Yeah, you know, I've had this conversation quite a few times over the years with founders and friends who were running a company going sideways or worse and have had this question, should I continue or not?

I always have the same answer.

I basically say, how much conviction do you have in the solution you're building?

I know in the beginning, before you knew all you know now, you had tons of conviction.

That's what caused you to leave your job.

Now knowing all you know, do you have more or less conviction in the problem and the solution you're building?

And I'll tell you, like I get different answers.

You know, some people are like, oh, Scott, I mean, I have more conviction.

Like all that I've learned, all the validation I've received from customers, we just haven't figured it out yet.

It's driving me crazy.

We've tried three times and it's still like each product fails, but I have more conviction than ever before.

And for those people, I'm like, you know what?

You're just in the messy middle.

Stick with it.

You know, this is this is par for the course.

But you know, oftentimes I'll hear honestly, if I knew now what I if I knew then what I know now, I would not have done this like, holy shit, I am like, then quit.

Like your life is short.

You have a great team.

Pivot do something completely different.

If you've lost conviction, you should not be doing what you're doing in the world of entrepreneurship.

Welcome to Lenny's podcast where I interview world-class product leaders and growth experts to learn from their hard one experience is building and growing today's most successful products.

Today, my guest is Scott Belsky.

Scott is an absolute product legend.

He's a former founder starting a company called the hands that he sold to Adobe where he worked up the ranks to chief product officer and more recently to chief strategy officer and executive vice president of design and emerging

products.

He's also an author of the beloved book, the messy middle.

He's also an angel investor in companies like Pinterest,

Uber, air table, Flexport, Warby Parker and many more.

In our wide ranging conversation, Scott shares his advice

on how to build product sense, why you should only build half

the features that you want, what it takes to build a successful

consumer product and we spend a lot of time on how AI is likely

to change the world of product and the world broadly.

Scott is such an insightful and articulate thinker and I learned

a lot from this conversation.

With that, I bring you Scott Belsky after a short word from

our sponsors.

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innovate faster.

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Scott, welcome to the podcast.

Hey Lenny, and it's great to be here.

I don't know if you know this, but it's been a big goal of mine to get you on this podcast since the day I launched it.

And so I'm really excited that you're here.

I wanted to start with your role at Adobe.

So for the longest time, you're a chief product officer at Adobe and then recently I noticed you shifted to this very complicated sounding role.

I'm curious what this new role is and then why you made that shift.

Well, in this new role, I'm overseeing strategy and corporate development, all of design across the company and emerging products for the business.

If you look back at the last five years or so, it really has been about getting our core products to the cloud, making them collaborative, making some critical and interesting opportunistic acquisitions over the years, ensuring that we

have connectivity between the products, that we launch new web apps that meet new types of creatives.

And that was an incredible five-year chapter now with the advent of AI and new and emerging fast growing businesses we have, like the 3D and immersive space, the stock business and how that whole space is being changed by new technology, the idea of bringing that into an organization and being able to focus on that full time was really exciting to me.

So what is it that you're doing day to day now just to even get it even more concrete?

I'm curious what your days are looking like.

Well, I think that it's the strategy of a company always needs to be iterated.

And so being tasked with developing the strategy across the entire company, there's no shortage of opportunities and people to meet and things to think about there.

Corporate development, certainly like new M&A stuff and integration, all that sort of stuff, you know, falls under me as well.

And I have a lot of feelings about that having been an entrepreneur that went through integration myself.

So it's kind of fun to be on the other side and try to improve it, you know, from that vantage point on the design side.

It's been a ton of time reviewing the design across every product and really trying to raise the bar for the experiences we're shipping.

And that's that's a hard thing to do in a company that has a lot of legacy products, you know, and a lot of baggage that comes with them.

And on the emerging product side, it's really about the new products we're bringing into the market and how to make them win.

Something that comes up on this podcast a number of times is how CPOs rarely last at a company.

They stay like Casey mentioned this and a few other people they stay around for a couple of years.

They're like the best they can do is just take a few swings at how things work improve a few things and then they see us like now this isn't great and then find someone else.

What do you think has contributed to you surviving and lasting and thriving and, you know, taking on more and more responsibility at Adobe?

Well, in the in the Chief Product Officer role, I oversaw design products and engineering.

And I think part of the reason I was even interested in coming into the company and taking this role is that I felt like these these boundaries between these functions are, you know, at best artificial at worst, like really constraining.

And I always have felt like a lot of products win not because of the technology, but the user's experience of the technology. And so if you have an aligned team that gets that and makes decisions accordingly, I think you can ship better experiences. So a lot of the work I had to do was breaking some of these boundaries down over the years.

And I think that a lot of Chief Product Officials traditionally don't oversee engineering and sometimes don't even oversee design.

And, you know, for me, that wouldn't be interesting.

Zooming into product.

If there's a Mount Rushmore of insightful product thinkers, I feel like you'd be on it.

And part of the reason is that you have this incredible product sense, whatever that means, it's clear that you have strong product sense.

And PMs often talk about the importance of product sense and how to build product sense.

And I'm curious, how do you feel like you built your product sense and what advice would you give to younger PMs looking to build product sense?

First of all, I think the biggest mistakes that teams make is they become very passionate about a solution to a problem they're trying to solve as opposed to do everything they can to develop empathy for the customer that's suffering the problem.

And oftentimes the empathy gives you the solution, whereas the passion you have for whatever you think the solution is might be 30 degrees off with the solution actually is.

And so this development of empathy, you know, is a key part of it.

And of course, as I think about the discipline of crafting product experiences, to me, it's all about psychology. It's about understanding the natural human tendencies that people have in their most, you know, primal moments.

