

Defining Creativity S1E11: Brooke Ivey transcript

Debbi: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining me for this episode of Defining Creativity, a podcast that explores where and how creativity is found. I'm your host, Debbi Ponella, a creativity researcher, cultivator, and devotee. On today's episode, we're joined by...

Brooke: So, I am Brooke Ivey. I am the Chief Sales Officer for a niche company that provides services to insurance companies. So, my clients are health insurers. I'm also a mom and a longtime Debbi Ponella fan.

Debbi: Oh, no. Oh, here comes that editing button. Oh, you're funny. Well, Brooke, thank you so much for being here. I'm excited about this conversation. Let's just jump right in and tell me how you use creativity in your world.

Brooke: Well, gosh, I use creativity every day in my world. I'm in business development. So, I always say that everything that I do comes down to kind of two things. It's either telling stories or listening to people, which is at the very center of creativity, I feel like. So, every single day, I'm thinking about how do I take something from concept to reality and what's the best way to convey that? How do I communicate that to potential clients, to existing clients? How do I communicate those needs internally? So, I think in a million different ways every day, I'm tapping into a creative need in order to do my job.

Debbi: And so how do you do that? How do you communicate? What are some of the ways that you creatively communicate?

Brooke: So, one of the things I'm doing is saying, what is it that we do well that people need to know about and how do I want to best communicate that to people? That might be saying, we have this specific feature or piece of knowledge that will meet this need that everyone in the industry has. Let's make sure that they know about it. What's the best way to do that? Are we going to do that through social media channels? Are we going to do that through aggressive marketing channels, direct mail channels, through TV? Are we going to come up with a strategy that involves us calling people? Are we going to stand up on the podium and let people know about it? Are we going to put a white paper out into the industry?

So, part of creativity, I think, is about assessing what's the best way to get our message across. Where are people going to see it? How are they going to receive it best? And then breaking down all of the components it takes to create all of the different pieces that support that. So, if we decide we're going to do a traditional marketing strategy, who's going to be in charge of the messaging?

What are the most important elements of that messaging and how is it best to convey that to people in a visual way, in an auditory way, in a way that creates an experience for them? How do we tap into that? That's just one of the many ways, I think, to do it. And then additionally, when I'm thinking about what I want to be able to serve up to those clients, what I want them to understand, I also have to be able to communicate to my internal team. How do we properly produce those pieces? How do we deliver on the promises we're making for those folks? What's everyone's role within that? And I think it takes a lot of creativity to look past kind of standard process and say, how do we do something extraordinary here? Does that make sense?

Debbi: Absolutely. So, in regard to your clients, the communicating with them, I'm wondering, do they often come with ideas to you? Is it more you presenting? How do you merge those ideas or how do you, because it is collaboration even in that way.

Brooke: [3:44] You're absolutely right. So, thinking along those lines, I think there are a few different things. So typically, I have a discrete set of products and services, right, that I let people know about to say, hey, here are the things that we know how to do well. And then within a conversation with those clients, they're typically not only evaluating, I think, those products or services that I'm talking to them about, they're thinking about how that affects them, but oftentimes, in the best possible business development conversation, they're letting me know what their problems are, which may or may not directly relate to what I'm bringing to them.

And those are the moments when they're bringing their problems to the table, when they're identifying directly a need that they have, that moments of creativity, I think, really tend to happen in the business development world. So if I hear something that's a problem that maybe we can't solve directly right now, or that we don't solve directly right now, but that we could solve, that is maybe adjacent to a product or service that we have, or simply that I can understand how we might alter a product or service that we have to meet that need, I'm able to come back to the team and say, hey, guys, I was out talking to this potential client about what we do, and they mentioned that they have this particular problem.

It occurred to me that we might be able to solve that problem in x, y, z ways. What do you think about that? And it's conversations just like that, we've actually ended up with new product lines or new service lines, new opportunities, just because we were willing to kind of creatively sit down and say, how might we approach this a little bit differently? How might we solve this problem?

And I think that's really what's driven our growth and what continues to drive our growth is instead of just saying, how do we find people who wanna buy this product? How do we find people who wanna buy this service? Which is certainly the foundation of any sale, right? We try to go beyond that though and say, what are the problems out there that people have that we can solve? What needs are there in the market that we can solve? How do we become partners to people? And that's, I think, where business and creativity really meet oftentimes.

Debbi: Yeah, a lot of creative problem solving, definitely.

