

Transcript - Alex Smith - What is strategy

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Ross G 00:07

Hello, you're listening to the Future Talent Learning podcast developed to help you build your leadership and management skills. I'm Ross Garner,

Ross D 00:14

And I'm Ross Dickey. This week, we're asking what is strategy? Is it a complicated plan that no one understands? A unique offering that's hard to maintain? Or a business buzzword while the boots on the ground do the actual work stuff? To answer these questions, we're speaking to Alex Smith, founder of Basic Arts.

Ross D 00:30

Alex created Basic Arts to help organisations where strategies are disjointed or confused, which sounds like pretty much every organisation. So I assume that you're incredibly busy. Let's see if you could help us today. So how are you doing, Alex?

Alex 00:44

Yeah, yeah, very good, very good. Thanks for having me, nice to be here.

Ross D 00:48

Did that sound like an accurate description of what Basic Arts do?

Alex 00:50

Well, it sounds like something I must have said at some point in the past. And I guess this is as good as any, but yeah, but essentially developing strategies, usable strategies, hopefully for organisations who, as you sort of suggested, typically don't have anything which I think could reasonably be called a strategy at all.

Alex 01:14

95, 98% I would estimate of companies don't really have a strategy. Not that it kills them by any means, as obviously we'll discuss, but yeah, that's the idea.

Ross D 01:26

I think probably the keyword that you used there was usable. So normally I think how those strategies developed is you have all senior people and they go away for a couple of days or they're in a room together and they come up with lots and lots of ideas and you end up with like 50 post-it notes.

Ross D 01:38

And then they're put together and be grouped slightly, slightly arbitrary terms because there's disagreement. So you have to agree on something. So then everyone has a slightly different understanding of what the words mean.

Ross D 01:49

And then you can roll out to the business and no one has a clue what's going on. So for you, what is a strategy?

Alex 01:58

Well, I think that you really, it really helps to just sort of take things back to a sort of babyish level of basics. Now obviously, I mean, I'm not sure what the dictionary definition of strategy is, but clearly it's something like a plan to achieve a goal.

Alex 02:14

And obviously in the case of business, that goal is going to be growth, sales, stuff like that. And so essentially, any path or direction that you can plot out that's going to deliver you that you could say that's your strategy.

Alex 02:26

Now, the problem is where I think that this kind of catches people out is that there is an unlimited variety of different ways that you could do that. I mean, if you think about, I don't know, let's say Tony Soprano, you know, his strategy might be all about whacking his competitors, right?

Alex 02:47

And, and, and it works for him. But it just,

Ross G 02:50

To a point.

Alex 02:52

Well, that's true. I mean, it didn't work out for him in the end, but you know, he had a good run. But when you have such a wide diversity of ways that a business can succeed, you still are left not quite knowing what you're doing.

Alex 03:08

So I think it's helpful to actually, although there are exceptions to this, many exceptions to this, I think it's helpful to actually think a little bit more in terms of, you know, what actually is a business?

Alex 03:20

What is the role of the business? What is its job to do? And obviously that job is to deliver value to its customers, to deliver value to the market. So obviously it has to do a particular, it has to do a particular job for people.

Alex 03:36

And, and whatever that job is, whatever the value it's delivering to the market is, that's the strategy. So all you really need, I think, as a business, or certainly 99% of businesses as a strategy is to figure out what exactly the value is that you're delivering to people.

Alex 03:56

And if you can figure that out, and if it's something which number one, clearly people want, and number two, another business isn't already doing, then you're laughing, then success should kind of flow pretty easily.

Alex 04:11

But I think that if you pin down almost every company and you ask them to actually explain what exactly is the unique value that they are delivering to people, they'd either not be able to answer at all, or they would answer something, or they'd answer one thing and their colleague would answer another, or probably most commonly, they'd answer something which is sort of fine, but which you could probably say about every one of their competitors.

Alex 04:37

Hence why they get into sort of a, sort of a commodifying race to the bottom situation.

Ross G 04:45

That's quite a different mindset to how you pitched it at the start of what you were saying there, because you were talking about your strategy might be organisational growth or increased sales. That's what the organisation is looking for.

Ross G 04:58

The way that you phrased it was much more customer or user centric in terms of the value that you're going to offer to these people. What does a good strategy look like? Are there examples that come to mind?

