

## AT THE EDGE PODCAST



### SEASON 1, EPISODE 5

#### DELANO A. JOHNSON – THERE IS NO WRONG ANSWER

Interviewed by Michael Lee

**Delano A. Johnson**, aka #TheCEOofCreativity, is originally from the Bahamas and has lived in New York for the past twenty-five years. He is the successor of Dr. George C. Fraser and COO for FraserNET, Inc, the parent company for FraserNation, Winds Financial Learning Centers, and the PowerNetworking Conference. He is the author of the best-selling book, *Refuse to Live Talented & Broke!*, as well as an international speaker, brand architect and leading authority on personal and corporate creativity who has worked with some of the world's most recognized brands such as BMW, Pfizer, Sheraton, Verizon, ATT, and Disney, just to name a few. He is a Grammy and Dove Award nominee, and a singer/songwriter with 9 Marlin Award wins. In 2008, he was the Online Creative Manager at ToysRus® headquarters responsible for all online visual offers, branding, and new acquisition brands, including the iconic FAO Schwarz®. After 3 years, his creative leadership helped grow the online division from \$50 million to over \$750 million. Personally, Delano is passionate about helping artists, entertainers, and entrepreneurs manage and maximize the high demand for their creative output. He believes that everyone is a creative genius and teaches his patented Creative Transformational Principles™ to thousands each year. Delano is the proud father of Jonathan Isaac, David Alijandro and Dyamond Jolie.

**In this episode**, Delano talks about Kahlil Gibran and Einstein, why creative people run the world and how they can value themselves more, the challenges of instilling creativity in corporations, as well as some solutions and tricks for doing so successfully including teamwork, problem-solving, and the art of dissociation. He also shares with us about the Guinness World Record he is aiming to break for most books sold in one day, which he calls “the most ridiculous thing I've ever attempted to do.”

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**Michael Lee**

*We are here today with Delano Johnson, known as the "CEO of Creativity." Delano is the author of the best-selling book *Refuse to Live Talented and Broke*. He's also an international speaker, brand architect, and a leading authority on personal and corporate creativity, and he's worked with some of the world's most recognized brands like BMW Pfizer, Sheraton, Verizon, AT&T and Disney, just to name a few. He worked as the Online Creative Manager at ToysRus®, and in three years, his creative leadership there helped grow the online division from \$50 million to over - get this - \$750 million, quite a jump! Recently, Delano founded the House of Creativity, a growing network of creatives from all over the world. The lotto. Welcome to At the Edge. It's an honor to have you on the program.*

**Delano Johnson**

Thank you so much, Michael. This has been a long time in the making. I'm just so happy to be here.

**Michael Lee**

*Let's begin by telling the audience about your personal history related to creativity, especially in companies.*

**Delano Johnson**

I got married and settled down and took a few classes with graphic design, and I bought a computer, and my graphic design business was born. Next thing I know I had thirteen employees, and I had my office in New Jersey, and I had an office also in New York. After a while, we sold the company, and I took a job at ToysRus®. And the job was the Online Creative Manager. I knew that the online space was becoming extremely important for business. That was a three year ride that I was able to work with Hasbro and Disney and Sony and a whole lot of brands, in particularly the iconic FAO Schwarz®. I had the opportunity to actually redesign their online channel.

After a while - I always thought about this idea of having a conglomerate of creative people because I believe that creative people really rule the world. It's our inventions, it's our music. So I imagined at some point in time that I would want to be a part of an organization or to lead an organization with creative people from all around the world, with different ideas of what creativity is, but to really have a nucleus of family, a group of individuals that saw that the world needed their creativity.

And last year in 2020, during the pandemic, lo and behold, that dream actually became a reality because of the pandemic and because of an app that's called Clubhouse. So I started a club called the House of Creativity, whose goal is to really galvanize creativity from all around the world and work on projects that we feel would actually change and reshape the world as we saw fit.

