



Episode 32



Corbett Barr

Corbett Barr is Fizzle's fearless leader and CEO. After a decade of venture-backed start-ups, Fortune 500 consulting and bootstrapped blogs he cofounded Fizzle, bringing his experience to new founders everywhere. He mostly lives in Portland, OR, where the dry cider flows like unicyles over the Willamette.

Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined. Every week we talk with thought leaders and revolutionaries who are bring innovation to their industries like today's guest, Corbett Barr.

Corbett

How you build your business matters as much as what you build. That's a key learning for me, but at the same time I think there are a lot of people who could put the cart before the horse and they could worry all about how they're going to build their business without recognizing what they need to do to build the business. You can't necessarily put that first, but it's very important.

Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined with Danny Iny.

Danny

Corbett Barr is a long-time entrepreneur whose work you may be familiar with. He teaches about entrepreneurship through his platform called Fizzle. Corbett always



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had entrepreneurship in the back of his mind, but he started out in the corporate world in a pretty enviable position that only the top college grads are able to step into, consulting for Fortune 500 companies. How did he get it? Corbett did have a Bachelor's degree in business management communications, but he also had a strong background in programming, which made for a killer combination. You'd think he had it made, but despite the prestige of his career something was very wrong.

Corbett

They really made it clear time and time again that they didn't care about us. It was really all about the work and the projects. As I saw the carrot that they dangled in front of you, which was partnership essentially, I saw that the partners in the firm actually had even less control over their lives than people in my position did. You can do all you can, but at the end of the day you're just helping some giant organization make a little bit more profit or something, and really when you combine the lifestyle with that there just wasn't enough in it for me.

Danny

So he left. For a while, Corbett was pretty disillusioned, so when an old friend invited him to be the co-founder of an investor-backed Silicon Valley start-up he jumped at the chance. They raised a ton of money and had a great stretch, but then 2008 happened.

Corbett

A lot of the big investment banks started shutting down and that made venture capitalists really nervous about where they were going to raise their new rounds from and which start-ups they were going to try to keep afloat. We were in this position which was we were trying to build something big, but then eventually figure out what the revenue streams would be. This wasn't that unusual. You see Twitter or Facebook or any other of the consumer facing start-ups, a lot of them



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start that way. They build something, they raise a lot of venture capital, and then eventually they figure out how to earn revenue, and it's usually some sort of ad model or something, so were sort of following that path. What that does is it sets you up on this hamster wheel of having to continually raise venture capital in order to keep the business afloat.

Danny

And the hamster wheel went off its track. Corbett and his partner had to lay off a lot of employees and were at odds with each other over the direction of the company. Finally, Corbett realized that much like that high-powered consulting job, Silicon Valley just wasn't for him.

Corbett

What I found out was there's this version of entrepreneurship in Silicon Valley, especially where you're working sixty, seventy hours a week, literally sleeping in your office sometimes, and you're essentially putting your life on hold so that you can build the business as big as you possibly can to try to make a bunch of money and then you can go do what you really want to do. What ends up happening to a lot of those entrepreneurs is they just get addicted to that process of building businesses and so they end up, even though they sell their company, maybe they go travel the world for while, but then they end up coming back to Silicon Valley.

That didn't feel like it was right for me either, so here I was; I had tried the high-powered career thing and now I had tried the "traditional" start-up world where you raise VC, and that didn't feel right for me either. With a board of directors, advisors, a co-founder, a bunch of employees, customers, all of these expectations just ended up making me feel like I had less control over my life than I did when I had been a high-powered Fortune 500 consultant.



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Danny

After all this, Corbett and his wife made a big decision, and that was not to make any immediate decisions. Instead, they did something they always dreamed of, a trip to Mexico. Not just any trip, one where they would explore and grow, clear their heads and hit the reset button on Corbett's idea of entrepreneurship and what he wanted it to be.

Corbett

While we were down there something really interesting happened and I never could have imagined this. This is why I encourage people to take some time off, because I had always jumped from opportunity to opportunity without really figuring out who I was and what I wanted from life. While we were down there, we kept meeting people who had really interesting stories and who had figured out ways to put their lives in front of their careers in a way so that they could spend months every year or maybe take a year off at a time or whatever to be in a foreign country or to travel around the world or to winter in Mexico or something like that.

