

Transcription - Rico Nasol Part 2

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie and this is Inside Exec. Today we're continuing our discussion with Rico Nasol. We're going to look at what a creative leader looks like and also his system of three C's, Confidence, Clarity and Culture. It's interesting that when you look at those three and the way he describes them as being a linear progression so you can't start at one and get good at one and then have the other two, that you actually have to do those three in order. So let's hear what we talked about with Rico.

In terms of creativity, do you, and we have to use the word AI or the acronym, do you see that there is a shift generally towards more creativity in the workplace? Given that we've got this wonderful tool that can help us be a bit more creative.

Yeah, just so we're clear, are you talking about AI or those kinds of tools?

Let's just do tools generally because it's certainly in the workforce. Gone are the days where you had to have a typewriter to be creative or you had to have a drawing tablet to be creative or in my case, I came from the construction industry, so the big change to that industry was that the draftsmen didn't have a board that they drew on, but they had a computer that they could do the plans on. So are we seeing enhanced creativity or are we seeing different creativity?

I think we're actually and I don't want to seem hyperbolic, but I do feel like it's the golden age of creativity. And the reason why I believe that is creativity and creative tools are making everything so accessible nowadays, right? So even my reference of like being a kid, using two VCRs to edit because I didn't have access to editing technology. Now any 10-year-old or 12-year-old or whoever can go, there's CapCut, they're like every platform almost has a version of a non-linear editing tool, right? So creativity is more accessible and what I think this is helping us do is true storytelling to come out and real human experiences to start to come out because people who before wanted to express these human experiences, but weren't able to, now can through the accessibility through all those tools. And if they're wondering like, oh, how do I use Premiere? You can go to YouTube, you can go to these places and learn how to use these tools and you don't need to go to university anymore. You don't need to go to school to learn some of these things. And it's all about refining your craft and whatever that means to you.

So if you're an editor or a product designer, designing more products, using those tools that enable you to do your job faster and better, right? And even why I bring up AI is, I think AI can be dangerous, but I also think AI is a huge tool for creatives. And the one thing that I haven't seen AI do successfully is create human connections, human storytelling, use human emotions, right? I use AI myself as fodder, as inspiration, but AI itself doesn't have a story to tell. What makes me, you and I compelling compared to AI is we have human experiences, we have stories to tell, we have experiences we can share, you know, we have experience with imposter syndrome, we have experience being in the boardroom, we have these experiences that we can share that AI just can't.

Does it then follow that in a, in what we see is probably a more openly creative workforce and

environment that leadership is more difficult?

I don't think it's that leadership would be more difficult, but I think it has to be more involved. So gone are the days of the tastemakers. You know, if you go back in the day, you had a creative, single creative director, that told you what good looks like, right? Like if you didn't look like this, it wasn't good. Like that's almost what the whole MadMan era was, right? The tastemakers are telling you what good looks like.

Now I think everybody who has a perspective and a story to tell, there's an audience there that will connect with that. So I don't think one person can dictate to an entire industry anymore, like what good creative looks like. And so leadership can't look like that either. Leadership now has to foster creativity and what good looks like determined by the audience and determined by the people that are doing the craft, right? So even my time at Netflix, I gave direction and I had a common knowledge of what good looks like. And this is where I think leadership has to come in, is helping define what good looks like. So is it authentic? Is it trust busting? Is it intentional? Right? And so now leaders have to foster that environment, but then leave it to the creatives and the people, the artists to actually make that come to life. So creating environment that fosters creativity instead of being the tastemaker is how I think creative leadership has to evolve or has evolved.

That's great. One of the areas that you send us some feedback from a previous podcast was about cycles and about revisiting old ways. What I'm hearing is that you still think that that's viable and that's valuable. As a leader, what are you going to say to me about how I go about that basically? Because the, you know, in the organization, let's say we've had this one process and we know that there's problems with this process and so now we want to sit down and have a bit of a think tank about how we can change the process. People within the team will suggest, why don't we try this? Someone else will say we've done that before. It doesn't work. How, as a leader, do we bring that together and say, you know, it's cyclical leader. We need to revisit this stuff because things are different now. We can say that. But how can we be convincing about what's different and why it should be considered again?

