next decade, those are really hard questions. And a lot of personal stuff comes up in it. And so to me, the kinds of conversations I enjoy, I used to enjoy. And I'm still good at facilitating like 100 people in a room for an hour, right? But that's and there's not like that's a big circus, versus like, getting with two co founders in a room and getting them to slow down and say, what's really going on, and why it's hard for them to get aligned, and unlocking empathy between them so that they can keep building instead of breaking up and destroying the company. Not hypothetically.



Jason Knight 17:19

So there's been at least one that you've seen do that.



Daniel Stillman 17:24

I've been part of that.



Jason Knight 17:26

Well, you know, we'll talk about that later. We'll have a good conversation about that. But let's talk about some of those skills that you've been alluding to, and maybe some of the practical steps that people can do. And some of the, I guess hallmarks of a good conversation, because I think you've already alluded to, again, the the concept that we're all having conversations all the time, we're having conversations at work amongst colleagues, with leaders, with customers, all of those people. And you've written a book called Good talk, which promises a step by step framework to help us all design conversations that matter. So go into the very heart of conversational design.



Daniel Stillman 18:01

Yes... available wherever fine books are sold.



Jason Knight 18:07

And all the ropery places as well. But,. just as an elevator pitch version for that book, then like, what would you say the ultimate use case for that book is and the desired audience or the ideal audience for that book?



Daniel Stillman 18:20

Yeah, I mean, like, I really tried to make something my real dream one of my, some of my favourite books, or what I would call bathroom books. Yep, they're books that you can leave by the loo, I believe you call it and you can kind of open to any one page. So like, there's a book I have over here called The Decision Book, which I like highly recommend. Do you know The Decision Book?



Jason Knight 18:42

I do not. But I get the feeling I'll get to all know it.

D

Daniel Stillman 18:44

So it's 50 models for strategic thinking. And it's one of these things where, like, every spread or so they kind of break their layout structure, which bothers me as a as a designer. I'm like, is it really like? My friend Abby covert who wrote a book how to make sense of any mess. I learned from her like one page one idea. And I made one spread. Like, one larger idea. And for me, I tried to look at what are the conversations that matter? So there's just the spectrum of size. Like I looked at it from a very dumb physics, I have a degree in physics, and I was like, Okay, well, there's big conversations or small conversations. I didn't expect to read a chapter about conversations with ourselves, but I think they're obviously really important. I talked about like, the nature of a two person conversation. So like, think of like one on ones and conversations with your friends with your mom, and like bigger conversations, like team conversations, and then bigger than that, like community and culture. So I think anybody who's trying to create a shift in any of these conversations, each section is about one of those specific sizes of conversation and tries to offer like, one framework, an exercise As a story about each bit so that you can like, just sit down and kind of like, see a picture and like look at the framework. And if you I find books very, very confrontational. So to me, like being able to be like, Oh, you mean I can open up any page, and like, like, look at two or three things and kind of like, get something that to me is easier to digest a book. So that's my, that's my my micro pitch. Talk, just put it by your bathroom. I wish I'd made it slightly smaller. Yep. My publisher wanted to make it six by nine, which is like the standard business book. And I'm like, No, dude, that's a really, like, let's make it five by eight. It's just a cuter size. And to me, that's the conference like this is even smaller. This I think is like, four by six. I love this size. Because this is like a very, this is almost like you could put in your breast pocket. That to me is conversation design. Can I take this with me and be in relationship to it? Whenever I want to be?



Jason Knight 21:04

Yeah, rather than some of these ridiculous, massive hardcover books.

D

Daniel Stillman 21:07

And you're like, oh, and your publisher tells you? Yes. And you read when you because you're gonna write a book, and you will you should, they'll tell you like, oh, it's got to be 350 pages, or 250, at least in order to be taken seriously. And I say like, write a friendly book. Oh, yeah, write a small book. And people love small books. Smaller, the better. Yeah, the smaller, the better. This book could have been a Medium post. Nobody wants to be in that situation.



