

Masters of Scale Episode Transcript – J.J. Abrams

“Make room for magic”

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J.J. ABRAMS: It's a foam latex tongue from *The Exorcist* that Dick Smith sent to me when I was I think 14 or 15 after writing him a note, a fan letter. And the note said, "Dear J.J., here's a used but clean tongue from *The Exorcist*. Stick some peanut butter on the end, and put your tongue—" which I've never done, because I just didn't wanna, so, I have it in the same box in which he sent it.

HOFFMAN: This unusual anecdote could only belong to my friend J.J. Abrams. J.J. is famous for many things, including his awesome collection of movie memorabilia. So maybe I shouldn't be surprised that he's the owner of one of Linda Blair's prop tongues, courtesy of legendary Hollywood makeup artist Dick Smith. It's a relic from a pre-CGI era, when the tools of movie magic were things you could hold in your hand.

ABRAMS: I love physical objects. There was this book that Doug Dorst wrote that he and I collaborated on that was called *S*. It came in this sleeve and when you pulled the book out you saw all this ephemera within the book, within the pages you could actually take out, and you looked on the pages of the book, and you saw all this handwriting in all this different colored ink, and you realized there was a story on top of the story, and all these little objects that came with it were part of it.

There was something about creating a book where the book as an object, as a means of telling a story beyond just the pages of a novel, just felt like a worthy and a fun idea. I wanted to live in a world where that happened.

HOFFMAN: J.J. has spent his life creating such a world. His production company, Bad Robot, has made some of the most iconic movies and TV shows of the last 20 years. Now, they also make digital content, video games, music as well as the occasional mystery-box book.

Ah yes, we should probably mention the mystery box.

ABRAMS: The premise behind the Mystery Magic Box was the following: 15 dollars buys you 50 dollars worth of magic, which is a savings.

HOFFMAN: In 2007, J.J. gave a TED talk that's since been viewed over 4 million times. It starts with a box he got as a kid, from a magic shop in New York City. The box is plain brown, with a big black question mark on the side. And to this day, it's never been opened.

J.J.'s talk isn't just about that box, of course. It's about the creative process. The box is a symbol of infinite possibility, and the pull of the unknown.

Since the day he gave it, The Mystery Box talk has been widely interpreted as the key to the J.J. Abrams approach. The shows he creates and produces, the films he writes: they all contain that sense of possibility and intrigue. The box comes up so often in fact, I almost felt bad asking about it.

ABRAMS: I will say about the magic box that it is both a real thing that I have here at my office and something that when I talked about it in that TED talk, I only did it because my friend and co-producer, Brian Burke, at the time said, "Talk about that box." I don't ever think about the magic box when I'm working on a project, and it's become this thing where people are always like, "So, you're using the magic box?" I'm like, "I don't use the magic box. It's a metaphor."

HOFFMAN: You may not own an actual magic box. But, like J.J., many of the most successful entrepreneurs I know have something that puts them in the right mindset for creative thinking. It could be a mantra, an ethos, or a daily practice that helps them limber up to think big. And it's something every founder needs to cultivate.

That's why I believe that great leaders learn to create the right conditions for magic. You can't predict your next a-ha moment. But you can create favorable circumstances for serendipity to happen – for you, and your team.

[THEME MUSIC]

HOFFMAN: I'm Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, partner at Greylock, and your host. And I believe that great leaders can learn to create the right conditions for magic. You can't predict your next a-ha moment. But you can create favorable circumstances for serendipity to happen – for you, and your team.

For most of us, the path to entrepreneurship isn't straight. It's filled with false starts, complications, and some outright failures.

But then there are those who seem to have the "secret sauce." "The magic touch." "The recipe for success." Whatever you call it, it comes down to an ability to somehow, achieve the impossible – not just once, but over and over.

I wanted to talk to J.J. Abrams about this because if ever someone had the magic touch, it's J.J. and his production company, Bad Robot.

