Alison Dean (00:09):

This is the Breakthrough Podcast, an ongoing series where we interview game changing leaders in technology, business, government, and entertainment, about their experiences and perspectives in life and leadership, learn about their latest breakthroughs and hopefully inspire you to have some of your own. Welcome to The Breakthrough, I'm Alison Dean and today we are talking with Rafael Franco, who goes by Raf, currently the Chief Product Officer at Influencer. Influencer is the leading data led influencer marketing and branded content solution. And he is an intrapreneur currently responsible for driving the product strategy and building successful products.

Alison Dean (00:53):

Raf sent me this quote from Steve Jobs, we know that guy. "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on, but that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the 100 other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I'm actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done. Innovation is saying no to 1000 things."

Alison Dean (01:18):

Hi Raf.

Raf Franco (01:19):

Hi Alison.

Alison Dean (01:20):

I want to know what that quote means to you.

Raf Franco (01:23):

Obviously, there was so many quotes but I think that one really represents a lot of what building product is all about. And it's really all about stakeholders and really understanding how all these people have business requirements. And human beings are like this, they all feel very special and they all feel that their ideas and their innovation is what should go next. And it's really the job of us product folks to really understand what is really the most important things. And that will obviously imply that you have to say no to a lot of people. So that's why this quote resonates so well to me.

Raf Franco (01:57):

However, and this is actually the big important bit, what is really important is explain why are we doing this right now. Explaining the reasoning is very important, because you always need to get people on board no matter what, and for that, you really have to be very clear and explain why isn't this particular features coming up next and the reasons for it, so that you get the buy-in of everyone. I think that's why this quote resonates so well with me.

Raf Franco (02:24):

You see this in so many facets and when you look at the iPhone, for example, that he launched without copy/paste and it was all, "It has no copy/paste. How on earth it has no copy/paste?" "Well, because actually by saying no to that means that we can actually launch faster and quicker so we can actually start bringing value to our customers as soon as possible." That's why it resonates so well with me.

Alison Dean (02:42):

I know. That's something that you've mentioned in your bio that, "Whatever gets it to market the quickest. Let's get it to the people."

Raf Franco (02:48):
Absolutely. Yeah.

Alison Dean (02:49):
Okay, so this is The Breakthrough so I'm curious what you consider to be the first breakthrough that you remember that set you on your career path?

Raf Franco (02:57):
There's obviously quite a lot, but I think for me really the breakthrough, if I look back in my career, I think, I was born in Portugal and then moved to the Netherlands, to Amsterdam, for six years, and then for the last eight or nine years, can't remember, moved to London. Now, I've been basically at that stage when I was in Amsterdam, essentially just doing engineering, climbed the ladder throughout the whole software engineering, and then solutions architect, and everything engineering related. And then, I always had a passion for music. That's really what drove me a lot. So I'm a musician and I was like, "Wow, London is the place to be if you're into music." So that's really what made me come to London.

Raf Franco (03:36):
Now, I came to London and joined a company called Nativist and they're pretty much doing consultancy on everything lasting related and I came in to join and lead the technical team and lead that technical team to essentially build a product. Now we had a product at that stage, at some point I had a product left the business, and up until then and I was already kind of feeling this, that engineering was great and it's great because you solve very small problems and you have technical challenges. But I started really getting more interested in the overall on the whole idea making and how it would actually impact the business. At that stage, it was essentially an opportunity to take her place and really lead the product as a whole.

Raf Franco (04:24):
But with an engineering background, and I think this is really what I think was a great breakthrough for me is really a kind of start doing more product management and moving a bit more away from engineering, but always having that engineering background. So I think if there's a breakthrough probably in my career path that was the stage and I never looked back.

Raf Franco (04:40):
However, it was a very difficult decision because it's kind of like a one-way trip, which is you're going to product most, you're not going to come back to engineering. Because I was always a bit afraid. So doing a good period of time, maybe four years or so, I was kind of doing both, but I promised myself that I was not going to be involved [inaudible 00:04:59] as less as possible to be involved in engineering because otherwise you become victim of your own success and then people start asking stuff about engineering and then it's a never ending [inaudible 00:05:09].

Alison Dean (05:09):

Yeah, I'm just going to say, "Yep" to all of that. I agree. Okay. Do you have a morning routine and can you walk us through what a typical day looks like for you?

Raf Franco (05:17):

Yeah, morning routine. I don't take cold showers. A lot of people are into that, not my thing. I like my hot shower. So I normally do that. And then one bit that is very important for me is cycling to work, love cycling so I always cycle to work no matter the weather conditions. So sometimes it's snowing is heavy rain and I'm like, "Yeah, I'm going to go do this," because I just love getting the fresh air, or rain or snow in the morning. It really kind of wakes me up. So I always cycle to work in the morning. So this is my morning routine and coffee for sure. I have quite a lot of coffee throughout the day and has to be good coffee too. So that's kind of like my routine.

