

Podcast series: Leading for Interdisciplinary Creativity

IDBM programme at Aalto University

Episode 3

Length: 54.05 min

Guests: Maija Itkonen and Lotta Partanen

Host: Irina Viippola

Maija: [00:00:00] Some free space, unknown parts, some curiosity, something that is not written in the script yet.

Aalto University Podcast.

Irina: This is leading for interdisciplinary creativity, and I am your host Irina Viippola. In this episode, we'll explore the essentials for making meaningful change, how to identify problems worth solving, and how to turn new ideas into thriving businesses. We'll also discuss ways to boost Finland's competitiveness through intangible value creation and the power of interdisciplinary cooperation.

For anyone interested in creating change, there will be tips and resources on innovation worth noting. Get ready for a conversation, rich with insights and inspiration from two seasoned innovation experts. Let's dive in.

Welcome my, [00:01:00] I'm excited to have you here. Great, thanks. Thanks. To start with, can you introduce yourselves?

Maija: Maybe you can start, Maija. Okay. So if I start, so my name is Maija Itkonen. I'm an industrial designer. I'm an IDBM alumni. Um. I actually have a little bit different career that you would maybe expect, uh, for, for an industrial designer.

So I currently work as a biotech company, CEO. So I'm a sort of like, not maybe serial entrepreneur, but maybe serial founder, if you could say like, um, this is my, this is my third startup, so I'm quite experienced on the startup field.

Irina: Excellent, excellent base for our discussions, I have to say. What about you Lotta?

Lotta: I am, uh, uh, I'm also a designer by background. Uh, I hold a master's in interior architecture, specialized in furniture design, and I'm a [00:02:00] interaction designer. I have a master from new media, from the media lab in Tike. Yes, but actually I, I specialized in, you know. Experience designing UUs computing and embedded systems, IOT.

I think a little bit before that some of those terms existed and that led me to work for a large corporations on innovation side, and that's when I discovered actually innovation as a career path. It didn't exist when we studied. There was no innovation design or innovation management. At the time. So, so that has led me through several kind of large corporations on the consumer electronics funds to utility.

And, and now I lead a spinoff incubator at VTT, at the Technical Research Center of Finland.

Irina: Oh, sounds really interesting. And of course the [00:03:00] startup and spinoff scene is quite, uh, active at the moment in Finland. That's right. So I'm sure that we can find, uh, interesting questions on, on that area as well.

But to begin with, I would like to go more into, um, how do you find these problems that are worth solving or how to identify things that you feel that now? Okay, let's, let's dig into this theme.

Maija: Yeah. Well, if I start from that, um. I think you can really approach this like from so many different directions that either you can, you can just like look at the surface and just to see like the big picture only.

But when you go like narrow and narrow, you can actually find new problems always. So for example, in my, uh, my, my, my startups, the first one was. Purely just, uh, this idea and business potential that was driving it and that the company started developing technology and acquiring the technology and so on.[00:04:00]

Then the second one was based on, uh, founders PhD studies, but was not really like anything that tightly connected with the university. And then this current one is a, is a true spinoff, so like very, very different take on the technology. But, uh, I think that that's actually like, I would say like the first thing.

First thing to recognize that it's not so that you know, like only the sort of problems or challenges that you just recognize today, and you would need to start solving a word solving. It's like all kinds of smaller, smaller, uh, problems like inside the box if it, if you would say, uh, so for example, in this, in this spin of, you know, you have like certain technologies, but then what is it?

How is it done? Where is it solved? What problem does it solve? And sort of like, you know, like all, all of these different, uh, different, like smaller angles inside this, like a core what's, [00:05:00] what, what's your innovation, uh, type of thing. So, so yeah, I think it's, uh, you can, you can really approach that like so many different ways.

Irina: Mm. And what gets you inspired? How do you then get involved with these new ideas and, and startups?

Maija: I have to say that, you know, like when I was younger, I was much more interested in just larger that Okay. You know, sort of, kind of like once you have developed, uh, your idea. That's sort of like already halfway there.

But now when I have become older, I have been more and more excited about than the how, like, I think someone said it nicely that, uh, like the real idea is the idea of execution.

Maija: idea, the creative idea is not yet the idea, but the idea of the execution is actually the real idea.

Irina: That sounds really excellent.

And I actually, in some of the other discussions that we've been having in this podcast series, we've been. Talking quite a lot about doing, not so much about thinking, [00:06:00] and maybe this is also a little bit in the same field. Yeah. That you just have to start doing the how is important. Uh, what about, what about you?

How do you see this, that, that, how do you kind of find the problems that are worth identifying and, and what gets you inspired? I,

Lotta: I must say, I, I, I go really far back. Hmm. Um, I always thought I would be, become an engineer and, and I, I did really extensive science mathematics studies in high school that breached already to the university level in some parts.

And, and, uh, last year of high school I realized I'm not gonna be an engineer.

Lotta: Um, and I quickly visited social sciences, political history. I interviewed anyone that I saw on the corridors or whatever. I asked them, so what are you gonna, what are you gonna do with your studies? What are you gonna become?

