

# Backstage talks

Dialogues on Design and Business  
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How much empathy should we sell to our clients and how much do we need to keep for our teams, and ourselves? We talked about the importance of empathy in creative work with Anna Kulachek, Brian Collins, Hedda Lilleng, Mark Pollard, David Numwami, Heidi L Maibom, Tereza Ruller and more!

# empathy for sale

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How do you avoid cynicism?

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"Cynicism is a lot like a cavity. You can get cynical when you are unable to process your disappointments in a timely or thorough manner. Sometimes you begin to feel your negative experiences coalesce in the back of your mind in an angry and sensitive sore spot. Depending on the severity of your situation, combating cynicism might be as simple, as a dentist might say, to 'start flossing'. But sometimes it's less clear. Pick at the cynicism with your tongue. Try to identify it. What is it? Why do you feel this way? What can you do about it? What changes can you make to avoid it? Or cope with it? Is it a matter of framing? Or does it require some larger change? As much as the solution to getting cavities is not to 'stop eating', the solution to cynicism is not simply to 'stay positive'. Try to care for yourself among everything, to be aware of mental 'wear and tear' and make changes where needed, wherever possible. Sometimes you need a filling, sometimes you need to stop eating so much sugar. Brush your teeth at least 2x every day. Just do your best."



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department of ours. The creative director and design director work with strategists in the discovery phase in order for everyone to start building ideas from the get go. Our motion designers are another department of their own, as well as our super talented writers. Then there are people who are responsible for money (and God bless, they exist!), Brian and Leland, our two founders, and Lauen, Klaudia and I are something like the HR department.

**Do you also work with freelancers regularly?**

Yes. We have incredible freelancers. I have a list, I call it my jewel box. Sometimes I need to open it and put this beautiful ring on for a little bit. We work with freelancers a lot. Usually, if we need a freelancer, we need them in a hurry. And they need to come, log in to our COLLINS way and work the way we expect them to work. So I imagine it could be challenging, but we do have people who return to us and are happy to work with us, so we're doing something right, no matter how crazy it gets. We work with some great, great, great people. My biggest problem was when Apple became global and hired a lot of freelancers to work for them full time.

**From your jewel box!**

Yes. They stole my jewel box! But it is OK. It's incredible how many talented people are out there in the world. I'm so lucky to be in this position of finding these people and making new friends and, you know, adding new jewels to my box.

**That must be an ongoing process, right? I assume that you need more people in your jewel box than you would hire for a full-time role at COLLINS. Are you always on the lookout?**

I definitely am always on the lookout. And I am very humbled with the amount of emails I receive from people who tell us that we are on their radar. It is fantastic to be in this position of people wanting to get to know us better. And I always want to get to know people as well. I am grateful for everyone who reaches out to us. I use a system where I plug in all of our upcoming projects, whether tentative or confirmed, and I can see which capacities will open at which time. I communicate closely with Chris, who is the president of our company, and I tell him when we can take on another project in order for me to be able to staff it. Most of the time we get an abundance of incoming projects and clients are willing to wait until I can find people, but sometimes it's impossible. You know, a big client will come, and they want to start two weeks from today and then I have

to go to the freelancers. But we're also trying to eventually grow some freelance positions into full-time engagements.

**Do you have physical offices in every city where you have a creative director?**

Brian likes to say that we have an office anywhere our people travel. Where our people are at the moment, that is where we have offices. But we have a physical office in San Francisco and in New York and we are talking about expanding to Europe. It's more like a clubhouse. We do not require people to go to the office on a daily basis. But it's a gathering space where we can get together, host events and clients, or do some creative workshops. So it is more like a gathering space than an office. Zoom is not going anywhere and we don't want the office to turn into a bunch of Zoom pods, that's not fun. So if you are zooming all day, stay home, but if you're doing some creative exploration, teams can get together there.

**It's always nice to have a space to go to, if you just get sick of working from home, as well.**

Every time I come to Brooklyn, I go to the office. I just love being there. It is such a good place. All the books and art and people and just that magic of spontaneity. It is really special.

**I also wanted to ask you about working in a company named after its founder. When it comes to clients, do they expect Brian to always be there, or ask for him to be at least in the first couple of meetings? Is Brian involved in every single project?**

It's interesting that you are connecting the company being named after him and people wanting him to work on their projects. I never thought about it this way. There's COLLINS, and then there's Brian Collins. Brian has a big presence in a lot of new business meetings. Not the initial ones, but when it comes to presentations. People fall in love with him. He is so charismatic, he is super fun. He is an incredible leader and yes, people want a piece of him. The CMO, CFO, CEOs are usually a little bit more "business people" and then there is Brian, who is the complete opposite of them right in front of them. He is also a very successful businessman but he is just so much fun. And honestly, Brian is in every project. He checks every creative team's progress, he checks the strategy. When it is being rolled out, he mentors a lot, he helps a lot. I don't understand how he does it. I don't know. It's too much, but he can do it. Brian touches all of it. But it is also important to know that when we hire people, Brian has a very big impact on them. And the longer you are at COLLINS, the more you are aligned with Brian's vision.

At the same time, many clients come to us and they say that they like the work we did on, say, match.com or the San Francisco Symphony, and they want to talk to that team. They come for our creativity.

**How do the roles of the two founders, Brian and Leland, differ?**

They are both very creative. Leland has this incredible vision of where this company is going and is one of the most incredible speakers I've ever listened to. He can take you on such a journey with his words that you will forget your own name. It's magical. Very, very, very cerebral. He is the strategic and transformational thinker for the direction of this company. So I guess he wears his business hat more than Brian, but he's creative in a different way, while Brian is a creative in a traditional sense of that word. He leads creative teams to achieve their best potential, whether with words, colours, shapes, systems — you name it. ●