Alex 05:12

Yeah, I mean in that particular instance just to sort of like clarify and that obviously the growth or whatever would be the the goal of the strategy, but obviously not the strategy itself and clearly...

Ross G 05:22

That happens as a result of the strategy.

Alex 05:24

Yeah, exactly. And clearly, of course, like many, many businesses, they mistake the goal for the strategy. And they do say things along the lines of our strategy is to grow. It's not normally that stupid, but it's kind of like in that same ballpark.

Ross D 05:39

Every organisation wants to grow. That's everyone's strategy.

Alex 05:43

That isn't very helpful, but to put a little flesh on the bones and sort of give you a sort of like an example, which I think we

could all kind of like understand and sort of and recognise. If we take, let's say Tesla, for example, when Tesla first came onto the market, the main way that they broke through was with a strategy, which I think we could pretty much boil down to saying was making electric cars into luxury performance cars, right?

Alex 06:16

Now, if you consider the context of the market that they went into, electric cars already existed and had existed for a long time. But all electric car brands and models out there, they were all focused on the value of electric cars being essentially obviously environmental friendliness, but also sort of economy.

Alex 06:36

So they were always these sort of like insipid little run around kind of wizard cars. Like none of them had the kind of luxury and performance appeal that you would get from, I don't know, a top end Mercedes or BMW or something.

Ross D 06:50

So staying on cars. It's like you want people to notice that you're driving an electric car and they will notice when you eventually arrive. But it'll take a very long time to arrive for people to notice.

Alex 06:58

Yeah, exactly. And so all that Tesla did was realise, well, okay, you can position electric cars that way, or you could use electric car technology to create something which is ridiculously fast and expensive and luxurious, which I mean, bear in mind the very first car that they ever released, it wasn't a nippy little run around, it was a sports car, it was the Tesla Roadster.

Alex 07:21

So they actually took almost the exact reverse approach to other electric car companies in the market. Now, obviously by doing that, they were delivering a unique values of the market. On a very basic level, there were no electric cars, there were no electric sports cars, and there were no electric cars that had those kind of like, those values of luxury and performance on the market.

Alex 07:44

And so in doing that, they suddenly made electric cars something that people actually wanted rather than feeling that they should want. So that gave them a very long kind of pretty much unchallenged time to grow.

Alex 07:58

Now, of course, that all the other manufacturers are entering that space, it's kind of, this isn't unique anymore, but they've staked such a claim on that part of the market that it sort of doesn't matter that it isn't unique anymore.

Alex 08:12

The point is, is that you can see how they managed to get traction when the other brands didn't, just through that very, very basic idea of just knowing what the value was they were bringing to the market and knowing that no other brand was doing it.

Ross G 08:27

Yeah, I mean, I think, I mean, I don't really want to go back to this example, but Apple is a very similar story, I guess, you know, they didn't invent the first smartphone, there were smartphones around way before the iPhone came along, but they came along and offered a well, like a Roadster version of Blackberry, I guess, or like something that was beautiful as well as functional.

Ross G 08:48

I don't want to take us too far down a garden path, but I'm kind of intrigued in what the overlap is between strategy and vision. So Ross, when he was setting this up, talked about how often strategies formed by a bunch of senior folk going off to rooms and they come back with lots of ideas, you know, pinned up on post-its.

Ross G 09:08

And then perhaps they struggle to articulate that to the business where it's difficult for people in more junior positions to understand what the strategy is and what it means to them. Where do you see the sort of overlap between strategy and vision?

Ross G 09:22

How important is it for those more junior members of an organisation to understand what the organisation's strategy is?

Alex 09:30

Well, I mean, that to that question, it's completely crucial. But actually, it's the sort of like it's the proliferation of terminology, like vision, mission, et cetera, et cetera, which makes that job quite difficult.

Ross D 09:44

We're going to be agile. What does that mean?

Alex 09:48

Like, personally, like, you've always got to think about it. You've always got to return to that old cliché of, you know, you're describing what the strategy of your business is to some bloke in the pub or something like that.

Alex 10:04

So, you know, all the strategy really needs to be needs to end up being is something which you can word along the lines of this business does X, which is a good idea because of ABC, you know, some kind of like casual explanation like that.

Alex 10:22

So like what I just gave you about Tesla, for example, you could write that up on a piece of A4, like, you know, three or four paragraphs. And it should be something that you could give to not just anybody in the organisation, but anybody anywhere to a 14 year old in Liverpool or something like that.