Brooke: Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

Debbi: And so we were talking about the client and your relationship, and then you're bringing it to your team as a leader in that way, creative leadership. How is it different, that kind of dynamic and leading and doing the problem solving there maybe then when you're doing it with the client or is it the same? Are there commonalities?

Brooke: [6:14] I think there are a lot of commonalities. I think perhaps when you're talking internally, you can be a bit more, or I tend to be maybe a little bit more frank and a little bit more open with problem statements, meaning, hey guys, I think we can solve this, but here are the problems that we're gonna have or here are the problems that we're gonna have as I see them, what are our thoughts? I think when I'm talking to my client, I'm more invested into listening to what their problems are.

Maybe I am, at least during the initial phases, less apt to point out to them what's gonna be hard because when I'm talking to our internal team, I wanna make sure that we can answer some of their challenges for the client before they bring them up, if that makes sense. I think a lot of the conversations remain the same and a lot of the elements of what are important are the same. The idea of being open to input from everyone because that's how you get a nice, round, supportable solution, right?

Really involving key stakeholders, hearing from them, creating a solution that's really gonna fit all of the different stakeholders and overcoming some of the obstacles in that way. Being authentic with everyone

about what the goals are, what you're trying to do, really listening to everyone and taking time to think about the details.

I oftentimes talk about this principle I learned as a theater student, which is that there's a triangle of fast, cheap, and good, and that you can only ever have two sides of that triangle, meaning you can have something that's fast and good, but it's not gonna be cheap. You can have something that's good and cheap, but it's not gonna be fast, or you can have something that's fast and cheap, but it's not gonna be good. And so oftentimes in that creative process, I go back to that triangle of fast, cheap, and good and say, okay, what are the most important things here? Are we driving for quality? If we are, let's think about the pieces of the triangle we need to focus on. And that's true, whether we're internally speaking or externally speaking.

Debbi: So, you're talking about being authentic and the people as part of your team, probably you want them to be authentic.

Brooke: Yes.

Debbi: So how do you generate that kind of environment? Because being authentic sometimes is being vulnerable and obviously everything they say can't be the answer. I mean, some of the times it sounds like you're talking almost more problem finding as much as problem solving and just that process. How do you help foster an environment that allows that authentic voice to be heard and respected and them to feel safe doing that?

Brooke: I think that's such a great question. I am very big on good old-fashioned roles and responsibilities discussions and really being open at the beginning of every meeting to set the tone for that. So, I try to be explicit and say, hey guys, I'm trying to come up with a solution for this or here's why I've asked you here today and what I need you to think about and talk about. I'm not an expert on all of this.

Sometimes I fail, sometimes my notions are wrong and I'm not the subject matter expert on your particular subject, which is why I've asked you here and why I need you to speak up and be an important part of this process. I try to, then, actively listen and then also I think it's important to make sure that everybody is heard, to make sure that they know that they're welcome to be heard and listened to, but that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone's solution is going to be taken, right?

There's a way I think to be inclusive, to take the good pieces of information and to also be able to say that is a great thought but we need to park it over here for next time. It's not gonna fit what we need to do in terms of this particular triangle of fast, cheap and good. Thank you for the contribution but let's put a pin in that one.

So I think that it's important to set the tone and the expectation for respect discussion to really set the rules of the road and live them and to also find a way to get people comfortable with the idea that you can contribute but not necessarily have your idea picked up every time and that you are still valuable in doing that. And that's why it's important to speak up every time because you never know what's gonna spark.

Debbi: And as I'm hearing you talk—and you did mention your theater background—I'm thinking a lot of these things you're talking about. You know that it doesn't every time happen. You can't cling to the fear of failure. You have to put yourself out there. Am I crazy, seeing there a little relation to what you've developed in some of those other activities, or are there other things that you see from your theater background that translate into business?

Brooke: First of all, you're not crazy at all. I think that my theater education was a tremendous business education. I think I got really, really lucky. I studied musical theater in college and while I didn't go to a conservatory program, I studied under some professors who said: listen, you know, it's wonderful that you want to study performance and that you want to study acting and know about theater.

We think it's important, by the time you leave here, that you have the requisite skills to be able to run a theater company, because their contention was, hey, if you're going to be an artist, you really need to have a well-rounded set of skills, because part of being an artist is understanding how to create something from nothing and how all of these different roles come together to create something. And it's one of the most beautiful gifts I've ever been given. I feel like all of those principles translate.

So everything that I learned about how to direct a play applies directly to how to lead a group of people on a project. It's all about taking something that is on paper as a concept and creating it into reality, and all of the principles that work to stand up a musical theater piece also work to stand up a business project or a presentation or just to see something through. I think that is a very direct correlation and I use it every day.