It didn't matter what they, you know, what level of study, you know, how far they were in their studies? [00:07:00] No, no one could answer and I thought, I need to get out of here quick. And then I, I, I, I got this grand idea that if I became a designer, I could employ myself because the world is full of problems that need solutions.

Lotta: And, and so, so, so I, I think I'm still on the same mission. Um, I find that the world can be made a much better place and, and I can't help it. I really believe in technology and applying sciences as, as a vehicle of or means of kind of creating this change and improvement. When you can actually commercialize it, when you, when you kind of make it desirable, feasible, uh, and viable enough, isn't it?

You know, and I, I, I believe that, [00:08:00] you know, somehow, you know, I'm old enough to think that, you know, people are just, we're just lazy. We're too complacent. We're not gonna change our behavior even though we know we should, unless. Behavioral change is made into something so delightful that I'm, I'm, I just wanna do it.

You know? And that's where we need real kind of effort in, in translating that, that opportunity of change created by scientific discovery into a value proposition that we'll all buy into, you know, so, so. In a way, in a way, you know, I'm, I'm on this mission to kind of change the world and so far, you know, development, you know, personal development is like a growth path.

I've come to realize that, you know, that at [00:09:00] the moment I, you know, I realize that there's, there is no truth. There is just a, you know what? I know of the matter right now. You know, but in a while I'll know something else. So currently my belief and the truth for me is right now is that the best vehicle of creating this, delivering this change is through growth companies.

Lotta: And why, why I do this is that I, you know, I have worked in the corporations, you know, my past career before joining VTT, and, and I was so frustrated with the, the corporate, you know. It's, it's inherent inability to deliver innovation into the world. It's not supposed to be there, you know, there, there's a business to protect, not a new one to kind of foster.

So, so I find myself, you know, on this kind of, as a rebel, rebel with a cause, you know, a bit of a business anarchist. I'm like, you know, good, you know, [00:10:00] we can't, we, you know, if, if they can create the plan. Compose the team and secure the millions from the investors. There's nothing stopping them. Go for it.

Irina: Rebel with a cause. Sounds really good. Maija, you had something to add here?

Maija: I also think that, you know, like one thing that people usually don't necessarily recognize is the meaning of this design when like utilizing the technology to kind of like, uh, uh, like enable those changes because like technology on its own is really nothing.

It's like just the carriage without the horse, you know? Because it's not brought anywhere. No. It's just there. It is, it doesn't serve anything. It doesn't, it doesn't deliver anything. No. It, it's, it's, it's nothing for nobody. Yes. But then once you kinda like package it somehow that it serves a purpose.

It's already designed. It's that, that that is already the meaning of design that, you know, like you are, you're channeling something to people and it's always, somehow people, like [00:11:00] everything that we have in here is somehow people centric. Yes. So, so packaging technologies, uh, into something that can be served to people.

It's always design and it, it's, I I think it's very inspirational that people don't usually even recognize. The design is there. So they just think that, okay, that's just usual business. But yeah, like there are always some creative people who, who are capable of practicing design, even without knowing that, so, so I think that that's super inspiring.

Irina: I was thinking that maybe it would be interesting to talk about the elements that are needed for making a change. Uh, and you said that then change is happening, uh, in the growth companies, but not in the corporate world, like the traditional companies and for, for making a change, design is needed. What else?

What are the other elements that then are required?

Maija: Hmm. Yeah, [00:12:00] but I mean, yeah, this just, uh, just to maybe comment a little bit on, uh, what, what, what lot said about this growth companies. I totally agree. Especially. Today. I mean, that was not maybe the

case like 10 or 20 years ago. There was still like innovation in the, in the bigger companies and corporations.

But now when everything is so optimized, it's kind of like that's, that's maybe a little bit answering to your question about what else is needed. It is like some freedom, like some, some free space, unknown parts, some curiosity, something that is not written in the script yet. So. It's, it's, it's very exciting when you start thinking about that.

That's really like the common nominator between like, like art and design and science. It's like, okay, we are just going to areas where nobody has been before. We can't guarantee the result, so we just need to explore. And then that's sort of like this optimization and ultimate focus efficiency. That's the biggest enemy.

Like of course it's needed, but we just have to admit that that [00:13:00] is the, that is the ultimate enemy. For, for the real, real, uh, innovation actually. Mm-hmm. And therefore it sort of creates, this is kind of the silver lining that it sort of creates this real. Ecosystem thinking that when the corporations are working the way they are, so that okay, the, everything is very optimized.

Everybody's just thinking about the next quarter results, you know, maybe their next promotion or something. The teams are very, very tight. It's like, uh, like everybody's just so busy in executing what, what they need to deliver this month. So that means that then the startups, the growth companies actually have.

A real role in this equation that, okay, you need this kind of building block that brings the new blood into the businesses.

Irina: And do you feel that then there should be more also, uh, cooperation between the startups and then these more kind of bigger companies?

