

Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

Gavin Ivester: My Career Roadmap – In Pursuit of Learning

Gavin Ivester, Director of Design & UX at Cisco, has taken his personal passions for brand, design, and production into a wide range of industries, forging his professional path through courage and curiosity. Beginning his career as a forklift driver at Apple, he parlayed his creative skills into becoming an industrial designer, creating the original PowerBook. Gavin's next endeavor was entrepreneurial, founding Tonic Industrial Design, which serviced clients such as Nike, Samsung, and Sony. He pivoted into designing footwear for Nike as Global Creative Director, followed by leading the international team at PUMA for footwear design, development, and product management. Gavin's next professional shift brought him to Gibson Guitar as Chief Creative Officer, before joining Under Armour to help the turnaround of their footwear division. Following these already impressive endeavors, Gavin co-founded FLO | THINKERY, using his brand and innovation prowess to build and grow businesses. The next stop on his career roadmap led him to the luxury audio brand Bang & Olufsen, based in Copenhagen, Denmark, to update their distinctive brand story and product design portfolio.



Currently, at Cisco, Gavin leads design for collaboration devices. Tim Boerkoel recently met with him for a deep dive into his rich and unconventional career journey, a thoughtful discussion on career philosophies, and many valuable nuggets of wisdom for our readers.

Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): Your climb up the ladder at Apple, Inc. began as you “sought career direction” - in roles as a forklift driver and engineering clerk ... which led to draftsman and designer roles as you attended university. The stars aligned creating a big break for you, however, it seems clear that your solid work ethic got you in the right place at the right time. What value do you place on the virtue of work ethic in today's culture?

Gavin Ivester (GI): My story is one of being in the right place at the right time, and more than once, and that includes some luck and privilege. I grew up in Silicon Valley and my sister-in-law worked at Apple. When I graduated high school, she suggested I apply for this warehouse job. I didn't love school or know what I wanted to do, but I did know I couldn't go to university without a purpose. Apple was a buzzy company and “the Steves” (Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak) were in the press and

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immensely successful. I saw an interesting company, full of talented people, where I could possibly find some mentors and discover what my path would be. My grand vision was to find my vision.

What I uncovered in my start at Apple was a desire to design cars, which seems out of context until I go back further with you to my very early childhood. As a really little kid, I began drawing cars and developed my own car brand with a brochure each year featuring my new model line. I was hole-punching paper and using kite string to make a book out of it. What I learned at Apple was that car design had a name ... it was *industrial design* and had a field of study at university. After seeking some counsel and learning the need to develop a portfolio at design school, I began my study at San Jose State University in transportation design. At the same time, I was still working at Apple and witnessing daily the passion of the team. I wasn't getting that same feeling with those I was exposed to in my transportation design studies. I wanted to be surrounded by the enthusiasm I felt at Apple. So despite being a crazy car nut (even to this day), I remained with Apple, moved into other roles, and focused on industrial design.

Here's where the stars aligned. I designed and shipped my first Macintosh before I finished my design degree. I was part of this team at Apple engineering a computer from the inside out, and the design consultancy *frog design*, led by Hartmut Esslinger, was supposed to design the outside. Steve Jobs left Apple and started NeXT; NeXT hired *frog*; so Apple fired *frog* because they violated their exclusivity with Apple. Suddenly, the project I was working on had no industrial designer – this was one of those moments when I realized there was an opportunity- and I went for it. I raised my hand to volunteer, asking “Can we risk burning some money to build some models so I can take some shots at this design?” They were low-cost foam models, which is how it was done *back in the day*. I got the yes. The

first attempts were good enough to keep going, and ultimately I got another “yes” for the whole design, and suddenly I was officially an industrial designer while just beginning my final year of design school. I have to emphasize— I was privileged to be there and lucky to have the opportunities that came my way. The part I'm proud of is that I recognized those moments and put my foot to the floor to capitalize on them.

