

Leading into the Unknown

Ep. 5—Cliff Skeete, Executive Creative Director of 140: Why leadership requires authenticity

Cliff Skeete: [00:00:00] So what separates you from the other guy? The design, the way that you present yourself, your product is the first touchpoint someone's going to have. And that's what's got to stop them. That's just gotta say they're different from the other guy.

Narrator: [00:00:16] Welcome to Leading into the Unknown. A podcast by SYPartners, featuring stories from leaders we admire about creating the path forward in complex times.

[Music]

Chad Bennett: [00:00:30] This is Chad Bennett from SYPartners. Today I'm talking to Cliff Skeete, Executive Creative Director at 140, Verizon's in-house agency. Over his career, Cliff has won many creative awards, including multiple Emmys for his work with the NHL. I'm really excited to have Cliff here to talk about the importance of creativity in business for everyone, not just in quote-unquote “creative industries.” So, Cliff thanks for being here.

Cliff Skeete: [00:00:25] My pleasure.

Chad Bennett: [00:00:27] I thought it'd be interesting to start with the story of how you got into advertising.

Cliff Skeete: [00:01:02] This is interesting because my road to advertising was unconventional, to say the least. I played ball, I thought I was gonna go to the NFL, but I've always been creative. Like growing up I would illustrate a lot, I would paint, I'd always write stories, not knowing that advertising was a career. And luckily, I just happened to take a class in college my senior year. Thankfully, the professor had a real interest in me and my ability, and it was actually a competition course—it was sponsored by the American Advertising Federation. And what they did is they gave you a project from a major sponsor. What you had to do was you had to operate like an agency, and I happened to do all of the creative for it. And then what you do is you'd have to present to industry folk, and we won the Northeast regionals and we came in third nationally. And one of the judges just liked my creative, hooked me up for an interview, went in and I didn't have the portfolio I didn't have a piece of anything. Once I got in the door, I just hustled and learned the craft, and sat with everybody I could

sit with—just was nosy, knocking on doors asking, “how I can help.” Just kept grinding and doing it that way until people started to trust that I could do it and then, that was that.

Chad Bennett: [00:02:09] That's awesome. At SYP, we really believe that creativity is crucial for businesses, regardless of the industry or role. How can design be a helpful tool for people in traditional business functions, like finance or account management?

Cliff Skeete: [00:02:23] It's all about getting people's attention. There's so much stimulus for people now, they'll just breeze right by something that's not eye-catching. Design is key. So, what separates you from the other guy? The design—the way that you present yourself, your product—is the first touchpoint someone's going to have and that's what's got to stop them. That's what's gotta say, “they're different from the other guy.”

Chad Bennett: [00:02:45] Of course it is sometimes difficult to stoke creative ideas and try new things when you're facing deadlines and deliverables. How do you manage that with your teams?

Cliff Skeete: [00:02:54] I always say creativity is not... You can't put a timeframe on it. It comes when it comes. Deadlines are deadlines, but I don't think that should ever inhibit or prohibit you from coming up with greatness. The way that I like to work is we all work towards that one idea, right? So if we have a deadline that's coming up quick, everybody jam on it. Let's come back in a few hours, put the ideas on the wall, and the one that feels the most close to the brief, then everybody attack that idea. Go wide as opposed to deep at first, and get that initial idea, and from there we'll all jump on it because then that spurs that creativity.

Chad Bennett: [00:03:29] And that creativity can come from anyone at any level.

Cliff Skeete: [00:03:31] Yeah.

Chad Bennett: [00:03:32] So really the buy-in can come from a junior designer, and you get your ACDs and your junior level talent on board as well.

Cliff Skeete: [00:03:38] Yeah, I mean when I started my last agency it was very divided in silos. There was the digital team, then the social creatives, and then the above-line creatives, and I came in and said, “I don't know what any of that means. If you're creative, you're a creative. So, we're gonna

change the briefing structure where when we brief, we all brief together.” And I would get ideas from somebody who was on a social team who was used to getting the idea at the tail end and they just had to, sort of, translate it to social. But now they had a seat at the table in the beginning, and there were plenty of times where I got ideas from them that turned out to be the campaign because they were hungry and they wanted that opportunity as well. So, when you get everybody in jamming on it together and you respect the work, and you respect the process, and respect those who are doing it, I feel like that’s how you meet those deadlines or timelines and get the work that is necessary.