Of course I was curious, because my view of the world up until this point was that essentially either you climb the corporate ladder as fast as you could and tried to retire in your fifties or you became an entrepreneur, the kind that maybe had to sleep under his or her desk once in a while, but you were trying to hit a home run so that you could make a bunch of money and then go do what you wanted to do. Here were these people who basically said who knows if any of that will play out? You can't guarantee that you're going to be wealthy. You can't guarantee that you're going to live long enough to make it through a career in a corporate environment and retire. These people decided to live now instead of waiting for the future.

They didn't all come from the same sort of backgrounds. Some were nurses. Some were in construction. Some people were software developers but they were



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freelancers and they worked from the road. Some people had their own businesses. There were all kinds of folks. So about two months into the trip ... You mentioned that your thing sort of grew out of a side project. Well, mine started as essentially I started a blog to chronicle our trip, to tell the stories of these interesting people that we were meeting, and to start asking myself hard questions out loud about the nature of life and career and the balance between the two and what I wanted for myself.

This was in March of 2009 when I started this. There were a lot of people asking these questions because a lot of people had been burned by the financial collapse. They had seen their friends laid off or they had been laid off themselves or they just started to feel like there must be more to life than pursuing a career when the careers don't end up being all that stable to begin with. By the end of that first year, a half million people had visited my site and my idea which had started as I'm going to come up with a new start-up idea and build some software and shop it around ended up being this blogging thing is really interesting. People are listening to me. Is there some way that I could harness this interest and this demand and create a business out of it?

Danny

And? I'm on the edge of my seat.

Corbett

What I did was I essentially built a business around blogging and I haven't looked back. I had a bunch of chapters in my life leading up to it and now I'm on this most recent chapter, which started with that trip and has led me to running this business which I mentioned earlier called Fizzle, which is a training library of videos and a community that helps people build small, sustainable, meaningful businesses around something that they're passionate about.



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I run a small team. There are four of us. I live in Portland, Oregon. My wife and I now winter in Mexico. We've returned every year since then. This will be our eighth winter in a row in Mexico coming up. I just have all the control over my life that I could ever hope for, sometimes too much. Now I have to ask deeper existential questions because I'm not just worried about how to put food on the table and how to have enough time to enjoy myself. I have all the time in the world. I get to work on a business that I really care about. I work with people that I really care deeply about as well and things are good.

If I hadn't taken that trip, I never would have known that there was some other version of entrepreneurship, that you as an entrepreneur have to decide how you're going to build your business, and a lot of times that matters just as much as what you're going to build.

Danny

I want to dig into some of the choices that you've made. In some ways we follow parallel paths and in other ways ... I was a student of yours way, way back in the day, and I'm still very grateful for what I learned from you. We've also taken paths that have diverged quite a bit. My ambition is to build a much larger organization. We're at thirty people now and we're continuing to grow. You've stayed very, very small as an organization, not in terms of the reach. There isn't like a better or worse, they're just different. Talk about the choices that you made. Why do things the way you're doing them?

Corbett

For a long time I was reluctant to hire anyone, because here I was, I had this rebirth, this awakening of sorts, realizing that there was more to life than just building a company and that there were different ways that you could build a company. As I started building my new business, for the first few years I operated alone essentially.



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I had this vision that I might always be a lone wolf of sorts, like a Seth Godin or like a Chris Guillebeau, somebody like that who builds significant reach but doesn't have full time employees.

At the same time, eventually I wanted to be able to take some real time off, so I started earning a comfortable living and I was able to do that from anywhere in the world, but I couldn't really take time off. I couldn't set aside the computer for a couple of weeks, so I brought someone on to allow me to do that, first as an intern and then he ended up becoming a big asset to the business, Caleb Wajik. That allowed me to take some time off. I also started to recognize that if you hire the right kinds of people who are invested in the business and you treat them like partners and you compensate them as such, then they really feel like they have ownership and they contribute to the business just like you would and you can trust them. You can count on them to work on the business just like you would. At the same time, it's also really fun to work with other people.

I started to change my mind about being the lone wolf and I hired Caleb and then since then I've hired a few other people. I just started hiring people basically to fill in gaps that I had in my own abilities, and I've been able to build Fizzle now, which is much more than I could build on my own mostly because I partnered with people who are really invested in it and who bring these other skills to the table.

At the same time, like you said, you've grown tremendously and I'm always amazed when I check in with you and you're like, "Oh, yeah, we hired ten more people." The same is true of a lot of other people that I've been friend with in this world for the past five years. I guess I'm doing it intentionally; I'm making sure that the people I



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hire are partner level material. Also, I just feel like growth for its own sake can start to consume the business and force it in directions that I don't necessarily want to go.