Alex 10:42

And they would be like, oh, OK, I understand what this business does. That in that case would be a strategy so that everybody, of course, in the organisation, when they understand not only what the business does as in this business makes cars, this business makes socks, this business is a law firm, but more specifically, this is a business that exists in that category.

Alex 11:03

And what it brings to that category, which others don't is X. You know, that's not a difficult thing for people to understand or it shouldn't be. And when they do understand it, of course, they can then look at their own role through the lens of that.

Alex 11:18

And, you know, in some cases, their role won't be meaningfully affected by the strategy. You know, let's say your average, I don't know, your financial controller or person working in a warehouse, their job might be exactly the same no matter what the strategy of the business is.

Alex 11:35

But for a lot of people, they have to understand, let's say, I don't know, a marketing manager. OK, well, the way that I do marketing in this business is actually very different than the way that I would do it in a competitors, because I understand what we're going out there and trying to do.

Alex 11:50

And yeah, ultimately, going back to your thing about the, you know, the senior people going away, post notes on the wall and stuff like that. If that doesn't at the end of it spit out, you know, a couple of paragraphs which anyone can understand, which puts forward an argument about what the business is going to do.

Alex 12:07

Well, then then I guess the job isn't done.

Ross D 12:11

I would push back on what you said there a little bit, Alex, with that. On the financial controller doesn't, you know, doesn't really the vision doesn't mean anything to them because what the financial controller is doing is enabling others in the business to deliver the strategy.

Ross D 12:23

And the, you know, the person that's in the warehouse, this might be a utopian vision, not shared by people in warehouses.

I'm obviously not in a warehouse right now. And, you know, the way that they deliver that service is something that ultimately feeds into the customer experience of that brand.

Ross D 12:39

Was I excessively optimistic?

Alex 12:43

I mean, on paper, I 1000% agree with you. And actually, when I first started doing this work, you know, everything I was doing was all about like, running the strategy through the business, like a stick of rock, you know, where absolutely every single sort of bolt and cog within the business would be unique as a trickle down effect of the strategy.

Alex 13:07

And certainly I do think there are the odd business out there, like, I don't know, your real sort of like famous kind of cliches, like your Patagonias and Apples and stuff, where you can probably say that to an extent that is true.

Alex 13:19

And I certainly think it should be the aim. In practice, I find that very few, almost no businesses have the follow through to get to that stage. And, you know, and ultimately, they don't kind of need to because just actually having a vaguely competent strategy and delivering on it in a vaguely competent fashion already puts you so far ahead of the norm that you probably lose the incentive to actually take the further steps like that, which are going to move you away from just being a really good business and into the stratosphere.

Alex 13:59

You know, I'd love to say that, you know, every brand that I've worked with is desperate to do that. But actually really, I'd say that the fundamentals are probably a bigger priority, I suppose.

Ross G 14:15

Yeah, once the fundamentals get you into that top 20% of businesses, how much impetus is it really to get into the top 5% because versus your competitors, probably the kind of slightly less stick of rock approach probably works fine.

Ross G 14:29

So the problem with talking about Tesla and Apple is that Steve Jobs and Elon Musk are not normal people. They're both absolute weirdos. So they're the exception, not the rule to your everyday company.

Ross G 14:47

So for those of us who are suddenly more humdrum like myself, what does a good strategy look like? Are there any of your clients that you can think of, a frame that's weirdly because I referred to it as humdrum, that have a strategy that you could share?

Alex 15:04

Yeah, yeah, certainly. Let me see what would...

Ross G 15:08

Setting aside the humdrum part. You're exciting clients who have a very exciting strategy.

Alex 15:13

Okay, well, one client of mine who are doing really well is a brand called Moju. They are the market leader in juice shots. I think it's pretty likely that you recognise them. They just won soft drinks brand of the year at the Grocer Awards, which I was very excited about because obviously soft drinks is the most sort of competitive and oversaturated of categories.

Alex 15:42

And in their case, they actually began, as a lot of businesses do, with a product, which was quite a unique and interesting product, juice shots. There weren't any other juice shots around at the time.

Alex 15:55

And the crux of what we needed to do for their strategy was figure out, okay, we've invented this product, but what actually is it for? Because recognise that there's a huge difference obviously between putting a product out there, even a unique product, and understanding the value that that product delivers.