Maija: Like, I think it's more important than ever.

Yeah. I mean, it, it, it, it, it has always been there, but now it seems to be the vital only way almost [00:14:00] that like, in order to, in order to kinda like have real innovation, the big corporations, you sort of need to have like a mature enough startup that has already grown themselves so far that you know, like it doesn't need this, so much of the uncertainty anymore.

That uncertainty is already done, and then you plug it in and then it, it can start living. It's like a next chapter. Yes.

Irina: And what about then, like how, okay, there are new innovations, technologies, ideas, uh, problems with solving. How do you de develop this into then successful businesses? Are there any tricks?

Lotta: I mean, you know, I love it how, uh, Maija, you started this, that you need the space to imagine, isn't it? Because, you know. I if you're just executing, you never have time to dream or or wonder, like, why, you know, why is this this way, why CATT or how might we, or this sort of things. And, and you know, once I, [00:15:00] once, once you have had that space to think, I, I do believe that, you know, leaders can set, you know, bald visions.

You know, you can, you can really. Create a grand vision and, and then something that is compelling that people are attracted to, you know, that, that, that who want to kind of work towards. Mm-hmm. And then you need to, as you know, as a leader, you need to empower the people to, you know, go and do it. Set them free.

Then when you set them free, you know, then, then, you know, set them free in a way that they're also accountable, you know, that they need to deliver the results where, you know, the bar is high, you know, that you want to kind of achieve. Yeah.

Maija: But I also, I also remember, you know, this one picture, uh, of like, you know, like a, people running at the, like you have a skyscraper that there's like no fence.

At the, you're at the rooftop. Yes. And you're just, people are just running around. Yeah. [00:16:00] What do you do? You're just gonna stay at the very center because nobody wants to go, go to the do the borders. No. But then like, once you actually have a fence that you have somehow, like, made a context Yes. That you've somehow like, uh, already like a, like a Yeah, like a given a context and just give like some frames.

Suddenly you can be actually very, very creative that you can just take the whole space. Yeah, you can, you can be like a totally free. So also like this, uh, this kinda like this is also something that I feel that is very important for the leaders to, to kinda like show where we're going, what we are doing, why we are doing this.

You are good. You are like, free to go. You are safe.

Lotta: Yes.

Maija: So you can dream.

Lotta: Yes.

Maija: Yes. You can imagine. Yes. That, that's like, so important. Uh, like, like, um, like a role for the, for the leaders. Yeah.

Irina: So to become a successful business, you have to concentrate on the people that you have and give them the freedom.

Lotta: Then to imagine or be [00:17:00] creative or, I dunno, to be curious.

Irina: As well as the resources to actually get the job done.

Do you have any favorite failures? Uh. Because of course there's always this, uh, thing that people are saying that, uh, that from failures, you learn the most. Uh, so can you share us any, any stories on failures and a favorite one?

Lotta: I joined VTT, um, seven years ago, close to seven years ago. And, uh, VTT is a, you know, uh, applied research organization. So. So if you're a research organization, failures, you know, you need to embrace failure,

Lotta: Because a good part of research is actually failing at what you wanted to achieve, and that's how you learn.

So, so at VTT we actually have, uh, uh, an event organized by the young professionals called the Gala [00:18:00] Failures Annual Gala. Wow. The gala failures, um. And, uh, a little bit of sidetrack. You know, uh, we have, uh, we have, there's the competition and then there's the competition between, between the invited speakers.

So, uh, 2021 gala failures, uh, winner on the, the, the guest speakers. Uh, so that, that was a great honor. But, you know, the, my failure, the great failure is actually linked to something that is actually a, quite a great success until now also. So, so I joined VTT to set up VTT launch, but the spinoff incubator.

Uh, and, and so far we have, uh, we have spun off not a large amount of companies. There's, uh, there's 15 startups [00:19:00] originating from VTT Launchpad and their market value at the moment, there's a half a billion Euros. Mm-hmm. Not too bad with, not too bad with two first of a kind factories being built currently.

You know, so not the pilot scale anymore, but really, uh, industrial scale. Why I call it my favorite failure is that when I was brought in, we had a really tight schedule, so we had to deliver as we were designing. So I called it that, you know, I, I was running with my, with my. Colleague, Tia Maria, you know, and, and you know, I'm, I'm, I have a stick in one hand that has a pencil at it at its end, and I have another stick in the other hand with an eraser.

And we're running and I'm drawing. I'm racing, I'm running. And, you know, and, and when you're doing something like this, clearly you're gonna have quite a few puddles on the way, you know, blunders and fall over, [00:20:00] you know, and step on someone's toe, you know, and draw on someone's wall. Ooh, sorry. You know? Yeah.

And, and so, so I was, I was, I was very lucky to have the full backing of our CEO at the time. Aunt Vara, you know, who would, who would always, you know, when, when the blunders were big, he would always back me up because they always landed off, of course, on his desk.

Lotta: You know, as they do, you know when, when someone gets angry and they know, who do they call?