I talk a lot about the first mile experiences that we have

across any product we use, whether we're a consumer or an enterprise user, in the first 30 seconds of using a new product, you are lazy, vain and selfish.
You want to get it done super quickly.
You want to look good to your colleagues or to your friends.
You want to feel successful very quickly by engaging in this product.
You don't want to have to watch a tour or read anything, you know, really endure any learning curve whatsoever.
Of course, if you can get people through the first 30 seconds, you have so much opportunity to build a more lasting relationship with that customer and have them understand your mission and the full potential of your product.
But we need to we need to kind of ground ourselves with the fact that that's really hard to do.
It's fascinating to me that most teams spend the final mile of their time building the product considering the first mile of the customer's experience using the product.
If you can just get more customers through that top of funnel, you are a world-class product team, you know, let's anchor ourselves on just doing that and let's use psychology to do so.
And just to make sure people understand when you talk about the first mile, essentially that's the onboarding flow maybe to the activation moment.
I think that's right.
It's the onboarding flow.
It's the initial experience.
It's the defaults that you see.
It's the orientation of where you are so many products.
You actually don't exactly know how you got to where you are and how to get home and where to get help.
So I would say it's the onboarding.
It's the orientation and it's the defaults.
You've been a constant and early advocate of investing in that part of the funnel and it's interesting how often that comes up on this podcast.
When people think about how do we improve retention?
How do we improve growth?
Often the biggest wins from stories that we get on this podcast are in that part of the flow.
And so another data point to spend more time there and as I

wanted to ask you, are you finding even at the stage of like an Adobe, there's still lots of opportunity in the first mile or do you find that it becomes less and less and less and then it's less important?

The answer is lots of opportunity.

The reason is because the customers change.

Every new cohort of new customers is different.

The new customers you have in the early stages of your product are typically more willing and forgiving customers and you might nail the onboarding process for them and then suddenly realize that wait, it's not being as effective anymore.

And the reason is because now you're engaging more of those pragmatist customers, those later stage customers who are initially more skeptical, less forgiving, less willing to deal with your friction.

And so you have to reimagine the onboarding process all over again. I mean, when you look at a product like Photoshop, for example, it used to cost hundreds and hundreds of dollars, right? Now you can get Photoshop for as little as 10 bucks a month. And so of course, the funnel is a lot larger.

A lot more people come in with creative desires without the skills or the tolerance to develop them.

And so that dictates an entire change in the onboarding experience for a product like Photoshop.

It makes me think if something should share the CF Coda shared about how he's like, I don't really buy this idea of product market fit because you have product market fit with your existing users that love it and know about it.

And you always don't have product market fit with the people you want to be used the product.

And it's related to what you're talking about, like the newest people joining up. No idea what you're doing.

I agree with that. And I actually think that the role of AI going forward will be to have applications increasingly meet us where we are.

You know, to this day, we've always had to generalize onboarding experiences for the most part for everyone.

And I'm really excited about the day when kind of products meet us where we are, you know, based on what type of user we are.

I have a billion AI related questions for you.

So I'm going to hold off just a bit and I wanted to double

click on the empathy piece.
So you talk about how to become better at product sense, empathy and understanding the user's problems is really important.
Give any advice for someone that wants to build that like what can I actually do to become more empathetic and build that part of their skill set?
Well, the most humbling moments for me as a product leader have always been shoulder to shoulder to customers watching them actually go about their day, not just use my product, but go about their day because what you end up getting is context for a lot of data that you're missing.
When customers are using your product, they're using it amidst everything else around them, you know, in the enterprise it's all their other, you know, meetings and other products and pings that they're getting throughout the day and as a consumer, you know, it's between dealing with their kids or their loved ones or watching Netflix or whatever the case might be.
And in order to really understand where the customer is and where their mentality is, you have to understand the context in which they're using your product.
So part of developing empathy is being shoulder to shoulder and just encountering that reality, you know, alongside your customer and that time.
It just gives you better intuition.
It helps you understand more and with empathy, we can then better create quote unquote for ourselves, right?
Because by developing empathy for others, we're feeling what they're feeling.
We can then be the customer and of course we all know some of the best customers, some of the best products in the world are made when we are, you know, the makers are the customer.
Makes me think of Mark Andreessen as this awesome code that I always come back to that everyone's time is already allocated.
They don't have time for your product.
That's right.
How do I find a new app to suck up my time?
And by the way, as a related note, since I know Lenny, you talk to a lot of gas around product like growth, you know, and sorry if I'm skipping around here, but I think this is also, it's

also relevant because everyone's trying to get their products to grow.

And the other thing that perplexes me is that people expect product leaders expect people to talk about a product being great and people don't talk about a product doing exactly what they expected it to do.

They talk about a product doing what they didn't expect.

And you know, you look at a product like Tesla, you know, people are not going and talking about how they had a great drive today, but they're talking about the Easter egg.

They they discovered on the dashboard or the, you know, cool new feature that, you know, they discovered that is associated with Christmas or whatever.

And so it always is interesting to me like in consumer and even enterprise products, maybe especially so, like, why aren't we optimizing for those things that people wouldn't expect the product to do as a way to get that surprise and delight to talk about it, to have like, you know, to develop kind of a relationship with our products.

I think that's another piece of the puzzle.

That is really interesting and reminds me of something I just talked about with Gustav from Spotify, whose episode might come in before this or after this about how every great consumer product pulls some kind of magic trick and feels like magic to you like Spotify as an example.

And I like that, you know, magic, you know, sort of a little mystery, a little intrigue, a little surprise.

It's a classic trick that Hollywood uses all the time.

Why don't we use it in our own products?

So let me pull on that thread a little bit about just consumer products in general.

You spent a lot of your career, maybe most of your career in consumer, imagine Adobe, there's a lot of B2B elements now as well.

And you also angel invest and you'd help a lot of consumer companies.

And tell me if you agree, but it feels like new consumer products basically never work.

And if they do work, there's like a period where they work like be real is kind of going through this now clubhouse paparazzi went through this and then they fail or, you know, fade away, maybe, maybe they come back and then fade away.