Raf Franco (05:56):

In terms of typical workday, I mean it really depends a lot. Obviously there's a lot of exact meetings that I'm obviously involved in as part of the exact team. We discuss a lot of things like burning issues, and stuff that we're experiencing, sharing some of that pain but also very important with these meetings, these defining clear action points. So now how can we deal with some of these things? Without a doubt, I'm the type of product person that still gets quite a lot involved. So I'm not the type that like, "Okay, here's the strategy, go crack on." I love being involved and I love being in touch with things, so I don't really want to lose that no matter the company that I join. So without a doubt, typical work day also place supporting a lot of our product development through things like discovery strategy and what do we need to deliver to fulfill our product vision?

Raf Franco (06:45):

Recruitment, for sure. It's a lot of that too. It's been a proper struggle and this last few years and it seems that it's a never in easy, "Okay, we've got it to the right place." No we don't, but we need more people. Oh my God, here we go back to recruitment.

Raf Franco (06:59):

Finally, I think hearing concerns from people and being able to listen and effectively like to be present. I see a lot of people like doing one-to-ones and whatnot. You can feel really from the body language that they're not really present. I go there, close my laptop, my phone down, just looking at the person and absorbing everything they have to say. And I really mean it, I really want to hear what people have to say. And then also what potential actions can we do to solve some of these things.

Alison Dean (07:28):

Mm-hmm. I think it's really interesting that you don't like a cold shower, but you'll have snow in your face on the way to work. So that's it.

Raf Franco (07:35):

Yeah.

Alison Dean (07:37):

Okay, so this is kind of a multi-part question. Let's start with how you would define an influencer.

Raf Franco (07:46):

So the first thing is often in the industry, then the main culture influencer is a bad rap. And within some of our partners it's kind of like taboo word. You use the word, "Creator," that's what people tend to prefer being called. How you define, well essentially someone that is obviously very interested in a particular set of topics, or things or categories around the world. Essentially, someone that uses their platform to obviously talk more about such topics, and sometimes it's even themselves to begin new things like lifestyle and whatnot. And promote it out there and also create a positive influence into people. And I think, more and more in industry you really hear a lot about that. The positive influence.

Raf Franco (08:32):

Often you hear about creators, they have a bad rap. It's like so many people doing such great things, like recently we met with a of creators on the sustainability topic. You go and check, these people are just doing really good to the world. Certainly there's a few that probably are not the best. As with anything, it can be used for good and evil, but at least the people that we work with is really lovely people and they work just really hard. And I think this is the other thing is, I think people don't really appreciate the amount of work that goes into what they do. It's mad. And I have seen this is stuff that we experience on a daily basis. They put in a lot of work and they influence positively, the lives of millions of people. Yeah.

Alison Dean (09:13):

There's the potential for that. So I'm curious how the company Influencer helps individual influencers and how the company Influencer also then in turn really helps organizations, largely obviously with marketing, but just how that all works.

Raf Franco (09:29):

So our company vision is to build meaningful relationships between brands, creators and their audiences. And I think this is really important is, we're at the time in the industry that you can't really just think of one of the sides; you really have to think on the whole equation that happens. So this really goes into how can we actually work with brands, connect creators to them and deliver something successful? And this success is essentially determined by a lot of different things. So it really depends, what's your objective? I think this is really kind of what it begins is, are you trying to create brand awareness? Are you trying to sell a product? Is this a product launch? And they all kind of look very different. I mean we work with many customers around the world, they all just have different things, different approaches that one needs to have.

Raf Franco (10:15):

Now, what we also provide is a platform where we can manage all of this really end-to-end. It's a product we launched last year called Waves, and now it's called Waves for Brands. And it's essentially a product that is a platform that is used to run an end-to-end campaign. So as you can imagine a campaign at scale, it's going to be very hard to manage all these things, how can you approve all these pieces of content? How can you make sure that all the creators are approved? We're talking about thousands and thousands of pieces of content. You can't really manage this with your typical spreadsheets, or your Google Docs or whatnot. So this is why having a platform that provides that is extremely important, has really to do also with transparency in terms of metrics. So we partner with a lot of the social platforms, for example, TikTok, Meta. And by the fruit

of these partnerships that we have with these brands, we have access to all these APIs. So we can pull all these information directly from the source to our customers.

Raf Franco (11:14):

So our customers can be sure that they go into our platform, they look at the insights and the statistics and they know it is truthful because it basically comes directly through the source, so it can't really be forced. So it's a multitude of things, really.

Alison Dean (11:26):

Sounds like it's a multitude of things, I would agree with you. What advice do you have for someone who is setting off on a path of influence or perhaps they think they are?

Raf Franco (11:36):

I mean, be prepared for a lot of work. I think this is the thing, A good example of this is our co-founder, so Caspar Lee is an extremely successful intrapreneur and he started when he was I think 15 or 16 doing YouTube. So he built a very successful YouTube channel with 10 million followers or something like that. And then progressively, he understood "This is probably not a sustainable business for the rest of my life, so I need to diversify." So that's where he founded Influencer.