Design seemed to be in my genes if I trace it back. My grandfather was an architect without an architecture degree. He worked as a contractor who built buildings, but he also designed the buildings that he built. He was fortunate to have architect buddies who would essentially check all his designs to ensure everything was up to code; allowing him to build his vision. It's in my heritage. My love and passion for cars led me to become an industrial designer. At age three, my parents would be driving, and I was pointing out the make, model, and year of the cars we passed. I was falling in love with moving sculpture.

The perspective on work ethic has changed quite a bit and is often misunderstood. There is an expectation, especially in design school, about your willingness to do anything to get the job done - you either have it in you or you don't. A designer's default position is to never sacrifice quality, so you'd burn the candle at both ends, throw yourself into the work, and sacrifice everything else; and in the end, you come out looking like a hero because you delivered something fantastic. It often requires this short-term sacrifice, which I did a lot of early in my career. At the time, I considered it as an *investment in myself*. However, this commitment to getting the job done right should not come at the sacrifice of self – one's health and wellness or family time. There are influencers in the work world today that romantic notion of “the grind”. The perspective I value now is that *taking care of yourself is ultimately taking care of business*.

TBB: With several years in an independent capacity, your career path included building the Management Consulting Firm FLO with a group of partners. How does the internal spark of an entrepreneurial spirit influence your leadership style in a corporate setting?

GI: The greatest influence I can share from entrepreneurship is the sense of ownership that it nourishes and this resulting sense of urgency; a radical difference from some corporate environments (but not all of them.) As an entrepreneur, you have a heightened awareness that you are alone with no safety net. If a decision needs to be made, it's on you. And once the decision is made, there is no reason not to act on it immediately, because you don't need to ask anyone's permission. Entrepreneurship is necessarily practical with a limited runway. Your customers need to be real people pulling real money out of their pockets and spending it on the brand. They can't be a customer profile on a slide deck or a piece of pie on a chart. Those practicalities and perspectives shared in a corporate setting help to enhance focus and identify efficiencies. A piece of advice I once received and still value is to *never confuse activity with achievement*.

Whether you're an entrepreneur or in a large corporation, we all need to take ownership and accountability for our piece; as an entrepreneur, we hold the whole piece. When you find corporate rules that don't make sense, it's time to consider changing the rules. Take ownership of the responsibility to lead as if you were an entrepreneur. My thinking is *that's how it's done around here until that's not the best way to do it... and then we change*.

You can't paint all corporate settings with the same brush— some large company cultures value urgency and move quickly. I try to set the pace by example until I need to intervene more directly. The process is not unique, we all know how to run meetings. You lay out the purpose at the beginning, make sure you achieve the purpose by the end of the meeting, and

confirm what's been decided including the next actions. If you can take them there, you do. When you drive that clarity consistently, progress accrues.

My focus tends to be on product portfolios, driving clarity around what the roadmap looks like. That's where I like to move deliberately. And then move fast toward achieving it. The other component that is critical to this concept is that *the roadmap is the roadmap until it's not the best roadmap*. You should always question your next move until you're making the move, then commit. It doesn't mean you do it in a way that slows you down, or *paralysis by analysis* - it means you keep your options open as long as you can so you're working from the latest information, and then move forward decisively.

TBB: Knowledge and expertise may diffuse some of the hesitation in taking risks. Does your technology and industrial design know-how validate this thinking? And as you lead a team of brilliant "creatives," how do you build an effective process for guiding unique backgrounds and styles?

GI: The short answer is yes, the more you know the more you can navigate risk with confidence. However, as the scale of business rises, so does the risk. I probably approach this from a slightly different angle than a lot of people who spend their careers in a single industry. Some have unbelievable depth in a particular topic, and my career has gifted me with unusual breadth in a lot of topics, with a curiosity to consult the experts. If I have one superpower, it is an ability to connect the dots between things that other people haven't experienced. Know-how can be a double-edged sword though – believing you can see all the problems may make you blind to the new ones. It's so important to stay humble, curious, and skeptical of your own mastery. This self-awareness is uncommon, but it's what I admire most about some of my favorite colleagues – they are constantly questioning and continuing to seek answers from others. I have designed very little from a pure

industrial design perspective in the past two decades, having pivoted to a role of leading process, encouraging top talent, mentoring the future of design, and guiding strategy for product lines. Often my best tool is simply asking questions.