I also recognize that money is a default that a lot of people opt for when they're setting their goals because money is a great thing and it can enable a lot of really interesting things, but at the same time money for me really isn't the point. The point is that I'm doing something that I care about, that I'm having an impact that I feel good about and that I'm able to live my life now, because to be honest we don't know ... I can't plan that I'm going to be here in five years or that I'll be in good health. We just had a very close friend pass away, a mutual friend of ours, tragically. That sort of thing happens and I just don't feel like I want to delay life for the sake of building a business. I want to live a really well rounded life that includes caring a lot about my health and friends and relationships and experiences as much as I do my business.

Danny

I agree with you completely about the way people default to money as a goal. I tell our students and reinforce within the organization all the time money only matters in that obviously it allows you to pay the bills to do what you're doing, but it's a benchmark for impact. If this many people paid you this much more money, it's because you're creating that much more value and impact.

*With that said, scope of impact can be measured in a lot of different ways and it doesn't have to necessarily be measured in order to be real. A book that's coming to mind is Bo Burlingham's *Small Giants*. I don't know if you've read it?*

Corbett

No, I haven't.



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Danny

I think you'd love it. It's one of those hidden gems that hardly anybody that I've spoken to at least has read. He talks about companies that have chosen to be great instead of big. Very, very interesting. You'd enjoy it. Tell me more about ... You don't want to be big. You clearly want to be great. How are you defining great? You mentioned being in a position where you have to think about deeper questions. You've got a good business. You're making good money. You've got great people you're working with. Where to from here?

Corbett

Yeah. In some ways I can be a little bit fatalist in thinking about what great means. I think that it's easy to delude ourselves when we think about businesses that are great, when really what they've done is they've earned a lot of money or they've reached a lot of people, but it doesn't mean that they've necessarily made the world a better place. I think you see this all the time if you read Tech Crunch for example. They're obsessed with these ideas of unicorn companies.

I think you could make an argument that ... Obviously Airbnb and Uber and companies like that are worshiped in that world, but I think you can make an argument that they haven't necessarily made the world a better place. They've caused a lot of problems as well. It's easy to delude ourselves that reach and money equals greatness or it equals impact. For me, we're measuring impact basically one entrepreneur at a time and looking at how many people we have helped find a business idea or how many people we've helped quit their day jobs, how many people have earned enough to support themselves from the businesses that they build.

We fully intend to get much bigger than we are, but we're also building a foundation of knowledge and a process right now for creating these success stories that is hard



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to do once you start scaling something up. It's harder to do that, roll up the sleeves and really work one-on-one with other entrepreneurs to make them successful. I don't have all those answers, Danny. I think we're all searching for them. The fact that we're asking those questions I think is the most important part.

Danny

I agree completely. To paraphrase Bill Gates, automation scale applied to an inefficient or ineffective process, it just multiplies the problems, and it takes a lot of courage to say you know what? I want to get it right first. I think it's very powerful and I think it's important.

Let me ask you this actually. How much of this is coming from you and how much of it comes from all of your partners? When you guys are in a meeting, whenever you meet regularly, are they saying let's go hire a faster, bigger and you're like no, let's make sure we get it right? Are you all on the same page? What is that internal dynamic?

Corbett

I'd say I'm in the middle actually in the organization. We have one voice that's very strongly focused on just doing a great job no matter how small it might make us, really caring more about the quality than the quantity of the work. We have another voice that's more in favor of growing faster because you can recognize to some degree money does enable you to have a greater impact. It enables you to hire people and it enables you to refine products and to do things that you can't do when you're a four-person business.

I recognize both sides. I think that there are ... You can point to success stories like MailChimp for example, which is bootstrapped and was methodical and has a tremendous business now despite never raising venture capital. Then you can look at



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other businesses that grew very quickly, like Groupon, because they raised a bunch of money but then they ended up flaming out. I think at the end of the day what I want is twenty, thirty years from now to look back on my body of work and feel like I really cared about the quality and the people that I was working with and the customers that we served instead of looking back and saying I had a hundred-million-dollar company, or whatever.

That would be great as well, but to be honest, the baggage and the expectations that come along with building a business of that size just don't appeal to me. That's why we're growing slow and methodically, and I think for us it's really a long game. I know that we're an anomaly in this space I think, but it's really just because we have a lot of these open, honest conversations as a team.

