One Knight in Product - E157 - Douglas Squirrel

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SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, Squirrel

Jason Knight 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show and an episode where we ask ourselves a tricky question. How can we get our tech teams closer to their business and help them realise it's not a separate thing at all, but they're actually part of it. Speaking of getting closer to business, maybe I can get closer to yours. This episode sponsored by one night consulting, and spoiler alert, that's me. I started one night consulting because I've seen variations of the same problems plaguing product companies, and I've seen them again and again. If you're looking to get an independent diagnosis of your business with actionable insights, or you're hiring product people or coaching the ones you've already got, you can go to one night consulting.com To book a call with me and see if I can help you out. That's one night consulting.com. You can check the show notes for more details. Back to an episode where we'll have a conversation about conversations delve into the little known craft of action science, talk about test driven development for people, and the importance of constructive tension to get good business results. If you want to find out how to make your tech teams insanely profitable, stay tuned to one that's important.

Jason Knight 00:58

So my guest tonight is Douglas Squirrel, or Squirrel to his friends. Squirrel's a longtime tech leader, consultant coach, agile enthusiasts, and authors says he's been fired from every CTO role he's ever had. So you can click the red button to hire him now as I'm presuming he's immediately available. School is the co author of 2020s agile conversations. So put the aims to help tech teams collaborate and have difficult discussions, not that US tech and product types ever have any of those. And he's here tonight to talk to me about how to make tech teams insanely profitable. And how productive conflict can lead to faster delivery. Hi Squirrel. How are you tonight?

S **Squirrel** 01:41

I'm doing great when you can just keep talking. That sounds super.

Jason Knight 01:45

But let's get started. So you are a director and presumably the founder of squiggle squared.

Squirrel 01:51

Well, it's really just me. So I'm a consultant. And there's just me, you're talking to my people.

Jason Knight 01:55

So you asked Google squared. So what problem do you, as Squirrel Squared, solve for the world?

Squirrel 02:00

Well, the technology teams are the probably the greatest that have the greatest leverage of any human organisation that has ever existed. And we tend to use them to have backlog meetings and to hold endless discussions that don't go anywhere. And we're not writing code that could change the world. And we should do that. And we should make a huge profit doing it.

Jason Knight 02:24

So your goal is to go and help teams get away from just going through backlogs, and actually be super successful. So your website claims that you've been making tech teams insanely profitable since 2001. So yeah, that makes you nearly as old as me. But I guess I have to ask the tech teams really need to worry about profits, or should they just be concentrating on the tech? You touched on it a little bit just now about like not wanting to just be backlog merchants? But did I really need to worry about the money?

Squirrel 02:49

They absolutely do. And when I see a tech team get really connected to the business outcomes for the business, whatever those might be, whatever the profit is that the business has, when I see that there's suddenly this huge flood of productivity, huge flood of opportunity that happens.

Jason Knight 03:07

Yeah, that's interesting, because something that I've wrestled with in the past in product companies specifically. And obviously, there could be a different kind of paradigm, if you're talking about more service or consultancy led companies that are maybe working on individual projects. And then you know, they're billing by the hour or something like that. But in product companies where your

Squirrel 03:23

That's a bad idea, by the way, they shouldn't start billing by the hour

Jason Knight 03:27

100%. But in product companies, obviously, you have long lived tech teams that are working and working on a product. And then that's presumably then being taken out to the world, either product led growth stylee, or it's being taken out to the world by salespeople, and then they're going out there and then selling stuff and generating the revenue that comes back directly themselves. But unless we're literally splitting everyone, like all of the tech teams into individual product lines, then you can directly draw a line of revenue to the development efforts that happened on that product line. So much of that still feels very dependent on sales. So for example, a crappy sales team can still fail to sell a great product, a great sales team can to some extent, so they're not great product. So when you go into these companies, are you just helping the tech teams? Or are you also touching on that kind of go to market and sales side to kind of wrap it all up and make it all work?