You know, they call the CEO. So you got people angry.

Irina: And that was part of the failure part, even though that then the launchpad has been successful.

Lotta: Otherwise, yes. But you know, you finish, you say Roy School, you know, and, and so, so, and, and you know what I promised with every single time that there was a blunder. We didn't see that coming. Now we saw it. We know you were not gonna do that again. And we have not [00:21:00] repeated those failures. Mm.

Maija: Then of course, the question is that what actually even is the failure? Because, you know, this are my, one of my favorite sayings that like the only way to really fail is to refuse from help, because there's always someone who is able to come. If you just think about like whatever you, you, whatever stupid things you did, you usually just did it all by yourself, you know? Like there would've been someone who would've had all the answers for you. Yes. But you were just like, oh no, I don't, I don't, I'm too busy, or I'm too proud, I'm too this or that.

So sort of kinda like, usually it's that because I kind of think that, you know, like there are wrong, wrong paths for sure. But you know, like, again, just coming back to this uncertainty. We just need to, we just need to cover those paths. Otherwise we wouldn't know like how, how, how would you know if you just don't go there?

Okay. You see like, okay, this was, this was not the, this was not the route at least. So let's go back. Yes. So was that the failure? Not really. So it's more like sort of kind of like learnings, so in certain way, [00:22:00] yeah. I mean I think that we should maybe have like some new vocabulary in there that what is really like, does failure mean that you're kind of like.

You learn in a good way and then, and what is, then when you didn't learn, you were just kind of like making some mistakes. So anyways, it's all about these wordings as well.

Irina: Now we can maybe move into the question of how has IDB and. Influenced your career path. You have my, uh, you are an alumni of IDBM. Uh, how do you see this as a, as what has been the influence of IDBM to your career?

Maija: Well, I mean, IDBM actually influenced my career very much, even before I started my studies because it was kind of like the, I, I really still remember when I saw first, like I was just, um, uh, I, I was, I was a little bit lost, you know, like, how, what, what should I do?

Like, what's really my, my thing? So I had. I had been studying [00:23:00] music and I was very interested in many kinds of things, but I just, I just knew that there's something that is waiting for me, but I just can't tell what exactly is it. Uh, I was considering architecture and many other things, but then, then, uh, I just saw like, maybe it was some grocery or something about idea BM and then when I started reading that, I was like, that's exactly what I have been meaning all the time.

So then I went to the, I, I went to the interview that was part of this, um. This, um, uh, what is the examinations? And then, um, they, they, they just, they were like little bit wondering that, okay, what are you talking that, you know, like this is some, some like, uh, master's degree program that, you know, you're not just applying to the, to the candidate program that you know what is, what, what is this?

Don't, you know, it's like, no, no, no, no, no, no. I'm just preparing already for that. Mm-hmm. So, so that was sort of like a self-evident thing for me. And, uh, I'm very, very happy that I actually had the, the, [00:24:00] the, the courage to really continue that path that, you know, because of course you could always just sort of be influenced by something else and then, then just go, go to some other other route.

But I really, very, very strongly felt that this inter interdisciplinary thing was, was really. Was really just, uh, like so much better than, than anything else, um, before that. So it's, it's self-evident and I, I kind of like say that because it's, uh. I always have maybe felt a little bit that I'm kind of like, not, not very easy.

I I'm, I'm not the person who, who very easily just kind of like, uh, plucks into a, like a certain type or, or, or kind of like, uh, uh, saloon, you know, so that everybody is like a little bit different and who is doing what and what's your specialty and, and so on. So I really felt that, you know, this.

Diversity was, was like, uh, inspiring me a lot.

Irina: From IDBM, there have been also others who have been talking about this that [00:25:00] IDBM students traditionally are a little bit outliers, a bit outsiders, so that's what combines them. Yes. So that they think a bit differently and maybe kind of don't see the Fitting into a certain place. Yes. And then that's the uniting theme.

Maija: Exactly. And, and then I mean, afterwards, you know, now when I have been running these companies for quite some time, I, I have also hired quite many, I dbms after that. So it's usually like, you know, if there's someone, someone who is applying, and then if there would be two candidates who are like equally good, you know, I would absolutely pick the one who has done the IDBM because I would know that, that Okay you, you went through that. So when we know, we know. And then of course we've been also, um, we've been also do doing this industry projects and so on. That has been also really great. Yeah. Yeah. So also hiring people from the, from the projects and so on. Mm-hmm. So it's, uh, also like from that angle, it's, it's really great.

So not just my own sort of like my own career, but also how I have been able to sort of like, uh, foster the other [00:26:00] people's careers.

Irina: As we know, our economy hasn't grown in quite many years, some more than 20 years after, after the Nokia growth. But how do you see that? How could Finland's long term competitiveness be strengthened?

What are, are there any any kind of magic tricks or how, how can it be done?

Maija: Hmm. Well, everybody knows that. Everybody who has been reading the news know that, you know, startups are already as important as a pulp and paper to the, to, to economy. So maybe that, first of all, tells something that like dare to dare to take those, uh, chances.