Danny

I don't know how much ... Anomaly is a strong word, because there are a few ways to look at it, right? There is an anomaly in terms of aspiration for growth, but to be fair you guys are a pretty substantive and substantial business. It's not like you're all making pocket money on the side. You're doing very well. You are operating at a scale that is impressive and very respectable in the industry. I guess you're right. It is anomalous in that the focus is not primarily on growth, and unfortunately as much as our industry touts itself as being all about lifestyle and value, people get swept up in the dollars very quickly and very easily.

Corbett

Uh-huh (affirmative). Yeah. Absolutely. The other thing is the boutique consulting firm that I worked for had a measure which always stuck with me, and that was revenue per employee. The higher that number, the more it affords you to do some really interesting things as a company and the higher quality people that you can attract because you can afford to pay them obviously.



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The kinds of people that I'm looking to hire at this point are very expensive. So frankly we could ... I probably could have a fifteen or twenty-person team at this point and pay for it, but they would be different kinds of folks. Everybody on our team right now is compensated according to how well the company does. That means that we scrutinize every additional hire that we might make because it's going to affect all of our compensation, and that's another way to look at it as well.

It's not necessarily that we are not trying to grow. We are growing revenue every year. For the past few years we've grown at a nice clip, but it means that we're move constrained in terms of how many people we're adding to the team.

Danny

There's a lot here that is against the grain in terms of how people look at business both in general and even within our industry. The theme of the show is Business Reimagined. If you had to capture in one or a few let's call them bullet points, how would you encapsulate your re-imagination of business? How do you see business differently from most other people?

Corbett

I see business differently from how I did just ten years ago or just fifteen years ago, and I think that is a couple of things. One is, as I said before, how you build your business matters as much as what you build. That's a key learning for me. But at the same time I think there are a lot of people who could put the cart before the horse and they could worry all about how they're going to build their business without recognizing what they need to do to build the business. You can't necessarily put that first, but it's very important.

The second thing is that getting close to customers in the very beginning to understand the problems that they face and to help them directly one-on-one so



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that you can understand the process and to build something that you can then scale is something that we didn't do with my first start-up. It's something that I didn't necessarily understand even in this business in the very beginning. It can save you a lot of heartache. lot of people play business in their minds and decide to go away into the laboratory for a year to come up with some business idea and some product, only to find out that all of that time and energy was wasted because at the end of the day nobody wants what you've built.

That's really the biggest risk that we face as entrepreneurs, in the beginning is that we're going to work really hard on something and find out that nobody wants it. The way to circumvent that is to get really close to customers and to talk with them directly, potential customers, and just to have honest conversations with people to say this is what we're thinking about building. Would that solve your problem? Or tell me more about your problem. What frustrates you about it? What exists out there right now? Why doesn't this company or that company or this product or that product fulfill that for you? To understand where the gaps might exist in the thing that you're trying to create.

Danny

I like that. I think also it's very important ... Maybe it's just so baked into your ethos that we become blind to the things that make us most special sometimes, but the growth for growths sake is not even appealing necessarily.

Corbett

Yeah. I think a lot of people ... You can pour gasoline on a fire I think and if you do it in the wrong way it can actually extinguish it or burn all the fuel that you have there out really quickly, whereas the fire might have been fine if you just built it slowly and methodically. I think some people focus on growth in terms of marketing and



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tactics, only to fail to realize that if they had focused more on the product to begin with, that could have become the greatest source of growth.

Danny

That was Corbett Barr re-imagining what it means to operate in the world of business. Does it mean climbing the corporate ladder at a prestigious Fortune 500 company or raising money from investors, working eighty hours each week and sleeping under your desk? It could, but it doesn't have to because life is short and it's really not about the destination so much as the journey. That's Corbett's message. I'm as inspired by his words as I am about the very strategic choices that he's made in building his own business. That's the lesson of this episode.

Whatever your goals might be, choose them consciously and be deliberate in pursuing them in a way that is true to the things that matter most to you. To learn more about Corbett's work, visit his company's website at Fizzle.co. That's F-I-Z-Z-L-E-. -C-O.

Voiceover

This has been Business Reimagined with Danny Iny. Join us next time as we talk with Pedram Shojai.

Pedram

The personal development spirituality world is all just kind of like kind of flowery language and trying to just sound more poetic and everyone is trying to invent Meditation 2.0 and then really take credit for it. It's like, "Hey, I've got the Pedram Method." Part of it was just to step out and be like, "Come on, let's get real. Let's talk about what's real and let's talk about the fact that you don't need to change your name or get a yin-yang tattoo or anything weird to practice this stuff and here's how you can get five in on your lunch break."



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