I guess, first of all, do you, you generally agree that like consumer is just like so rarely successful new consumer products.

You know, Uber was a consumer product, right?

But it built a network effect that was never there before.

It leveraged excess capacity that was always there, but never tapped.

It did something under the hood, right?

That gave it lasting power.

You know, I think of Pinterest, you know, and I was Ben's first seed angel or, you know, and product advisor.

And, you know, with, with, with that product, it was, you know, he had this like unique insight into the consumer psychology where it was not as much about getting likes and portraying, you know, yourself through pictures of you and seeing pictures of friends and all of this sort of anxiety that is induced by that, but rather helping people collect and, you know, represent themselves with their interests.

And so again, that was kind of like a new, a new insight that I also think developed its own network effect that enabled it to be lasting.

And there was a fascinating business component, which was it drove a crap load of traffic to every source of every pin, which then got those sites to then put pin buttons themselves because they wanted more traffic.

So they were underlying things under the hood again that were, you know, sort of tilting the market in his favor.

I think that a lot of these other more recent consumer products are just kind of clever momentary interfaces.

And they are in effect at the expense of venture capitalist R&D for the platforms that already have the network effects and already have the distribution channels and the ad sales and everything else.

And so I think that's why we're seeing, you know, B-Rills capability is now also in TikTok and you're seeing a lot of flashes in the pan, especially in these creative consumer apps, which I've been very, you know, paying very close attention to their fun and novel, but if they really work, those features have been brought into the native Apple camera, for instance.

So let's double click on that.

I know this is like a big question, but just what have

you found is important for a new consumer product to work?
You mentioned surprise would be great network effects,
maybe a new insight.
What else do you find is important for a durable new
consumer product to work?
Yeah, and it's interesting because I think my answer
10 years ago would probably be different than my answer
today.
I think that there is a nimbleness and a, and maybe
it started in China with these super apps that were able
to kind of do everything and that changed the idea away
from the atomized experiences of a decade plus ago where
you wanted like a specialized product that did exactly what
you wanted in a very like reduced way.
I think Snapchat emerged under that world.
You know, I think Instagram became valuable to Facebook
because of that phenomenon.
Fast forward to today where all of us are far more
technologically literate and we are able to manage a lot
more cognitive load in our everyday technology lifestyles.
And so there, you know, suddenly we don't mind five tabs.
We don't mind features hidden and tucked away in menus
because we're sort of used to that now.
And so maybe that's one of the reasons why these established
platforms get away with, you know, basically copying any
novel new capability as opposed to those becoming apps
in and of themselves.
So let me shift a little bit and talk about a tweet that
you tweeted about what one thing you've learned.
You have this amazing thread of just like things you have
learned over the many years you've been thinking about
products and consumer products.
And one of them was about how you've learned that you should
do half the things that you want to do like half the features
you plan to do, you have the features offer half the options
you want to offer focus on half the market versus market you're
trying to go after you just talk about maybe how you kind of
came up on that learning and then also just how do you
actually do that?
It's like, sure, great.
We're going to do half, but then which half and oh, but
someone wants this feature so badly shoot like we can do them

all.

So do you have any advice and just had it actually execute that sort of approach?

I mean, one of the first comments I'll just make is whenever I'm asked by teams what features need to be part of their MVP, how do they decide, you know, which features they need to ship first and whatever.

I always tell them to optimize for the problems they want to have.

You want the problem of customers getting through your funnel feeling successful using your product and getting value and then saying to you, Oh, but I need it on this platform or I need this capability or I want to be able to share this.

I mean, you want those problems.

So don't do those features now.

Only do the things that prevent people from getting to the point where they care enough to ask you for anything.

You know, make sure they can get through the signup flow.

Make sure they can connect their account.

Make sure they can use Google login if they need to or whatever the case may be.

So I always remind the teams like optimize for the problems you want to have and make sure that you eliminate all the brick walls, the major catastrophe type things that can happen.

But in terms of the the half the half half, you know, I learned this the hard way.

When Behance was launching back in 2008.

I was always, you know, trying to hedge us with product features.

And I wasn't sure if people would be coming to join groups or if people would be coming for the tip exchange where creative share best practices with one another or if people were coming to build their portfolios or just share work in progress.

Maybe it's too much to build a whole project of your work.

Maybe we can allow people just to share snapshots of their work.

And so we actually launched with pretty much all of these features and and then, you know, it was the most complicated form of Behance was ironically at the beginning.

And then what we realized is that some things were taking off and some things weren't.

So I remember when we decided to kill the tip exchange and

suddenly the publishing of projects in the portfolio went up and we're like, Oh my gosh, like projects being published is the core metric and it's what drives the traffic back to Behance.

Let's do this again.

I don't know.

Let's kill groups.

And so we killed groups and low and behold, more people published more projects and it was like, wow.

So actually, if you make the whole product about one thing, everyone does that.

That core crank operates at like 10 X the velocity and if that's the most important metric for the business.

That's that's gold.

And so we basically went on a killing spree.

We just started killing things and over the years we have actually tried to have this sort of and I pushed us on many products and I work with now whenever you're adding things consider what you can replace.

Consider what you can also remove when we updated the portfolio on Behance.

I remember we used to have this ability to change the colors of your portfolio in Behance when people clicked on your profile and saw all your projects.

You could control that and add your brand element to it.

And and so, you know, we were like, you know what, but what would happen if we just took this away with people?

Again, focus more on projects.

And so we took it away for 24 hours.

We had people reaching out to us being like, damn you.

Like, how could you take away these controls for for color in a portfolio after 24 hours?

We basically never heard about it again.

All the portfolios look cleaner and more consistent and people did the core metric more.

And so I just took from that.

Try to kill things and everything you think you need to do you probably only need to do half of it.