Squirrel 04:13

See I see it as one unit. So I don't see these things as separate? Right? So yes, I'm very frequently doing that the person I was just coaching before I jumped on this podcast with you is someone who is finding that being isolated within his tech team is really backfiring on him that he's not getting the attention from the rest of the organisation that he deserves, and that the organisation needs. And he has call centres that are down he has opportunities lost to convert customers, and he knows about it, but nobody else does. And my coaching to him is that he needs to get out of the it bubble. And he needs to be talking, for example to the CFO about the effect on the bottom line of having the network down once a week. And once he does that, that's going to drive the attention and the benefits that he He's looking for and he's frustrated by not having from his tech team.

Jason Knight 05:03

But you say you've worked with 150 plus companies, you're an adviser to a few as well. But when you go into these companies, like how many of them already doing something kind of like that? Or, on the flip side, like how many of them are just completely the opposite of that in the substantial surgery? I'm sure that there's a spectrum. But like, if you have to kind of put a finger in Yeah, like, how many of those are already trying to do that? Because you hear a lot about IT service mentality, like you just touched on it yourself. Seems to be really common, especially in bigger companies like do you see that?

Squirrel 05:33

Not only do I see it, I can think of very few who already have a profit focus for their technology organisations, it's surprising to me for exactly the reason you just said, it's usually the biggest

organisations, it's surprising to me for exactly the reason you just said, it's usually the biggest expense, right? The end, at least per person, engineers are paid much more than many other people in the organisation, who ironically contribute a lot more to profit, not because the engineers can't but because the organisation is set itself up to measure activity, rather than outcome. And when you start measuring the outcome, you discover that a lot of the activity is wasted. And I tell people to do things like delete their backlogs, iterate much more quickly, and get their teams focused on the features that drive profit, rather than being focused on the back end or the front end, or is data science, something that's very technically minded, which doesn't drive that outcome. And when they start, and almost no one is doing that to start with, when they start, they get huge benefits.

Jason Knight 06:28

When you're talking about profit, though, obviously, that could be short term profit, like the cliche sales quarterly target type profit, where you just gotta get as much money over the line and as short of time as possible to hit your quota. Is it that type of profit, you're talking about? Are you talking about the longer term for the good of the many, let's make lots of money from one type of profit, because you could take profits, I mean, either of those two things. And you could argue, I guess that focusing on the quarterly targets, for example, is a real enemy to innovation, because you're always prioritising stuff to give you that kind of adrenaline shot.

Squirrel 06:59

Yeah, that's exactly the kind of thinking that limits people. So when they say, look, should we do short term or long term I say, that's a company strategy issue. And company strategy is very important. I work with teams of entire executive teams on the company's strategy as well, I just did a workshop on this. And the crucial thing is that they need to pick their companies for whom the short term profit is absolutely the number one thing. Yeah, I have a client who spent this summer doing a huge technology overhaul, which I helped them with. And now they're reaping the profits at Christmas, because that's when they make half their sales. So they're focused on how do we increase the conversion rate in the next hour? Right? They're very short term focus. Because it's Christmas right now, when we're recording this. However, I have other clients who are thinking about how, three, five years out, I think they're thinking too far, they can't predict that far. But their horizon is very different. The point is that the technology strategy almost always is completely out of sync with that company strategy. And the technologists are in the ivory tower, inventing wonderful, fantastic new things, which have no relationship to whether it's short term or long term what the company actually needs.

Jason Knight 08:05

Now all by that, but one follow up to that and something that I've been wrestling with a little bit recently, I'm not 100% sure if I believe it myself, but one a floater with you, since we're talking about the money, whether the idea of having quarterly targets, for example, is the enemy of that long term thinking in general, because obviously, for example, we're sitting there saying we want quarterly OKRs that are based on moving certain numbers. Okay, cool. And is obviously the sales targets as the quotas that the sales team needs to hit, which, obviously, they're bonused on and in some cases, they get fired if they don't hear. So there's a really big incentive for those people to privatise things from a sales perspective that do hit those

numbers. But you could argue, and again, you said just now that obviously, it depends on the company. But you could argue that making those big long term bets. So let's say for example, if we wanted to the metaverse, let's imagine we needed to sink like a year or two of development into something. But if we're always chasing that short term revenue, because that's what the company needs to stay alive. Are we ever going to be able to make those big long term bets? Or do we, as you say, just have to pick and kind of accept our fate?