**Michael Lee**

*What I'm curious about, we could talk about for a bit, is the difference between individual creativity and the work you've done with innovation in a number of companies where as hard as it can be to develop the creativity of an individual. It seems even harder sometimes to make companies innovative.*

**Delano Johnson**

I like what Kahlil Gibran said, that creativity comes through us and not to us. Creativity is when you're in that state of mind where you're able to see problems, you're able to look at them in a different light, and then go into this ideation where you see, or you imagine solutions for those problems, hatching an idea and bringing it to the seen world. From ideation to actualization is that process of creativity. However, innovation is being able to focus on very specific technologies, to present that creativity to the world.

What happens with corporate innovation and creativity sometimes is extremely difficult, as a big organization, to actually maneuver and allow the space for creativity, because you have people who are hired for specific roles, and those roles are vetted, and those rules are all needed, this person needs to do this to allow this to happen so that revenue can be made, and so that shareholders could be happy and reinvest, and everybody keeps their job.

There was a study done with Forbes magazine in 2010, a study with fifteen hundred CEOs from across the world, from across different disciplines and different businesses. And the study was on the necessity of creativity in business leadership, mainly CEOs. An overwhelming astounding 69% said creativity was the most important attribute for CEOs in the twenty-first century. In other words, it is the most necessary attribute - more than honesty. Creativity was the most important thing for a CEO to have. Why? Because we're basically living in this three C's, which makes the environment very difficult: overwhelming change, fierce competition. It is a very difficult environment from which CEOs have to operate.

What happens now, in the past, rather, it was more difficult to have individuals be creative or think outside of that box, because a lot of corporations didn't allow for being outside of a cube. You had the visual clue of thinking inside of a box, and then you have the lack of resources to think outside of the box. Now, companies like Google and Apple have shown that there's a different way to get better and more productivity from your employees. They showed with different models, as employees get to arrange their own schedules where the life-work balance is able to, they're able to manage that more.

Studies show that most employees get most of their hard and most important work done between the hours of nine and one. Some employees would work during that time and go home on the other rest of time, or they would stay but they would be in what we would call the employee sandbox, areas within the organization where people actually get to go and play. And that's where they solve a lot of problems. So you have a problem on your mind, you go and play and on the playground is where you find the solution.

So it's just a remarkable thing that we've seen that's happening now. Throughout a lot of corporations, they're making space for creativity, they're allowing employees to have more

freedom to take off the stringent rules and guidelines and open up that box a little bit so that they can get out and change their thinking. I love what Einstein said, that we can't solve a problem with the same thinking that got us into that problem. So I think now that there's some open-mindedness to allow for more creativity, whereas ten years ago, it was a little bit more difficult to have that done.

**Michael Lee**

*And yet there's so many challenges to that ability for companies to achieve the creativity that they're now willing to achieve. What are some of the difficulties you've seen in your experience with companies trying to be more creative and innovative and perhaps struggling or failing?*

**Delano Johnson**

I think companies fail because they're thinking of investing in everything else except the most important thing that doesn't show up on a corporation's balance sheet and that is human potential. The human potential could only be extracted with creativity, creating an environment where people are able to create and solve the problems.

One of the problems is simply the pressure, alleviating the pressure for them to perform. If you look at most of the documentation that is shown for some of the most creative companies, when you look at Apple, when you look at a company like Google, now we're seeing that Amazon as well is joining the ranks of innovation, I mean, they can only grow in one area so big, you take that over, then you have to grow in other areas, so that's why they're really growing and expanding. And what they're finding is, if you look at a lot of the properties that that they're acquiring, and the talent that they're acquiring, are individuals who have a reputation of creativity. You can't go to space thinking the same way you used to.