And, and then of course, uh, like somehow we need to have enough resources. For, for, for the startups. I think that this is, this is a major question that like, you know, all of these amazing startups that, you know, like, uh, lot is nurturing from the, from the, uh, incubator. Okay. So. If they, they really may come with a really, really brilliant, uh, [00:27:00] concepts and, and amazing game changing technologies with, with brilliant, uh, teams taking that to the market.

But then, okay, what happens suddenly is like, uh, there's some kind of like a, um, uh, like downturn on the VC market and the funding is not easy. Okay? And then the startup just disappears. So, so that is something that, you know, we shouldn't, we shouldn't let happening that these, these are like so important building blocks of the future economy that they really, really need to be strengthened in an appropriate way.

And I mean, of course we have like, like for example, business, Finland has been doing a lot of work for that. And that is, that is something, is really, really unique that, you know, like whenever you go. Uh, anywhere and just tell about it. Okay, this is how we're doing it. People are usually like as astonished that, okay, is this really the case that you know, that you can actually get this, this type of development money because you know, the same optimization is going everywhere in the society.

Like, for example, if you just look at like, like, [00:28:00] uh, like, like the venture capital, uh, funds. Yes. Well, they used, there, there was this like a little, little, um. Wave of the impact funds, but quite, quite often, quite many of those impact funds are not, not doing impact anymore. They're sort of back to the, uh, quick, quick wins.

Like they're hoping to have like quick wins from AI or, or so, so like these, these kind of development, uh, cycles, they just, they're just like, they, they just go against this like quick, quick, fast, uh, returns, logic. Mm. So this is like long-term, long-term, uh, support for like a science and, and creativity and, and, and this kind of, this kind of work is, is absolutely needed.

So it takes time. It always takes time. It always takes time. And at the same time, I mean, it takes time does not mean that you're doing things that don't matter or that you're, you're doing things that, that are kind of like a [00:29:00] waste of time or you're just having fun or, or anything like that. It is not about that, but more also, also to kinda like recognize that if you're developing groundbreaking technologies and ground, ground, groundbreaking businesses, like, you know, like for example, my company on bio.

We are working with the egg business. Okay. \$300 billion business and it's broken, so it's still something. Okay. We just, we have IP here in Finland for something like that, and that cannot be done anywhere else. There's, there's no other place in the world that knows how to do this.

Maija: So it's very unique, it's very unique, extremely functional and efficient and very, very promising.

So. Sort of like, I think that we would, we would need to have like more, more that kind of cases here in Finland.

Irina: Where do we get the funding then? Okay, we need resources. How do we get the resources? Maybe you can look the answer this. Do you have any ideas on, [00:30:00] on well, how to get enough resources?

Lotta: I mean, if you look at, uh, Finland or, or EU wide, I mean, we're not short of resources.

It's just how we have chosen to allocate those. So there's of course, been quite a bit of discussion on, on the, uh, pension funds, for example, that, uh, how, how they invest in, how much they invest in to VC funds is, is not even a rounding error. For them currently. And if you would triple that, it would still not be a rounding era, but would make a massive difference on the, on the, you know, investible capital.

So, I mean, you know, as, as ACI as society and gear wide, we need to kind of, you know, if we want to have a [00:31:00] strong, uh, resilience also on the technology side. And, uh, you know, uh, independence on the self resourcefulness on the technology side. We need to invest into letting it grow, you know, so these are unpleasant choices that you know, or, you know, choices always unpleasant to make, you know, because it requires thinking and changing ways and, you know,

Irina: and is there also this risk avoidance?

Uh, not only optimization, but then Yes. Uh, that they don't want to take any risk. Yes. With the investment.

Lotta: Well, you know, if you think of, you know, that it would still not be, if we're looking at the pension funds, it would not still not be a rounding error, you know? For them, the risk would not be recognizable.

Maija: Right. You know, what is [00:32:00] really nice in in Finland is that, you know, like we have this very serious fact-based basic culture. That like we really like to tell the truth. We are very, very like, uh, uh, we are like honored to, to, to be like a true to the facts and and so on. So it's like very different than this. Like paint a sky blue and you know, like a fake it till you make it a style of ma like, like doing business, which is actually great in this, this, this current, uh, current economic situation that, you know, like.

People are trusting the Finns. People see that, okay, okay. Like this is it. It's not just, you know, like, oh, just a bold vision. But it's like really like bold vision backed by facts. Yes. So that's a, that's a like a bold vision tutor row almost, you know, that you can kind of like, you, you can really, it's, it's very much this like a deep tech.

Deep tech, uh, way of doing things. Uh, and the, when the scientists are on board, you know, like they, they, they, they, they have like no bandwidth for this kind of like, uh, like a, like a faking, [00:33:00] faking anything. So that's sort of, kind of like, it's, it's really like a sort of like built into the, the profession that they, they want to be like a true to what, what's their, what, their skills and so on.