S Squirrel 09:08

But I think that I'm going to reject the assumption in the question with respect, because everybody makes that assumption might reject the idea that you need to sink two years into the metaverse, for example, then not because the metaverse is or isn't a good idea. I'll reserve judgement on that one. The point is that these lengthy projects are what kill KILL IT teams. That's what makes things very difficult. What you want is imperfect indicators. Sometimes people call them leading indicators, but I emphasise that they're imperfect IE, they don't give you all the information that you need. But they do give you a guide to whether what you're doing is helpful. And you want feedback. Ideally, every day I often teach teams how to deliver new software that's valuable, that gives them a further movement on their imperfect indicator every single day. But certainly at least every week, every two weeks. You want to be able to take a reading and Say, Hey, this Metaverse stuff, it seems to be working, we've got some people who are interested, we've got people who are starting to pull out their wallets and use it. Now, take an aside and say, I'm not sure who those people are. But if you've been buying them, and they're willing to pay you for it, then you've got information and you do not have a multi year project, you do not have this huge sunk cost. And then a conflict between that and your quarterly outcomes. A quarterly is too slow, we only have weekly outcomes.

Jason Knight 10:26

So far so agile manifesto, but I completely agree. By the way, this idea that you have to put everything into a big long term project is just the death of being able to make any good decisions, because you're just throwing so much. And you're kind of getting into like a minecart, and just going down the track, rather than just stopping and learning as you go. So big fan of that. But I'm assuming that of these 150 plus companies that you've worked with, there's a bunch out there, maybe larger companies, a bunch that are smaller companies, I mean, I don't know what your mix is, but not all of those companies are even going to conceptually have any, like, that's not going to jive with them at all. Well, because they've got this old school way of thinking or

S Squirrel 11:04

that they hire me to change that. For me, because they want to they want to do something different companies that don't want that, that they really do want this, as you call it old school approach to giant projects that are on a path to Nowhere, I often say it's like getting in a rocket ship and going to Mars. Well, I don't care who it is. But what you have to do if you want to get into Mars right now with current technology is get in the ship, bring a book, bring a lot of books, because you're not going to be doing anything, right, you just wait. And then eventually you bang, bang into Mars. And there you are. However, what we really want is the Starship

Enterprise. Because you notice in any science fiction story that's worth its salt, the drama would be missing, right? If you were just in the ship reading the book, nothing would be happening. But what happens is they're headed to epsilon 123. And suddenly, they discover that betta Zoid number three is much more interesting. So they they change, right? They go someplace different, halfway along, because they're getting feedback all the time. They look out the window, and they see the stars, and they say, oh, wait a minute, that one looks more interesting. Let's go over there, there seems to be something to do. And that's the sort of thinking that companies need to have. And far, far, far too many of them don't take advantage of the fact that technology allows them to do that.

Jason Knight 12:17

Yeah, but I think also one thing I've seen in the past, and I'm sure you've seen as well as this idea that maybe the people that don't get that, I mean, it sounds like those aren't the people that are going to hire you. But the people that don't get that they have this idea in their mind that what they're really looking for is predictability and a plan and just knowing what's going to happen. And obviously sales teams like to have plans so that they know what they can pitch to people. But again, I guess,