Jason Knight 21:35

Maybe not that small. Now, but let's talk then about some of the skills that the book teaches you then. So yeah, within the book, you've got the conversation OS canvas, which provides some structure to designing conversations. And I believe there are nine points in there. So we don't have to go through them all one by one in like, excruciating detail. But I wonder if you could give maybe a flavour of how the canvas is laid out. And some of the key considerations when designing a conversation.

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Daniel Stillman 22:03

Totally. So like, I'll give like a little bit of backstory if I can.

D

Daniel Stillman 22:07

My perspective came partly from my physics and my industrial design perspective, where I thought to myself, I understand the materiality of my first semester, in design school and industrial design school and Pratt, in Brooklyn, we did this class, where would they would tremble us around the New York City area, and there's actually a lot of light industry still here. You go to like, an aluminium casting factory. And then we learn how aluminium is cast. And then we would have to design something that was like in that style. And then you're like, Okay, so now we're going to do metal spinning, which is such a cool process. And we're like, Okay, well design something for metal spinning, or roto, moulded plastic. And that's where I started to realise each material dictates something about form, you say form follows function. But the material also dictate something about form. And when we were before we started recording, you're talking about your mental CPU, which is a really great metaphor to unpack. The question is like, what is what kind of software is your mental CPU running? What's its operating system? And what's its clock speed. And the basic truth is, in general, everybody's running some basic software. And everybody's got their own programmes running on that OS. And one of the biggest challenges, I think, in all conversation design, there's this classic quote, that the biggest challenge in communication is the illusion that it has taken place. And the reason that happens is because I can think it's really hard to study how fast we can think. And there's some great books about it, Charles spinning around the voices within there's a great Atlantic article about it, that I absorbed his book through, I'm still working through as much larger book of how do we internalise speech as we grow older, because you can watch kids kind of talk to themselves, you have kids. So you see that they kind of like Coach themselves as they're going through challenges. Yep. And we can think, like, you could kind of clock it at 1000s of words per minute. In the sense that it's actually in some sense is almost instantaneous that you put together like five or six things and images. And to explain what you just thought of to someone actually can take several minutes while I was thinking about this, and then I realised that and then I knew there was this other thing that I forgot about, and then boom, I realised this. And all of that happened in an instant. We can only speak at 125 words per minute. And so, to me, I think one of the most fundamental things about everybody's conversation operating system is that the cadence and turn taking so those are two elements of the OS canvas. There's this expectation that when I have been talking too long, someone should step in. When I stop, you should speak because cadence the cadence. instead, we expect is about 200 milliseconds that only gap, a gap of like more than 200 milliseconds feels like dead air, it takes us approximately 600 milliseconds to kind of put together what we're really what we really want to say. And so usually what's happening is because of us a bad 400 milliseconds, yeah, so usually, that's why people go like, um, or, you know, what I was thinking. Or what people are really doing is they kind of stop listening 100% to someone in the back third of what someone's saying. And so, in order to create really deep conversations, one of the things you have to do is change the cadence. So as a facilitator, we say, slow things down, we have a Talking Stick, say, Jason is going to finish. And we say, Jason, are you complete, I'm complete, you have to actually indicate that you're done. And you've we've all seen this, everyone here, listening knows this, where, hey, I know where you're going with this. And it's a stupid idea. Right? And...



Jason Knight 22:07

Yeah, for sure.



Jason Knight 26:02

Again, you're having a go at me again!