I wonder if in reality, most of the time you only realize this afterwards versus ahead of time.

And that's just the way it is.

And then it's just the seal of sunsetting things that aren't

actually important.

I do have to say the Lenny, like some of the best product leaders that I've worked with, I do feel like they have this great, you know, a reductionist or minimalistic tendency by default, you know, they're just like very much.

They anchor themselves on the one thing they want people to do and do well, and they just are like pretty ruthless about like everything else being like, okay, but only if we have a problem with doing this core thing.

Okay, put on the back burner.

You know, it's and so it's something I've tried to I've tried to get better at over the years.

You know, it's really interesting is this is exactly like Matt Machari, who is actually the number one most popular podcast episode talks about when you let people go and he's helped a lot of CEOs let people go that a hundred percent of the time, everything just starts moving faster as soon as you have fewer people.

And so it's the same exact model in people and products.

I think that's right.

And that's why I always feel like, you know, tough decisions, you know, almost always afterwards feel like a relief.

And that's true for the product.

That's true for people on a team as well.

Let's shift to talking about AI, which I'm really excited about because I know you've been spending a lot of time talking with people about AI, building AI products, you all launched Firefly, which a lot of people are really excited about.

You also have this newsletter where you kind of just share your implications on how AI and technology is going to impact the world.

So a lot of questions, I'm excited to ask you around this and I'll just start really broad and maybe this too big of a question, but just how different do you expect the world to be in say five years as a result of AI, both for product builders and then just people in general.

Listen, I'm an optimist and and I feel like our human potential has always been held back by the laws of physics essentially.

The mundane repetitive labor you need to do to get anything done is what holds back our ingenuity.

It's the friction, right?

It's the work in workflows that wouldn't be great if we could

just have flow and no work.
And I think that that's what AI kind of does is it gets us
from workflow to flow.
It gets us into this flow state where any idea in your mind's
eye, you can start to develop it.
I was having this discussion with with Howie who runs air
table actually just earlier today, where we were talking
about we were talking about the leader at IBM who announced
that he's not going to hire 8000 people that he would have
hired because AI is going to be able to do that work.
And what we were talking about was and how he made the point
as engineers have become much more productive over the years.
That doesn't mean that companies have wanted fewer engineers.
It actually just means that they demand more of their engineers
and engineers have more possibility to do more.
And so if human ingenuity goes up, maybe we actually want
to hire more people because if you have more ingenuity per
human being, maybe you can actually do more as a company.
You may be companies that used to have three products will
have five products or seven products or 30 products.
And you know, maybe that's actually the trend that we're
forgetting is that humans bring this level of ingenuity to
every problem and every opportunity.
Whereas computers remember like chat GPT is basically just
giving you what it would look like if right.
It's not truly finding edges that will become the center.
It's actually just mining the center and is trying to regurgitate
the center, which is also very helpful by the way.
So I'm optimistic, you know, I think that there will be far
more people engaged in delivering experiences.
You know, I'm very long the experience economy because I
think that there will be some people liberated to focus more
on the non scalable things that really move the needle for
experiences for customers.
And then I, you know, and I also am excited about humans
having less grudge work to do.
I'm also excited for that.
It reminds me there's a, I have a TikTok account and I have
this team that helps with the TikTok and they, we haven't
shared this, but a few of the TikToks are my voice generated
with AI and they just write a script and it's me reading the
story and it sounds sort of like me, but like, and I showed

it to a friend and I was like, do you see anything?

You feel anything weird about this video?

And he's like, oh, you, you sound great.

You sound like really like a great speaker of like, okay.

Say hi.

Well, while you were reading, instead of reading a script,

you can be, you know, plotting the course of the next episode.

Yeah, exactly.

So I totally see what you're talking about there in the product team.

Which function do you think will be the most disrupted and or the most, I don't know, optimized through AI?

We're entering the era where we collapse the stack in every organization where instead of having to go to someone for anything, you can kind of do more things yourself.

It's very empowering to get the answer from data as opposed to having to go to a data scientist or a data analyst in the middle.

So there's going to be far less game of operator across the organization and, you know, far more empowerment for people to dig their own rabbit holes, answer their own questions and get things done.

You know, I happen to believe that that's the advantage typically of small teams is that they're flat.

The stack is collapsed.

People all can hear each other, you know, in an audible across the room.

And that's how they run circles around big stodgy like old companies that are disparate, you know, and dispersed around the world.

So maybe, you know, maybe this technology allows cross functional work, right?

And to happen and I'm excited about, I'm excited about that.

That is really interesting.

So essentially what you're saying is a PM will be able to do more design, more engineering, more data potentially, and it won't, maybe one day it'll be just as good as having a data scientist and your team, but there's essentially everyone becomes kind of as a unicorn cross functional mini team, which sort of suggests this idea of idea meritocracy, you know, it's almost like what if people get promoted and opportunity, you know, based on how creative and how much ingenuity they have as opposed to, you know, how many reports

or bug things they've gotten through or whatever else.

So there's something about what you're saying that I do think, yes, it's disruptive to the degree that will you need a data analyst in the loop, but I also would suggest that again, a data analyst doesn't have to answer redundant requests all day.

She can spend time on, you know, thinking of other things without the boundaries of functions like we just discussed.

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I've already moved some of my favorite spreadsheet templates to Rose.

Go to rose.com slash Lenny to check them out.

That's rose.com slash Lenny.

A lot of listeners are product managers and so just going a little bit further even within the product management function.

How do you see the PMRL changing in the next five years as a result of AI?