The other thing I want to hit on that you said there is that I'm constantly talking to, especially our newer employees now that I am a veteran employee, if you will, or a tenured employee, I'm talking to our younger employees about not being afraid to fail and how important that has been in my life—the sense of failure. And, that if you haven't failed, it really just means you haven't tried. Part of growing is knowing that you can fail and move forward from that and understanding how to fail. I think it's a really important skill in life. So that's something I talk about an awful lot. Actually. It's interesting you brought that up.

Debbi: And just speaking of these skills in business so that that are skills in life? Do you see any of this applying beyond the business world or musical theater world?

Brooke: I do. I think it applies to everything. I think anytime you're doing anything with a group of people, with a community group. I have a seven-year-old daughter, so now that I'm starting to see it in things like PTA groups or even parent meetings, I really think any sort of interaction where it's, how are we as a group of people going to organize ourselves to achieve something? All of the principles remain the same, right?

How do we make sure that we're stronger together by hearing everyone's voice, but that there is a clear vision about how we're going to do something at the same time? I think all of those principles apply just in just about any situation.

Debbi: So you mentioned a seven-year-old daughter.

Brooke: Yeah.

Debbi: So, and this can go actually twofold: what do you remember in your childhood, growing up? What were the things that helped you nurture this creativity that you're able to use throughout your life in all areas? And then, secondly, how do you hope to, or see possibility of, cultivating that in your daughter?

Brooke: [14:08] Oh, this is fun. So I grew up in a very creatively driven family. My grandparents were vaudevillians. They like to call themselves the last of the red-hot vaudevillians. And so, even from my very young childhood I would get to go along and watch them perform and you know church basements and local community organizations where they would basically do kind of a vaudeville act. Sometimes I would get to tag along with them. Additionally, my father is a trial attorney. So, I grew up, I think, seeing creativity a lot of different ways.

My mother was a second-grade teacher and then later an elementary school principal. So, I feel like I've had exposure as a child to a lot of different adult outlets of creativity. So, I had these grandparents were very actively performance artists. I had my father who was doing a performative style of law oftentimes, if you will, in other words, having to publicly stand in front of people and deliver important concepts to them, and a mom who was trying to engage kids right.

So, I think I saw a lot of creativity used in a lot of different ways as a child and maybe the best gift that all of the adults who influenced me gave me was that they let me be creatively interested in whatever I wanted to be. So, I happened to turn out to be a theater kid, but when I wanted to play softball, they all invested in that, and when I wanted to do other things, they all invested in that and just said, yeah, we're gonna put energy and excitement behind you and then let you invest in whatever you want to do.

I'm trying very hard to carry that same thing forward for my daughter. One of the, I think, fascinating things that you can't possibly prepare for when a little tiny person comes into your life is you just don't know what they're going to be interested in. And she's at an age, particularly now, where her interests just are moving and changing a lot. And so, what I'm trying to do is foster in her curiosity, really, letting her be curious about things, letting her get creative with things, and being open to whatever those happen to be. That's a fun little journey that we're on right now.

Debbi: Yeah, I think that's so important. And I'm not surprised that that's something that you key in on is that curiosity and developing it. Because truly, through that curiosity that it's playing, and I don't care if it's playing an instrument or putting on a play or playing softball, like you mentioned. It's that exploring and oftentimes, you know, with others collaboratively, whether it's sports or music. And I think that too many times people put them in different separate categories instead of seeing that all is part of the development.

Brooke: [16:57] I completely agree. I think so oftentimes we hear people standing up talking about putting children in organized sports because it teaches them leadership skills and collaborative skills. And the same thing is so true in the arts as well. And I also feel like people say, oftentimes, I put my children into the arts or I foster that, because I want them to be creative and I want them to learn how to perform. And I think that sports get undervalued for those pieces as well. And maybe some of the key is just finding the universal themes that we want kids to learn and that we want to foster in kids, regardless of the activity. And that's a lot of, I guess, where my focus is.

Debbi: Absolutely. No, I'm right there with you. That's the whole purpose of this for me, is that finding it everywhere. It's everywhere. And everybody has it. They just have to find out how it manifests itself for them and respect that it's different for others and just see that, I think. And I love that about your story, your history of your family and everything. You've seen it in so many different ways and you just respect those different ways. And one isn't right, one isn't wrong. And my guess is that that then also translates to how you see the world around you and the people around you. Do you find that it affects relationships outside of family or work as well?