Daniel Stillman 26:04

No, well I mean... It's like, we've all done this, because we want to speed things up. And so to me, yeah. Look, I've done all these workshops, where I asked people like, what do you think conversations are made out of? And then let's subdivide by what we think we can actually shape. And so we could say conversations are made of words like speech acts, we can control what we say sometimes not picking on you again, Jason. People say like emotions and vibes. And I'm like, Yeah, but I can't actually control my emotions. I know that. I know, I can't control someone else's emotions. So the elements of the conversation though, as canvas are ones that I was thinking as a facilitator, what can I actually like, get my hands on, and that's why space, the interface for the conversation is so important. So there's some elements of the conversation of his canvas that are like very chunky, like, turn taking and cadence and space, and goals. And people because we know that small conversations are less complex. A person's conversations with themselves are very complex. A two person conversation is everything I meant to say everything you think I said, everything I thought you said, like layered on top of each other. But when you add three or four or five people, it gets really hairy, really fast. Which is why the, you know, the people who design sprint conversation, say, look, seven, capping it out at seven. And we've got to have a decider, we're designing the conversation to say, at some point, we're at a time who gets to make the call. So that's designing power structures in the conversation. We're normally it's unclear who gets to make the call, especially at flat organisations. So in like in Google at large, by the way, the sprint is just more of a dialogue, because there is no decider. So deciding what the power structures are, well, who gets to decide what the power structures are. So power is an element of the OS. Canvas, like, can we intentionally redesign the power structures have a conversation to say, who gets to kick someone out? Who gets to invite people in? I mean, I was just talking to a friend of mine, who's a consultant. He's like, Oh, my God, we've done seven revisions of this report, because secret stakeholders keep showing up and offering notes. And we have to do another revision. And my boss has offered them two extra revisions because they just feel bad. Well, that's, that's all their conversation. We didn't design the conversation well enough. So these are all elements of the OS canvas. To me, I think the two that are weirdest, most ephemeral, but I think most important are narrative, or threading. So like in conversations, there's like a thread. Like we try to pick up the thread, we lose the thread. And threading winds up looking like what's the story of what's happening? How is each moment of the conversation connected to another. And I was just, I just got off a call this morning with two co founders separately that are having a real come to Jesus moment where each of them has a story of what the last five years has entailed. Right, one of them has very strong feelings about why it has to be one way. And another of them feels a very strong sense of based on the story and the future story I want to write. It's got to be like this. And it's pretty much like, well, who's going to budge? Because I've given up so many times. And this is really like this is where story, one of the hardest things to see and shift. But once you start to see stories as an element of conversations, can we shift the stories and conversations? It's legitimately hard? That's I mean, that I've talked about most of them,

but to me, I think it's up to everyone to decide what they are capable of shifting, because it's everyone has to decide for themselves. Like, you know, can I speak up? Can I take power in this moment and say, Hey, I don't think we're actually on track. Or we're not meeting the goals of this conversation. Everyone has that power, but taking that power in order to shift the conversation is actually really legitimately hard.



Jason Knight 30:02

How much of that is about... really, I mean, I'm sure it's part of conversation design, but really fostering a culture of psychological safety where people are actually able to speak up in front of people that potentially will have more de facto power than them and actually having a confidence, like, you know, like you see in like the Netflix book about Trump, how it's almost seen as an abrogation of responsibility if you don't speak truth to power, but I don't necessarily feel that that's the case in a rather large number of companies.



Daniel Stillman 30:32

So the question is, like, I don't I think I've definitely worked with people who have asked the very legitimate question, but well, how do I actually foster psychological safety? They want to know, how do I design a conversation to make sure that happens? And I would say, in your one on ones on a weekly or bi weekly basis, saying, What feedback do you have for me, and actually demonstrating that you can take it in a meeting, saying, I'd like to hear everyone's perspective. And I'd like everyone to tell me like it's built. That's why I say it's still you design the conditions. For that transformative conversation, you can't just say, oh, let's have a psychologically safe conversation. After years of abuse, you have to week on week, create the conditions for psychological safety by slowing down and inviting it, by making it clear that the power to decide is not just going to be rested in you, but in the team, that there's a reason for them to speak up that they will be heard. And so I think, the how to do it on a day by day, week, by week, month, by month basis comes down to you can structure it, and you can even fake it till you make it right. Like, if a leader is like God, I just I just say, I can't I keep like cutting my people off. And they you know, my engagement scores are low, and I'm not getting creativity. And I say, Well, okay, well, can you slow down? Can you just It's what my parents would say, can you count to three? Or four? Can you structure a meeting where you make sure that everyone gets to speak? Can you bring in a check in at the beginning of each meeting where people say, I'm feeling in the red or I'm feeling in the yellow and I'm in the green? Can you actually create a space where everyone feels like they personally matter how they are matters. So I think even if you are not an empathetic leader, and you notice, like I hear all this BS about, like, I don't know, caring about people and making them feel safe or some shit, like, I don't know, how do I trick people into thinking I care? I'd say, oh, okay, cool. Like, you're a terrible person. But if you do this check in, people will start to feel like they matter. So I think like you, yes, psychological safety, but how psychologically? How do we create that? Like, it doesn't come for free?