Raf Franco (12:03):

So I need to diversify, so that's where we founded Influencer and other companies too. And he was telling me he born in South Africa and he started this whole YouTube channel in South Africa. So he was constantly just trying to create videos and he was like, "Oh, no one he is watching." So he was actually going there to visualize his own video just to get views. So imagine the hustling that he was trying to do just to make it work. And when he goes through all the process and then when he was I think 18, he moved to London because he's like, "No, if I really want to grow my channel, I have to move to London." So he went home and packed his stuff from South Africa and went to London to try and make something out of his. It's like, it's just a lot of effort. There's a lot of hustling, so there's that.

Raf Franco (12:44):

And I think consistency is without a doubt, very, very important. You have to be posting regularly. You have to understand what your audience is looking like. How do you want your audience to look like? There's this particular thing attract this particular type of people or not. I think this very important, but it's just a lot of hard work, honestly. And I think this is quite interesting to see how the industry evolved a lot even from five years because it's a very recent and new industry. So we're all trying to figure out what works or not. I can sit here talk about my product, blah, blah, blah. All the companies are trying to figure out because we haven't really cracked the code yet, which is part of what makes it exciting.

Raf Franco (13:21):

But back in the day it was all about authenticity. So there was no high production videos or any of that. You wouldn't record in 4K. It is just record with your crappy phone and try to make something out of it. And then social media kind of boomed so much and now the expectations of people are so big, so you can't really get away with it. We're now observing an interesting phenomenon, which is it's kind of going back to the whole authenticity thing. So the videos that are actually not

highly produced are actually picking up quite a lot. It's very interesting because people, "Oh well I already expect everything to be highly produced." And then they see something that is not, "Oh, what is this?" Because everyone knows what to do. So if they're not doing something high tech more often it's because they're intentionally doing it. So it's fascinating. It's quite interesting how the industry evolves then.

Alison Dean (14:11):

Do you think that that's maybe the next thing for influencer marketing is kind of the less jazzy effects to video content? Or what do you anticipate being the next breakthrough for influencer marketing?

Raf Franco (14:24):

I think so. I mean it is really breakthrough. I mean we already had this in the past, but I think it is.

Alison Dean (14:28):

That's true.

Raf Franco (14:29):

It's already happened. So there's this platform called Be Real, which has picked up a lot. There's millions and millions of people. And what the platform is all about is at a random point in time in the day, everyone gets a notification to take a snapshot of the moment. That's all the app does. But it was so popular because it's the most crazy thing is crazy picture or something like, "Oh I'm drinking a beer," and then someone takes a beer. And then you kind of catch up on all of what your friends are doing at that precise moment. So it has picked up so much that now other platforms, you see this a lot, other platforms try to replicate what works. You see platforms like TikTok and others trying to implement some sort of be real implementation of it. So yeah, I think that's just really picking up a lot and not sure breakthrough is the right word, but it's definitely trendy is one.

Alison Dean (15:17):

Yeah, okay. So you recently were at the web summit conference and you mentioned Waves. Did you launch Waves for Brands there or was there a big launch that just happened at Web Summit Conference?

Raf Franco (15:32):

Yes, you are absolutely right, but not Waves for Brands. So as I was saying in the beginning that we truly believe in being present in both sides of the equation. Now as we always have to be very brutal in the beginning, especially like I joined and I'm like, "Okay, what is the top priority?" And clearly the priority with the brands. So that's why we put all the focus on the brands. So we launched Wave for Brands two years ago. And then we're like, "Okay, well we proved that there's market fit. Customers love Wave for Brands. But now poor creators, we haven't done anything for them." And on top of it, I truly believe that there's a big opportunity on the creator economy, and you see a lot of platforms making Patreon, Only Fans. There's so many platforms out there making really great businesses out of the creator economy.

Raf Franco (16:16):

We wanted to give something back to the creators, so we've developed a mobile app for creators called Waves for Creators. And the whole point of the app is kind of creating a one-stop shop for creators. Because again, different from back in the day, these days, creators are pretty much companies by itself, very effectively entrepreneurs. Both of us know that because it requires so much more than just doing your stuff. Even just single consultancy gigs, you can't just go into consultancy. No, you have to explore ideas. You have to do your invoicing. You have to submit stuff. There's a lot of happening that we need to do and creators are not different than that. And unfortunately it's just taking so much time from what they do really well, which is to create. So the whole point of the app is that we developed a set of tools really to help them focus on that.

Raf Franco (17:09):

So one of the main key features of the mobile app is this concept of the media kits. So what the media kit does is allows creators to connect to their social platforms, Instagram, TikTok. And what it does is pulls all this information and all of these historical statistics of them and then kind of combines it. Think of it as your portfolio so that you can then share with brands and hustle. And our customers always like, "Oh I wish I had this. I could just build my stuff and just share with brands and hustle better." So this is now part of what we do. It's kind of one of the big components really focusing on combining all of your platforms into one single place that you can share with brands. Because you can imagine, you go up to your Instagram and you check your statistics on Instagram. They say one thing. TikTok has a different experience. And sure you can share screenshots of that. It just doesn't look very professional. You kind of want to build something like an aggregated ...

Alison Dean (18:05):

Package. Yeah, absolutely. So beyond this media kit, does the mobile app also help with some of the admin type stuff?

