



SEASON 3

EPISODE 16

[INTRO]

[0:00:05.8] ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to Happy Porch Radio. The podcast for progressive agency owners and web professionals. Season three is focused on the growing number of agencies who are making the world a better place.

We explore what this even means, why is it different from any other agency and how can it be reconciled with the real-world challenges of running a profitable agency? Join your host, Barry O’Kane as he speaks to leaders of agencies who are driven by verify use to positively impact the world around them.

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:43.7] BOK: Welcome to another episode of season three. Sadly, we’re nearing the end of the season now and if you’ve been following the whole season, actually, even if you haven’t, please do reach out and let me know what you think. You can find us at Twitter or at happyporchradio.com. One of the coolest things about doing this season of the podcast is I get to speak to inspiring people who are doing really great work and who are able to clearly articulate the purpose and the values behind that work.

My guest this week is an outstanding example of that. Kwame is founder of the innovation group Impossible. In our conversation, he shares a story about his name and how recruiting great people sometimes means going to Mexican restaurants and on top of that, he very clearly explains who and what Impossible are, their culture and the motivation and the approach that allows them to do some amazing work.

Let’s meet Kwame.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:45.6] KF: My name is Kwame Ferreira what you use name over last name, first name is actually my main name which means Saturday. I find this out because when I was studying I had a flat mate, his name was Kofi and he was like, “You’re Saturday, I’m Friday.” I was like, I had no idea. My mother had never told me.

I was actually called Saturday, who am I? Kwame Ferreira, I am the founder and one of the instigators behind the innovation group called Impossible.

[0:02:19.1] BOK: Yeah, that’s pretty cool story about your name, I like it a lot. Friday and Saturday. Tell me a little bit about what is Impossible and when you say innovation group, how does that actually manifest itself in reality?

[0:02:31.7] KF: Yeah, that’s the thing with agencies, right? Innovation groups and our innovation collectives, we’ve been toying with so many words for so long and yeah, sometimes we all go into a room and “Okay guys, now, we’re going to properly design what it is that we...” – or how – not what it is that we do, we know that’s fairly clearly but how do we convey the message to the outside world about who we really are.

It's always hard, you know, agency like you know, talking to my grandmother about agency, she thinks of I don't know, similarly to agency, people buy it, that's when you call an agency. It's been kind of tricky and I think perhaps most agencies go through that if they start to look in the mirror a little closer. We settled on an innovation group because what we do is we go from problems that companies and individuals and entrepreneurs come to us with.

We take those problems and we wrap them around a usually a startup kind of process and we create a product or a service to solve that problem, or to at least solve that problem. Once we have that product to service we take that and turn that into a business, right? That's in a nutshell what we do with problem solvers. But obviously contrary to like problem solvers because that's what most people, you go to the doctor when you have a problem and he's going to solve your problem.

Everybody's problem solving in this climate, in one way or the other. Innovation, when we say innovation, I guess we mean that we're problem solving in new and innovative ways and trying to pave brave new parts and look at problems in a slightly different way and that's why we call ourselves an innovation group.

A group is just because we're a collective of mammals, right? Which is human beings, a bit like you guys, at Climate.

[0:04:41.2] BOK: Awesome, you described that quite well in the home page in your site, we say, a group of people who come together to solve meaningful problems and guide global change. What's the second part of that, the "guide global change," what's the type of work that you do?

[0:04:55.1] KF: If you think about how to start a company, like Fairphone is the first ethical phone, right? That sets precedence, why are we not doing ethical phones? And you are in many ways helping to guide the industry of "Oh yeah, I'm dealing with electronic manufacturers in a certain direction that you feel will ultimately lead to more balanced relationship between the human sphere and the biosphere."

We're helping Samsung create their new refrigerators for example, right? What does that mean? That means, many devices in people's homes that you have an origin, they provide people with an experience and the way we do that will help guide behavior, right? And behavioral change, if we decide to make the fridge more about preventing food wastage for example. Rather than putting Tetris on a little screen on the door, we're making choices, right?