Squirrel 12:42

stop planning? Well, no, I mean, it really No, I agree, I have a whole concept called the tilted slider. You remember, it used to be, you know, radios and machines like that you're old enough. I think that to remember these that you'd have a whole school thing you moved along, and it took you to the right radio station, right, it slid along a little track. And that kind of control is what people try to manipulate a slider that they can move to one end or the other for their predictability or their productivity of their tech team. And the problem is, the reason that this tilted or this slider is tilted is you could push it all the way up to productivity. And startups, for example, very small startups often have that no people come to me and they'll say, oh, you know, I remember the old days, when there were three of us in a room, we could just get anything done, we did it right away. Now we're big. So suddenly, we've moved our slider down. And I say there's a natural reason for that. The reason it's tilted downward toward the predictability side, is that other people in the organisation want everybody in the organisation wants control. So you have this desire for control that pulls your slider down, that you have to be consciously moving it up, so that you're moving toward productivity. And you can do that, unless you're somebody like NASA, right? Where you really do have to get in the rocket ship. And if Mars if you don't launch at this exact moment, Mars will be there, right? So there are cases where that kind of planning is absolutely necessary. Almost none of us are in that circumstance, right? NASA wants to phone me, I'll consult with them, for sure. Most of my clients 99% of those 175 companies that I've worked with, they don't need that kind of planning. What they need is really rapid feedback, they need to be in the Starship Enterprise. And so what I tell them to do and help them to do is to move that slider up and move it away from the desire for control. So they have less control, they have less certainty. But man, are they productive?

Jason Knight 14:30

Yeah, I guess that's the dream, right? Like going in there showing them the evidence, showing

them your work showing them what happens when you go to this newer approach or newer for them approach and getting them to take their hand off the tiller to some extent. But are there any specific techniques that you use, not necessarily with the technologists, but with those non technology stakeholders to actually help plan that and get them to think a little bit less about control? Because that's the constant kind of argument that we just can't persuade them. So how do you persuade them Aside from just showing them the examples of your past work,

Squirrel 15:03

well, the main thing to do, and the thing that I teach people over and over again, to do is to have much better conversations. Yes, because when you say, Look, we can't convince them, you're right, you can't convince them. But there's a tremendous opportunity to collaborate with them in a completely different way. So for example, this same person that I was just telling you about that I was just coaching, one of his problems is that other people in the organisation don't trust him. And I have a method for increasing trust, which actually is based on test driven development, test driven development for people. And there's a method that you can use for building trust. So you structure your conversation, almost as a series of tests. And as you pass more of the tests, you're building more and more trust. So those are the types of methods that you can use as an engineer to build that kind of trust outside the technology organisation. And then you don't have to convince anybody.

Jason Knight 15:55

Oh, there you go since steps and you're trying to make it that they had the idea first, and or something like that, but

Squirrel 16:00

it's not quite that manipulative, but we can go into it if you want.

Jason Knight 16:04

Well, let's we'll talk about that in a minute. But before we talk about that, you also talked about using action science to help achieve this within organisations. Now, I'll admit that I'm not a big expert on action science. So in a nutshell, but

Squirrel 16:15

he is nobody's ever heard of it?

Jason Knight 16:17

Well, that's the thing. So what is action science done? And how does it help? So in the broadest sense of the word,

Squirrel 16:24

there was this brilliant guy at Yale, I think, called Chris arteris, who invented this whole mechanism of having better conversations, and then buried in it a lot of academic journals. So his work is almost illegible, you just can't make any sense of it. But the ideas are brilliant and test driven development for people is my update for a technology focused audience of a method he used called the ladder of inference, then you can go read about the ladder of inference on various websites, describing how he used it, that his original work goes way beyond that. So there's a whole philosophy, there's a whole method of improving your conversations. My co author, Ron, conversational dodos, where we practice these techniques were you get better at them, they're not natural, they're not obvious. But when you use them, you suddenly have a very different interaction with people around you, they don't have to change, it's not necessarily they also have to read the book, they also have to use the methods that in fact, when you have, say, a trust, building conversation of the kind I was just describing, you alone, can increase the trust of the information, passing the value of your interaction with those people. And this is something you can learn this is a skill that you can practice, just like you would go to a coding dojo and improve your, your ability with rust, you can do the same with your conversations.

Jason Knight 17:43

Well, let's talk about conversations. And so you've that book, I think it came out a couple of years ago in 2020, or at least the edition I saw on Amazon. Yep. So agile conversations, which says that it can help you transform your conversation and transform your company culture. That's right now, some engineers, not all but some are quite famous for their lack of desire to, or they seem to be at least famous for their lack of desire to even have conversations at all, let alone sure agile ones. So

Squirrel 18:07

computers, not people understood.