Alex 16:15

The product is not the strategy, it's the value. It's the classic, I didn't buy a drill, I bought a hole, kind of situation. You have to understand what exactly the value of your product is. The product itself is kind of incidental.

Alex 16:31

So they had this product, but they weren't really sure what it was for. It was doing pretty well, but it didn't have any sort of direction in the market for them to grow from. Now, in short, in their case, because their product is made out of juice, it's a juice shot, they had sort of been seeing themselves as a competitor with other juices, brands like Innocent and people like that.

Alex 16:57

But when you think about it, nobody buys a shot of juice instead of buying, let's say, a 250 ml juice. The two things, they may sit next to each other on the shelf, but they aren't remotely the same need state.

Alex 17:10

A juice shot, actually, although it's merchandise next to juice, it's much more like a Barocca, or even dare I say a sort of a Paracetamol, or a Lemsip, or an Espresso, these kind of like products that people use when they're feeling a bit rough to sort of perk them up and get them through the day and sort of help them kick on.

Alex 17:31

So through this, Moju sort of realised that rather than being a juice brand, they were a little bit more like what we call a performance products brand. They were really a sort of pseudo medicinal kind of almost like a sort of liquid pill, if you like.

Alex 17:48

And so when we recognised that, it put them into a completely different competitive space than what they were working with before. Suddenly, they were up against a bunch of very sort of chemical, very sort of unnatural other brands like the ones that I just referenced, and also brands like Lucozade and people like that.

Alex 18:11

And when they moved over into this different category, this suddenly gave them a huge amount of leverage they didn't have in juice, because in juice, everybody's natural. But over in the world of performance products, all the products are very chemical.

Alex 18:25

So when we positioned the brand essentially is offering kind of natural performance. So in essence, think a brand like Lucozade, but not full of sugar, but made from like juice. That was a whole new market position that they opened up.

Alex 18:40

Now the product in essence was exactly the same as it was before. But because we framed everything else in the business differently, it obviously allowed the consumers to understand much better what the product was for, what it could do for them, how they should use it, when they should buy it.

Alex 18:55

And so from that point, all the various kind of subsequent decisions that the business made around that have enabled it to sort of kick on and grow, I don't know, 10-fold or whatever it's been in the years in between.

Alex 19:10

So yeah, I do think that they've created something very exciting there, not maybe like Apple or Tesla just yet. But I think it's just an example of how understanding the job that you're doing and then following through the implications of that to all the different parts of the business are ultimately what is going to sort of supercharge your growth.

Ross D 19:36

Out of interest, to what extent has that framing changed in response to a recent global pandemic? I've already mentioned Apple. I feel like if I mention COVID by name, there'll be claxons going off.

Ross D 19:48

But I'm intrigued. So with energy shots or these kind of juice shots, a lot of the appeal, I think, is the sort of benefits that they can bring to your health. And I was just checking out their website and it says, you know, winter is here. Make sure

your immunity system is ready.

Ross G 20:12

Need a fact check with what you're saying Alex,

Ross D 20:12

You didn't expect that when you came on the podcast.

Alex 20:15

No, no, no, I'm panicking now.

Ross D 20:19

But I was interested in asking anyway. Like, you know, so how because there's something that nobody foresaw and, you know, the supply chain shortages is something that I think a lot of economists didn't see coming or not to the same extent they have.

Ross D 20:36

And so I wonder, like, to what extent, you have to, you build sort of adaptability into a strategy and how often do you revise it in response to unforeseen changes? Yeah, I was just curious how Moju have approached that and whether or not they're framing, as you said, has changed since COVID-19.

Alex 20:59

Well, no, I mean, I don't think that I think that Moju completely, well, not only fine, they were better than fine with that, because obviously what they were doing was inherently quite sort of COVID compatible.

Alex 21:11

So, you know, in the nicest possible way, it's actually been, I think, probably quite a good thing for them. But to answer your more, your more general question. Well, I mean, again, clearly, there would be sort of exceptions to this.

Alex 21:25

But, but generally speaking, as a rule, I do not like the idea at all of businesses pivoting and reacting to external circumstance. I think that the way the best way to look at it, certainly the way that the most kind of sort of iconic brands like your Tesla and Apple's and all that do it is that they identify a particular market role for the business, which is essentially kind of eternal.

Alex 21:56

It's something which they know will always be wanted where there is no real conceivable scenario where, where that wouldn't be some brand delivering that within their category.

