

# Pivot Perfect

*A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group*

## Ivy Ross: Artist, Learner, and Leader

Ivy Ross is the Head of Design for Hardware Products at Google, a role designed for her given her proven strengths in creative design, brand marketing, and leadership. She honed these skills at an array of companies including Bausch & Lomb, Coach, Calvin Klein, Mattel, Old Navy, The Disney Store, Gap, and Art.com.

The Brownstone Group's Tim Boerkoel spoke with Ivy about her left and right-brained approach to her work as a maker and manager, traversing industries as she strives to make "things" better.

**Timothy Boerkoel (TB):** Ivy, your career has spanned so many categories, ranging from eyewear to art, apparel to toys, and now hardware technology. What were your earliest ambitions, and when did you realize your interest in consumer-facing brands and product design?

**Ivy Ross (IR):** My dad was an industrial designer across many categories and taught me to see things beyond what they appear to be. He'd say, "Ivy, look at that lamp. Look how it's connected. How can you extrapolate what you're seeing and apply it to other things?" He really gave me a sense of imagination.

So, I knew I wanted to be a maker because I think manifesting an idea is like making magic. I loved it. He taught me also that an artist puts a piece of their soul on a pedestal in the hopes that someone comes by and resonates with it. But a designer solves problems within boundaries for millions of people, and that's actually even more rewarding. I started by being a metalsmith making jewelry that ended up in ten museums around the world; I really had this orientation toward wanting to affect millions of people. And for me that was moving from making things by hand to getting into the field of design and manufacturing.



My dad worked for Raymond Loewy, the famous industrial designer of the 1950s. He actually worked on the Studebaker Hawk (the car). He loved cars and took me to the New York Colosseum car show as a child, and as the cars would rotate on their platform, I would be eye-level with the hubcap, fixated and examining how the different metals were connected. I remember feeling like Alice falling down the rabbit hole; I would be so mesmerized, and my little mind would wander, "How did they connect this? How did they make this?"

It's fascinating. As kids, we are sponges. What you put around your children, and what you inspire them with, really has an effect. My dad wasn't like a stage father, he didn't push me in any way, but if by natural inclination I picked up a certain color crayon, the next day I'd have a set of those crayons. So, he was encouraging but in a very beautiful, subtle way. I also remember going with him to Germany when he was one of the first people to hire a psychologist for his design business to figure out what people wanted. For instance, they would do research for a

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grocery store to determine what a shopper connected with. He ended up designing a lot of prototypes for 7-Eleven stores and some of the new supermarkets that were selling more than eggs and milk. In those days, they were into human factors and industrial design, but not yet getting into the mindset of what makes a consumer look on one shelf versus another.

I think about those early influences that gave me a passion and desire to understand humans, beauty, and design. In part, it was through them that I was destined to become a designer in industries that create beautiful objects or products that solve problems.

**TB: You've held leadership roles in a diverse set of very well-known brands and launched your own once. As both a creator and a leader, what did you learn about yourself by experiencing these different cultures?**

**IR:** At the core, I am a builder, and I have to like what I'm building. It can be a product, a team, a company... I even love building houses! But as a builder, it can be lonely in the studio, and I'm a people person. When I was at my most creative, winning awards and having work in museums, I thought, "I want to give this gift to others." Though I had never had the desire to go into a big company, I started receiving recruiting calls. Ultimately, as an endlessly curious person, I decided to experiment by saying, "Yes" to an opportunity. An immediate realization was that the big company environment was rarely conducive to creativity.

Throughout my career, people have asked, "What are you? A shoe designer, a toy designer? Or are you a clothing designer?" because I have been in all these areas. But in the early days of my career, we were all focused on being an expert in one swim lane – which has changed. Now I understand design as a way of thinking and working with people that can apply to all categories.

**TB: It is evident that you desire to create and learn constantly. Did you ever experience pushback to your broad, combined left and right-brain capabilities? Conversely, who helped to cultivate this approach and your leadership style?**

**IR:** I've learned both what to do and what not to do by being a good observer. Every boss has taught me something. It's notable that early-on, as a female in the industry, there weren't a lot of female leaders above me, so there weren't a lot of role models doing it in the way that I think women can put their best gifts forward – there wasn't room for it in the company or it wasn't around us. I just stayed curious and observed and picked up lessons piece by piece.

I had a boss at Mattel, Ron Longsdorf, whose side passion was collecting antiques, and we would have wonderful long conversations about refining one's eye and taste level. I never studied Management 101 books, but I remember one of the best books I ever read that influenced my leadership style was *Leadership and the New Science*. It explored how nature creates new species and used that as a metaphor for how leadership should operate. I remember when I read that book my lens really flipped around to this organic way that collaboration happens. I became inspired by how nature innovates; how a bee flies from flower to flower and combines things.

A lot of my inspiration came from outside the company, and I've looked to hire people with interests outside of what they do for a living. If you have another passion, you are more innovative when you do your job because you've seen different processes and other ways of thinking. Ron Longsdorf's acquisitions, taste, and deep dive into studying auction catalogs encouraged a broader refining of my sense of detail whether I was working on a doll, dream house, or a watch. Bruce Stein, who was my boss at one point at Mattel and just a wonderful human being, set a tone so that we could have conversations that zoomed out from corporate mindset, and then looked back in to have frank conversations about how things were operating. Many people along the way have given me these little gifts that made me who I am. I am very grateful for the different experiences and leaders that I've worked with.