Well, let me start by saying that I think that the greatest performers I've ever worked with, whether they're designers or

product leaders, basically preserve the time to explore
lots of possibilities.
They call those possibilities down to fewer set.
They get feedback on those.
They refine them even further and then they present to the
team like these are the two or three things.
I think we should do.
And that's the way a great designer works.
You know, for example, that is a function of time.
If you have the skills and the capabilities, it's just how much
time, how much time do you have to explore the full surface
area of possibility and find the best possible option?
In my world, in my mind, generative AI and AI for all, you know,
any talk to about just like product leaders exploring
possibilities, this should expand the surface area.
I was talking to a pretty well-known director in Hollywood
world and he was telling me that he uses chat GPT.
I was like, no, are you serious?
You do?
He was like, yeah, I don't use it to write any scripts.
But sometimes when I'm developing something with a writing
partner, I won't ask chat GPT, you know, what would you do?
And I'll explain the full instance, you know, the full
situation in extreme detail and it will spit out like five
scenarios and I actually don't use any of them, but it just
like gives me more surface area.
It tells me the things that I wouldn't want to do, which is
also good data.
And I just thought that that response so interesting.
And so when you ask about product leaders, I think that's
what we're going to have is we're going to have the superpower
of exploring far more surface area in far less time.
It reminds me of something I always share about like, why
do you need a PM?
Why do you need a designer?
Why do you need researchers?
It's not necessarily that they're just like very good at
these specific skills.
It's that they just have time to do this one thing that needs
to be done.
Like you can have engineers do the PM role, but they don't
have time.

They want to code and they're not they'd rather do that.
And so this is really interesting that it connects to
it'll give everyone a little more time to get better at
the thing they want to be doing.
That's true.
Is there anything you're doing with PMs at Adobe at this
point that help them leverage these tools and just the ways
of working that you're actually using today?
One of my obsessions has been bringing design earlier into
the process of product development.
So it's not necessarily AI yet, but it's the idea of designers.
First of all, being in the room, even being in the room with
some of the customer research and some of the debates around
even the value proposition to the customer and some of the
things that traditionally happen only with the PMs.
I just find that again, like collapsing the stack, if you
will, like having a designer hear these things and contribute
gives them like a golden gut as they are then sitting down
later and going through possible interfaces to solve the
problem.
So I love bringing design upstream like that's in fact,
that's probably been the cheat code of my career as a
product leader as has just been disproportionately empowering
design throughout the process.
I think what we're going to start seeing is generative AI
augmenting the designer's work in real time.
So right now, I mean, in Photoshop, we're experimenting
with when, you know, instead of just reducing an image and
cropping, you can also extend an image and and that's of
course using generative AI for outpainting.
And so you can imagine as you're doing edits and that as well
as in other forms of design, getting kind of thumbnails of
what you might be trying to accomplish and then touching
them almost like predictive text to go to the next step to
the next step and take leaps in the creative process as opposed
to incremental steps.
I think that that's going to happen far more and hopefully
product designers, product managers will be involved to
some extent in some of these decision points, you know,
as as designers have more options to choose from you
throughout this term golden gut.
What is that about?

The golden gut is when you're when you're designing an experience and and a flow.
You are playing around right with all kinds of options.
You're moving things around.
You're saying actually that's too complicated.
Maybe I'll separate this one page into three steps as opposed to one page with three steps in a row.
How do I break this down?
How do I simplify?
You know, you sometimes have instincts like, oh wait, what if I just remove this altogether?
You know, what if you didn't even have this whole series of steps?
What if I just had a presumptuous default instead and customers could change it if they think they need to?
And you know, in some of those sorts of I wonder if I wonder if I wonder if to me is the difference between a very junior product thinker and a very experienced product thinker.
I think experienced product thinkers with that golden gut of, oh my gosh, wait, reduction of cognitive load.
Maybe if even if 10% of people get confused to get 90% of people far faster through this process is a big win and a great opportunity cost trade off.
Like I think those sorts of little micro decisions that we make in the process of building products.
That's the golden gut.
I love it.
I've not heard that term before.
4 p.m.
is listening and they're like, okay, AI is happening.
I don't know what to do.
What would be your advice for them to kind of stay ahead and be aware where things are going and not be left behind?
Quite simply in one word play.
You know, we all have to be playing with this technology.
We have to find ways.
The risk of becoming more experienced in your career is you get stuck in your ways and you're like, oh, no, I don't need to have that automatic draft in my email and get chat GPT to suggest what I want to respond with.
I'm fine without that.
Make sure you try it.

Make sure you play with it.
You know, write poems for your friends.
You know, try a lot of these various generative AI tools out there just to see what's possible and and pursue every curiosity.
The reason I started the implications newsletter is because I was seeing this high velocity of new stuff every day and I'm like, I have to force myself to make sure I understand all of this and think about how these implications will change my business as well as the world that I operate in and there was no better way to do that than to have to write about it, you know, and promise my readers, I'll get a monthly thing out there.
So I just think we all have to do some version of that.
Let's plug implications while we're at it.
How do people go subscribe or do they find it?
Yeah, I know it's implications.com.
So it's easy to find, but this is a it's just a it's a monthly exercise where throughout the month, I try to capture a few things I think are important and I really try to go deep down the rabbit hole of what the implications are for, you know, various parts of our work in life.
And it's been a fun it's been a fun exercise and also I get some good polarizing feedback in the process.
Oh, you do.
Interesting.
You should share that.
That'd be interesting as like, here's what I'm getting in response to the stuff I'm writing.
This also touches on a thread that comes up a lot in this podcast is the power of just writing to help you think through stuff.
Like a lot of people think my newsletter is I'm just sharing all these things.
I know I'm just like, I know it in my head.
I'm just going to share it in the thing, but it's more the writing helps me figure it out and gives me an excuse and like you said, it's a forcing function to spend the time crystallizing it.
And so that's another reminder for that and capturing those things.
I think that the thing I've kind of learned over the years

with writing and also with product development is, you know, as soon as you capture these little glimpses and things or sketches and they become relevant years later.

So don't always capture and write because of a foreseeable need for that content.