Jason Knight 18:11

So as your book aimed at those people, or is it aimed at all engineers, or is it aimed at, I mean, you said that not everyone has to read it, but should the entire organisation read it if they really want to be effective at this stuff?

Squirrel 18:20

Well, my publisher would say so. But you know, if, if listeners want a copy, they should just get in touch with me, I'm happy to send out copies. But the point is not that everyone needs to read the book, or that everyone needs to have the conversations, there are people who just that's not their thing. That's not what they want to do, and they don't need to, but somebody in

the technology organisation certainly should be improving their conversations in their interaction with the rest of the business. Because almost every organisation I look at, that's very, very poor. Yep. And of course, product managers like you are the perfect glue for connecting those less social, less interested in people, engineers, with the rest of the organisation, to many organisations don't even have that person, much less have any focus on improving those interactions. But it's crucial. If you do that, you wind up connecting the engineers and the engineering work to profit. And that's when you really unlock the value,

Jason Knight 19:12

not 100%. And I'm a big fan of bringing engineers into those product conversations. I gave a talk yesterday on how engineers should be front and centre in all the different parts of the product journey as well. So from discovery through to solutioning, and design, all of that stuff that I think is really important. The book itself, though, talks about various different types of conversation, it talks about the trust conversation, which you just touched about the fear conversation, the why conversation or commitment conversation, the accountability, conversation. There's lots of different types of conversations. Is this like a step by step guide? Or is this something that you really dip into to try and work out how to have certain types of conversations when those conversations come up? Like, would you read this front to back or was it more of a kind of a playbook for individual situations?

Squirrel 19:55

People use it different ways. And it's amenable to all those ways. So for example, If you want to really master the techniques and practice in dojos, practice your conversations, improve the way that you build trust and reduce fear and involve people and collaborate with them through joint design, then you can read every word of the book, go through all the exercises, do all the practice items. And that works great for the people who are willing to put in a lot of work. There are other people who read it and they say, Boy, this was a nice book, this was fun. Those people would do the hard work. They say, Man, this was tough. I really had to work hard at it. That's good. I don't mind that usage. But it's also fine to say, Man, I got this tough conversation coming. I know that they are not committed the commitments, not there. I haven't involved them. I haven't included this, the data science folks in the conversation up to this point. And I want to fix that. Well, then you could dive into the commitment conversation, read some examples from life, we have real conversations that have really happened, and we analyse them, and we say how you could improve them. And that can help you in that technical moment. So you can use it any way you like.

Jason Knight 20:56

There you go. But how has that gone down then with some of the technical people that its main audience? Like? I'm assuming you've had some feedback, some personal feedback? Or even Amazon reviews? Like? Do you feel that the ideas within the book and the kind of value proposition of the book, you know, having better conversations getting engineers involved in the business? Like, do you think that that's something that's really landed and had a really positive effect?

Squirrel 21:19

Well, I think it's had a positive effect on the people who've taken it seriously worked hard at it and made improvements. And those are the kinds of people that I coach, and who really get benefit from techniques like test driven development for people. There are a whole class of other people who just kind of want to get something that's nice, and they want to just feel that they've they've read something, and that they're not actually implementing anything that they that they read. I'm glad to have those readers, I'm happy with them. The problem is that what I haven't seen is some massive revolution in how people have conversations. So I don't think my consulting business is in any trouble. We haven't changed everyone to this kind of trust building fear reducing attitude and approach yet. And I don't expect to because this is very hard work. It's not what we were kind of evolutionarily guided to. This isn't how we survived in the wild. And when we were being hunted by lions, that are vital now that we have huge knowledge teams that are building things like as you say, the metaverse.

Jason Knight 22:17

Absolutely. Well, hopefully a few more people will pick it up after this. But one thing I saw in the book, which did interest me, given it is for techies and talking about a lot about commitment and accountability type conversations, and in the Agile community, at least, and I'm thinking of a few people specifically that have kind of come up with this commentary. There's some pushback on the terms, accountability and commitment. And the suggestion that they're almost punitive concepts like really, they're used badly. Well, yeah, exactly sort of hand over some of the old Taylorist management days and just a way to bash teams over the head. Yep. And you do touch on this in the book itself, as well. But do you think there's any way or there's any place for commitment and accountability conversations in this truly agile, empowered world that we're all aiming for?