Jason Knight 32:52

Well, I guess there's also an argument that if they're faking it, that at least a it kind of gives the effect anyway, if they fake it, well, like you kind of just touched on. Yeah, but also maybe that does suddenly start to nudge them as well. Like it says the nudge them into thinking that that's

actually a good thing. And even if they're just pretending for the rest of their lives, at least they kind of internalised the behaviours and Yeah, gotta make themselves look like psychologically safe leaders, at the very least, even if they don't really feel it in their heart of hearts.

D

Daniel Stillman 33:19

Yes, my friend, Fred Dust, who wrote a book called Making Conversation. He's an ex, IDEO big wig,



Jason Knight 33:25

You designed it and he made it. This is like a great little partnership going...

D

Daniel Stillman 33:29

No, I know. It's really funny. Because we had a conversation, our books came out at a similar time. And I was like, Oh, my God, it's there's somebody else who thinks this way. It was very nice. And he was like, got my publisher wouldn't let me use the word design. And I'm like, making conversation. Is this great? You know, it's a double entendre in the same way that my book Good talk is a double entendre. Hey, good talk. But he said, like, he's kind of against this idea of active listening, because it is kind of mechanical. But at the same time, active listening is one of these things like you can mechanically train yourself to just parrot back what somebody said. And because of the talking, thinking gap, there's always more that someone could say, there's literally member it's 4000 words per minute to like, 125 words per minute. So it's, it's a factor of 10 more that they've got on their mind. And so act what I think once I've said this at a keynote a couple of months ago, where a group of tech founders really got it, they're like, Oh, my God, there's a fundamental flaw in the operating system of conversations because I to assume that I've heard what they meant to say everything they meant to say is flawed. And so once they realised that they were looking at it through the wrong lens, active listening is a great way to say well, okay, so you just said this, is did I get that right? And so that's where active listening becomes an app. act that is based on a fundamental belief that there's no way you heard everything that they wanted to say about it. And active listening is just a good way of designing a conversation to get more from the person about what they were, what about what they really meant to say. And the fact that you probably got it wrong, because you were thinking half the time. And so to me, active listening is a great trick. It's a great way to redesign conversations. It's a durable design, say, have I heard you say this? Is that right? And they say, yeah, yeah. And then you say, is there more and they go, Yeah, this, and then you, I have an article about what I call the listening triangle. Or the rather listing triangle model that I stole from HBr. They just didn't make a nice, they didn't draw a nice picture for it. And it's like, okay, so you triangulate, you say, Oh, I listened, I reflected. Now I'm gonna ask again. And then I'm going to listen again, I'm going to keep doing that until you're like, Okay, I'm ready to move on to the next subject. So that's where you're active listening isn't enough? Because you need to re ask you say, so it sounds like you're saying this. And then you ask a little bit differently, and then they tell you more. And if you're trying to do product conversations with someone, everyone knows, if you're doing user interviews, there's no way and that's actually how I got started and realising conversations. Needed redesigning, I was doing a lot of customer interviews, and I was like, Oh, my God, like, I'm gonna ask my next question in the list while

they're about to give me more information about my last question. And below, and they say, Oh, what did you want to say? And they're like, I can't remember it. Nevermind, you're like, Well, shit. Now, I'm never gonna, like, learn what it is that they were saying. So learning how to slow down a little bit, and ask a little bit more. That is a way to redesign conversations just to get better stuff out of people.