Consider it almost like a, you know, a back burner that you're constantly tending to and imagine that three years from now, the stars will align and this will become invaluable content or some crucial idea, you know, for a problem you're facing at the moment.

There's a lot of people actually in your shoes that want to write more and put content out, but that also full-time job with a lot of things on your plate.

Any advice for actually getting it done the way you've been getting it done?

You know, listen, there's, there's, there's no hack to it other than ruthlessness of time and prioritization, you know, saying no to most things, you know, this morning I went for a run and I was like, I have 40 minutes exactly until I have to get in the shower and I have to be somewhere in 30 minutes from that moment.

I'm going to take those 40 minutes or at least 35 of them and I'm going to write.

I don't care if I write five words or five pages and it's just a great, you know, without that discipline though, it's, as you said, it's super hard to get it in the, you know, in the, in the, in the seams of the schedule.

Speaking of discipline, you wrote a book called The Messy Middle and without even talking about what it is, the title is pretty, I think people feel like I get it and imagine many people listening are founders or PMs that are feeling like they're in this messy middle.

What is one piece of advice for people in this period that you might, you think might help them through the messy middle?

The bottom line is that these years in the middle of whether it's a venture from your new startup, bold turnaround within a big company, they are messy because they are full of lows, you know, it's very volatile when you're in those lows, you need to find a way to endure them.

You need to endure the anonymity and uncertainty and anxiety.

I'm sure a lot of listeners are whether they're in big companies or starting their own company.

It's hard to be doing something that no one knows or cares about.

I always like to remind myself that the life expectancy of humans 100 plus years ago was 25 years old.

So the idea of spending three to five years of your life on something, especially if it might fail was a bad decision, you know, and I think biologically we feel the need for constant rewards and affirmation to stick with something long enough.

And in fact, like if any of you know, most of your listeners are we're all we're all building things that take many, many years to defy the odds and we have to overcome our natural human tendencies in this instance by sticking together long enough to figure it out.

So how do you do that?

Right?

I mean, obviously part of it is culture wanting to serve the customers you serve and working with the team you were working with and that being enough to kind of stick it long enough.

I think part of it is short circuiting the reward system, you know, finding micro goals and milestones that are mutually agreed upon.

We're going to celebrate these even though in the greater scheme of things, they don't matter much.

I think that's a key part of keeping the team and keeping the dream alive.

I always like to use the analogy of we're driving our teams across country as product leaders with the windows blacked out in the backseat and everyone's sitting in the backseat.

And so if they don't know what we're doing that we're making progress, this traffic is clearing where we just cross state lines.

If they if they don't receive the narrative, they will go stir crazy.

And so there's a lot of research around progress be getting progress and how progress is a source of motivation.

And so as product leaders, we have to merchandise progress.

We have to be the steward of this narrative.

And you touch on this a bit as you were just talking, but there's also this moment where it makes sense to quit like you shouldn't stay with things endlessly.

And I guess any advice on just when something is like, okay,

should probably move on from this makes me think a little bit
about there's all these companies that just keep going that
maybe should keep going because they have enough money or
they're just like, no, founders never quit.
Any advice or thoughts that you share there?
Yeah, you know, I've had this conversation quite a few times
over the years with founders and friends who who were running
a company going sideways or worse and have had this question.
Should I continue or not?
I always have the same answer.
I basically say and I really ask how much conviction do you
have in the solution you're building?
I know in the beginning before you knew all you know now,
you had tons of conviction.
That's what caused you to leave your job.
You know, that's what caused you to take all this risk and hire
people and raise money and all this stuff.
Now knowing all you know, do you have more or less conviction
in the problem and the solution you're building?
And I'll tell you like, I get different answers to some people
are like, oh, Scott, I mean, I have more conviction like all
that I've learned all the validation I've received from
customers.
We just haven't figured it out yet.
It's driving me crazy.
We've tried three times and it's still like each product
fails, but I have more conviction than ever before.
And for those people, I'm like, you know what?
You're just in the messy middle stick with it.
You know, this is this is par for the course.
But you know, oftentimes I'll hear you know, honestly, if I
knew now, would I if I knew then what I know now, I would
not have done this.
Like, holy shit.
I am like then quit like your life is short.
You have a great team.
Pivot do something completely different.
If you've lost conviction, you should not be doing what
you're doing in the world of entrepreneurship.
Sometimes there are moments of that, I imagine.
And so there's probably some spectrum of just like how little
conviction and how long you felt that, right?

I think so.

But at the same time, listen, we all have ups and downs.

We all have good days and bad days.

However, I do think that great founders are just they absolutely know in their core, you know, that something needs to exist and they will just be ruthless and relentless until it does.

But if you lose that, I actually don't know if you have the fuel to continue.

So listen, I'm don't you're right.

Don't make a bold decision on a bad day.

But if the conviction generally dissipates, be open-minded about other options.

You do a lot of angel investing.

Talk to a lot of founders.

What is it that you look for?

What do you think is important for a startup to show you for it to feel like a good bet that it'll likely work out?

What are some of the important attributes you look for?

I'll talk a few for a few things on team and then a few things on product.

Perfect.

You know, you know, on team.

I really value founders who listen, you know, who really learn, who long to shake shit up a bit, you know, and and and also value the mission that they're on more than the money that it yields, because I do think that especially during a period of time where you don't have revenue, you're going to need to be motivated by something grander and bolder than revenue.

I also have an allergic reaction to founders that are real promoters, you know, who are constantly trying to sugarcoat the truth who, you know, like to gloss over the hard parts.

I've always admired leaders that are optimistic about the future, but very pragmatic and somewhat pessimistic about the present.

So the founders that I have like a great sort of chemistry with are people who are like, this is how big the market is.

This is how amazing this is.

I know this needs to exist, but you know, we've got a lot to figure out.

There are things that are not working.

We don't have these data sets.