Brooke: [18:14] Absolutely. I think I'm an incredibly, maybe, curious person by nature. I am interested in people. I get made fun of a lot because I'm that person that, when you go on a trip, has to talk to the Uber driver and needs to know everybody's story. I've never met a stranger. I just think everybody is interesting and everybody has a story to tell. And I also try to foster that in my child, right? It's understanding that everybody is interesting. You've just got to find out who they are and get them talking to you. And again, I think I annoy, oftentimes, people with that tendency, but it is there.

Debbi: Oh my. I don't believe that it's annoying. I think it's amazing. And sometimes it's the rest of us who are sitting there who want to know the story and you help us find it out. So, thank you for that.

Brooke: I'm glad you think so.

Debbi: [19:15] Going into having a young one, just starting the education journey and having a mom who was involved in that and just the various ways, because you've been a student your whole life, too. What role do you think that creativity should have in education?

Brooke: Gosh, you know what? I think my answer might've been different pre-pandemic, but I think that it can't be stated enough how important creativity is in education. So, in our particular little situation, we had the pandemic lockdown happen when my kiddo was in her last year of pre-K. Here in Florida, we call that VPK. So, at the very end of her pre-K year, basically the world shut down, she came home.

And for her kindergarten year, she spent that year doing kindergarten virtually at home with my very darling husband, teaching her kindergarten all day or sitting beside her as she did virtual kindergarten with her teacher all day. And then he would teach college at night. And I don't know if you've ever spent any significant amount of time with a kindergartner in front of a computer, but that is not where they want to be for an extended amount of time. And it is not the ideal learning environment for a kid who really wants to be up and manipulating things.

And so staring at 24 other little faces through a computer all day caused our household to have to get really creative. And again, God bless my husband for his abilities and his creativity to find a way to educate our child, our kindergartner, from home when she spent the majority of her time for a year with really, you know, just two adults and staring at a computer. So, I think, you know, the fact that she managed to still learn so much in that year, the fact that she was able to start school a year later is a testament, I think, to his creativity.

And then I am just... My mind is blown watching the educators that have worked with her and with my nieces and nephews and other kids that I've seen around, and other teachers that I know as friends. The level of creativity they've come up with over the last few years as the world has just rapidly changed around the kids has blown my mind.

So I think that creativity in terms of how we educate, how we communicate anything that we're educating on, whether that's to kids, to adults, anybody else, can't be undervalued or under understated, the importance of it. And I'm just, I'm finding myself grateful that there are educators who are willing to be creative and are committed enough to making sure that kids are learning to be creative lately. My mind is absolutely blown is the best way to put that.

Debbi: So speaking of some of those trials of COVID, I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about things just changed so much of how we were able to interact or not. How can creativity in that type of a situation or other situations maybe be something that helps heal?

Brooke: [22:26] Oh gosh. That's a wonderful thought. My first thought goes to, strangely, the number of memorial services I attended virtually during the pandemic. And I'm not sure what that's why my brain, where my brain went first. But I think taking something that's been a marquee event, something like a funeral or a wedding. I went to several weddings during the pandemic virtually as well. Something that has had a very traditional base, that we have very set expectations for, frankly, kind of societally, that we know what to expect.

And it's always been done a very particular way. And having to be forced, in a lot of ways, to interact with them differently, I think is one of the weird and wonderful gifts of the pandemic. To say, you know, there

are still ways that we can connect. There are still ways that we can come together. We can take something as important and ritualistic as a wedding, as a funeral, and find ways to connect, even if we can't physically be together. Yeah, that's my, that's where my first thought was there.

Debbi: Yeah. So, it seems like a simple question, but it's so personal and different for people. But do you have a particular creative process?

Brooke: [23:37] You know, I don't know that I have a particular creative process. I'm a planner by nature, so I think, again, talking about how I have a theater background, I tend to approach things creatively more like a stage manager or a director than I do an actor, if you will. So, in other words, I want to look at things. I want to take them apart. I want to try to put plans and schedules and spreadsheets together and understand how to break it down into its component parts to put it together.

So, maybe the first part of my process is always breaking it down into the component parts and understanding what it takes to get there. I tend to do that before I tend to think about even what I want the component to be. In other words, I tend to draw the big picture before I brainstorm on what those pieces are. Again, it's the stage manager in me that wants to put a timeline to it or wants to understand what the ultimate outcome is we're going for, if that makes sense.

Debbi: Absolutely, and I can just say that when I have had the pleasure of working with you, that is a benefit to all. Your vision is definitely so helpful.