Knowledge and expertise are the foundation for confidence and provide a true advantage to realize your designs as you see them. The reason I'm motivated as a designer or design leader is to make the world better, and understanding manufacturing methods is one of the keys to making new and better things. It allows you to navigate the challenges that come from production and engineering difficulties and empowers you to push the boundaries once you understand them. I have a deep respect for innovative design, which sparks a favorite quote - *when you figure out a new way of making something, you have a way of making something that is truly new*. If you're not challenging anything, you're not really changing anything.

I try to keep up with the latest in technology and science, have continued to take classes, and stay engaged in engineering conversations to keep my *tools sharpened*. I've always been a factory geek since I was a kid ... going back to my love of cars again. My mother took me on my first automotive plant tour in California. My family owned a Ford Mustang; my pedal car when I was four years old was a Mustang; my best friend's mom had one; and the Ford Mustang assembly plant was 40 miles from our home. My mom understood my love and announced one day, "we're going on a factory tour at the Ford assembly plant!" It was pure magic watching Mustangs going down the production line; just mind-blowing as a six-year-old. I've since been in factories for footwear, eyewear, computers, sneakers, apparel, guitars, spirits, and mold making, to name a few. The first Macintosh I worked on was assembled in a factory just a few miles from the Ford factory I toured as a kid. When I'm in those environments, I still feel like the forklift driver I was at the beginning of my time at Apple in that I relate

to being there all day every day keeping the work moving. The last thing you want is a design that causes problems.

The other valuable lesson that I gained from my early career was as an Engineering Expediter— a clerk who organizes all of the documentation necessary to release new products. It required running around trying to get the world's greatest hardware engineers to do the most boring part of their job. I'm asking brilliant people, who are designing cutting-edge technology, to give me their drawings so I can make blueprints and log them into the system to ensure everything is in order. In that role, I learned about influencing people who don't report to me. It always comes down to sales; you have to sell them. I pitched the value of the process and kept it top of mind for them. Who knows, maybe they completed the work just to get rid of me!

One of my favorite chapters in my career was when I had the United Nations of product creation at PUMA, a super, international team of footwear designers, product managers, and developers with amazing ideas and diverse perspectives. The product that came out of that group was magical, and it was fun for all of us to be constantly challenged by better ideas. That's the key – to approach people with different backgrounds and styles as learning opportunities. Stay curious, truly listen, and make sure all voices are heard, remembering *diversity is nothing without inclusion*.

TBB: Your board roles are heavily focused on non-profits. What draws you to those particular organizations; is there an emotional appeal and how are you personally impacted as you give of your time and expertise?

GI: My board roles so far have been both pragmatic and emotionally driven; focused in Nashville, TN, and aiming to uplift the Nashville community. It was interesting to think back on this time ... I grew up in CA, then lived in OR, then onto Boston, MA for

seven years. When my family (my wife, three kids, and a dog) moved to Nashville, it was the first time I felt like I was at home since CA. I moved there for a job that didn't work out—I stayed six months—but that move changed my career roadmap. With no Plan B, it was a crazy scramble to figure out what to do next, because we all fell in love hard with Nashville. My board seats were my effort to invest in the Nashville community - and selfishly I was trying to make it better for my kids by improving education, economic development, and the arts. I met another parent who had a vision to create a new arts foundation that sought my involvement and expertise. It has grown into this incredible institution in Nashville called OZ Arts.

I also had the opportunity to help figure out the future of the Adventure Science Center (the local science center for kids) and was also involved with the Nashville Fashion Alliance with the goal of achieving economic growth. In theory, it was generous to give my knowledge and expertise to make Nashville a more diverse, creative community; but I also enjoyed the social aspect, continuous learning, and adding to my network in the arts, law, medicine, finance, and so many other fields.

TBB: Loyalty is a feeling of allegiance developed from a basis of trust. You have nourished this devotion in the companies you have worked with by committing completely, and exceeding expectations in meaningful, measurable ways. How does one earn loyalty – both personally and as a brand? Are there any mentors that instilled this in you?