Absolutely. So I'll use an actual example for this and a lot of it is just about showing evidence that times have changed. So at Netflix when I first got there, so I first got there at 2012, coming off of Zappos where I implemented video descriptions for the first time on an ecommerce platform, first time at scale. So I did that through 2008 until roughly 2010 and then going into Netflix, this is what they wanted. They wanted me to come in and help them crack the code for video. And all I heard was, oh, we tried that. We've tried video here. We've tried video there, right? And so the things I had to combat was, I get it, in 2009 you tried video. But think about what online experiences were in 2009. Think about what online experiences are now in 2014, right? 2009 auto play video and pop ups were like annoying. But by 2014, 2015 people expected video. So you have to bring everyone along for the ride that like, you know, this is definitely how it was before. But human behavior has changed with internet speeds, access to technology, whatever it is, the context has changed. So we can continue to stay in 2009 and say, oh, this doesn't work anymore. Or we can do what the audience is asking for, evolve with the rest of the world. So that's the way I approach it.

And this can happen in the future too. My way of doing it is not going to be the best way.

There's lots of things I did in 2012 in Netflix that were terrible. And we found a way, better ways to scale and to increase productivity as the years went on, as we hired people that were intelligent, that were exposed to different tools, different models. It's just by nature, you bring more people in more ideas are going to flow. So it's just keeping that open mind that solutions can come from anywhere. Human behavior changes, right? All of those things impact how we should lead. And that's the context we should bring into these conversations.

Do you feel that leadership is sometimes driven by technology rather than by speaking?

I think leadership is driven by humanity. The technology is just a way to help us get there.

Okay.

So I look at humanity and being human beings as the way to be a leader. And I look at technology as the platform to get us there.

One of the things that you've talked about is your three C's approach, confidence, clarity and culture. Do you think they're equally weighted?

I do. And I think they're sequential. So it's in that order. So I believe confidence because I know myself and this may not apply to all, because I know some people have extreme confidence in themselves, then they can probably skip that part and move on to the clarity part. But for me, growing up as an immigrant kid, a first generation kid of immigrants, we're always like keep our head down, all those things. And so when I entered the corporate world, I had a lot of confidence issues that I needed to work through as I developed myself and developed other leaders around me. I noticed that this is the same like a lot of people, whether they're immigrants or not, have the same insecurities, a fear of failure, a fear of people finding out they're not good enough or not as smart as they thought I was. So the confidence part is really about identifying your strengths and knowing that nobody's perfect. Nobody has all the strengths, right, in the world. And we just have to identify our gaps and hire for those gaps. But the first part is identifying them and knowing that it's okay.

And like for a long time, I never wanted to say I don't know. Like I felt terrible. Like I should know that. But as you develop as a leader, "I don't know" is totally acceptable answer. And oftentimes the better answer, followed by but I'll go find out or whatever. The confidence piece is really building the confidence in your skills and yourself and your abilities and even your emotional intelligence. That's also part of that.

And then clarity next is how do you communicate well, effectively? How do you create mission, vision, how do you inspire and motivate? Right? How do you get everybody around you to connect what they do to the larger mission and vision of the business? So how do you communicate effectively create that clarity for everyone?

And then the last part is culture. How do you then create these high performing environments? How do you get everybody to bring their best work? How do you become a coach, a mentor? How do you create an environment that's diverse and then has equity and

inclusion? Right? These things are intentionally laid out that way because you can't really start if you don't have your confidence in yourself to be able to have those conversations, to be able to deploy those strategies and tactics. So that's the order of my foundational leadership program.