Chad Bennett: [00:04:25] That’s great, your leadership style is very inclusive. That’s awesome. At SYPartners, we’re seeing design leaders shift away from the traditional hierarchical leadership of the industry—for example, by creating supportive and empathetic team cultures and diffusing power. How do you approach your role as an ECD that may be different than leaders of the past?

Cliff Skeete: [00:04:45] I’ve had Creative Directors who would, literally, they would rip up a script in front of you to sort of like, try to inspire you. And you’re like, “Dude, that just hurt my feelings. It didn’t work, why did you do that?” You know? But that was their way of leading. That personally was never my style, never will be. I like to lead by, not only example, but by my nature, my personality. I like to have fun with it. I work hard, but I want to make sure everybody who’s working hard has a good time while doing it. I’ll do dumb things like play pranks on people, but also, I like to reward. And I feel like that unity, that oneness is important as a team and as a leader. What’s important is to let people know that not only am I a leader, but I’m also one of you. I’m human.

[00:05:30] The way you find that leadership is take all of the good things from somebody that you’ve worked for and that you like. I’ve had mentors early on that showed me their style, and some pieces I took, some I left. And then I worked somebody else and I was like, “oh, I like the way that this person presents.” Like you know, I would take certain things from different people and then you put it in that gumbo pot and you come up with your own style, and then my special sauce in it was just my personality. And so I crafted it over the years, and early on I didn’t know what I was doing, but once you get that footing, to me that really then defines who you are as a leader.

Chad Bennett: [00:06:06] The advertising industry has long been a white male-dominated industry. We’re just now starting to see that change. How have your experiences rising in the agency world as a Black man influenced you in terms of how you showed up?

Cliff Skeete: [00:06:19] First of all, I'll say that it's still, at the top, a white male-dominated industry. In all the agencies I've worked in, I've historically been the only African-American executive, which is a blessing and a curse. But I would also say that I'd never let my color define how I was treated, how the work was viewed. I never let it hold me back, nor did I ever let it promote me further. I'll be honest, I never really saw it because I just had blinders on—it was all about the work. I made sure, I was very careful like, I would never do a commercial with somebody rapping or something like that. My skin would crawl when I'd see things like McDonald's, and somebody goes in and raps their order. And I was like, "dude, I've never asked for a Big Mac that way." I felt like, I brush my teeth the same way as you do, dude. I don't need you to talk to me in a different way, or say something that is comes at it from a different angle. But I don't think that you have to specifically try to bullseye it, because it comes off as false. I think the work is the work and it should be colorblind by the time you see it, and not be able to say, oh, a white man or woman made that or a Black person did that. Unless you're doing [something,] you know, specific to the culture.

[00:07:30] I've always kept it true to who I am and I show up every day the same way. And I like that people are surprised when they see who did the work. When they see, oh, this Black guy did this award-winning commercial for the National Hockey League, because that does not make sense. Early on, a mentor told me to make sure when you take a job or position that you're ready for it, because if you don't handle it, if you don't do your best, not only are you going to mess it up for you, you're gonna mess it up for everyone who comes behind you. So, I knew I had that responsibility, but I didn't carry it like a burden.

Chad Bennett: [00:08:01] Right.

Cliff Skeete: [00:08:02] I let it elevate me, I didn't let it hold me back. I just like, you know, this is what I need to do. And I would speak to students, I would go places, and I think I would surprise people because they weren't used to seeing someone at that level, of this color.

Chad Bennett: [00:08:14] Right, look like you. Tell me how important it is to have a different voice in the room when it comes to pitching a campaign.

Cliff Skeete: [00:08:23] I think having a different voice and perspective in the room gives the brand relevancy. Having those voices in the room is critical today to not be tone-deaf, because not only

does it fall short, but then you get ridiculed by it, you get destroyed by it. And that diversity in a room is critically important. Nowadays more than ever.

Chad Bennett: [00:08:42] How do you rally your team around an idea even when creative opinions don't align?