Raf Franco (18:14):

Yeah, precisely. And I think this is all going to be an evolution. So the initial stage was the media kit. And the other bit that is extremely important for us is the whole campaign management. Because as a creator, before you even post it on social media, there has to go through quite a lot of stages of approval. Because the customer has to approve is the media okay? Is the video okay or not? Does the caption make sense or not? Is the tone of voice the correct one? So it goes through quite a lot of iterations. So they essentially use the mobile app to upload and to revise some of this content to specify what caption they're going to be using, and so that's why we really believe in this ecosystem. What this does is when they upload something through the mobile app, it goes straight into Waves for Brands. Our brands will log into Waves for Brands and will essentially review some of these contents kind of in a Trello-est board. So cards will appear kind of in a Trello board so that customers really understand what's the status of your campaign and what's the progress of it so far. So that's why we really believe in this whole connection.

Raf Franco (19:12):

Now very soon we are going to be adding a couple more things, specifically YouTube is also upcoming. So not only we have TikTok and Instagram, we also have YouTube. And then progressively the whole information about payments and invoicing and all that stuff really to make their lives easier. But I mean there's just so many good ideas. And this is the other thing about this

industry, it's so fascinating. I never work on one like this is often you go to an industry and because it has already been settled for a while, people already know what works and what not. To break through into this market is very tough. With this it's the opposite. There's so many good ideas of what to come and everything looks good, what do I even do or not? So yeah, that's always like the struggle, what do we do next because everything looks great? But it's a good problem to have, I guess.

Alison Dean (19:59):

That's a really good problem to have. I would agree with that. I'm curious how the launch of both Waves products stacks up against other milestones in your career.

Raf Franco (20:09):

I've launched quite a lot of products in the past. I think one thing is for sure, Waves, both the Waves products is the first product that I launched that I was involved on the very beginning from inception. So I created the idea and we moved forward with it. So it's the first time that this happens really from scratch, and that is a great experience to have. I think it's important to have both experiences, for sure. But I think this is just a great experience because you kind of have to go in through stage. You're not really narrating something that already has some value and you're trying to look for other ways. It's just you have to go to market quickly. I think this is the important thing. Because often that has a bit of bad rep from an engineering perspective, "Oh you guys want to push things forward quickly."

Raf Franco (20:50):

But I think you have to understand this as fast as possible if something has market fit or not. Because if customers don't like it then you're not going to continue investing in that. So that's why I'm a big proponent of things like lean development and design thinking because it's really methodologies and tools that help you deliver something that is skinny but provide some value and that you can actually validate some of these ideas before you even go to engineering. Because the amount of companies that I've seen that just go straight into engineering is baffling. It's like the amount of effort and money spent on building ideas when you haven't really validated if it's going to work or not. That's sad because there's actually no need for that. Especially with things like designing, prototyping, that's literally in no way. You should just completely validate everything very well.

Raf Franco (21:41):

Now important to say that you cannot be into this whole paralysis of decision. So just a bit more data until I make my call. And you see a lot of these big companies that sometimes, and I'm sure a lot of the people are listening to the podcast, they'll think, "Oh, your Metas and your Twitters of the world, they have so many people. Why aren't features being delivered?" And I think a lot of it has to do with that because they're just trying to make sure that they get the right thing done. I understand that from a big company perspective. But when you're a small, medium sized company, I don't think you can really afford to do that. I think you just have to put things out there and understand. But equally, also review the things that you've been putting out there and understand did this actually work or not? Did it match the KPIs? And then have the courage to remove and to sunset some of these things is equally important too.

Alison Dean (22:33):

I mean the stakes get higher the larger the audience that you have. So the risk for putting something out and something really epically failing when you're something like a Meta could really have catastrophic effects versus when you're a smaller company and you can maybe work a little bit more agile. You're not going to necessarily feel the effect. But I also would also, I guess insert if there was any life or death risks of anything. I was in a conversation on the podcast where he worked and was doing a big railway project, and so there was literally engineering requirements that were life or death. Things like that obviously had layers. So when we talk about pushing things out, there's variability there. But I think I generally agree with you that it's always better to get it into the hands of the people so that you can actually validate or know that something's just not going to work, so I'm aligned with that.

Raf Franco (23:33):

Absolutely. But I think there is ways to mitigate that. You are right. We are very privileged from a digital perspective that often a majority of things are probably not life-threatening, but still they can impact a lot of people.

Alison Dean (23:44):

Oh, absolutely.

Raf Franco (23:44):

But I think companies like that, they can mitigate these things through AB testing or whatnot. Let's actually launch this to a small group of people. We play with it. So there's many ways. These companies do that. For example, Instagram does that all the time. They launch to just a selected few people, analyze it, and see they need to write over it. The case of the ...

Raf Franco (24:03):

... analyze it and see it, and iterate over it. In the case [inaudible 00:24:05] probably harder, but if you can do it with just one person, that's probably a good way of mitigating the problem, I guess.

Alison Dean (24:09):

Totally agree. I want to know what comes to mind for you as the most memorable project that you've been part of, and it's kind of a two part, because I also want to know what comes to mind is the most difficult project that you've been part of.