For over two decades, they've made relentlessly impactful – and addictive – content. You've probably seen their mischievous-looking logo pop up after TV shows like *Alias*, *Lost*, *Fringe*, or *Westworld*, and ahead of films like *Super 8* and their *Cloverfield* franchise. But even if you

missed all that, you definitely know Bad Robot from blockbuster reboots of major movie franchises. *Star Trek*. *Mission: Impossible*. *Star Wars*. In Hollywood, J.J. Abrams and Bad Robot are the people to call when you need to give your beloved characters and storylines a fresh spin, and launch them into the public consciousness at scale.

J.J. runs Bad Robot with his wife and co-CEO, Katie McGrath. He credits Katie with designing and maintaining the structure that allows Bad Robot to scale. But when it comes to writing down his own recipe for success, he'll say something like this:

ABRAMS: It's funny. I think as soon as you feel that you have a process, somehow that process betrays you. I think that my true answer is I think not knowing can be your friend.

HOFFMAN: From an early age, J.J. was exposed to the magic of the entertainment industry. His father was an ad man who became a TV producer, which put J.J. in just the right place to witness the alchemy of Hollywood up close.

ABRAMS: When I was 11 and 12 and 13, he had offices at Columbia Pictures and then another time at Paramount Pictures. I would go, I remember, and I would just wander around. I'd find out what was shooting, and I would just peek in and sneak onto sets and watch what they were doing. This was when they were shooting TV shows like *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* and *Mork and Mindy*.

I'd sit in the empty bleachers, and I'd watch them rehearse, and all the actors in their civilian clothes, and the idea of being anyone on the floor was my dream. I thought maybe special effect makeup, maybe being a DP or working with set design. It didn't matter to me.

The idea that you could, as a grownup, play, and that that could be a way of making a living, it just seemed miraculous.

HOFFMAN: J.J. took that sense of wonder and possibility, and threw himself into making Super 8 films with his childhood friend, Matt Reeves. And when I say childhood friend, I mean that they were both actually children.

ABRAMS: Matt Reeves, who is a director and writer, and I were in a Super 8 film festival. There was an article that The LA Times wrote about the kids who had movies in the festival. It was called "The Beardless Wonders," as if we weren't already self-conscious.

This article came out and we got a call from Kathy Kennedy. Kathy Kennedy, at the time, was Steven's assistant.

HOFFMAN: It's worth noting that "Kathy," or Kathleen Kennedy, would go on to become president of Lucasfilm. And the "Steven" J.J.'s referring to is director Steven Spielberg.

ABRAMS: She called Matt and said that she saw this article on us, and they had just found Steven's 8mm films. They had been left in a house in an attic, in a box, and a guy had found them and had brought them to Universal Studios and delivered them.

HOFFMAN: If it's not clear, these were old films that Steven had made when he was a teenager, found in their very own magic box in the attic.

ABRAMS: She had this idea to give those two movies, instead of giving them to, say, The Smithsonian, she had the idea of calling two utter strangers that were 15 years old. We weren't 30 years old between us. And, she gave us these movies that needed to be repaired. Would we be available to repair them? Which, of course, we were available to repair them. So, we got these two movies, and these are not copies. These are not you could run a dupe of these. That was the only one.

HOFFMAN: If this is starting to sound like a pitch for some lost Spielberg classic, you're getting the idea. It was so implausible, so out-of-the-blue, J.J. still can't quite believe it.

ABRAMS: It still to this day boggles my mind. So, we repaired these movies, every single frame remained intact. We returned them, and they gave us \$300. I didn't get to meet Steven for another six years or so, but I still to this day don't understand why Kathy ... She is so brilliant and that move is so insane, so it doesn't make sense to me.

HOFFMAN: Well, a little bit different than *The Kid Stays in the Picture*. It's like, "Oh, the kid repairs the picture."

HOFFMAN: Jokes aside, I actually have an idea why Kathleen Kennedy took a chance on the "Beardless Wonders." It makes a great story. And not just a fun anecdote to tell some entertained podcast host. Kennedy saw an opportunity to build a mythology, there on the spot. There's the mythology of Steven's brand, which taps into the adventure and exuberance of youth. And there was a new mythology she was building for these junior filmmakers. She saw a chance for her, and for Steven, to airdrop a little magic into Matt and J.J.'s lives. And if it went wrong, they were only out \$300 and some 8-mm film.