Those choices guides our future to an extent. Solving problems, you're always safe with the choices. An informed way of coming about those solutions will inevitably guide us on one path or another until we – yeah, that's why guiding change makes sense.

[0:06:26.7] BOK: Yeah, that makes complete sense and Fairphone are one of my hero companies. I think they're amazing. I'm interested in the story or the journey that you go through from – I don't know if you're able to share details but maybe talk about one of these things, where the original kernel came from, how you got connected with whoever it is to solve the

problem and then journey that you take them through, do you have a very defined process is it very bespoke for each person?

Right the way from that kernel of where the problem, where you first come across the problem, through to the journey that you go through to solve it. Can you share a story around that?

[0:07:01.4] KF: Sure, I mean, there's a number of stories and if you go to our website, I'm sure you can read up on them. As an agency so to speak as we co-create a lot so there's a lot that we obviously can't share but there's a lot we can share because as a group, we made a very conscious choice very early on to spend part of our time helping big corporations solve their problems.

But also helping our own entrepreneurs and our own people, crystallizing solutions for problems that they saw and that they identified within their environment. One of those is we had this issue, everybody's traveling all the time, and we had this office manager who made sure that she logged it on to a spreadsheet to see where everybody was and what they were working on. It was like laborious and kind of pointless.

Pointless in the sense it's very useful from an accounting perspective and from like a global overview perspective but for a person to do that, someone we bought to do that, can't we get the machine to actually do that? Can we acclimate that process? That's what we did. The problem with identify it in the Hackathon by one of our designers, Daniella actually I think. Then we looked at it and said, "Okay, why should Mika..." that's the name of our Lisbon office manager.

Mika is like "Yeah, I really hate doing that, I wish you could find the solution." We created the spot that through a piece of software, asks every single designer and engineer in the company, every day in a very kind of informal way what they're working on. A very simple conversation which is quite natural, we're able to derive a lot of important data. I think that ties into our company, department and financial recording and all that.

That's one way where we identified an internal problem and a quick data rated solution and then we realized, perhaps other people have this problem, right? That's usually how it works. I mean,

if you look at the story form the Uber, you know, some guy in San Francisco that just wanted to have some private chauffer, right?

To Amazon, to – most stories actually start with a problem that a person has felt you know? On their skin and then found the solution for that. We then created a company out of that and we called it Mika bot obviously in honor of our office manager and we sent her on the very long holiday. Actually, that's not true.

Yeah, you know, she's doing other stuff, believe me, she's happier not having to do that cumbersome logging of people's activities every day. Now we have thousands of other companies using that piece of software. That's one example but yeah, I have so many.

[0:10:02.2] BOK: Yeah, that's really cool. You mentioned as well some of the decisions you made at the start about – I guess, that's what I like to explore a little about where did all of this come from and what's founding story and what was your motivation for setting Impossible up?

[0:10:17.2] KF: I spent a lot of time in consultancy, you know, consultancy in the early 2000's was a different kind of creature and it was wonderful, it was part in the very early days of the company called Fjord and learned a lot, working with that group of people.

I realized that agencies as they were naturally going to evolve towards more product centric companies. They'd have to go all the way to products, you can't just show up at the beginning of a process, right? Where your client comes to you with a problem and then you just deliver a handful of slides and they're all beautiful and wonderful and then just point them in the right directions and off they go, "Off you go, good luck!"

That wasn't enough, I felt it wasn't enough and if you look at the industry, obviously, I wasn't alone in feeling that. That need to go all the way to product. I surrounded myself with my best friend and family and made a big mixture, a bit of a tribe and we – half designers, half engineers – making sure that we kind of cap that quota of 50/50 and we started offering a different way of solving problems through a more product centric approach, right?

You have a problem, obviously you're going to get to a product or a service that – these days it kind of fits more or less the same, a digital product is a service. Like it's all that problem, the help you go all the way to that. I guess, that's how it started, I knew I always wanted to be in a very creative environment and it's either doing it for somebody else which I had no issues doing because I wanted a more pragmatic approach.