Raf Franco (24:22):

Maybe it's just my memory short, but I think the project I'm working with now, without a doubt feel very memorable.

Alison Dean (24:29):

I love that.

Raf Franco (24:29):

Both from speeds that we've developed and how quickly we went to the market, but also about the awards and about being at Web Summit. I was in Lisbon actually a year ago, and we passed by the web summit logo. I was there on holiday and I was commenting with my girlfriend, it was like, oh yeah, it'll be great one day to go to Web Summit and actually launched my product and at that time I hadn't even no idea we were even going to do a mobile app. So this whole thing happened very quickly and then we were in the main stage, 70,000 peoples, a sea of people listening to it. It was a moment without a doubt to be proud of.

Alison Dean (25:08):

Yeah, that's amazing. And what a good benchmark story too, was walking by the previous year and then the next year I was in front of the 70,000 people.

Raf Franco (25:16):

It is true. This is one of the things I really need to work on. It's like the moment it happens, and I recommend this to everyone, I recommend not doing it like I do, which is I reach a milestone and take this one, which is a big one, it's going to Web Summit. This is the biggest tech conference probably in the world. There's so many people out there, a lot of influential people out there. Often I never really take time to appreciate and to enjoy the fruits of what I do. It's literally I reach the peak of a mountain and I'm like, "Yay." And then I'm like, "Oh, another mountain out there." I'm already thinking, "Okay, what's the next thing? What's the next thing?" It Just can get a bit dangerous. I frankly think it is important to take a good amount of time to like, "Oh great, we've achieved this and we've achieved actually something great." Instead of always thinking about the next thing.

Raf Franco (26:04):

Is it important to be ambitious even from a achieving stuff way? But at the same time, I think it's important we did take some time to appreciate and to think, "Oh yeah, actually that was pretty cool. We should all be very proud of it." I speak here by myself, it's the effort really of quite a lot of people, engineering, prop management, all working together towards one objective. Because often you don't have hard deadlines, it has to happen in this day, but in our case we're like, we want to do our website. It has to happen that day. It has to go on the app store. Obviously, you cannot break, because then people are getting a little bit disappointed by it. So that was a lot of pressure. But I think pressure at times, and in the right measure is good and I think it is important to do. Yeah.

Alison Dean (26:50):

Totally. So you would also rank that as the most difficult project because of the timeline?

Raf Franco (26:55):

Not sure I would rate it as the most difficult one. One that I had had in the Netherlands was particularly difficult because it was in risk management. Risk management is tough, even just to understand this thing, you have these actuarials that take 10 years to study it. So now imagine coming in, having no idea about anything risk management, having to learn quickly, [inaudible 00:27:18] quickly, but at the same time trying to wing it, for lack of better words, and really trying to understand the business, because this is extremely challenging. Because at least with influencer marketing, I get it right. It's not really hard to get, it's not really rocket science.

Raf Franco (27:32):

Obviously, when you start exploring, you understand there's a lot of difficulties and technicalities of it, but it's not really hard to understand. We all use it. When you're talking about something that you actually don't use it and you can't touch and you can't experience, it makes the whole thing just so much harder, and harder to understand and harder to empathize even with customers and people that are doing it, so yeah.

Alison Dean (27:56):

Yeah, sounds harder. I've certainly dealt with my elements of risk management and I would agree with you. Lots of stakes in that game.

Raf Franco (28:03):

That's precisely the other things, the amount of money when you look at the numbers, my God, man, when you look at some of these insurance. Oh my god, the amount of zeros that this has, you're like... You really feel the sense of responsibility more than anything is like, wow, man, that's just a lot of money. But if you don't get these models right, some people are going to lose a lot of money. Right? It's a huge responsibility. So I think that was certainly one of the most challenging ones for sure.

Alison Dean (28:39):

All right. This is a quickfire round, Break On Through. We're breaking on through to the second half of the interview, so I want you to just answer the first thing that comes to mind. All right, here we go. Morning or night?

Raf Franco (28:52):

Nights.

Alison Dean (28:53):

Autumn or spring?

Raf Franco (28:55):

Spring.

Alison Dean (28:56):

Your pick to win the World Cup.

Raf Franco (29:03):

I mean, I have to say Portugal, of course, right? [inaudible 00:29:04] It's an easy one.

Alison Dean (29:04):

Naturally. Okay. This might be a two-parter for you. From a business standpoint, like business Raf does business Raf prefer Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, or TikTok?

Raf Franco (29:14):

Business Raf, TikTok.

Alison Dean (29:17):

And then weekend Raf, would it be Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, or TikTok?

Raf Franco (29:22):

Twitter all night long. Yeah. I love Twitter.

Alison Dean (29:24):

That's so interesting. Okay. Favorite color?

Raf Franco (29:28):

Blue.

Alison Dean (29:29):

Favorite place to travel.

Raf Franco (29:31):

Portugal, of course. Yeah, it's beautiful.

Alison Dean (29:34):

I want to go there. Favorite book.

Raf Franco (29:36):

I'm reading one that I'm really enjoying called The Power Of Now.

Alison Dean (29:40):

A historical figure you'd like to have coffee with?