(In reality, they'd be out some priceless artifacts of cinema history! But hey, what's magic without a little danger too?)

J.J. took this early validation as a filmmaker and ran with it. He started writing screenplays, and sold his first script treatment while attending Sarah Lawrence College, outside of New York.

ABRAMS: It was a very small, beautiful progressive liberal arts college. It felt like a place that was unlike any I had been to before. It was certainly unusually compared to the public schools in LA and it just felt like an adventure, and it felt strange.

I thought maybe that's what I should be doing.

HOFFMAN: And, what started you thinking, "I'm going to be the storyteller"? Just because writing was a way that you could show yourself or...

ABRAMS: I started writing as a means to an end because I was working on movies, and I know to write something, it was an important step to know exactly what you needed to tell a story.

HOFFMAN: J.J. had broken into the industry he loved. But it wasn't long before he ran into a dilemma that might resonate with many of you. He had his foot in the door, but no inspiration or direction.

ABRAMS: I had written on a bunch of movies, things like *Regarding Henry* and *Armageddon* and this movie *Joyride*, and for a while, I found myself frankly a bit adrift, not knowing quite what I wanted to do because I was doing a lot of rewrites for people, and it just was feeling slightly soulless. Katie McGrath, who is now my wife but when we were dating, she was telling me, "Write what you love," which is so obvious and yet, sometimes you forget the obvious.

HOFFMAN: I couldn't agree more. In fact, every entrepreneur should keep someone in their inner circle whose job is to remind them of the obvious – that is, to steer back to their mission. Part of laying the groundwork for your next a-ha moment is having someone reflect back to you what, deep down, you may already know.

Katie's advice, "Write what you love," wasn't some wild new idea. But it's exactly what J.J. needed to find his inspiration. And he found it in the adventure and heartbreak of the college experience.

ABRAMS: I started writing this thing and talked about it with Matt Reeves, and it ended up being the show *Felicity*, which he and I created together and produced together.

HOFFMAN: *Felicity* was a breakout hit – not just for its young star, Keri Russell, but for Matt and J.J..

ABRAMS: I ended up writing a pilot for ABC for the show *Alias* and then directing that pilot. We had that show on, and while both shows were on at the same time, I would be in the editing room until crazy hours, and it just felt like it was eating me up, and I didn't quite know what I created.

I remember talking to Steve McPherson, who at the time was the head of Touchstone Television, and he said to me, "It doesn't have to be just you." He was like, "You could start a pod," he called it, and I had never really even heard that term at the time. I was like, "What do you mean?" He was like, "You could start a company." I was like, "Really?"

So, I called my agent at the time, and I said, "So, Steven McPherson said I could start a pod." He was like, "Yeah."

Anyway, the reason it got me excited was not because I wanted to start something for the sake of it but was because I thought, "Oh, could I get help?"

HOFFMAN: This realization is more common than you might think. Not everyone starts off with the idea that they might become an entrepreneur. But then they find something they want to make happen in the world and discover that entrepreneurship is how they can make it happen.

ABRAMS: It was really about just having people that I could not just bounce ideas off of but who I would ask to please work on this or work on that and make some room. As a writer, you're doing all of that stuff yourself. There's no delegating as a writer. You know what I mean?

You're on your own. As a director, I started to realize, "Oh, there's this amazing thing called the crew." And, you rely on all those people. You're not meant to light and to dress and to ... You're hiring and working with, collaborating with people who are ideally elevating everything and showing you things that you never expected and making scenes better than you could have imagined. And I thought, "God, to do that with a company would really be an amazing thing."

HOFFMAN: J.J. may have called it a "pod," but Masters of Scale listeners will recognize this new arrangement for what it was: a startup. And in typical startup fashion, the beginning was a bit chaotic.

ABRAMS: When I was doing *Alias*, I had to turn the show in on a Monday, and they said, "You need a production card, because you have it in your contract you have a production card."

HOFFMAN: If you're not a filmmaker, a production card is that brief, animated sequence that shows a production company's logo. In films you see them at the beginning; in television, they come at the end.