Squirrel 23:01

It's vital, but done the right way. So the problem is that if you if you push the tilted slider too far down, and you're looking for unwarranted predictability, and you're looking for huge amounts of control from outside the tech team, then what you wind up doing is creating exactly the negative environment you just described. What I tell people is your I don't let my coaching clients refer to holding people accountable. I make them talk about being accountable, because it comes from the word account comes from when people would count things, they would count the taxes actually, for the English king, and they would count them out in in a certain way. You can read a manual on how they did this. And their accounting was I went to these people who lived in these places, and I extracted taxes from them. And here's the taxes free and they actually count out the pennies. So what you want to be doing is actively giving an account of what the technology team did, and how that matched the things that the team committed to do. What we don't want is the salespeople saying, Okay, here's what we're going to commit you to do. And then we're going to hold you to account for delivering that that never ends. Well as all of the listeners, I'm sure know. But if you were to be part of the conversation, if you were to jointly design, something that you're committing to do, you commit to experiments and imperfect indicators along the way that tell you whether you're making that progress, then you can account to say Mark Zuckerberg and say, Mark, we've been trying out this Metaverse thing. And man, people would really like to have legs. They're kind of annoyed by the fact that the,

the avatars don't have legs. And so we're working hard on something we didn't expect right into Starship Enterprise. We're changing our direction. We're working on legs now. And we're seeing an improvement in conversion. We'll know more next week. If you're having that kind of conversation. If you're being accountable in that way, then you're very closely tied to profit. you're adjusting the direction that you're going in all the time and you have the commitment and buy in and engagement of the people who jointly designed it with you, rather than this kind of externally imposed deadline which is all about on increasing control and reducing trust?

Jason Knight 25:02

Yeah, no, absolutely. And I'm always gonna be a big fan of going that way, and being able to collaborate your way to success, I think, you know, the, one of the things I've reflected on a lot over the last few years is this, this, this simple fact that we should all consider ourselves on the same team, right. But I have worked in organisations where the sales team have a antagonistic towards the engineering team and, and obviously, vice versa, because it feels like they're just from different worlds, and they just have no coordination or shared values or anything at all, they're just all been forced into different directions. And it just feels like a really toxic atmosphere of and one that we should all hopefully be able to change.

Squirrel 25:39

But let me say something there, because there are a lot of people who are going to be really resonating with what you're saying, Jason, they're gonna say, yep, that's exactly what my organization's like, isn't it terrible. Here I am listening to the podcast and hearing that other people are in this situation, since it's so hopeless, I'm just glad that there's somebody who's confirming my hopelessness, they're gonna change it, the thing I'm here to do is to say that you individually can change this, I have this radical idea that you don't have to sit there and say, Well, this is how it is. Now 100%, the rest of the organisation doesn't have to change, you can do something different. Now, there's not enough time in this podcast to go into it in depth. I'd encourage people to find out more from the book, get in touch on my website, lots of ways you can do something about this. And so the next time you hear somebody saying, Well, you can't do anything, they change their minds all the time, they never listen to us, they impose the deadlines. Tell them please, that there's a crazy guy named squirrel, who says that they can do something about it. And that's all I ask you to do is that recognise that there is something you can do, you can choose to do it or not. And the organisation can choose to listen or not, that there are things that you can do such as test driven development for people that make a huge, immediate difference to the profit of the company.

Jason Knight 26:49

100%, I'm a big fan of the concept that you should try and not necessarily to meet in the middle, but you don't have to meet up one side or the other, right, you need to try and find some common ground and work where you can so 100% agree with that. So let's just assume then that we've got the engineer, the tech team talking to the rest of the business, and everyone's contributing to the strategy, everyone's aligned and moving forward as a team, this fantastic utopian Star Trek type future that we're all talking about. But then you talked about potentially, the fact that you could communicate that strategy using a napkin. Yes. Now, I've

worked for companies that have apparently been started off the back of a napkin. So obviously, that is an approach that has legs. And I don't know if Miro has a napkin plugin. So like whether we can use that in these

Squirrel 27:31

big or small box, it has to be physically, physically the size of a napkin,

Jason Knight 27:35

put a little coffee stain on it. But what's the idea specifically around the napkin? I mean, obviously, I'm all for simplicity. But isn't it a bit too simple to just put everything in that one little box?