These are the major obstacles we're struggling with.
You know, these are the things that keep you up at night.
Those are real people and you know that in that volatile middle, you know, messy middle that they're going to inevitably go through that their team, their investors are going to have the real truth and they're going to be able to engage and find solutions.
So I really love finding those types of founders and I and I'm very wary of kind of the name dropping overly promoting folks who are unlikely to be able to partner in that way on the product side.
I am looking for an object model way of thinking about a product that I am confident the will scale, you know, and as they as they solve their their problem.
And when I say object model, what I mean is, is it clear whenever you're seeing the product like how it works, where you came from, where you're going?
You know, those are the three questions I always ask when I'm doing product reviews.
It's like, how did I get here?
What do I do now?
And what do I do next?
And I feel like every screen and every product experience, you should be able to answer those three questions.
Sometimes I'll be talking to a team that says they're design driven, you know, says that they're building an incredible product and they'll show me a demo and I'm like, this is all over the place.
Like there's no clean, clear breadcrumbs and object model for how this thing works.
How are they ever going to get people through their funnel?
Clearly they don't value this as a core principle and that's also always a red flag.
And then finally, I just obviously have to believe in the, in the problem they're solving.
So, you know, those are some of the things I think about.
And you focus primarily on consumer or do you invest all over the place?
And I'm asking in case people want to reach out and maybe, hey, Scott, you want to know, I'm pretty agnostic.
I look for product design oriented teams, you know, making things that need to exist.

Beyond that, I try not to be too prescriptive.

Okay.

Excellent.

Any last words of wisdom that you think it impact the way people build products in the world, the tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of listeners listening.

Is there anything else you want to share before we get to a very exciting lighting round?

Two quick things, you know, one for the moment that we're in and then one for why we do what we do.

For the moment that we're in, you know, we're in a resource constrained environment.

Let's face it, we're all going to have less money, fewer head count, all that kind of stuff.

And I've always found that resourcefulness, you know, brings you further than resources, despite the fact that over the last seven to 10 years, we've basically thrown resources at every problem.

Oh my gosh, this is not scaling, throw more money at servers.

Oh my goodness.

You know, we need more people on the social media team, throw more people at head, throw more money at head counts.

Like we, we've had a resources way of solving our problems as opposed to a, well, let's refactor how we run that database or let's refactor how that team answers customer service requests.

Let's bring in new technology to make it more efficient.

Let's leverage and play with AI to see if that can help us.

You know, we are in this area now where we're being forced to be resourceful and to refactor as opposed to hire and, and throw resources at problems.

I think that's a great opportunity.

I feel like this is where the best teams are going to build that muscle that are going to go the distance.

That's why all these VCs say it's so cliche that the best companies are always built in areas like these.

So my one, you know, my point number one is capitalize on the crisis, everyone, you know, it's a, if, if, if resources are cards, resourcefulness is like muscle.

It stays with you.

It makes you stronger and it helps you, you know, have a better, better intuition, you know, and, and better, better performance

over time.

And then I guess taking a step back, I would just encourage folks to recognize that, you know, anything, anything amazing in the venture world is ultimately an exception.

And, and with all the best practices, Lenny that you and I just discussed and all the stuff that we read in books and whatever else, I always try to remind myself that, you know, at the end of the day, sometimes exceptions are the rule when it comes to doing something truly transformative and that nothing extraordinary is ever achieved through ordinary means.

And so while we should always like take these best practices and sure listen to some of the lessons I learned the hard way and whatever else, but at the same time, if everyone says you're crazy, you're either crazy or you're really onto something.

So, uh, so take that with a grain of salt.

Love that.

Speaking of extraordinary, I thought it'd be cool to just give you a chance to talk about what you're doing at Adobe.

What are some of the products that you're working on?

What should folks know about potentially what's happening in Adobe?

They may not be aware.

Yeah, I know.

Thanks, thanks for asking.

You know, for, for us, I would say there's really three trends that are driving or three waves of transformation.

I would say that are driving the strategy right now for us.

One is just that people are becoming more creatively confident.

It's kind of wild that we're like most confident as five year olds creatively when we're drawing and our parents are like,

Oh my God, that's beautiful.

That's amazing.

Let's put it on the fridge and then creative confidence kind of goes down from there for most adults.

And that's really sad.

And with generative AI and tools, we have something called the adobe express and market and our gender value offerings called firefly.

These types of tools make people feel more creatively confident right away.

It's pretty amazing to see people that would never pick up, you know, a pen and draw or suddenly feeling confident.

So that's, I would say that's like wave number one, you know, wave number two that we talked about a little earlier were, you know, is the fact that creative professionals can now explore 10 X the surface area of possibility.

These tools are making them so much more efficient and some people are like, Oh my gosh, creative pros are going to be replaced.

No, no, no, no, they're not.

They're just going to find 10 X better solutions.

They're going to have that capability to explore more possibilities.

And that's what makes design great is finding, you know, exploring more surface area.

And then I would say the third wave that's fascinating to me is personalization.

You know, I think we talked about this a little bit, like our apps will meet us where we are.

I think that every marketing experience will be increasingly personalized for each of us, you know, every commerce experience, they'll know who we are.

They'll just show us our shoe size and no one else's, you know, these sorts of transformations will really change the entire world of commerce and content and media and everything else.

And Adobe has a big digital marketing business that is focused on enabling some of that.

So those are, that's really the, those are the factors of strategy that I would say are driving some of the new products we have under development.

And, you know, now it's all about let's talk more ship.

I love that you need a banner of that.

It's been amazing to watch Adobe's rise over the last decade.

It just kind of felt like it was going nowhere and all of a sudden it's, it's a juggernaut.

And so, um, great work, Scott and everyone else involved.

But with that, we've reached our very exciting lightning ground.

I've got six questions for you.

We'll try to go through it pretty fast.

Sound good?

Okay.