ABRAMS: I didn't have a company, and I thought about this children's book I wanted to do called *Bad Robot*. I thought, "I'll just call it *Bad Robot*." So, I designed and animated the *Bad Robot* that weekend.

HOFFMAN: Chances are, you've seen this robot before. Its head is made of red metal, and it looks a little troubled. It tears through the grass, storm clouds gathering behind it.

ABRAMS: We had at the time two kids, we now have three, and they were our and five, so I had them both say, "Bad Robot" together into my laptop.

KIDS: BAD ROBOT!

ABRAMS: I put that on that little animation in After Effects that I did, and I turned it in and I thought, "I'll change it later." I just never changed it and it just became the company.

HOFFMAN: The sequence is not just a classic, it's undeniably magic. And it came out of a constraint entrepreneurs are very familiar with: lack of time. Some of our best, most unexpected ideas come when the clock's running out, and you need to come up with something, fast.

But a deadline alone isn't what made this now-iconic sequence. J.J. reached back into his vault of ideas, and found one that brought him joy, and he kept joy at the heart of his very first branding efforts. The hard deadline gave J.J. permission to go in a more whimsical direction. He just didn't have time to talk himself out of it.

HOFFMAN: And, how did you approach building a company? Because obviously the classic entrepreneurial path is I know I need a company, I'll read leadership books. Whereas you're already embedded in the industry and you're already extending the set of production relationships you have. Now, you're learning new skills. You're becoming the conductor and the chorus manager with the director as opposed to the cellist.

How did you approach, "Okay, now I'm building a company. This is a different pattern." The company culture, there's physical space. How did you adapt and iterate and start approaching that intentionally?

ABRAMS: It's such a good question. The honest answer is I should be reading those leadership books because I'm sure there's some really helpful things to glean. What happened was it started very small.

HOFFMAN: But soon, Bad Robot became much more – a physical space designed to incubate magic.

ABRAMS: We ended up buying a building in Santa Monica that we completely redesigned. Someone I went to Sarah Lawrence with, Andy Waisler, was the architect.

HOFFMAN: Andy Waisler teamed up with another architect, Joey Shimoda, to convert a former carpet cleaners in Santa Monica to an 18,000-square-foot creative playground. The building itself is cryptically named the National Typewriter Company. And inside are not just the expected

screening rooms and editing bays, but also a recording studio, walls of collectibles, a waiting lounge full of art supplies to encourage guests to draw, and a full-service maker's workshop.

ABRAMS: All of a sudden with this building, we had other things like a music studio, and we had an artwork shop. We have the laser printers, and we have the large format printers and the bookbinders and the silk screens. We have all these things to make stuff there.

HOFFMAN: There are so many hidden delights in this workspace, from mysterious signs to levers too expose secret doors. To honor Bad Robot's spirit of intrigue, we're choosing not to give TOO much away. Instead, I'll have J.J. share a story about the kind of delightful sleight-of-hand his magical workshop can pull off. And it starts with a visit to Elon Musk, and a decision to make him a hat.

ABRAMS: I read that he was starting this company that was going to dig holes to create tunnels. I sent him an email, and I said, "I want to come see this hole," which I know sounds weird. So, I went over to see the hole, and there was this giant boring machine. He said, "I'm going to do this thing. It's going to be called the Boring Company, and he showed me this hole, which was really not a very impressive hole, but it was at least the beginning of another one of his making a fantasy into a reality.

HOFFMAN: Staring into that boring hole inspired something in J.J.. Maybe it was the untapped potential the hole represented. Or maybe it was just the playfulness of a bad pun. Either way, an a-ha moment struck.

ABRAMS: I went back to the Bad Robot office, and I had an idea for a really boring logo for the Boring Company. So, I made up the logo, and I gave it to our workshop, and I said, "Is there any way we could make this hat today?"

Beth in the workshop took the logo and made the hat, and an hour later said, "Here's the hat." It's the reason we have the workshop, which is to say it drives me crazy when all the cool shit you have to send out for. I don't want to, like, have awesome stuff be made in some mysterious other location.

She made the hat. I had it messenger-ed over to Elon that day.