I realized that I had to kind of create that vehicle, right? That big shift and that's what Impossible is. This vehicle that allows us in a way – me and my best friends, friends of friends, we're now a lot bigger and spread throughout the planet – to actually have fun and enjoy and lead more or less happy lives I guess, in solving problems.

[0:12:34.7] BOK: Yeah. On your site as well, you talk about the culture or the values and you're talking about happy and healthy there because that's on of the top of the list is health. Has that evolved over time or is that something that was very clear from the start?

[0:12:51.2] KF: That was very clear from the start, it didn't really come from me. Our CTO at the time – he is a Danish surfer, tall, kind of good looking – who is now in Australia actually. He had migrated from Denmark down to Portugal and we met in Lisbon and he was really big into surfing and really eager to explore new ways of marrying our passions with our responsibilities, right?

He managed to instill within the company a health within the company that type of an approach where we could, yes, we co-created with our clients so it's a product of co-creation. Never kind of redo it in isolation but as we co-create, we – you know we spend some time with a client and then sometimes away from the client and if you're away from the client, most of the work we do, I mean, whether you are doing it in Nicaragua or in London, right?

It doesn't really matter, if it doesn't matter, then what are the advantages and these advantages in these places and if you look at Nicaragua from a creative, healthy lifestyle much more interesting, right? Than London. Obviously Nicaragua wins and people go and so we rent out a place in Nicaragua and people just fly out there and spend some time out there problem solving and then fly back.

There's no reason to compromise on our healthy and creative lifestyle as Kim puts it. We started exploring very early on. It wasn't really – it never was kind of a PR thing, it was just the way we behave and obviously, as soon as we got a PR department, there were ways to have that as a story to tell because it was a little bit different but it's just the way we like to operate. We're getting a little older now, I have a kid now and some of our guys, they're also multiplying so I think for the next couple of years, at least for me, it's becoming a little bit flexible but then hopefully we can resume that kind of –

I wouldn't call it nomadic but it's a nice word, it's a nice adjective, lifestyle because we can I guess.

[0:15:07.3] BOK: Yeah, that's really interesting and firstly very interesting because it's – I have a very similar approach and similar lifestyle and the sort of traveling and exploring but what was interesting to me about that you described with marrying the freedom and the responsibility instead of it being purely "Let's just go and work on a beach because I can."

But tying that back to the value and the problem solving and the responsibility.

[0:15:30.7] KF: Yeah.

[0:15:32.3] BOK: How does that work in practical terms, in terms of you say, co-creator, does that mean actually going to clients or group's offices, how does it actually manifest?

[0:15:41.5] KF: Yeah, that's exactly it, we spend a lot of time with our clients, we embed ourselves in our client teams. If I were to start a project, one of our designers is very likely to pair with one of your designers if you are the client and have the design team. One of our engineers would pair with a couple of your engineers and it's a process of co-creation, of pairacy, Because at the end of the day, we're solving a problem by creating a product or a service and then we'll going to go away and solve some other problem somewhere else. So you are going to have to deal with it. If we just give you a solution, you are never invested enough as a client in the whole process of actually getting to that solution. So you won't nurture it as much as you would if you were actually part in co-creating it.

So there is no other way of doing meaningful and successful product these days at least that's at an agency level without co-creation. I think yeah, I just don't believe in isolation.

[0:16:45.1] BOK: Yeah but it's interesting as well that co-creation that you are talking about physically working together as well. I think a lot of agencies feel like they work quite closely with the agency but you are actually going one step further and as you say in co-creating. It's really interesting. Then the third thing that is mentioned on your culture page I guess on the site is happiness, which is something that I am really interested in with our team as well. Can you talk a little bit about why that's a theme and why is that a thing on the culture page on the values?

[0:17:15.7] KF: You know for a long time, if you look at post-war baby boomers generation and all of that, somehow there's somewhere, that we created this very tight correlation between happiness and wanting, right? So no one really asked you about how happy you were, they just asked you if you were earning enough money because that was it, right? If you were earning enough money surely you must be happy and under a capitalist framework that makes perfect sense.