It's remarkable, what they're doing is they're adding teams to their creative innovation teams, adding team members to their creative innovation team, that would not necessarily be or have the expertise in that area, because what they're finding is that thinking differently, from a totally different experience and a totally different work set and totally different tools, allows someone with a fresh perspective to come in to old problems and to see that from a different angle. So there's a lot of value in that.

The companies that don't do that. that don't allow for hiring based on 40% capability but 60% intuition in the interview - What do you feel about that person? What vibe did you get from him? Were you able to determine that what they talked about was true? They're forcing individuals within organizations to use more of their intuitive gut feeling, as opposed to going on a rigid, very strict paper-based analysis on many things that they're working on. Companies, when they embrace those types of tactics and ideas, they're depending on what industry they're in. The output is going to be extremely important, relevant to the employees, first of all, and then it's going to eventuate and end up strengthening their revenue-generating departments. That's the way that I see that.

**Michael Lee**

*Your book *Refuse to Live Talented and Broke* focuses on how a creative individual can maximize their own chance for success.*

**Delano Johnson**

First of all, it was birthed out of an experience of someone who had in their mind a certain level of success, but didn't realize that your plans are one thing, but the actual navigation through life processes, which builds character, gives you the type of success. But if you don't understand how to manage your life through the process, and then outside of the process when you're done, when you've attained that success. It is a book that captures the ten different things in the creative process that prevent creative people from attaining and/or sustaining the success that they intend to have, or the success that their talents demand that they have.

These are the things that we overlook in our lives - your success is built on your character, and if your character has flaws, if your character foundation is not strong, then the pressure of that success will simply collapse all that you've worked for. And that's what happened to me, I became a millionaire at age thirty-three, and by thirty-nine, I lost everything. And I read over three hundred books. And that's where I was able to extract a whole lot of principles that I missed in life, even though I had some mentors, I missed it. And so the book captures that and it's really a cheat sheet for people to come behind me who intend to sustain the success that they attain. It's really a cheat sheet on how you can actually build the inner life to be able to sustain the outer success that you achieve.

**Michael Lee**

*How can a company apply the same principles to avoid becoming talented and broke?*

**Delano Johnson**

Yeah, that's an awesome question. In the book, I talk about your inner value. Understanding everything that you're good at brings a certain value in the market. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we look at somebody's emotional intelligence as extremely valuable while we're hiring, their ability to defuse confusion, their ability to explain difficult situations, to galvanize a team to come together for a cause. That's leadership.

In the book, I talk about your ability to do that as a value. Imagine if corporations really saw that as a valuable asset on hiring day, sitting across the table, they saw that in that person. It's not necessarily just a leadership ability or gift or talent or something that we need in leadership, it is needed for everyone. Everyone inside the corporation has to work with someone else, so your ability to get along and to create this environment where everybody feels special is needed - their idea of creativity or their ideas are valid, before they are thrown away or said that it's too expensive to do that work. Imagine that environment that we create.

So we take another idea of team building. One of the things I did in looking at hires was to formulate a team like I would a championship basketball team. There are players, there are

people on the team, who everybody likes, they become influencers, they bring out the best in everyone, because all the players want to be like that person. I imagine at some point, everybody on the court with Michael Jordan wanted to be a Michael Jordan. But while he was Michael Jordan, he didn't really become a true champion until he learned to pass the ball.

I talk about this in the book a little bit. When you really look at what Jordan gave to the team, it was a thousand percent motivation and inspiration, and only ten percent skill. What do I mean by that? Well, if you really look at it, between all of the other players on the court, including an amazing Scottie Pippen who was really the backbone of the team, when Jordan left the team, Pippen took the Chicago Bulls to the playoffs, right? They didn't win, because they didn't have that clutch player, the person who would put the ball in the basket in the heat of the pressure.

So it said to me that without Jordan, the entire team was able to get there, to the playoffs, but lose, because they didn't have that one person. It means that the entire team is valuable. So choosing your team, the people around there, who can share the glory of a win, who can share the glory or the duty of responsibility, that's an amazing thing.