Debbi: What kind of environment do you find inspires your creativity? And then, maybe on the flip side, if there's anything that particularly stifles it?

Brooke: [25:10] Oh gosh, what I find inspiring is any kind of excitement. So, I am very much, again, a people person. If there's something that people are invested in, that they're passionate about, that's going to make a difference for them, that's something that I'm going to get excited about, that I'm going to have a lot of energy for. Yeah, that's going to get me excited.

And really, the reverse is also true. I very much feed off energy. So, if there's something that people, if the project that we're doing is something that people are dreading or frankly there's just a bad attitude amongst the team members about it, that's harder for me. That's something that I have to get past.

Debbi: And how do you do that?

Brooke: I find the ways to be happy about it. Sometimes that is through a direct conversation with those folks to say, hey, this is no way to live. This is not how we want to spend our time. So how do we get out of this moment of dread? How do we get ourselves excited about this? What can be exciting about this? And making that move just because I think life is too short to be spent in any kind of misery. So, eliminating that for me is always the first step.

I think the one thing that comes to mind is how I find myself surprised as I, again, mature in my career, how oftentimes people don't realize how creative they are. I think sometimes I find that we have people that are in roles like maybe an accounting role, a finance role, something that is a little less gray, right? Roles that are much more black-and-white or defined, something that is maybe compliance-based. And they don't think of themselves as creative people necessarily.

I think, again, because their projects or their processes require them to think in a very black and white, very linear way. But it's amazing how engaging those folks who are oftentimes in those roles in the creative discussion yield so many wonderful things. And I think that's because oftentimes the people who are in those spots have a perspective on process, why it works, why it doesn't, how it could be improved, that just are very seldom heard from.

Because, again, I don't think you necessarily think about bringing those folks into creative conversations every time. And I find that they really bring a lot of richness to the process. But it's also important to directly ask for their feedback. Because, again, I think so oftentimes for the people who maybe are not traditionally labeled as the creative part of the team or the creative part of the business, they also aren't used to being asked about their creative process.

So engaging them, encouraging them to contribute, and that they have things to contribute, I think is important. Knowing and seeking out those folks and encouraging them to contribute is big and yields some really beautiful things.

Debbi: And you mentioned you're in Florida now. When I met you, and I knew you were in Indiana, and so you've lived in different places. Do you see a difference in, even within the United States, do you see a difference in the cultures maybe of places that affect how people either express themselves or feel comfortable living in that owning, I guess, their creativity?

Brooke: [28:19] Oh, absolutely. And certainly, I think geographically things can be different. And I've in a bunch of different places all over the U. S. and seen different attitudes toward creativity and creative living and being oneself. I think within the business world, it's an interesting time. And I think an exciting time where businesses are really examining culture, popping open what it means to really let everyone have a seat at the table, how to foster that best and most appropriately. And I'm feeling a real shift in the business world as I deal with different clients across the spectrum.

The people that I'm talking to, the attitudes, the conversations are really starkly different than they were even five years ago. I think that we seem to have come to an era of understanding where there is not only a willingness to say we value everyone's voice, but to say in valuing everyone's voice, we have an obligation to make sure that voice is heard, not just to invite people to speak up and be a part of the conversation, but to make sure that they really are a part of the conversation. And that's really exciting to see for me.

Debbi: It's so important. So, Brooke, thank you so much for your time and your conversation and just your insight. Before we go, though, I do need to ask, because it is the *Defining Creativity Podcast*, what is your definition of creativity?

Brooke: [29:48] My definition of creativity is taking something and making it into something else. It's that simple.

Debbi: Perfect. It is that simple. It is that simple. What's your favorite creative thing that your daughter does?

Brooke: Oh... I love that she can, within a five- minute span, be a million different things and people and mesh them all together. She can be mermaid, pirate, villain, queen, fairy, angel, princess, and mesh all of those together comfortably, and it all makes sense in her mind. I think she is too young to realize that there are any limits, and that's a very beautiful thing.

Debbi: Amazing. Amazing. Well, thank you again, Brooke, for being here today.

Debbi: That's a wrap for Episode 12, my discussion with Chief Sales Officer and Supermom Brooke Ivey. I'm so grateful for Brooke and for you, the audience, for tuning in. Additional thanks to August Fackler for composing and recording the music. Join me next time as I talk creativity with actor, writer, stand-up comic, improviser, and free thinker Dev Meenagh. Meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections, and embrace your creativity, however it manifests itself in you.