So. I think that that's kind of like, you know, we should maybe forget this, this whole old stupid phrase that, oh, you know, we are so bad in marketing anything and so on. Okay, maybe not, not this. Today's world is ready for our style of marketing things, so let's just go, go bolder with that. So that's one.

And then the other thing is that we also have to think about like, how do we raise our kids? That, like, what, why, why the brightest minds from, from different, uh, universities would always just be like searching for, for, for paid jobs in corporations and just kinda like start collecting these, these brands in the, in the cv.

So this is also something that, you know, like traditionally, um, here in Finland for example, you know, people actually like to stay much, much longer. In, in the, in the, uh, work workplaces where they, [00:34:00] where, where they have,

that they have chosen. Mm-hmm. So. That's a huge strength. Like if you're just building something that is so long, it's almost like a long term and, uh, almost more serious and like a much more difficult and everything, you really need to have these people staying there for many, many years.

It's like if people are just changing every six months, you know, you can't get anywhere. And this is, this is really a true handicap that we see. For example, in Silicon Valley, there's always, people are always just like, uh, buying and selling, you know, like their, their next promotion. So it's like if you, if you get like a little bit, little bit higher salary somewhere, it's, you're just, you're just gone next morning.

So this is something that, that we can also like, uh, count on that. Like, for example, if I'm just thinking about my, my company, you know, we haven't had like anybody leaving. So far, we've been now doing this for almost four years and it, the team is still the same and everybody's a hundred percent on board.

Hmm. So it kind of like tell us that, you know, you can really rely on these things. But anyways, I mean, maybe [00:35:00] you've seen but this, uh, startup handbook that Yes. That, that, that, that Timo and Jyri have made. That was the, the number one bestseller was it? In academia? It's like the, the number one. Yeah. I noticed that in LinkedIn that they've been selling a lot, so maybe that kind of like tells that, you know, this ideology has been like a little bit now taking, taking wings and.

And just to kind of like, you know, I think that it's like a challenge for, for each and every parent that, you know, like if your, if your kid wants to be a founder, never say that. Okay. When are you, are, are you, are you planning to, to apply for a real job at some point? Mm-hmm. Like, that's like the worst thing.

Ever that you could, you could tell to your kid.

Irina: Yeah. And there was also in, uh, the previous discussions that I have been having, uh, talk about, uh, skill accumulation and the importance of having certain skill set and especially that you can be a generous in, in many things, uh, know a lot about everything and that's important, but then you have to have a [00:36:00] certain area which you know a lot about, and then you actually have something to give in this interdisciplinary set up.

Maija: I kind of feel that's, that's a good thinking because for the younger kids, it's important to say that you, you do need that in order to give something to the table when you are in this setup. I dunno if you have had any, uh, ideas on this

kind of deep expertise, uh, skill accumulation, but the deep expertise also does not need to be like, okay, I'm an astrophysicist.

You know, it doesn't need No, no, it doesn't need to be that. No. Be so it also could be that, you know, like for example, my deep skill is. Well, my deep skill is definitely like running companies and, and building teams, but that's sort of kinda like, is is very much of course like a broader purpose skill as well.

Maija: Well, creativity also could be my deep skill. Yeah. Problem solve, whatever. Yeah. But anyways, it, yeah, it's, it's kind of like, uh, I, [00:37:00] I, I think that like in general, you know, in the interdisciplinary, uh, teamwork, basically all kinds of people are needed. So. You just sort of like, maybe, maybe even more than to have those is to recognize what you have.

Hmm. To know, know what really are your, your strengths,

Irina: uh, about creativity. Uh, does creativity then translate into economic value or, or. Does it or how does it,

Maija: this is now, this is now really leaning towards our, uh, secret club thing. Ah, okay. But this is, this is really like a, kinda like a favorite topic, uh, in that sense that sort of like.

Quite often people don't really understand or recognize that creativity really is very much into this value creation. Value creation means more value, means, means higher profits, uh, and and so on and so on. So, so sort of kind of like, uh, being, being a [00:38:00] designer, running business. Uh, you are actually very much into the actual value creation.

So designing how businesses work, uh, that's as much design as designing, for example, some objects. So, yeah. So we have like, if I may just reveal in here, so we have this, uh. This kind of like a little, little, uh, how do I say? Like a, like a, a thought that we have been nurturing that, that if there would be this kind of like a club of, of, uh, designers who never sort of, wouldn't always reveal that they're actually designers, that they're kind, like, you're just like, when people are asking what's your background?

You just say, oh, business, business background and then innovation. Innovation, innovation. That's, yeah, exactly.

Irina: And then, uh, closet designers. Are you closet designers?

Maija: So kind of like, only when somebody's really, really, really scratching the surface, you're like, okay, okay, I'm a designer.

Because that's sort of [00:39:00] like, somehow we are still like, I mean, I have to say that this is something that if I, if somebody would've, would've told this like 20 years ago that really we're still 20, 25, we're still in this situation that, you know, it's kind of like need to little bit like, uh. Uh, you, you, you need to justify Yes.