And, he emailed back and he said, "Can I have this?" I said, "Yes." He made it the logo of his company. He actually started selling the hats. I think he sold a quarter of a million of them in a week or something insane. The point though is that he showed me this thing that was really fun, and I loved the idea that I could respond to him with gratitude with something that was a physical object instantly, or faster than you might think. And, I know that making a hat is not a miracle or – no pun – rocket science but it was one of those things that, like, it was fun to get to take advantage of this workshop that Bad Robot has.

There's some great artists that work there, and it was just one of those little things, the fact that he made it the actual logo of the company I did not expect.

HOFFMAN: The spirit of play that inspired J.J. to make the hat was something he could act on immediately because of the way Bad Robot was set up. The structure of the company actually helped a moment of serendipity turn into a reality.

But what happens when a moment of inspiration turns into reality way, way too fast?

[AD BREAK]

HOFFMAN: We're back with J.J. Abrams. When we left him, he was telling us about the ways Bad Robot is able to cultivate a sense of play and mystery, for the entire team. One way is to create it in their unique physical environment.

But at the time of our conversation, the Bad Robot offices had been shuttered for over a year due to COVID. And yet, Bad Robot as a company hasn't lost that spirit of play.

When I asked J.J. what he and his team do to cultivate creativity, it wasn't the offices he mentioned.

HOFFMAN: What kinds of things do you do in Bad Robot to keep limber, keep magical, keep serendipitous?

ABRAMS: First of all, we have any number of movies or series happening at one time, and we're lucky to get to collaborate with people who are of all different varieties of storyteller, and they bring a different energy all the time. So that by default keeps you a little bit flexible in that way.

I do think that when the people who are coming together don't look the same, the value of that is monumental because you think you know what it is that some other person who doesn't look like you might think or might want or might believe. You don't.

HOFFMAN: In other words, you can create conditions favorable to magic, but you also have to invite a variety of magicians.

ABRAMS: If you're talking about movies or shows, you're talking about an army. It is never one person, and even when there is the auteur, even when that auteur is famously and typically a male raving maniac on a set who's wielding their power loudly and viciously, it's not that one person. I can not stress enough that any work that we have done at Bad Robot that has been any good, and I know that we've done some that is, and we've done a bunch that isn't, but I will say that any work that we've done that is any

good is only a result of that entire campaign of people that are working together to make something great.

HOFFMAN: Nowhere has this method been more apparent than in the creation of one of Bad Robot's biggest successes: the genre-bending, zeitgeist-catching TV series, *Lost*.

The story takes us back to 2004. ABC was looking to develop a new show, and they tried pairing J.J. up with another TV writer, Damon Lindelof.

ABRAMS: We were pitched an idea that was just survivors of a plane crash, and they said, "We would need an outline in a week." I had never met Damon. I just heard about him. He came in on that Monday, and we just started writing this outline.

Damon and I ended up writing this outline that we turned in on Friday. I got a call that Saturday from Lloyd Braun, who had pitched this thing to me. He was the head of ABC at the time, who said, "It's greenlit. We're doing it." I was like, "What the hell are you talking about?" He said, "We need the completed pilot done in 12 weeks." Not the script, the whole thing to be shot and edited and scored. It was crazy town.

HOFFMAN: Taking a page from the classic entrepreneur's playbook, they decided to move faster than they thought they could. J.J. and Damon would write the pilot script, and J.J. would direct. But to pull it off, they would need to stack processes that normally happen sequentially, which had an interesting effect on the script itself.

ABRAMS: We started writing the script while we started location scouting, while we started casting. We knew, for example, there would be a couple that didn't speak English. We thought maybe they'd be German, and then we met Yunjin Kim, and then we thought, "Oh, they should be Korean." I saw an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and Jorge Garcia was in a scene. I thought, "Oh my God, that guy's amazing. He's got to be on the plane."

And, all of a sudden, he was Hurley, and we started casting people and writing things to the people we were casting and taking trips to Hawaii for location scouts, writing on the plane, which was a really creepy thing when you're writing *Lost*. And then, figuring out while we're there maybe there should be a polar bear. It was insane, and before we knew it, we were shooting.