Jason Knight 36:39

I think it's interesting from a coaching perspective as well, that kind of playback and reframing and restating things, yeah, is really helpful not only to make sure that you've heard them properly, but it actually actually lets them know what what they just said sounded like as well. And I've had so many occasions where coaches have been like, oh, yeah, no, I get it now. But just by the fact that you just say to them, and they kind of realise either how good or bad or indifferent the things they said sounded, when played back to them through someone else's ears, and they start to realise, maybe some of the things that they've missed out, or some of the things that they almost get to realise what they should concentrate on. Without even having to tell them, which I think is like the very core of coaching, right?



Daniel Stillman 37:21

It's a very powerful aspect of it that in the book, there's a story that I heard on NPR about a woman who would go walk her dog and like, leave herself voice messages about what was on her mind, and then listen back to them. And it's so powerful to see your thoughts laid out that way. And I've done this for myself, now I use a lot of automated, I have an automated transcription service that I use for my coaching clients, and I can just get on a zoom call with myself and talk some things out and then look at the transcript with myself. And be like, Wow, okay, yeah, I see what I'm thinking there. And I can kind of piece together my thoughts. When somebody asks me like, Oh, are you like, will I get something out of coaching, like, how good of a coach are you, there's this idea of rubber ducking, and I would say to somebody, like, if you can commit to taking a two hour bath every other week with yourself, and just really talking things out to a rubber duck and recorded the conversations, looked at the transcript and then spend another 20 or 30 minutes doing sensemaking from it, you would get value from that, you'd also get very pruning fingers, that they would get value out of it. But I found that like most people will have a really hard time committing to themselves. Right? This is why I like group fitness is so powerful. This is why peer groups are so powerful. And this is why consultants are powerful. Sometimes I think people are just paying for their own time. Right. And so because a client is paying me, it's much there's there's just a higher commitment level. So they're not going to flake on the call. Plus, I asked good questions. A rubber duck just sits there and, and squeaks. So I think I mean, this is why therapy is useful. This is why coaching is useful. For anybody who's a verbal processor, I think it is very hard to pull apart all of the elements of our own internal conversation, because we have multiple stakeholders we have what I think I should do, what I think I deserve, what I ought to do, what I can't do all of these elements, like what my mother would do, like what my co founder would do, what would make people proud, what would make people angry, all of these different stakeholders, and we just have to pull them apart and figure out like, what do I really want? Such an important question.



Jason Knight 39:32

No, absolutely. But let's bring that back then to that OS canvas. And yeah, you talked a lot about some of the things that you do to fill that Canvas in basically and to design those conversations. But is this then something that you were effectively doing before each individual conversation or is it something where maybe you send some norms and rules and expectations kind of effectively, globally, that you kind of always have within your organisation and maybe tweak it or do you have I see design every time.