Why designers have a, have a, have a place in this. I would've, I would've been laughing that it can be possible, you know, like we were already like at the brink of a breakthrough to, to, to make design like more like a pre business credible, uh, discipline. But apparently we're still in there and I've heard many people say like, you know, it's better to talk about the customer understanding of market insights and things like that.

That's sort of like, um, gets, gets this understanding.

Irina: But your secret club, does it have meetings or is it just still an idea? Yeah.

Maija: It also has had meetings. Yes. Yes.

Irina: What you discuss in these meetings?

Maija: Just, uh, just, just breathing more, [00:40:00] freely.

Irina: okay. That's nice. Maybe, uh, through this, uh, podcast, you can find more members to selves.

Maija: Oh, yes. We, yes, we, we quarterly invite all the closet designers who don't always reveal that they're actually designers when they're talking to business people.

Irina: Yes. Right. That's good. And also maybe is it not only the business people. Any, anyone in kind of in startup business, technology, uh, legal, whatever.

Yeah, yeah,

Maija: exactly. And I mean, of course, sort of kind of like the requirement to, to, for the, for the entry of this, this club is kind of like that you sort of are, you are a leader or you are thinking about to be some kind of a leader. So you're sort of like willing and capable of like, handling larger entities and, and, and, uh, looking at things like from the.

Big picture perspective.

Irina: So what are then the superpowers of these designers or closet designers, or designers in general? [00:41:00] Or do you see that there are also other capabilities and powers mm-hmm. That could be utilized, uh, in business, uh, world?

Lotta: So, you know, I, like a, you know, um, something.

Observing people is nice. That's what I've been trying to stutter here. So observing people is nice. And uh, and uh, a long time ago working at Phillips, there was a senior colleague who walked into a workshop room and there was a massive kind of a printout on the table from a material that was clearly new to him, and he walked to the end of the table.

You know, it was rolled out, you know, and he was like, you know, this massive printout. And he goes, and he starts flopping because he's doing a material study, started turning it, he's observing it closer. He's flopping it again, [00:42:00] you know, from another, you know, and, and he's bending it, you know, he's stretching it, you know, and, and somehow I have this, you know, this vision in my mind.

You know, I will never forget this because. This was creativity at work. He's doing material study. He sees, okay, okay, this thing was printed on it. What can I do? What is this good for? How could I apply this? What else can I make out of this? You know, you, I could, of course he's doing all these thinking in his mind, but I'm ob, I'm a junior there, you know, so I can do what, you know, I'm observing, you know, him do this and, and so this is what I think.

That the great value in creativity is asking, not declaring, but asking, being inquisitive. So, so you know, exploring constantly, you know, and of course we have from the textbook, how might we, you know, but there are other [00:43:00] things, you know, so rather than taking the mantra and repeating that. Being curious, being open-minded, exploring.

Mm-hmm. You know, not taking in what is said, this is how things are, this is how, how it's always been done, you know, or this. You know, when I joined VTT, there was a whole bunch of like things, how, how spinoff companies were harmful for VTT, and then I started collecting the data on those. As soon as I had kind of bandwidth and I had access to data, I started collecting data and I just, I was busting those myths one after the other because there were just, there were things that people felt this is the way.

And that's all right. You are, you are entitled to a feeling. However, in the light of facts, this is not true. Hmm. You know, and I think this is, you know, so rather than being this expert who knows through creativity, you have the opportunity to wonder and ask. [00:44:00] And, and be curious, and that's where the future value lies.

Irina: Can you recommend any books or resources or people to follow that have influenced your perspective on innovation or change or, uh, business thinking or anything like this?

Lotta: So I, I thought of, uh, I, I actually realized that there are two, two books that, uh, that have been very insightful, somehow opened my eyes or ears or whatever, uh, made me aware, more aware, maybe given me also kind of tools or ways of working.

Um, it's already a long time ago, maybe 15 years ago, I don't know when, maybe about 15 years ago. I, I, uh. And maybe I even got it as a gift from someone, the Art of Possibility by, [00:45:00] uh, Benjamin Zander, who, uh, was at least at the time, a conductor at the Boston Philharmonic and his wife, Rosamund Stone Zander

And together they, they wrote this book very much, you know, building of course on her. Kind of professional, um, knowhow, but very much embodying Benjamin Zander's experience as a conductor and as a leader. Um, it was striking that from this, uh, book, I learned that actually one of the, the, at the time at least the, the Unhappiest Professions was a, uh, musician in a symphony orchestra.

Yeah, because, um, the, the, the leadership methods there were very much [00:46:00] commanding and very much very little of listening and engaging. So, so there was a lot of unhappiness and, and he was kind of reflecting on this and he ways of working together with the musicians as a leader, as the conductor. Um, and so some of the methods from, you know.

One of them that I, I think, and of course my memory might have, you know, done funny things on me over the years, but one of the methods I use constantly still in my, you know, or use constantly in my current work is, uh, you know, and his way of collecting feedback, you know, uh, and very simple. Three questions.