HOFFMAN: Believe it or not, this story gets even crazier. We don't have time to get into every twist and turn, but you can catch the entire exchange in the complete interview, which is available to our members. Go to mastersofscale.com/membership to learn more.

Suffice it to say, J.J., Damon, and a vast production team pulled off the seemingly impossible. An impeccably structured, relentlessly mysterious, two-hour ensemble pilot. ABC loved it; test audiences loved it; and *Lost* went on to air for six seasons. The magic of the show spread to its

massive fan base, who created entire multiverses of fan fiction and online resources. And the rest was television history.

And it came so close to never happening.

ABRAMS: But the thing about it is you can get fooled. It was a perfect storm of Damon and this idea and the two of us as new friends and colleagues suddenly working together, whatever we brought to it. The great Sarah Caplan was the producer, the locations that we had, weird things while we were shooting like it was raining and actually helping a storyline that we would not have done the same way had it not been raining.

All these crazy things happening, and I just don't think it's the rule you follow where you say, "We'll give every show 12 weeks." It's like, "No, no, no. Not the moral." I feel like those constraints can be incredibly exciting, and they can also be awful. I've been in both situations, and I keep promising myself I'll never do that again. It doesn't usually end happily, that story.

HOFFMAN: Yes, and it's part of the reason why it's told as the survivor bias, speaking of *Lost*. When it does work so magically, it's like, "Look, it can work magically."

ABRAMS: Exactly. You think, "That's the way we can do it now." It's like, "No, no, no. Don't do that. Huge mistake."

HOFFMAN: This is a lesson many startups stumble on, so it bears repeating: just because you pulled off a feat with an insane degree of difficulty, doesn't mean you need to recreate those same conditions to succeed!

It sounds obvious, right? But too often, founders come away from a close call thinking that constant, extreme pressure is the key to success. Because look at the amazing things it made the team do! But this can lead to bad work habits at best, or even dangerous gambles with your team's mental and physical safety.

The "survivor-bias" I mentioned to J.J. is a real thing. Success imprints on us more strongly than failure. We over-value the memory of that time we took on something crazy and it worked, and shrug off all the times we tried something crazy and it didn't. Because of course it didn't!

So if it isn't the crushing pressure of time, what really makes a team pull together and excel? The answer isn't exotic, or even surprising. Creativity, cooperation, a sense of ownership, shared goals. These are things you can cultivate without the ticking clock. But how?

ABRAMS: I just think it's about kind of being relentless in trying to get to that magical thing, that sixth sense certainly in the creative world that I think is just priceless but is so real is the chills.

When you get the chills, you can't deny it. When you just are physically feeling the hairs stand up on the back of your neck, and that feeling of "Oh my God, I am actually moved." It no longer becomes an exercise. It's no longer an intellectual thing. It's an actual physical ... You're being touched by the potential of something.

HOFFMAN: J.J.'s right, and, as you probably know, it's not just something that happens in the creative sector. Every field has its own version of the chills. It's that moment when you sense the potential of an idea.

But you can't just put "Get the chills" on your to-do list. You can't make it a quarterly deliverable. Rather, you need to make your company a place where the chills can happen.

This is a challenge that only gets trickier when you start to scale, and a more robust infrastructure makes life more stable, but also more predictable. As this happens, how do you keep cultivating the unexpected? How do you keep from becoming, well, a boring company? J.J. has somewhat of a contrarian take.

ABRAMS: The truth is I never really had a handle on what it is to truly manage and lead a company until I started working more closely with Katie, who had worked at companies and had a sense of it and wasn't coming at it from a folly, creative, what-if place.

She was coming from a far more practical, these are things you need. You need to have reviews with people. You need to have a bonus schedule. People need to have titles. They need to know who they are. Things that I'm like, "Really? Does that have to..." And, of course, it's easy for me just being some creative schmuck who just wants to come in and tell stories and make fun stuff. Of course, she's right on all counts.

I didn't realize we needed an HR department. The list of things I didn't understand that were necessary, and then Katie started this thing called Good Robot within Bad Robot, which is our social impact arm. I will say that, with no exaggeration, I think that much, if not most, of the culture building, of the pride by association at the company is through the work that Good Robot does. Of course, you look at a spreadsheet of the company and you say, "Well, is this really necessary?"