Squirrel 27:44

Well, one of the key things is that your napkin strategy should be wrong. Uh huh. So what you want is to have something that very clearly communicates a mostly right, but probably certainly wrong in certain aspects. Idea. Yep. Which is easily communicated. So pick anything that's got a small idea. We talked about Musk before. And we talked about rockets, right? If you ask anybody at SpaceX, why are you here? Why did you get up? Why did you come to work this morning. The reason is, we want to get humans to Mars, maybe Elon should stay there. Once he gets there, I'm not sure. But we want to get people to Mars. That's the goal. And when you can keep people aligned to that, it's much simpler and easier to then have all the conversations you need to have in order to achieve that goal. Now that goal is not right. It's not true. They're only trying to get to Mars, they're also trying to make a profit for the shareholders. They're trying to improve technology for all kinds of space operations. Mars isn't the only outcome. But having something very simple like that shows that you have an understanding that transcends, you know, the 70 page 500 Slide definition of your strategy, and gets it in a compressed form that shows your understanding and gets everyone on board. And that's why a napkin is a very good way to summarise many ideas and why exactly as you say, many startups have started with ideas on napkins,

Jason Knight 29:06

napkins, or beer mats or

Squirrel 29:08

whatever, whatever it was to hand, but small, small square

Jason Knight 29:11

object with the basic right ability that they can find

S Squirrel 29:15

compression shows understanding. There you go. But if we go back

Jason Knight 29:19

then to communication and conversation, I mean, you and I have talked in passing about constructive conflict. And I know that's something that you're keen to. You're saying that that's a good idea. And there's been lots of talks out there. I remember Steve Jobs doing his thinking about pebbles in the rock grinder and getting the shiny pebbles out. And obviously, if you think about your book, we could say, Well, part of that could be the trust conversation, you know, like having the psychological safety to have open, effectively conflict but in a controlled fashion and seeing what great shiny pebbles you get out of it. But yeah, in many companies, that's not the case, as we all know. So how have you managed to help foster an environment in the companies that you have worked with where they can actually have that create Some tension without just actually going toxic and shouting at each other?

S Squirrel 30:03

Well, I certainly agree with not being toxic. I think shouting is probably not usually the most productive way to get into conflict. But whichever method you use you want conflict and whose you should be steering for more conflict in a productive way. And when you're measuring is my team being effective is am I getting creative technological innovations into live production so that users get benefit people pay me more, I have more profit. If that's your measure, which it should be, then you want to be looking at how you create more conflict, you should be steering toward additional conflict and danger. The problem is that because conflict is unpleasant, humans tend to avoid it. And they say, oh, man, alright, I'll delay the conversation, maybe they'll realise themselves, maybe they'll figure it out, I can avoid the conflict. But that's like avoiding eating your broccoli, or avoiding having to run in the morning, right, those things aren't necessarily pleasant to do, but they may create tremendous benefit for you. So you can do this. And that's the main message I have is you don't have to wait for the organisation to bring in a consultant like me to make a big organisational change you tomorrow today, this afternoon, can have a difficult conversation and create conflict, which then leads to better outcomes, you can do that.

Jason Knight 31:17

But in some cases where you maybe, as you touched on, can't have that constructive tension and you can't speak up, you almost get an atmosphere of toxic positivity instead, where any doubts or dissent is seen as a character flaw or somehow disruptive and you're not on the you're not on the team. You're not You're not on message. Yep. How many times have you gone into a company and said that as a kind of a base state that you've, you've walked into?