Okay, so one of our listeners is thinking, yes, I've got those things, I'm confident in all those things and now I'm looking at going into a different role, a different organisation, a different industry, where the culture is already set, where I'm going to be questioned because I haven't been in this industry, I don't have the background in this type of area, whatever it is. How do you get it back into that process? When you know that the culture is the limiting thing, and I ask the question because it is a perennial question that we get through the podcast, is how can we change a culture? How can we fix this culture? How can we develop a culture?" So, organisational culture is something that is uppermost in many leaders minds that we come in contact with.

Yeah, it's a great question. It becomes difficult to change because culture is not bottom up. No. So, you can't have, you know, your ICs, individual contributors, or even your first line managers come in and expect to impact the larger culture, right? So it begins with the executives. So executives, they are the models, they are the ambassadors, like everything, the culture, whatever you say, if you don't act in alignment with those words, then your culture, your culture is going to reflect your actions versus what you say. So it starts at the top. And if you are coming in as a middle manager, these are the things where I would, if somebody was asking me if they should take this job, for example, I would ask them and help them establish their values first. What are your values? What is your personal mission? All those things. And does this align with that? Because I've, unfortunately, a lot of my clients that I work with are in these toxic cultures. And many times it could have been avoided because they saw red flags, but they were more concerned about the title and the company than they were with the culture and the red flags that they saw.

And so when I talk with them, they're like, oh, I should have known because the CEO was like this or should have known because I heard this or should have known. So that's what I would do for someone coming in, whether they should take a job or not. But from internally, it's a soul searching for the executive team because that's the only way to truly impact culture is through top down.

Good. At the other end of the scale, you are a leader in an organization and you would like to identify those who might be showing potential. So how do we go about measuring leadership potential within our teams?

Yeah, it's a good question. Leadership, I always would tell my team, leadership manifests in more ways than one. It doesn't mean people leadership, right? You can tell the leaders because people start to naturally gravitate toward them. People tend to naturally ask them questions. People ask them to be their mentors. And those are usually the leaders that will perform well when you promote them or if they decide they want to go into people leadership. I don't look for subject matter expertise as much, right? Because oftentimes if somebody is good at the process, it doesn't mean that they'll translate into being able to teach or manage the process or the people who are now doing that, right? There's amazing creatives that are

on my team. But would I ever let them or have them manage people? Probably not because they like to work on their own and kind of be in their bubble. Does that translate to people management? If they wanted to, they could learn those skills, but more often than not, they just like what they do. They like the isolation, they like being individual contributors.

It negates the imposter syndrome. They know that they know everything about this topic. And so they're not going to put themselves at risk or be vulnerable. So in terms of being vulnerable, you've talked about saying that you don't know the answer and how that was something that you had to learn, is there a place for vulnerability in our leaders?

Absolutely, 100%. One of the first things I did when the pandemic started was share the struggles I was having as a leader and as a father. And what I think that helped do was, and I got a lot of replies back from my team, what it helped do is make people understand that they're not alone in this. Like we're all going through this together. And it'll also show them another side, that I am human. Even though I have a title, it doesn't mean that I have it all together. So I would share that like, yeah, my daughter is struggling and I'm trying to help her because she was so used to being around her friends. And now we couldn't go anywhere, right? I was struggling because I was very social person. And I loved going to each one of my team members and just randomly, hey, what you working on? I'd love to look at some creative and I wasn't able to do that. So I shared these things I was struggling with with my team. Every other week, every other Friday, I would send an email out and it would talk about the three things I was thinking about for work and the three things that I was thinking about in my personal life.

And in terms of the responses you got, did you find that people opened up more than you might have expected?

Yeah, absolutely. So people would share, hey, I'm struggling with the same thing. I got a lot of great tips too. Like, hey, we, I enrolled my daughter in like a pandemic pod, maybe it's something you'd want to look into. So it was just a way for me myself to maintain mental health, but also to share with my team and allow them the ability to be vulnerable back.

Time for a break in this really interesting discussion with Rico. Join us for part three, the final part of this discussion. For now I'm Kim Baillie and this is Inside Exec.