That's good. Three questions. Three questions. What. Should I continue doing? What should I stop doing and what should I start doing? Or should, [00:47:00] what should we, you know, as a guidance, you know, and this is, this is something that we use as a feedback, uh, for example, in our incubation activities currently. Um, so that was, you know, but there were many other things, uh, that I found very insightful.

But the other one then is, you know, uh. Uh, one that many you'll hear referring to, which is Daniel Kahneman's thinking fast and slow.

Lotta: And that of course, you know, uh, is, you know, when, when we're kind of dealing with complex matters where, where that require quite a bit of cognitive power to kind of make sense of, you know, then.

Then how do you stay aware that, you know, your, your mind has a tendency to look for those shortcuts and, uh, you know, find the quick answers and how, how to remember that, you know, I'm a lazy individual, you know, [00:48:00] and I have a tendency to this, you know, and how might I force myself and my colleagues and everyone else, you know, to, you know, how do, how do we lure ourselves to do the hard work of really thinking deeply about complex matters?

Irina: Yeah, that's very topical at the moment when thinking about how AI is changing the way we are working and thinking that then maybe that offers us the, the lure of fast Yes. Answers. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Nice. Very nice tips. So out of possibility and thinking fast and slow. Yeah, that's good. Uh, any other kind of, any tips for listeners who are interested in creating a startup?

Do you have some. Thoughts on, on this?

Maija: Yeah. So it's very important that you have a great founding team. That is absolutely the most important thing for a startup. It's even much more important than, than any business idea that you may have or any technology that you're working on and and so on, [00:49:00] because everything else can be, uh, evolving and, and will be evolving.

But the team with the strengths and the weaknesses will be there. It's, it's unfortunately very difficult to change the founding team. I mean, of course, sometimes something like that happens as well, but it's, it's very painful. Um, and also like, you know, these are gonna be the people who are, you're gonna really be sort of married to it.

So you really, really need to feel the, feel comfortable with them. And at the same time. You need to feel comfortable with people who are totally different than you. So try to pick people who are not at all the same. So that's sort of like a trap because we are, we are, we are usually always feeling so much better with the people who are just like ourselves.

And then when you know that it's actually. Possible it's better, but it's also possible, uh, to try to find people who are, who are like very different in their way, way of like justifying things and, and [00:50:00] approaching things. But you can still have fun with them and you, you know, like you can have like, say a similar sense of humor, for example, and a completely different way of seeing the world.

Irina: Yes. So that's absolutely the best possible, uh, combination. That's great. What about you? What do you have this on?

Lotta: I have nothing to add on this team perspective. I mean, that is the, the core of it. Without that, there is no success without the fantastic team. Um, and that's, that, that is of course, the most difficult bit, you know, as human beings and how do we deal with one another in the right way?

Yeah. Um, and how do we kind of go through with also the painful decisions of, you know, making sure that you're working with the. The best possible team. Um,

I, I would, um, I would add to that then, you know, that the power of imagination, [00:51:00] imagining that great success, you know, imagining the great success. I think anything you can imagine and you can describe, you can start working out the plan of how to do it. But if you can't imagine the great success. You will never have a great plan.

You know, there's no way we're creating a, you know, a successful plan without a vision of success. And, and, you know, I guess our imagination is only the limit of what we can, you know, create. So, so once you have that, then bit by bit you will be able to create those steps towards it, even if you don't know exactly how, but just having that vision.

Taking step by step, you know, and openly embracing the uncertainty and doing it with, with the team, you know, step by step and collecting your learnings and making sure that you also use what you learned, [00:52:00] you know, I think will bring you far.

Irina: you both talked about this earlier, that when everything is to optimize nothing new happens. There is no, no change coming. And you need freedom space to imagine curiosity, but then also accountability. Yes. And some framework. Yeah. So that then you don't go all over the place. That's, I guess, that's right. This applies also to kind of start up business Yes. As well. Yes. Uh, our time is, uh, up.

Uh, do you have any final thoughts that you would like to share?

Maija: I actually have one. Um, I think that this could be still like a part of that list that, um, like, you know, we are so, we are, we are so attached now to the, to the ai and you, you just quickly get, uh, your, your answers from there. But also just to remember that you also have your own AI right here.

You can actually give it some assignments. You can give it a prompt. It's like, I need a solution for this. And just wait and [00:53:00] see what happens if you say like, okay, in like a couple of days, I would like to have a solution for this. And it brings you that it's, it's not in couple of seconds, but it's, it's maybe a couple of days.

Maija: And it can actually solve quite abstract things.

Maija: So it's, it's, I think it's really exciting to Yeah.

Irina: So give your brain a possibility Exactly. To, to think. Hmm. That's nice. Thank you very much for the discussion. It was really fruitful. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Maija: Thank you, irina.

Irina: Thank you for listening. I am your host Irina Viippola. This episode was edited by me and Aditya Parekh, and produced by the IDBM program at Aalto [00:54:00] University.