D

Daniel Stillman 40:01

I think that's a great question. So, slowing things down, for example, like looking at the cadence of the conversation, and focusing on turn taking, will just, you know, for any leader listening for anybody who's in meetings, just doing that, you can say, Oh, I'm going to do active listening. So for me, realising that the function of active listening is slowing down the conversation, and using my turn, not to say more, but to learn more, is a reprogramming of my operating system, because some people are programmed to take every opportunity to like, drive the conversation forward and get more or say more or push more. Right. And so I think there's just like global general ways that people can reboot their OS. And just look at like, hey, globally, am I getting what I need out of my conversations? And what needs to shift? versus using the OS Canvas as a lens to say, Okay, we're having this off site, right? What do I want the cadence or the goals? What people? What's the story? I want them to say about it afterwards, like so you can use it as a lens for a big conversation. I know that when people say conversation design, this is a quick question that comes up like, oh, do I have to design every goddamn conversation? And I say, Well, you are. But you are already designing them, either with a habitual, outmoded, Steve Jobs who should be quoted cautiously because he was a bit of a jerk. And, and we, you know, he's brilliant man. He pointed out like, the whole world has been designed by people who are no smarter than us. And this means that we have the opportunity to redesign the world. And that means that like, why are so many meetings when we had meetings in person in an office with a long table, where there's a TV at one end, and a brick wall, and a felt wall? And then like a glass wall? And it's like, where do I put my sticky notes like you've had this drive had this problem? These are not spaces that were designed for collaborative conversations. And so really looking at the whatever conversations that matter most to you. And then asking yourself, Am I getting what I need? What can I change? How do I want to change it? What change? Can I commit to? What does good look like on the other side, then I think it's worth the juice is going to be worth the squeeze. I don't think everyone needs to go around asking like, oh my god, do I need to redesign this 20 interrupts? What do you say? Like, look, if I'm not getting what I want out of my one on ones, I should probably look at redesigning them. Maybe I need to bring in more coaching skills or more active listening perspectives, whatever it is, if I'm not getting what I need two out of my all hands meetings, a classically poor designed meeting, a gathering, right? If I'm not getting what I need at home, I mean, men and women in heterosexual relationships often have incredibly complex challenges getting along after many years, because of the ways that men and women are acculturated to tend to speak. Obviously, there's like incredible diversity in how people approach conversations. Women are punished for seeming bossy, right? It's like women get this feedback all the time. And, and when I coach women, and they're being told they're getting feedback in their annual reviews, that they're bossy. I'm like, Okay, you have the option to look at that, and see what you can do to change that story. But acknowledge that that's a lot of work. And probably some of this is based on them looking at you through a much longer story of how women are supposed to be. Right. And so engaging, that conversation carries a lot of baggage. And so do they want to redesign that conversation? Or would they like to go to a company, pull

up stakes and go to a company where there's just more balanced leadership and where women aren't seen through that negative lens. So to me, it's always we can design our conversations better, of course, every single one can be. But it takes time. It takes effort, it takes care and love and patience and attention. And I want people to get juice for whatever squeeze that they put into it.



Jason Knight 44:19

Now, absolutely. I think there's a lot of very important points there. And I think also just to call out that one really important thing and I've chatted to others about this in the past is being the upstander in the room as well, when you see some of that stuff happening to actually try and call out. Totally. Like for example, if you see that happening to a woman, it's just important to actually stand up for that person and call out the person that's exhibiting those behaviours, which is yeah, maybe not 100% designing a conversation but I think it's just good etiquette and hygiene and...



Daniel Stillman 44:47

Oh, it is absolutely designing a conversation because everyone has the ability to speak up. But again, men who speak up are seen as you know, taking initiative and being proactive and women who speak up aren't in the book, there's a story about how in the Obama administration, women noticed that their ideas, they would they would pitch an idea or bring up a point. And it would kind of get like kicked around the room. And then eventually, a man would, like speak to it. And he would kind of wind up with you. Have you read this bit that he would kind of wind up with...



Jason Knight 45:22

I've heard this story so many times. It's just become part of the social fabric of the world, I think.



Daniel Stillman 45:28

Yeah. So he, they realised they kind of all got together and you're like, are you seeing what we are seeing? And so they came up with a conversation design strategy. Yep. Which they call the amplification. And you could also look at it as redesigning the thread of the conversation, because we've seen how we've all been in meetings where the thread kind of like drifts, and like we why are we talking about this? Can we bring it back to this? And that is somebody's read, weaving, redesigning the conversation. So the women in the team would just be like, Oh, Tom, really, I'm glad you like Audrey's idea. Your points, really emphasise the core value of Audrey's idea. And we should definitely mark those down in the notes as great. Yes, hands to Audrey's idea. And then when it would go back off again, they're like, Yeah, Thomas, you and you guys are all having great ideas that amplify Audrey's idea. And they were just each all the women colluded to say, we will make sure that we re weave the conversation back to amplification of the originator of the idea when it's a lady. And I was like, That is designing of the conversation. Yeah, it's work. It is work. And eventually, I think Obama noticed it, right. And