Raf Franco (29:43):

I don't know. I mean, historical figure. Oh, you say the first thing comes to my mind, I would say Churchill.

Alison Dean (29:50):

Oh, that's so interesting. If you had one superpower, what would it be?

Raf Franco (29:55):

Be able to sleep properly. That'll be a great superpower. I sleep very little. Which is [inaudible 00:30:03].

Alison Dean (30:03):

What's your favorite song on the radio right now?

Raf Franco (30:05):

Song in the radio. So I'll have to say, because my band is a Pearl Jam tribute band. So one that I'm really enjoying is Why Go, that's the name of the song for Pearl Jam.

Alison Dean (30:14):

Cool. Favorite movie?

Raf Franco (30:17):

Before Sunset.

Alison Dean (30:19):

And favorite podcast? That's not a loaded question. You don't have to say this one.

Raf Franco (30:26):

Good podcast. This is a funny one because I'm a visual person, so podcasts don't work very well for me. I love the concept of the podcast, I just like to associate it with videos. I know I go to a lot of YouTube channels also, so I can't really answer that question, though.

Alison Dean (30:36):

So we need to for sure post this interview to YouTube because for that very reason, you'll watch it more often than just listening to it. So I'm a fan of this idea.

Alison Dean (30:58):

Continuing our tradition of past guest questions, this week's Breakthrough Club Question is from Richard Baker, who is VP of product design at PandaDoc and PandaDoc's mission is to help organizations eliminate workflow inefficiencies. So he asks you this question. You've transitioned from engineering to product, to consulting to executive, what advice do you have for someone shifting into new roles?

Raf Franco (31:26):

We could sit here for one hour. I think the main advice is don't be scared of just doing it, right. If you are always expecting to be a hundred percent prepared for it, you're not going to be. You have to embrace the unknown and just be hungry all the time for learning. Honestly, even this year, I've learned so much. Particularly important also to say it's important to learn about topics that you would often not get exposed to, so if you get a chance of getting exposed to try to absorb as much as possible.

Raf Franco (31:57):

This year I learned so much about finance in general, and about business finance and how it works. It just never came across, but I have the opportunity, I'm like wow, because I love learning about everything. I always go and try and suck it and to absorb it. Don't be scared of it, just accept the unknown.

Raf Franco (32:15):

However, also, it is important to feel that you can do the gig. Because I feel so many people go into these positions and frankly they shouldn't be doing it. I think these days in particular people are in such a rush of growing up and getting the job title and whatnot, and being senior and being an exec. It's like you have so many time in your life, enjoy the process because it takes a long time. I only started in product probably 12, 13 years in my career.

Raf Franco (32:46):

I took all this time to be good at engineering, takes a long time, and all these people are two years, I want to be senior. You're not senior, but it takes a long time. You can have the job title, that's not going to make you senior. I mean, I'm an exec, it's very early in my career, man, I'm 42 and it's very early in my career. I'm very privileged, right? I am. Because it should take longer. So even for me should take longer than this. People just don't really appreciate owning and understanding better what the current position is.

Raf Franco (33:17):

It's only really when you exhaust all those things, then fine, you go and search for something else to do. But taking the time to really master it, I think it is very important.

Alison Dean (33:26):

Savor the moments. Do you think that the nature of influencer marketing has skewed people's perceptions of savoring the moments, or people feeling like they need to be at a different level because of the things that they see around them? I don't know if influencer marketing plays into that or not, but just thinking about how people benchmark themselves now. Just wondering if you have thoughts on that?

Raf Franco (33:50):

It's a multitude of things really. Social media brought something for sure, which is being fast-paced, the immediacy of it. On top of it brought a lot of comparison. It's like all of a sudden you're not just comparing yourself to your neighbor, you're comparing yourself with the whole world. The best example of it all is dating apps. All of a sudden you're not just looking at the pool of people around you that you meet through friends, if I'm going to be comparing myself with world, maybe I'm not that great, but maybe around my area I am. Dating is a huge problem.

Raf Franco (34:22):

And actually it's very similar to career, really, right? Because people look at it and say, "Oh yeah, well, but he knows more than I do." And I'm like, "Okay. So what?" " But he's senior." And yeah, okay, so what? This is the thing, right? We need to ask this. And I think it's important that managers in general do not facilitate this sort of behavior. I think it is important that manager have the courage of saying, "Just enjoy the role. Don't feel rush in trying to be promoted. You will get there if you put the work, you will get there, no doubt about that. But now it's time to absorb as much as possible and try to learn." But yeah, social media for sure played a big part of it. It's a generational thing too, for sure.

Alison Dean (35:03):

I agree with you. Okay. So in terms of leaning into a role as something that you would say is a pretty big leadership lesson perhaps, are there any other leadership lessons, like significant leadership lessons that you've learned?

Raf Franco (35:20):

Particularly from a product leadership, I think it is very important to have a vision, a clear one. I think that vision has to be shared and fully understood by everyone. People have to understand where you're heading. If you hire the right people and have their buy-in, they'll be able to execute a vision. But I think you can't just go about not have the buy-in of people. People have to understand why we're doing what we're doing, otherwise they're never going to be able to perform well. So I think whatever it is, being very clear about the reason why we are doing it and hearing people out. But also be able to articulate what your vision is, I think is very important. And I think overall in general, having empathy and listening to people is just extremely important.