**TB: Do you have a favorite pivotal moment in your career, or believe there was a particular moment that unexpectedly changed your course?**

**IR:** My favorite pivotal moment was when I first applied what I had learned from my deep interest in sound and vibration to the workplace. For vacations I'd go study with people who were researching the power of sound and vibration. I always found it a great counterpoint to be able to clear my mind of business objectives for a few days and focus on something different.

I read about a man who was bombarding cancer cells with different musical notes. He had been a jazz musician. Just like ultrasound breaking up kidney stones. I thought that made a lot of sense, just like the way opera singer can crack a glass –when two frequencies get in resonance, they can explode. I'll never forget, I was president of accessories at Calvin Klein, and on a Friday night I'd take a redeye from New York to California to go study with this man on weekends. Then I would come back to the Seventh Avenue office at sunrise on Monday - and I would have such energy because I was learning this information that I thought was so fascinating and powerful. This was pivotal because I had kept these two worlds separate until then. I was at Mattel, I had turned 40 and was a Senior Vice President with 300 people reporting to me and I thought, "How did I end up here? Why am I in this role?" The little voice in my head said, "You're here to do the real work of making people happier or showing people a different way to be." So, I chose to be brave and combine these two worlds a little bit.

I first did some experiments, combining the right and left halves of my brain. I asked one of my sound teachers, "Can we force that to happen for others, get the two sides of your brain to come together?" Since the brain can be exercised, he made some recordings using binaural beats and had me have my designers listen to these beats 20 minutes a day to see what happened. I took my own money, bought a sound chair, found a closet at Mattel to hide it in, and asked for 12 volunteers who would listen to this music 20 minutes a day as an experiment. I knew I had to capture metrics to prove it worked and found the company that administered a creativity test that measured a whole series of attributes that equaled creativity. In six weeks, the 12 volunteers showed they increased creativity 18 percent. Anything over 10 percent is significant, and I remember going to the staff meeting when it was my turn to share what

was going on in my area. I said, "I've increased creativity in my department 18 percent!" And she said, "Did you hire new people?" I then presented a chart and said, "No, I have made people listen to music 20 minutes a day." We got to a new place in a nontraditional way – and people loved it.

From there, I created Project Platypus which was a new way of working with people to create products and brands based on collaboration and connection. This 12-week experiment began with 2 weeks getting to know each other, our gifts, and our talents. Once feeling safe, the next 10 weeks we could be productive in building on one another's ideas. If you don't do that, there's an undertone and vibration of one-upmanship or insecurity that doesn't create the best environment for collaboration and creativity. Project Platypus was very successful and the CEO at the time was supportive and asked me what I wanted. I asked for a separate building and to take 12 people out of their jobs and work with them in this way to solve some business problems, create new brands and ideas. That was a pivotal moment. I did that for three years while also doing my other job. To this day I get people sending notes about the way we worked and how happy they were producing great ideas. It gave me the confidence to say, "You do have insight, and there's a better way to get creativity and innovation out of a team." That became a real driving force from then on. And now I don't feel the need to have a separate building. Instead, we start by integrating this on a day-to-day basis to keep people inspired and create ways that they can feel psychological safety if they are going to step out and push the envelope with their ideas.

**TB: What is the best part of your workday? How has this evolved during the pandemic?**

**IR:** Pre-pandemic, I was commuting two hours each way to work. I was productive with those two hours taking east coast calls etcetera. And I believe there is something nice about a transition between work and home. Pre-pandemic we also had something called Joint Product Review because now at Google I'm responsible for design and user experience for all the categories of hardware – phones, laptops, home products, earbuds, any physical objects. A great gift was participating in the design of a design center, so

we got to create the color materials and finish studio and the materials lab - we created the way we want to work in the physical space. I really enjoyed Joint Product Review where my various groups, from directors to young designers, would share their work and partner to create a design language and a series of values. And we would respond, react... it was joyful to be able to be around the table together to listen and learn and share these different product ideas. I do miss that because instead, a courier now brings the prototypes to our houses.

But as the pandemic has pushed us far away in some ways, in others it has brought us closer. Now we are seeing into each other's homes! I'll never forget when there was a senior staff meeting and a dog jumped up into an executive's lap, and people asked about the dogs. The next thing you know, all of these Type A people are running to get *their* dogs. Then it becomes a conversation about each other's pets. That never would have happened pre-pandemic. I believe that someday we'll sit around boardroom tables again, and there probably won't be dogs there, or children interrupting meetings and getting introduced. In some ways it has been so difficult, but there are new moments that would never have otherwise happened. We've been able to have a little glimpse into people's broader lives.

**TB: Over the past seven years at Google, a lot has changed in the world. With Google being a central figure of evolution worldwide, how has the experience transformed you?**

**IR:** Technology is a tool to serve humanity - and technology stays only if it is helpful to humanity. So, I'm grateful to be in a technology company right now because the future is about finding how machine and man continue to work together. Using tech to amplify humanity, may be taking certain tasks off our hands so that we can as humans only do what humans do well. All these questions are coming to the surface, and to be able to think about these things and work with smart people to create the ways in which AI can serve us – not change us - but help us. And to have people with different perspectives in technology – this is critically important. We need diversity of thought to solve the world's problems, which we are doing.

Previously, I had stepped into a role someone else had done. At Google, they had not instituted the discipline of physical design before. Creating a department from scratch within such a large company has been wonderful, and to be part teacher, part maker... to be tasked with applying new principles to technology - it has been a great gift for me, the team, and the company.

## About The Brownstone Group

*The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.*

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