it made a difference. And eventually they wrote about it. And that's when people realise, oh my god, this isn't just me, and then everyone can start to do it. And that's what I mean by design, like a design is something where you're like, oh, I can take that design. And I can reuse it someplace else. So when I say rose thorn, bud, like, let's talk about what's good and what's not good and what has potential rose Thorn bud is one of those like hilariously dumb simple conversation designs and like it works good for retro and works good for a one on one. It works good for a year and personal reflection. It's great for like, my wife and I do a daily rose Thorn, but when we're like, on vacation, because it helps us remember what's going on. It's just good. In the same way that active listening fundamentally redesigns, conversations for the better. All women realising that this is a flaw in the operating system. Live they can do something about it is good.



Jason Knight 47:48

No, absolutely something that we should all try and help out with as best we can. We need to make sure that we can 100% Again, be those upstanders and make sure that we call people out and drive good behaviours like we talked about earlier. Like maybe you don't fix it all in one go. But if you can fix it step by step and nuts, nuts nuts, then yeah, yeah, hopefully you get someone good at the end of it.



Daniel Stillman 48:08

Yeah, it's like start where you feel the most pain!



Jason Knight 48:12

We're product people, we prioritise, right?



Daniel Stillman 48:15

Yeah, exactly. Conversation backlog. You can do a kanban make sure you don't have too much conversation debt. By the way, look at your calendars. I guarantee you have conversation that like yeah, there's a I had a podcast guest Emily Levada, who's head of product now at embark veterinary services at the time, she was at Wayfair. And she talked about this two by two matrix of quality, you could think of it as like, I don't have it in front of you like amount, and quality of communication. And if we have like, way too much high quality conversation, we actually can get burnout. And so a leaders job is to like slowly delete amount, until while maintaining quality and until quality starts to suffer. And then you repeat, because we need to have a meeting about meetings. Most people have tonnes of conversation, backlog debt, like how many meetings a week that are just standing meetings that are no longer serving their purpose?



Jason Knight 49:09

No, 100% And I think, as with everything in the world, product principles basically apply everywhere, right? So like you say, we need to make sure we pay down our conversation debt

everywhere, right? So like you say, we need to make sure we pay down our conversation debt and we're prioritising relentlessly to make sure that we're changing the things that are causing us the most pain and hopefully deliver the most value. Well we could talk about this all night but obviously can't see your time so I do have to ask where can people find you after this if they want to find out more about conversation design in general. Dig into the conversation unless canvas or maybe even see if you've got any old VHS tapes kicking around?

D

Daniel Stillman 49:43

I might still have some I am highly Googled double. <https://www.danielstillman.com> is my my coaching website and then you can people can find links to the book. There's like they can download a bunch of free chapters and some worksheets from the book, all for free there. And they can see my podcast, which you are going to be on very soon. I'm very excited to...



Jason Knight 50:05

I know, who knew? It's almost like we've kind of scratched each other's back on this one or something.

D

Daniel Stillman 50:11

Well. I'm really excited for that conversation. And so I get my... just like you might my podcast is where I learned about how people are designing their conversations as well, or what challenges they have around conversations.



Jason Knight 50:22

Well, I'll make sure to link all of that information into the show notes if you want to send me any links or articles, and I'll make sure to link those into so we get a few people both heading in your direction, sparking up effective conversations and learning a bit about themselves at same time. Yeah. Well, that's been a fantastic, well, conversation. So glad we could spend the time going deep into the concepts of conversation design. Obviously, we'll stay in touch and indeed be chatting soon on your podcast. But as for now, thanks for taking the time.

D

Daniel Stillman 50:52

Jason, thank you so much for the like the really great questions and holding space for this conversation. It's important.



Jason Knight 51:00

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to <https://www.oneknightinproduct.com>, check out some of my other fantastic guests. Sign up to the main missiles subscribe on your favourite

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