Alex 22:11

And so, and so they keep that effect of the indefinitely, they kind of never change the strategy. What they do change, however, and what they actually have to change is the way that they execute on it.

Alex 22:22

Because obviously, the context is always changing, the competitive context is changing, the cultural context is always changing. So, delivering on that value at any given point is actually going to look very different in like 2020, then it looks in 2010, then it looks in the year 2000.

Alex 22:38

So if you follow my logic, what they actually have to do is they have to constantly change in order to stand still, right? I mean, to give you a concrete example of this, if you take...

Ross D 22:50

Can I run one past you, a test one? Because I was thinking, ah-ha, I've got him. He's talking nonsense. Because fossil fuels are a thing that you would think you always needed. But I realise as you're speaking, actually, what the company sell is energy, not fossil fuels, and how the energy can adapt as the years go by.

Alex 23:12

Exactly. I mean, fossil fuels would certainly be a classic example of, you know, it's the execution. It's not the strategy. If you

want a sort of very brandy example, and again, from another sort of like big brand that everyone knows, if you think about Nike, for instance, certainly with their marketing, Nike since like the 70's, when they came up with just do it and all that, the crux of their brand in essence has sort of been to celebrate the struggle that athletes go through, right?

Alex 23:45

Whilst other brands celebrate victory and all the sort of upside, a classic Nike advert back in the day would not show the athlete winning, it would show them having a horrible time at 5am in the morning going out for a run and training.

Alex 24:00

And it's the struggle which the brand was sort of celebrating. Now, and that's what just do it is basically all about. Now, obviously just do it.

Ross D 24:08

Anyone who runs knows how horrible it is. I can get behind that.

Alex 24:11

Exactly, hence the genius of it all. But now, obviously, just do it, they've never changed that. No branding agency ever goes into Nike and says, guys, it's time for a refresh. Let's ditch, just do it and move on to something else.

Alex 24:23

Of course, they don't because Nike's the strategically switched on company. They have this indefinite strategy, but they always have to change the way that they are delivering on it. So back in, let's say, the 80's, for sake of argument, it was things like, here's a picture of a runner out at 5am.

Alex 24:39

This is the way that we're going to interpret struggle, right? Now, you look a huge volume of their work now is obviously all sort of like social justice oriented, right? So all the Colin Kaepernick stuff and all that kind of thing.

Alex 24:53

Now, some people look at that and they say, and they say, oh, well, this is Nike just doing something that seems sort of random or opportunistic. And I suppose it is opportunistic, but again, if we pull it back to the idea of overcoming struggles, neither is to say it's actually spot on strategy, right?

Alex 25:13

It's just a very 2020 way of delivering that strategy. So yeah, that idea of this sort of constant, never moving focal point, which you are regularly changing in order to deliver within the current cultural climate is the kind of the gold standard, I think.

Ross G 25:37

How would you identify what that was? So those are really famous examples, but you also gave us a less famous example and you do this work. So is there a model that you follow or what approach do you take with your clients to identify what the strategy is?

Alex 25:52

Well, for me, I really... It's not necessary. I don't think it's the sort of like the... I don't really know exactly how other people do it, but I don't think this is the normal way. I think that it's something that needs to be arrived at emergently, and which actually, if it doesn't sound too sort of woo-woo to say, it is the company that should be picking its direction, or if you like, the market should be picking the direction rather than the people within the business.

Alex 26:20

So what I mean by that is that to develop a good strategy, you can't do it, in my view, when the company is first founded. Every company is founded on an idea, and every company is founded on a crap idea, an idea which basically doesn't turn out to be true.

Alex 26:38

However, some ideas are wrong in a bad way, meaning the company just sinks without a trace, and some ideas are wrong in the right way, whereby even though the founder's initial kind of hypothesis didn't turn out to be true, the business succeeds in spite of that, and it gets some traction and it starts to grow.

Alex 26:55

Then, after a few years of kind of experimentation and muddling about in the market and trying to find a foothold, assuming that you've got something which is reasonably successful, you can then stop, pause, look at the thing, and say, okay, well, what have we really created here?

Alex 27:10

Like, what is this thing that we have on our hands? So you aren't thinking about, oh, what business would I like to create? What is this great idea I have? No, you're actually looking at this thing that you've created by accident, and you're trying to interpret it, and so you're saying to the business, you know, what do you want to be, essentially?