Raf Franco (36:03):

I mean, you are not going to be able to do anything if you don't do that. For example, I can look at my team, and since I joined, no one left the team. I say this with pride because I build a culture where people understand why we're doing it and we're all kind of working together. There's no, "Oh, Raf is the CPO," and blah blah. Now, it's like we're all in it. It doesn't matter the size of the company.

Alison Dean (36:23):

Right.

Raf Franco (36:24):

If you have multitude of layers of management, it is your job to make sure that your vision trickles down so everyone at every single level fully understands this is the reason why we're doing what we're doing. Even if tough decisions need to be made, even those tough decisions have to be very clear on why we're doing what we're doing.

Alison Dean (36:42):

Oh yeah, I totally agree. I think that's probably one of the missteps for a lot of organizations, not ensuring that our people are hyper clear on just the vision of what they're doing, right? You need to have clarity. You need to know why you're putting in all that hard work, right?

Raf Franco (36:55):

Explaining the vision, and it takes time.

Alison Dean (36:58):

Oh, sure.

Raf Franco (36:59):

I just want to go and do it. You're missing the point. You have to spend the time. It's kind of the same thing, that when you go to a meeting, you can't go straight to the point. You have to first set the background. "Okay, this is why we are here. This is what we're talking about. This is why I want to get out of this meeting." Right?

Alison Dean (37:13):

Yep.

Raf Franco (37:14):

It's exhausting. Yeah, it is plenty exhausting. And on top of it, you can't just go set the vision, and that's it now. This is a constant thing. You have to constantly reiterate so that it sticks into people's minds they have constantly do that. It's a lot of work, but it's really only the only way you can build successful businesses, really.

Alison Dean (37:31):

Yep. Okay. What do you want your direct reports to remember you for?

Raf Franco (37:36):

It's interesting because the other day, one of my direct reports said this. He categorized me. And I actually think he did a very good job on what I also want to be remembered for. And he said a hard but fair person. That's exactly how I think it should be. I think fairness is one of my core fundamental principles as a person, and I definitely apply it for business. I want things to be fair, right? I want him to be treated fairly. I want people to be listened fairly-

Alison Dean (38:05):

Yeah.

Raf Franco (38:06):

... make fair decisions. But at the same time, I think it is important to have a good balance between compassion, but also be decisive in what you think is best. Because I strongly believe that leaders are higher and are in the company also to make decisions. What I think it is important is that people understand that, and that people trust that your decision is on the wellbeing of the company, on the best interests of the company, and that sometimes can come across as being a bit hard. I'm certainly quite a perfectionist. [inaudible 00:38:39] one thing's like it has to look good, it has not good enough, or has to be good, it can come across as a bit of an obsessive thing on being good and building a great product. But I think this is really where you build successful products, not saying, "Eh, it's okay, but it's fine." No, it is important to be good, hard, but fair.

Alison Dean (38:55):

Hard, but fair. I like that. Okay. We talked a little bit about some of the things trending forward with influencer marketing. Are there any other future innovations that you're particularly excited about? And that could be personally or professionally.

Raf Franco (39:08):

Yeah, for sure. As I kind of alluded to, influencer marketing shifted a lot, and it's still [inaudible 00:39:14] quite a lot still. And we're observing that the behaviors, even of brands, have changed also quite significantly. What do I mean by this? Before, they would be way more interested on how a creator looks like, how their own type of content looks like. It was very visual thing. So brands acted a lot through gut. It's like, "Mmh, I don't like it. There's something about it. I don't really like

the style." Whereas now, brands... And it's interesting because ad tech, as a whole, went through a lot of that too.

Alison Dean (39:47):

Right.

Raf Franco (39:47):

And now, [inaudible 00:39:47] are way more interested, and they find it way more important than the actual performance of a particular creative regardless of that. There's like, okay, how many impressions do we think we can get with this person versus that person? That's probably what matters the most, not how it looks or not, and this has a massive impact because this is really how tech can really help deliver this. Because you can't really deliver statistics at scale without partnerships.

Alison Dean (40:13):

Right.

Raf Franco (40:14):

We have, with our brands that provide us access to API based data, and this is really how you perform those campaigns at scale. And I think this evolution will continue, and I think you'll see a lot of artificial intelligence and machine learning playing a big part into it. Because here's the thing, we have all these data that you're pulling from all these social platforms, but other partners have access to the same data, so why is it going to make you unique? How can you apply intelligence on top of it? Good example of it is, you can say, "Oh, this specific creator has X amount of impressions on that day." Fine. But a more interesting thing to say is, "When you post drunk at 2:00 AM, you get a lot of engagement.' That is applying intelligence on top of it, right? It's not just taking the fact, it's applying intelligence on top of it. This is really where it's going to grow about, and this is really where the whole industry is going to go to. And so machine learning and AI is going to play a big part of it.

Alison Dean (41:16):

I'm very curious, if we were to revisit this particular episode in five years, just how many things have shifted. You know what I mean?