Technically, I guess it's not. But technically isn't always the way to look at what a company needs and what builds a culture and what makes people not just loyal but give their best and show up feeling seen and safe and free to do their best possible work.

HOFFMAN: This may be one of the cleanest explanations I've heard yet on why building protocol and infrastructure doesn't mean the death of spontaneity and magic at a business. It can actually be quite the opposite. Creating a measure of security for your employees is part of how you earn their trust. And work created with trust is almost always better and more sustainable.

Also, trust is what allows you to get your team's true opinions. This is so valuable. Giving an employee a fixed title doesn't mean you need to restrict them to a single lane.

Fundamentally, Bad Robot is built on collaboration. House rules say, team members are not just allowed, but encouraged, to nominate changes, even late into production. Core to their ethos is that a great "a-ha moment" can come from anywhere.

ABRAMS: Sometimes bringing in people you might not expect at an early level to get their feedback can weirdly start a dialogue where you are being inspired. I remember it happening on the first *Star Trek* movie we did, where we were cutting the movie and working on it and trying to find it, and this editor, Jenn Horvath, cut a trailer, and we have a bunch of trailers that just weren't feeling any good, and every time I saw one of those trailers, my heart sank and I thought, "Oh. We're dead. Worst thing ever."

And, Jenn Horvath cut a trailer with music that she found and all that stuff, and I saw it, and it was this moment where I'm like, "Oh, that's what the movie needs to be," which is to say, "Yes, we already shot the movie", we were cutting it, but seeing it from another point of view, she told me what we needed to do in terms of just the spirit of it. It might have changed things here and there by degrees but the point is it was a seemingly outside-in thing that then from inside out was critical. So, I just think sometimes having a voice that is maybe not the one you might expect would be in the room where it happens, having them there, he or she will say something that might just turn your head.

HOFFMAN: This is such a practical lesson any entrepreneur can use, right now. Make space for the unexpected by inviting in other perspectives, including those that are deliberately outside your normal process.

ABRAMS: If we make anything at Bad Robot, it's mistakes, and we're always learning from them, or trying to.

One of the things we're doing lately is saying: Can we use the different divisions within Bad Robot to be additive and comment on what the others are doing so that if something is happening in theater, what do the TV people think about that and what do they say? Same with features and games or music, and finding a way for the company to be less siloed and less protective of what they're doing.

Because I think that there is a bit of territorialism that comes with companies and people don't really want to share their projects or their things. But, I'd much rather play out mistakes loudly within the family than have it play out even more loudly outside the family.

HOFFMAN: Yes.

ABRAMS: So, I feel like there are all sorts of things that we try to do to ask opinions, ask outside opinions, have different eyes on things when available, whether it's scripts or cuts and try and get honest opinions, because that's a harder and harder thing to find the more insulated you get.

HOFFMAN: Yeah, because that's actually one of ways that I think we got to know each other, and one of the things that I've discovered about your storytelling process. In order to resonate genuinely, the call that I most often get from you is: I'm trying to solve this problem, who are the people I should talk to? I need another voice.

ABRAMS: Yeah, you're incredibly helpful with that. And by the way, if you weren't, I wouldn't call so much.

HOFFMAN: No, no. But, I actually think it's a great lens of understanding that your view of the storytelling and how you get to the magic is not the individual auteur but how do you reach that wide range of voices, finding the voices that you bring together in some chorus or music together to get that story, and that that's part of the angle of it. And that always means: don't overly believe yourself, always be looking out as a way of doing it, and that's one of the things that I derivatively have learned from you on storytelling.

ABRAMS: That's really sweet to hear, and I'm grateful. I feel like I think there's nothing more deadly than being incurious, and I think we all like to think that we're curious and then I think if you look, you'd see that we probably talk more often than we listen. And, I know it's a thing I'm working on.

HOFFMAN: Making room for magic isn't just a luxury, it's an essential part of entrepreneurship. But it's also one of a founder's enduring joys. Building the conditions for discovery gives your team a reason to show up, knowing that the next a-ha moment could be right around the corner.

I'm Reid Hoffman. Thanks for listening.