So if you hire more like building teams, as opposed to filling slots, to move and push or sell widgets, I think that's the first level of where you will actually go into the psychology of who this person is and what they bring to the team. So you have a personal team, just like your corporation. If you're a solopreneur, and things are going great, maybe through the pandemic your business started to grow, because you started to focus in or hone in on a major problem within the pandemic, and now your business is growing, well, now you got to hire a team.

So how do you do that? Where do you find the people from? If you go through the book, you'll see that there's specific players, there's your team cheerleaders, there are people on the team who are simply going to be there, they are the most can-do people, they're the motivating force of the entire thing - whatever is happening, we can find a way around it. Every team needs that. So if an organization thinks like this, there's the person who is the go-to for a good dose of motivation or inspiration, now, they may not perform like the other person does, but they bring a value to the team. And the value is extremely important.

So that's another aspect of how I feel. And I actually do this now in terms of helping people to actually hire teams within their corporate structures, or build teams within their corporate structures.

### **Michael Lee**

*When we talk about Innovation at the Edge, what we talk about is bringing innovation throughout an organization, so it's not in a silo and isolated in a department, or even in a certain day of the week, but something that people do all the time across the organization and maximizing the ability to communicate, work together, collaborate, and be able to offer their input and receive actual input back, feedback. It sounds like you know what you're talking about, putting together teams, and finding ways to balance a team in a good way. You're touching on some of that. So I'm curious if you have thoughts about how we can best use innovation as a way to engage people.*

### **Delano Johnson**

Eighty percent of people lose that battle of innovation by the first introduction of brainstorming. You have a team together, you brainstorm, and the leader or the curator or the manager of that space opens the floor and says, Okay, guys, we need some ideas to solve this problem. First person, employee number one, gives an idea. The leading manager says, Well, that's a great idea, but we're not thinking - why don't you kind of shade that idea more towards this problem here?

One of the main problems is we don't allow for free thinking. Innovation comes with your ability to solve that problem using your creativity in such a way that brings a new perspective, but you can't get perspective if your thinking is harnessed. So creating an environment where everything goes and there is no wrong answer - it's called CPS training. I do this in CPS training, Creative Problem Solving.

So we gather people together, and we say, Okay, we have to solve this lighting issue, we've been having problems and concerns with all of the employees talking about lighting issues, something's happening with the lighting. So we bring people together, and we give them a needle, we give them a paperclip, and we give them chicken soup, and we say now we have to solve this problem using these things. And it is the disassociation which causes our brain to widen our spectrum of thinking, because now we have to associate these abstract objects with solving the problem. You will be surprised at how individuals are able to come up with innovative ways to solve that problem because their thinking was not inhibited.

So this is one way that I help corporations to actually think outside of the box, because we're not thinking in the box, we're thinking actually in a circle right now. We think in a circle, and we go around. Changing the way and the process of how we get to innovative ideas is the first step to changing the outcome of using innovation to solve major problems. Innovation is nothing in and of itself unless it solves a major problem.

### **Michael Lee**

*What is the biggest danger you've come across in companies that gets in the way of that freedom that you're talking about?*

### **Delano Johnson**

Yeah, it is a stretch for the C-Suites, because again of the pressure to perform. It is a pressure to perform, and so we usually go to what worked last year, with a small adjustment.

At ToysRus®, it was very interesting. Every year, of course, our biggest quarter's the last quarter during the Christmas shopping season, and so we would compare what's happening to other competitors, so if they have what we call a big book, this is the big magazine book, ordering catalogue, that goes out to your mailing list. We would look at the size of the book in terms of the pages. If the competitors had a fifty-six page book, we would say, Oh, we got to be more innovative, we'll have fifty-eight page books this year. All you're doing is adding to this small little degree of change. But instead, what I did with FAO Schwarz®, I thought, why don't we take the shopping experience away from turning pages. So I created a shopping

experience online, which is the first time in one hundred fifty years of FAO Schwarz® that was ever done. There was some animation to it, and it was a totally different shopping experience. We were able to get a write-up in the *New York Times* because of it.