GI: My personal belief is that loyalty evokes this underlying feeling of value that takes time to develop through a foundation built of trust. Trust doesn't guarantee loyalty. You get it or you earn it when there is value exchanged. It can go both ways and be as intangible as sharing meaning or a connection to an idea. The value holds your attention. Brands earn trust by eliminating any gap

between what they promise and what they deliver. There's no room for marketing romance that isn't backed up by the product and experiences being delivered. Trust is nurtured and evolves into loyalty when that spark of connection is made and there is meaning in what the brand does or how it does it.

Loyalty among people is similar – consistently doing the right thing, keeping commitments, communicating transparently ... they all build trust. There is a quote by C.S. Lewis, "Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching." That is how trust is built. The value exchange among people can be as simple as friendship or support and can create a bond forever.

An influence of mine is John Mollanger, whom I originally met when he was a young product manager at Nike. I then recruited him to PUMA, and later he hired me as a consultant at Bang & Olufsen which snowballed into a full-time role and a move to Europe. John would always say, "Your consumers are not going to call you and ask permission to use a product the way it appears" – meaning there can be no gaps between the story you tell with the design, and the experience or performance you deliver. The other concept he instilled in me was an awareness of competition. As an idealistic industrial designer, especially coming out of Apple where you feel like you don't have any competition, John broke me of the fantasy of being so special that you would never be challenged. Instead, he introduced a healthy respect and fear of competition – taking that energy and turning it around to creatively think about how I might compete with myself if I wanted to take a share of this business. That type of thinking drives continual improvement. You cannot compete on romance alone – and if you do, you will be exposed.

TBB: As a designer, you have a clear understanding of the key elements that ensure success in design – *proportion, texture, balance, scale, contrast* ... How do the elements of designing a successful brand align with those for a

successful career? And do they also align with your personal brand?

GI: Alignment is critical in design, so yes, it is ideal if it all aligns, but I see brands and careers as a journey or a book in chapters. Brands stand for something – it can be physical, or sometimes it’s a point of view, an idea, or even an outlook on the world. Whatever it is, a brand commits to delivering better than any other – with a unique value for its customers. I wrote a book called “Thoughts on Brand” found on my LinkedIn; it’s only 10 pages, the world’s shortest book on brand. It will give you a peek inside my brain on this topic. One tool I use often in my work, especially when I’m trying to encourage product managers and designers to make compelling product, is to pose the question of “What’s the first, the most, or the best about this thing?” Otherwise, why are we making it? With brand, it is about continually evolving that unique thing your brand does better than any other to create the ongoing story.

A good analogy is music artists – there are those who come back and repeat the last album with new songs, but the interesting ones are people like Madonna. With every new album, she had a new look, a new point of view, and a new topic, with a twist to stir up the status quo, always reinventing and taking her fans on a journey each time. Great brands do that as well, sometimes by continually advancing the technology, or with visual expression, advancing manufacturing, or upgrading performance – it’s progressively building, enhancing, and improving. It can even be in its

presentation and how they communicate with the world. They engage their fans with the next chapter, and each time attract new ones.

The alignment or connection to my own story or personal brand is this ... almost all the career moves I made have been in *pursuit of learning* - always about building on the last chapter and reaching for something new. At Apple, I experienced such an incredible run of constant challenges, each time questioning if I could do it. It was invigorating and scary at times, and I learned so much. After I designed the first PowerBook and had become the *mobile guy*, I could see my learning progression plateauing – so it was time to move on. When I left Apple, I wanted to broaden my portfolio, become an entrepreneur, and open my own design studio. I enjoyed my design consultancy experience and achieved those goals, and then Nike came calling with an opportunity to learn how to manage large collections and more emotionally driven products leading their footwear design. The PUMA role provided the opportunity to gain a business education by taking on a broader leadership role driving enormous growth on a product creation level with product management, development, design, and advanced innovation responsibilities. With each turn I made on the career roadmap, I advanced my learning journey. I’ve enjoyed many industries and many roles, in both product and brand creation – and now I am appreciating connecting the dots as I lead teams in tackling big problems. When you’re learning and making an impact, it never gets old.

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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