Raf Franco (41:25):

So true. You don't even need five years.

Alison Dean (41:28):

One year.

Raf Franco (41:29):

I'll give you an example of it. It just makes my life really hard, if I'm being honest. Last year, TikTok-

Alison Dean (41:36):

Yeah.

Raf Franco (41:36):

... was not that known. And then the pandemic happened, and TikTok shoot to the sky, and it's now probably even bigger than Instagram itself. Now with that, last year, I was like, "Oh, beautiful roadmap. Oh, looks good, man. This is what we're going to be achieving." And then the whole TikTok boom happened. I'm like, "Oh my God, they launched APIs. We need to integrate. Alert. Let's just change the plans." So agile is this huge thing. Out of all the industries I've worked, without a doubt, this one is the one because you never know. There can be a new social platform coming in and dominating the game, and all of a sudden you have to pivot your whole thing. Oh my God, we have to do that. The other thing is, one, it's fine. It's just very hard for our board members to look at 24 month roadmap as like, "I can do that. It's most likely not going to be correct because we just need to adapt." And that's okay. I think it's okay. But yeah, I don't think we need five years maybe.

Alison Dean (42:32):

Well, I think really just the five years, it would be interesting to reflect on how much has actually happened, just because of the nature of the pivoting and how quickly things are coming to market, I think in that span, reflecting on just a timeline, and how many things may have happened.

Raf Franco (42:50):

Absolutely. And even different markets too, right? If you in the US-

Alison Dean (42:54):

Yeah.

Raf Franco (42:54):

[inaudible 00:42:55] Europe, it's just so different, just a completely different ballgame in every single sense. The way creators operate their expectations, in the US, there's a lot of SaaS happening. Here, is still quite managed service. It's not that one is better than the other. The landscape is just so different. You want to try to get into this markets. You have to also adapt your approach. So there's a lot of business strategy there is to go into it, for sure.

Alison Dean (43:20):

A hundred percent. So we talked about an early breakthrough. Is there a recent breakthrough that you've had?

Raf Franco (43:25):

Don't know. I've been playing a lot with my band. That was quite recent breakthrough, which is quite nice. We have so many gigs booked in for next year, which is-

Alison Dean (43:33):

That's awesome.

Raf Franco (43:34):

And I love playing drums. I've been playing for a long time. So that's a bit of a funny one. But yeah, I think that's a great recent breakthrough that we're just playing so much. I love the fact that I can combine both my artistic side and my product engineering thing, because I think it would drive me mad if I couldn't express myself in another way. And the other interesting thing is when you see people clapping, it's such a magical moment because you don't get that sort of appreciation at work. Get other things, for sure, but this is just something unique, and I encourage everyone... Working is fine, but it's important to express yourself in other ways, be it art or be a hobby that you really hone and really become good at it. I think it's quite important just becoming good at something different. I know, for example, for a fact, that I'll just think about work all the time. I kind of do. But this is really true. When I'm playing music, I'm really in the moment, and goes back to the book I was reading, The Power of Now.

Raf Franco (44:32):

You are really in the moment. You can't actually think about anything. And only musicians will understand this, but if you are playing and you start thinking about what's going to come next, you going to screw up. No doubt about that.

Alison Dean (44:44):

Right.

Raf Franco (44:45):

It's kind of a meditative thing, right? You have to put all your thoughts to the side and just live the moment. That's why I think it's just so important for me to be able to play live, which is what I love doing. Yeah.

Alison Dean (44:55):

Absolutely. So, okay, is Raf the musician going to leverage the influencer platform to elevate all of-

Raf Franco (45:03):

Oh, well you say that. Actually, yes.

Alison Dean (45:05):

Good.

Raf Franco (45:06):

For example, so we were just having a few gigs lately, and I'm like, wow, now I know everything about paid me, so that's basically ads on Facebook. I know what performs better or not. So I can actually create a great marketing campaign for us because I know what works and whatnot, what kind of formats do work better or not. So I'm basically drawing out-

Alison Dean (45:26):

I love it.

Raf Franco (45:26):

... knowledge from social media and actually applying it to our band, which is awesome. Yeah.

Alison Dean (45:30):

I think it's genius. Okay. And then tell us the name of the band.

Raf Franco (45:33):

The band is called Brain of J. So [inaudible 00:45:36] Pearl Jam [inaudible 00:45:36] with band.

Alison Dean (45:36):

Yeah. That's awesome. Okay. Is there anything I didn't ask you that I should have?

Raf Franco (45:42):

Not really. I think you've covered quite a lot. Yeah. I think it was good.

Alison Dean (45:46):

Well, I was delighted to talk to you. I hope everyone learns a lot because I think there's so many layers to influence our marketing. It's fascinating. So very appreciative to have you on. Thank you so much, Raf. I hope you had some fun.

Raf Franco (46:00):

Thank you.

Alison Dean (46:01):

Thanks, and thank you for tuning into this episode of The Breakthrough. Be sure to subscribe on your favorite platform and follow us on Twitter and Instagram @breakthroughpod. I'm your host, Alison Dean. Until next time.