Sound excited.
Sounds good.
Let's do it.
What are two or three books that you've recommended most
to other people?
First is build by Tony Fidel.
You know, Tony is just an amazing charismatic, deeply
pragmatic product builder.
You know, he, he's been brave enough to do both Adams and
bits as he says.
And, uh, and his book is just chock full, chock full of wisdom.
You know, I do, I do appreciate like some of these kind of laws
of nature laws of power type books.
I love psychology books.
I'm trying to think of some offhand that have really struck
me, but understanding the natural human tendencies of people.
I think the laws of power like talks about tons of wars over
centuries and, you know, what, what, what sorts of natural
human tendencies or inequalities drove, you know, massive
rebellions and revolutions.
These sorts of insights, believe it or not, uh, parlay
into decisions we make in products and making people, uh,
feel successful and productive.
So I don't know.
I love those books just because I think that they remind us
of sort of the limitations and opportunities or possibilities
of humanity.
What is a favorite reason movie or TV show?
What I love is these, uh, documentaries about like the
cosmos and about, um, the sort of the, the edge of our understanding
of black holes and, you know, and what happens out there in
space.
So I don't remember.
I know one is called cosmos on Netflix.
There are a few of them, but in my downtime, I get lost in,
in some series like that.
You have kids, one or plus, one or more kids.
Yes.
What are you doing to help them plan for this future?
I think about this all the time.
You know, what are our, what are our children going to do in a
world where, you know, if you know, if you believe Vinod

Kosla's prediction that 80% of the work of 80% of jobs will
be replaced by AI, what, what will, uh, what will people do?
As we talked about their ingenuity will be unleashed.
That's great.
But ultimately, I always revert back to this one belief that
if people are passionate, they become successful in something.
So I've always just been focused on trying to make sure that
they find something they're super passionate about.
And it doesn't even matter if the thing they find now is the
thing they do later, because I do believe that passion in itself
and taking initiative on your passion is a muscle memory that
once you develop it, you know, I have a daughter who loves
horseback riding.
I don't know if she's going to do horseback riding forever
or whatever, but, uh, I think that the passion that she has
for it, this, and this desire to be better and to constantly
learn more and do more.
That in itself is like a replicable muscle memory.
So, um, I don't know what the future holds, but I believe that
passionate people will always have a path.
Love that.
What's a favorite interview question you like to ask
when you're interviewing people?
There's a real one and there's a snarky one, right?
So the, um, you know, I do, I do love trying to understand if
people are introspective, you know, and, um, and so I like
asking about something people have learned about themselves
that reveal the limitation in how they work.
You know, it's a way for to test like introspection and
when this person hits their limits, uh, or struggles, can
they be open and introspective?
Are they going to blame and point fingers?
So I do ask that.
I also like the question that do you consider yourself lucky?
I think it's a fascinating question because it also, you
know, some people who are super insecure about, you know,
where, where they are and how they got there might decline,
uh, admitting luck, you know, those who are comfortable should
admit that they were lucky.
I mean, I think the truth is we're all very lucky and, uh,
and certainly privileged.
And, you know, I just think that that's always an interesting

conversation.

What's a favorite recent product you've discovered app or physical product?

Anything that comes to mind?

I've been playing with a product called Q and it's Q, U, E, U, E, I think, and it's basically a way to keep a Q of all of this content you want to watch across every streaming platform and it's because there's so much content across so many streaming platforms and to make your own Q and then to see your friend's cues and to see what content is in most of the people you know is cues.

Like it's actually an incredible graph of kind of stuff that people want to watch or have liked that.

I think we're going to need in this world where there is just a billion sources of content.

I'm definitely going to check that out.

I've been looking for an app like that of like I'm sitting it in the evening.

What the hell should I watch?

I've seen everything that exists on the internet.

So that's awesome.

What's a favorite AI tool that you've recently discovered or find useful that isn't something Adobe has made?

Okay, well, I'll, um, I will mention if it's okay, like a product that I did invest in, but, um, it's a product called Tome and, uh, and they can take a narrative or that you want to put into a presentation and with AI basically create a, um, you know, just like a draft of this presentation with imagery and compelling points.

And it's pretty, uh, it's almost as if you like handed this off to an intern and said, come back to me with something I can work with.

And suddenly it's like instantly there.

So, um, that's been like a fun one, a fun one to play with.

I will check that out.

We'll link to that.

Also reminds me, um, Kevin Kelly on Tim Ferriss was talking about how AI and chat GPT is basically an intern.

That's like the level of their skill right now.

They're just this intern that's helping out with stuff.

I think that's right.

And that's why we have to see it as a resource, but not a

constraint because, you know, again, it's, you know, it's
answering that question.
Like, what would it look like if, uh, as opposed to doing,
you know, true distinct thinking per se?
Scott, this is the first time we've ever chatted, but I feel
like I know you, you are wonderful.
Thank you so much for being here.
Two final questions.
Where can folks find you online?
If they want to reach out, learn more and how can listeners
be useful to you?
Yeah.
No, awesome.
Like listen, thanks Lenny.
And, you know, your, your podcasts and your emails are
probably among my more forwarded, you know, uh, pieces of nuggets
and resources that I send to product teams I work with.
So thank you for elevating the field for all of us, I should
say, and it's an honor to be on this podcast.
I'm easy to find, uh, just Scott Belsky.com or at Scott Belsky
on your favorite favorite social network of choice.
Um, and, you know, implications.com is where I'm writing these days.
And then, you know, and I, I welcome, I welcome folks to share
what they're working on.
You know, I just love taking as much data points as possible.
I love connecting dots for people and making introductions.
I feel like, you know, that can be a contribution to this whole
world of better and better products.
And I, I welcome you to, to reach out.
Awesome.
Scott, and again, thank you for being here.
Thanks Lenny.
Bye everyone.
Thank you so much for listening.
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