S Squirrel 31:40

Oh, many, many times. And that's something that I have to help the organisation change. And sometimes I can be very few cases, I will say that in a very few cases, I haven't been able to help the organisation and I stopped and I say I'm not the right person for you, I can't help you make this change. But the vast majority of the time, what I find is that by changing the conversations, by changing the the approach that one person takes, then that can cause productive conflict and a ripple effect that really changes how the whole organisation functions. I see that over and over and over again, and people may not believe me might say, squirrel, you're not. I don't think that's really happening. That could never happen in my organisation. My challenge to you is get in touch with me. Talk to me about how you could do that. Read the book, whatever method makes sense to you. But if you give these methods a fair trial, you will see that it's called Action science for a reason. You can do experiments in which you have the productive conversation, you have the conflict. And you see what the results are. I guarantee to you that you will see you will certainly not be bored, as you probably are today with the toxic positivity. My co author likes to say, you know, if you're in a meeting that's boring, announced that it's boring, it will no longer be boring.

Jason Knight 32:52

Oh, I can think of a few where that would have ruffled a few feathers

S Squirrel 32:55

that they need, roughly. That's what you need. And it'd be much better if somebody went to Zuck and said, hey, people aren't buying this Metaverse thing. And not only do they not like having no legs, but they think it's stupid. And they'd rather just phone someone, it'd be much better for Zach to hear that. And for them to have a good old discussion about it. And to come up with a better idea than for everyone to say, Metaverse greatest idea of or Leadville hundreds of teams building this vision of Xbox,

Jason Knight 33:22

oh, bow down at his feet. That's not helpful. Not at all. But aside from buying the book, and aside from getting you to come in and help them, what's one thing you'd recommend any engineer or tech person, maybe even a product person, if they're in that sort of organisation. One thing that they can do today to start down the path of having more constructive conversations,

S Squirrel 33:42

pick something that terrifies you pick something that is a conflict or a difficulty or in a way of interacting that's not working, and go and make that discussable with the person or the group or the team that is in that situation. So when you're thinking to yourself, Man, they just asked me to do new things all the time that we're changing our minds, and this isn't working. You go find the team that's generating that you say, Where's this coming from? Tell me more about it. That's not working for me. If somebody is adding people to your team, when you don't need them, and you can't train them, and you can't keep up, we've got people in that situation, then

you go find whoever in HR keeps hiring additional people and putting them on your team. And you find out why they're doing that. The question why leads to tremendous insight. But it's far too threatening? Because the answer might be well, because you told me to or because I thought this was better for you or because I understood that this is the company policy, all of those will lead to other actions, then this person's an idiot and making my life difficult, which is the natural, easy way to go and which doesn't lead to productive improvement in your profit.

Jason Knight 34:48

Well, that's a fundamental attribution error there but they're basically just sitting there and assigning motives to people when they don't have their own story. So definitely want to push against that. But where can people find you after this? If they Want to have a conversation with you have any type of find out more about your book or just chat about action science? Or how to make their teams insanely profitable?

Squirrel 35:07

Yeah, well, there are two places to do that. And one you can do as long as you remember my name. And that's at Douglas squirrel.com, where you've been reading from and seeing lots of material on what I do. I also run a completely free community called squirrel squadron. And that's squirrel squadron.com. and I do events every week that are completely free, some are in person, some are on line. And those have interesting guests who come and talk to me. I have discussions this week we're talking about today we're talking about blasting through barriers and how to overcome problems. And we're drawing ideas from the treatment of paranoid schizophrenics. Because it turns out that's terribly relevant to how you break through barriers at your work. So there's free material on squirrel squadron.com. And there's lots more about me at Douglas squirrel.com.

Jason Knight 35:55

Oh, there you go. I'll make sure to link that all into the show notes. And hopefully you get a few people coming over heading your direction and learning how to have a few more productive conversations. Well, it's been a fantastic chat. So obviously, really appreciate you spending some of your valuable time to talk about some meaty subjects. Obviously, we'll stay in touch but as for now, thanks for taking the time.

Squirrel 36:13

Thank you, Jason. Really appreciate it.

Jason Knight 36:17

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to white knights in product.com Check out some of my other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app

and make sure you share your friends so you and they can never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now, thanks and good nights