Alex 27:29

And then if you figure that out, and you sort of understand what the business is already doing, but you haven't quite, as a sort of management team, cottoned onto yet, you can then actually get on board with the direction things are already going and sort of accelerate that process that is already happening.

Alex 27:50

So, you know, I think the best way to summarize it, Dolly Parton, she got it absolutely spot on. The best, the single best strategic line in history, in my view, is when she said, find out who you are and then do it on purpose.

Alex 28:06

That is all that any strategy project is, as far as I'm concerned. But you see that that's very, very different than what I think most people do, which is saying, figure out who you want to be and then go out there and be it.

Alex 28:21

If you do that, you're probably gonna fail because it's almost, the market is so complex, that it's almost impossible to kind of preemptively make a plan which is so perfect that it's gonna pan out just the way you intend.

Ross D 28:38

Yeah, but that's quite seductive though, because then you can look back and say, oh, here's what we're doing. And that was my idea. You know, publicly, you can claim credit for it.

Alex 28:47

Yeah, exactly. I really like that.

Ross G 28:49

Okay, let's wrap up there.

Ross D 28:57

Ross, what will you be taking from this conversation and applying it in your life this week?

Ross G 29:02

I think it was struck by what Alex said about terminology being problematic, goals, vision, strategy, mission, all that stuff. And I think Alex phrased it as the business does X, which is a good idea because of Y.

Ross G 29:14

So I'll be thinking about what we do and trying to reduce it to that kind of compelling statement. What about you, Ross?

Ross D 29:21

Yeah, I think for me what surprised me was the concept of the indefinite strategy was the phrase that Alex used. So you don't change your strategy, but you do change how you deliver on it. So with like the Nike example that we talked about, the overcoming struggles could in the past be about running, but in 2020 it became about overcoming social justice struggles.

Ross D 29:40

So how can we keep changing while staying true to our indefinite strategy? I think that's a challenging question, but one that's worth exploring in detail. So I'll be thinking about that.

Ross G 29:55

All right, let's move on to our regular feature. One thing I've learned this week, and Ross, do you want to go first? Yeah.

Ross D 30:02

No problem. I actually have quite a good one this week, I think. I recently...

Ross G 30:06

Oh, we'll be the judge of that.

Ross D 30:08

Well, I think it's good. We'll see. We'll see by the time I get to the end of my story if you'd both agree.

Ross D 30:13

But I was recently in LA for my one-year wedding anniversary, and very touristy while we were there. We went to Warner Brothers Studios and did a tour of the lot. Lots of fascinating facts about different films and TV shows were shared with us as we're going through the tour.

Ross D 30:35

But I think one of the most interesting things I learned, there was a point where we were passing these vaults, which are used to store lots of old films going back, as far as Casablanca, all these sort of old film reels.

Ross D 30:48

And our tour guide was saying, one of the tricky things about film is that it's very sensitive. It has this tendency to spontaneously combust. And so as a way to preserve film, Warner Brothers, along with 20th Century Fox and Disney, all store copies of films, so film reels, in a underground salt mine in Kansas, a town called Hutchinson, Kansas.

Ross D 31:15

The value of salt mine being that it's incredibly dry, so you don't get any moisture getting into the film to damage it. There's no chance of fire. Salt doesn't burn. And yeah, I just thought it was fascinating.

Ross D 31:32

I've since researched it further, and apparently there are also, I think, 15 high net worth individuals who have apartments in this salt mine as a kind of doomsday prevention.

Ross G 31:44

That's outrageous.

Ross D 31:47

It is, that bit is kinda outrageous, but I thought it was interesting. They were talking about how there's this perception that, you know, all the Hollywood studios are constantly at each other's throats and very competitive, but they're all together in this one.

Ross G 32:02

They've all got flats next to each other in a nuclear bunker, that's what they say to each other, hey guys, where are all the films? That's where I want my bunker.

Ross D 32:07

Exactly. So in the event of an apocalypse, at least these 15 people will have plenty of movies to watch.

Ross G 32:17

That is a good one. Okay, you said the bar quite high. Alex, what have you learned this week?

Alex 32:23

Well, I've got to give you a strategic one, obviously. But I am sadly a Manchester United fan who, as even if you're not into football, you're probably vaguely aware we're just dreadful and an embarrassment and have been for about a decade.