If you want to be noticed, simply be different. But if you're doing the same thing, and you're solving problems the same way with one slight degree of difference from your competitors, then you really don't stand out. So the biggest mistake that they make is having the fear of stepping out into something unknown.

Listen, I get it. The CEO has to answer to the Chairman of the Board, the Chairman of the Board has to answer to the board and the shareholders and the stakeholders. That's extremely difficult in a competitive environment. But it is the individuals, the CEOs that take that calculated risk and allow departments to simply create new ways of doing things, this investment into four or five new thinkers into your department will eventually lead into a stockpile of ideas from which you may be able to do something totally different. The investment of time in those individuals, I guarantee you will be worth it. I saw it in my business. We saw it at ToysRus® . And I'm seeing it in my clients and the corporations that I work with today.

**Michael Lee**

*What advice would you give to someone listening to this podcast, who's working in a company who wants to maximize the employee experience, the employee value, get people to be able to contribute the most to innovation?*

**Delano Johnson**

If you're in a leadership position, if you're a supervisor, if you have direct reports, your main job is to unearth the abilities and the creativities, the hidden potentials and talents within the people that you work with. Besides the fact that they have a job description, your job description is to help them to develop things about themselves that they never knew. And what a wonderful thing to have that done within the organization.

These are two things that will happen. Number one, you'll be extremely valuable in terms of a close relationship to your direct reports. And number two, you will be extremely valuable to the organization whom you serve. Focus more on the hidden potential of the people around you.

I hired a team of people when I was at ToysRus® that I believe was extremely proficient. It was my job to find projects and to champion and fight for projects that would give them the ability to actually showcase their talent. And the project that I just mentioned with FAO Schwarz®, that's what we did. My key programmers at that point led the charge, and that created a wonderful experience for millions of people.

So if you're in that space, remember that a big portion of the job, I would say eighty percent of your job, is to help the people, your direct reports, to discover new things about their

talents, and the ones that they do know, creating opportunities for them to use those gifts and those talents, so that your team can have a better self-esteem. A team esteem.

**Michael Lee**

*Is there anything else you'd like to say that you've thought of along the way today that I haven't asked you about?*

**Delano Johnson**

Yeah, I like to share that one of the projects that I'm working on is to beat a Guinness Book world record. We've done almost a hundred thousand units of my book within four years or so. And, that's all just grunt work. And so I'm going after a major Guinness Book world record, which is to beat the most books ever sold over a twenty-four hour period. It is the most ridiculous thing I've ever attempted to do.

But you know what? I had successes along the way that remind me of defeating those Goliaths in my life, the things that people said I couldn't do. People said I wouldn't make money being a musician, when family members were afraid that I was going to be a failure. But I did it anyway. Yes, I failed sometimes. But those failures didn't define me.

**Michael Lee**

*What is the record you're trying to break? Specifically?*

**Delano Johnson**

The most books sold on record is 8.3 million books sold within twenty-four hours.

**Michael Lee**

*And what book was that?*

**Delano Johnson**

Oh, we're getting into it now. You're causing me to give away all of the juice here. So that book was Harry Potter, it was a book written by JK Rowling. And very formidable. This is the biggest Goliath that I've ever gone up against to do anything. You know what? It's worth the try. The only thing you can do is to fail trying and know how not to do it. And perhaps you have the courage to do it again, and to go after it again. And so every record is made to be broken. Why not you?

**Michael Lee**

*Cool Delano. This has been Delano Johnson, giving us the honor of his presence here on At the Edge. Thank you, Delano for being with us. Again. It's been an honor.*

**Delano Johnson**

Appreciate it, man. Thank you, Mike. Appreciate you, buddy.