Because that is capital at the center not the user as the center, right? Not the user, not a human being at the center. The moment we start doing a lot of design thinking and we borrow a lot of that west coast school, you're stopping the user at the center when you solve problems right? So you solve problems for users, right? You don't put the business, you don't care if the business has problems. You care if the users have problems. Then you could solve user problems, you'll solve business problems.

You add value to user's lives. So by putting the user at the center, we as designers and engineers as problem solvers, we started to have to look at users from a multi-dimensional way and we realized that it is really not about the money. The money is a factor that is important surely but there are other factors. That then led us to look at our own internal processes and how we evaluate people and how to grow people because ultimately you are spending an enormous amount of time working with other people.

You know a third of your life will be spent at your work place and surely the matrix cannot just be capital, just how much you earn. There needs to be something else there and because of users

and through thinking we started travelling and obviously we all evolved through time and we have all heard about the happiness index in Bhutan and we've all heard that happiness is definitely – since the late 60's is a big prospect and it is about open meaning.

It is about serotonin, is it about oxytocin, it's what are the – so happiness is quite a multi-dimensional problem and we like multi-dimensional complex problems and so when we look at our company and our people, happiness plays a very important role and obviously as I said, there is a factor of money there is the factor of personal growth in our wellbeing of health. There is the factor of are you connected to your community because it takes a village to raise a child.

And if you look at the 50's in the way of how it constructed these people silos, most people know one neighbor in the big cities and they spend a lot of time in this work place and they just happen to know the work colleagues. How can we help expand those networks? We know that by helping expand those networks that they are going to increase your happiness level. So it is a multi-dimensional problem and we need to address it as a multi-dimensional problem.

There is no happiness button right? Travelling it's time, well if it is on the holidays. Yeah it is a whole bunch of factors that we didn't really – and I don't think we've practiced yet you know? That is the ultimate solution but overtime, we have been experimenting with different dimensions and tweaking here and there and then hopefully, I am trying to meet this data. I could have, I am happy but hopefully people are too and if they aren't, there need to be processes in place that identify that fairly quickly.

So just like there is a Mika bot, a bot that asks you what you are working on, why isn't there a bot that asks you about how you are feeling. If you say "crap" then the whole place should stop and you should have a conversation. Yeah, I guess that's how we think about it.

[0:21:24.2] BOK: That is a really amazing answer actually and something – that last point which was going to be my follow up question is about do you have ways where you review that or internally review that or try and catch problems?

[0:21:37.0] KF: If we were 1,500 people and if you look at – I just read this book on values and principles which is amazing and disturbing at the same time and you know I am sure if you have

the time to take a glance at it because it is interesting. We are talking about a person who build obviously the OCD way, processes from the very start for everything, based on principles and you tweak those and you created this gigantic highly efficient machine to bat on the market.

And these people were part of this machine. So he is very interested in how to optimize the machine and I guess that the big word here is how to optimize. We are not 1,500 people. I know everyone, we know everyone, and I think as soon as we got to that kind of dumb bar number of 150 people – I don't think I would like to be more than a 150 people because then you lose track and so that mitigates the risk of you losing touch and I think it is so important.

The most important thing is just to have honest – transparency being our number one value, conversations with everyone. Like yes, we can delegate that to a machine but I am sitting across the room, just come and talk to me. Let's have dinner. In London for example, we have a wonderful kitchen. We all cook and we all eat and we all cry and we all share our heartbreaks and our ups and downs and if you do that more like a family then you exude that energy of a family.

Which is very attractive for those who don't have one in the workplace, right? And it works very well because it lubricates the path between individuals and you don't have those barriers like let's just talk, "what's wrong?" and so we incentivize conversations and if you look at not only from a happiness gauging perspective but also from a creative perspective. Everything– kind of that Frankfurt, the school, we do believe that reality happens in that space between people and when the conversations take place and not in isolation.

So I guess the most important thing is to create an environment for conversation and I am not talking about gossip or meetings. I am talking about genuine conversations, can take place.