Alex 32:39

And so, I like every other fan looks at them and thinks, you know, well, what a terribly run club, all that stuff. However, I heard recently about this baseball team in America called the Savannah Bananas.

Alex 32:55

And the owner of the Savannah Bananas had this, I think, incredible insight, which was that he recognised, well, ultimately,

you know, we are a media organisation. We earn money when we get bums in seats and when people pay attention to us.

Alex 33:09

So what if, rather than actually trying to win baseball matches, we actually invested all of our attention and money and energy on creating essentially the most kind of interesting and fun to watch team that there is.

Alex 33:24

So, you know, the experience that the stadium has got all this sort of other kind of like circus and theater, if you like, around it, all that kind of stuff. And so sure enough, because the team was so entertaining to follow, even though they weren't any good, they started to attract more and more people.

Alex 33:43

They started to attract more and more attention. And of course, the irony is that they got so much attention and so much money that actually the team started to improve as well just because they had much, much better budgets.

Alex 33:55

And now, after that, I look at Man United and I think to myself, well, we may be crap in a football sense, but like, we are interesting. We are entertaining. We do, we are, people love talking about the club.

Alex 34:10

And I thought maybe the owners are actually, you know, geniuses and every decision they make is oriented around essentially generating stories, generating buzz, generating a kind of narrative that people can complain about.

Alex 34:25

And so, I don't know, it made me feel a lot better about the situation. And certainly, it's a different way to run a sports team.

Ross G 34:35

That is interesting. Ah, you've blown this thing wide open.

Alex 34:38

Exactly. Yeah, the conspiracy's out.

Ross G 34:42

So this week, I wanted to recommend an episode of the rewatchables podcast. So the rewatchables is a weekly film show. And normally it's just a host and they talk about the films they like and that these things stand up to being watched again and again and again. In episode one, they talked about the 1995 crime drama Heat starring Al Pacino and Robert De Niro.

Ross G 35:03

And then in episode 100, they did the reheat where they talked about it again because they'd worked out their format by then. So they revisited their first episode and they've got different categories and things.

Ross G 35:14

But the episode I'd like to recommend is the three-heat. And this time they're joined by director Michael Mann, who talks about how he researched the film and what he wanted to say with it and how he shot it and all these kind of things.

Ross G 35:26

And I think even if you don't like heat or don't care about films, I think you would find Mann an incredibly interesting person to listen to. He talks about every aspect of his work with this laser like precision.

Ross G 35:37

Like there was no element of the film that he hadn't thought about incredibly deeply and that didn't contribute to his overall goal. So, for example, one point, Robert De Niro hands his girlfriend a glass of water with a napkin wrapped around it.

Ross G 35:51

And that's because when Michael Mann was researching the film, he went to Folsom prison. He was shooting some stuff there and someone handed someone else a glass of water with a napkin wrapped around it because it was a sign of respect.

Ross G 36:04

As he was like, oh, I'm going to take that gem and put it into the film. And it made me reflect on my own projects because if

you ask me why I made a lot of the choices on my projects, half the time I have no idea.

Ross G 36:13

I have to do something. So I'll just pick something. But it's really inspiring to hear someone talk about their work with that much passion. And I think I'm trying to think of what his strategy was with the film is essentially to make a drama where you had two identical but opposite characters who you deeply cared about both.

Ross G 36:33

So no matter who won, you were going to be excited. And Alex, I know that you're not much of a fan of Heat, but I reckon....

Alex 36:41

Well I'm going to go and watch it now. Well, you've blown that open for me now too, because now you've made it sound really interesting so maybe I'll go and watch it.

Ross D 36:50

All right, great. Just before we wrap up, Alex, do you want to mention anything where people can find out more about you and so on?

Alex 36:57

Yeah, sure. So I think the main thing is that I have a newsletter called The Way, which the whole concept is teaching strategic thinking to founders, but you know, I guess you don't have to necessarily be a founder, anyone who wants to sort of learn strategic thinking.

Alex 37:12

And it begins with a kind of eight day sort of mini email course of the kind of fundamentals, and then you get into the full thing. So it's free. And yeah, you can sign up for it on my website, which is basicarts.org.

Alex 37:30

So yeah, would love to see some people there.

Ross G 37:39

And that's it. You've been listening to the Future Talent Learning podcast with me, Ross Garner and Ross Dickey. Our guest this week was Alex Smith. Until next time, bye for now.