Cliff Skeete: [00:08:48] When you rally around an idea, not everybody is always on board with it, but I think you have to prove the work and why it works, and why it is the right idea. You have to show why it works socially, and why it works digitally, and why it aligns to the brief, and it is what the client needs and delivers upon that. I mean, I'll tell you one instance, I used to run—I guess this is one instance where my color did come into play—

[Laughs]

[00:09:08] But I used to run the United Negro College Fund, which was at the time the longest standing tagline in advertising history. “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” Seventy-five years running, it was the longest tagline in advertising history at the time. We wanted to change the tagline, and people thought we were crazy. But we had found out was, right around—it was right after the last recession—very simply, the language we used to ask was asking people to “donate.” And at that point, people didn't have money to donate. People don't want to donate money, they just lost their 401Ks, like, they were trying to pay their mortgage. So, what we said is we need to change the vernacular, and change it from “donate” to “invest.” And what we did is, we showed how investing in the minds of young kids and their education will actually help the economy. What you're putting in is what you're gonna get out. And not only did I have to prove that to my internal bosses and creatives, but then I had to prove that to the United Negro College Fund. Then I had to sit in front of the Board of Governors, which were the presidents of all the historically Black colleges and universities, which was as intimidating as I'll get out. But I believed in it, and I was able to defend it. And when you believe in something, other people start to believe in it as well. That belief is how you rally people behind an idea.

Chad Bennett: [00:10:29] That's great. At SYP, we believe that the critical leadership skills that matter most in these uncertain times are optimism, authentic communication, humanity, and creativity. Which of these come most naturally to you?

Cliff Skeete: [00:10:42] To me, that's one of the biggest things. Not only authentic communication, but just being authentic and being real about things. Like, you know, people see through you when you're fake, or were you're not truthful. Back to your earlier question about meeting deadlines: when people work hard, they want to know what their work was for. Even if it ultimately wasn't a thing that was presented, people have to have that communication.

[00:11:04] I remember when I was younger in the industry, I would hate when you would work all night. You'd work on something that had to get done, had to get done. And then you'd get it, get it out the door. And then it went to the meeting, and they wouldn't tell you what happened. And I was like, "well, was it good, was it bad, do I need to work again tonight? Like, some feedback, anything."

[00:11:23] So, when I'd gotten to a position of leadership and management, if I was on the road for a meeting I would send a group e-mail or I would call somebody who was a point person, give them the news—good or bad—and have them disseminate it to the group, because I think you need that feedback, you need that reinforcement. I think people need to know what happened. If your work didn't make a meeting, why it didn't make a meeting. The first thing to keeping your people rallied behind you, keeping people rallied around work, is to be authentic and real with people and let them know what's happening. Even if it's not about the work, just on a day-to-day basis. I'll take 40 minutes when I get into the office just say hi to people and talk before I sit down and open up my laptop, because that connection and authenticity is what, for me, makes sure that my team knows that I'm with them and they're with me.

Chad Bennett: [00:12:12] Now before we close out, I've got some rapid-fire questions...

Cliff Skeete: [00:12:15] Woo! Bonus round, bonus round! *Pew-pew-pew!* Some sound effects?

[Both laughing]

Chad Bennett: [00:12:21] Talk to me about a project that you were most proud of, and why.

Cliff Skeete: [00:12:25] One would actually be that United Negro College Fund that I referenced earlier, because that was something that was important to me as an African-American male, youngest in my family, first one to go to and graduate from college, investments—instead of

donations—like skyrocketed. And I know we helped thousands of deserving kids get to college, and that to me was very important because it meant something. It did something.

[00:12:52] I've worked on a lot of sports accounts, and some of the proudest stuff I did was when I worked on the U.S. Olympic Committee. Oddly enough, the U.S. is the only country that is not privately funded by the government, the Olympics. All of the athletes'—the money, the housing, and everything they get comes from donations from the public. So that was pretty special for me as well.

Chad Bennett: [00:13:10] It sounds like the work that you enjoyed most was purpose-led. What does a change you see happening in the design industry?

Cliff Skeete: [00:13:18] The thing I'm seeing, and I'm encouraged by, is the design being led by the idea. And simplicity, which I think is great.

Chad Bennett: [00:13:30] I love that. What do you do to get inspired creatively?

Cliff Skeete: [00:13:32] I think everything around you can inspire creativity. I listen to a lot of music personally, to inspire me. Depending on my mood, I listen a lot of classical music. If I need to write like a big, sort of anthemic spot, one of my favorite things to listen to, oddly enough, is the soundtrack to the movie *Interstellar*. What I used to do is when creators would present a script, I would then have them read the script with the music playing underneath.

[*Interstellar* music plays]

[00:13:58] I'm like, "NOW listen to how good this is!"

[Both laughing]

[00:14:04] So, I mean look, I think creativity comes from everywhere man.

Chad Bennett: [00:14:07] That's awesome. Well thank you, Cliff.

Cliff Skeete: [00:14:10] My pleasure.