[0:24:10.8] BOK: That is really interesting as well. I was going to ask what's the biggest challenge you've had as you've built Impossible and as you went from this group of people to what it is now. Is that maybe that people – or maybe there is no one challenge – but I'll try the question anyway. Is there a specific thing you could point to as being over the history of Impossible, the biggest challenge you've had to try and pull the success together that you have now?

[0:24:32.5] KF: I mean when you ran out of friends, the best thread – because you all have a very finite limit here, you start hiring people. I think hiring is definitely the biggest challenge because what do we do at the end of the day? The only thing we really have is our time and people’s time and that’s what we sell as a group. That’s what we sell to big corporations, that’s what we sell to each other, as we create new startups, internal startups.

So time is really all we have and it is very – and we are going to share it. I am going to expand it a lot within the group. So getting new people into the Impossible kind of family is, I think that has been the biggest challenge, getting the right people, with an open mindset with people that we can help grow that can help us grow. That has been I guess the toughest because yes, there are loads of tests that you can run people through and three rounds of interviews and how do you interview has a human resource element to it.

And I am sure there’s a science behind it that I haven’t really delved into. I have always very much used my gut feeling and because we are growing, I need to move from instincts into structure and processes and that is the biggest challenge because one of the best designers I ever hired, I have found him in a Mexican restaurant serving tables and I just knew it. He had the right attitude, he was communicative, he said that is what he would like to do.

Amazing, let’s go and we do take apprentices every two years. I have an apprentice and now it’s been growing. Now I can’t do that anymore, that needs to be properly done and that is a challenge.

[0:26:29.5] BOK: Yeah, well that is a pretty good way to recruit, to go to Mexican restaurants. So what’s the flip side of that question, what’s been the biggest success or the most pleasurable part of the journey?

[0:26:40.9] KF: The fact that my partner who runs our US operations here, Christopher he – what was he saying in the last board meeting we had? That most companies, 95% of companies in the first five years don’t make it. So it is really hard and you know it. It’s really hard to keep a group of people together, to grow that group of people, to maintain your culture and all of this to be happy, truly happy. So that has been the biggest joy that we are still here.

Sometimes I pinch myself, you know what? We're not really working for anyone. I don't have a boss and we have a very flat structure and we're still here and I enjoy it. I get to spend time with my family at the same time, just a meaningful workplace. Yeah to use that word and so I feel quite blessed.

[0:27:36.8] BOK: Very cool, awesome. Well thank you so much. We are running out of time, I just have one final question. What do you see is the future of Impossible? Do you have a particular vision or a view or is it still continuing to have the journey as it has been?

[0:27:49.5] KF: We're definitely going to start creating more of our own products. So we have a wearable company. We have an insurance company, we have an eyewear company, we have a bot company. So we have a whole bunch of startups that a few of them aren't startups anymore because I think they are a little too big. That's the journey that we want to go into and to invest in a little more and that frees us up from the tyranny of randomness and that is the next job.

With Google it might be amazing but it might also be crap and you know as an agency, you know that as well as anyone who has an agency, sometimes you can't choose. I'd love to be in a position where you can actually choose most if not every time and yeah, that freedom comes at a price and the price or the cost will be measured by our ability to tread our own path through our own products and our own startup and their inherent success. So let's see. I guess the future I think is – well I don't think, the future I feel is much more down that road.

[0:29:06.0] BOK: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me as well. Thank you so much Kwame, I really appreciate your time today. That's really awesome. Just to finish this of, for anybody who's listening who wants to find out a little bit about yourself or about Impossible, where should we direct them?

[0:29:17.5] KF: Just drop me a line, Kwame@impossible.com.

[0:29:23.0] BOK: Thank you again, I really appreciate your time today.

[0:29:25.5] KF: Have a good one Barry.



[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:29:32.6] BOK: You can get all the links and notes from this episode on happyporchradio.com where you can also find out how to send us questions, feedback and get involved in the conversation about this series. If you enjoyed the show, please share with anyone else who might enjoy it too. Thanks for listening.

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