David: Are you really going to make me walk in this weather? It looks pretty nasty out.

Karin: Yeah, but it only looks bad. See, there's not a ton of umbrellas out there.

David: Let's do this.

Karin: All right, let's do this.

David: Let's go.

David: So why are we walking on this drizzly day?

Karin: It's where all my good and sometimes bad ideas come from, is this time where I only focus on this.

David: So most of your ideas don't come from meetings or sitting at your desk or banging your head, literally, against your wall like I do?

Karin: No, I mean those are important things to keep projects moving and to make sure that people are learning their craft in design, but I'm not sure it's where genuine inspiration comes from, right?

David: Okay. Do you feel like you've had your best ideas when walking?

Karin: The thing about ideas is that they're hard to pinpoint and they kind of sneak up on you when you're walking. It's not always like this moment of actual inspiration. You get done with a walk or I arrive someplace and this thing that used to be sort of subliminal becomes liminal and then it usually formulates itself pretty quickly after that.

David: Oh, so like the idea comes after the walk but it wouldn't come without the walk?

Karin: Correct.

David: Got it.

Karin: So it's not like being struck by lightning. It's something that needs to marinate and I think that walking is that sort of, that time where you're giving things space. It's not compressed, where when I'm in a meeting or if I'm in the studio or something, it's this very time blocked thing where you have to be on-demand creative or on-demand inspirational. And that's not the same thing as sort of a natural emergence of ideas and creativity.

David: So you're making me walk in the rain and I'm not guaranteed an epiphany on this walk.

Karin: No, maybe not. But maybe later. Maybe later you'll get one. [LAUGHTER]

David: Okay

David: I’m David Zax and welcome to Creativity Unlocked, the show designed to unleash your potential at work. Creativity Unlocked is a new collaboration between Fast Company and Microsoft 365. Today’s episode: A Walk On the Wildly Creative Side.

David: We live in a world that’s constantly demanding us to be more creative, but also a world that seems designed to drain us of creativity. With endless meetings and deadlines and distractions, how do we find ways to step back and engage our imagination; to truly listen and build on a colleague's ideas; and to slow down so that we’re faster on our feet when we need to be? So come join us as we explore the solutions that help some of Fast Company’s Most Creative People.

David: The key to unlocking your creativity may be in your two feet. That’s right, it’s that simple. It’s right in front of your nose, or, below your nose. In this episode we talk to several people in business who rely on this trick that anyone can use: to slow down a little bit, to walk.

David: At Frog Design they spend much of their days brainstorming. They’re a global design and strategy firm which means that companies come to them for ideas - ideally brilliant ideas that solve the company's problems or lead to new products and services in sectors from health care to consumer electronics to finance... it's a lot of pressure. So how does frog do it? How do the people at Frog keep coming up with something new and amazing? Well Karin Geifer, an executive creative director likes to go for a walk.

Karin: See? It's not so bad. It stopped raining.

David: It seems like it's clearing up a little, maybe.

David: Karin and I met at the Fast Company offices and then we set out.

David: Okay, so I'm going to say something that I haven't said since I was like one or two years old probably. Teach me how to walk.

Karin: Teach you how to walk. I think-

David: Like what are we doing right now?

Karin: I think you're thinking too much.

David: Oh.

Karin: But I think you just follow your feet, right?

David: Just follow your feet.

Karin: Just follow your feet.

David: Easy enough, we put one foot in from the other, but as we walked I started to realize it was obviously about more than my feet.

David: You know, should I be attending to this in some way and sort of like, learning from it?

Karin: I think as a designer your job is just to build as big a visual vocabulary as you can. So that might be something. That kid's shoes were blue and they were pretty cool. For me, it's this thing of, "Huh, I didn't know that was there," or, "Oh look, that building's finally getting renovated." It's almost like a running talk track. I have to admit that I'm not in Lower Manhattan at this time of day usually, certainly not in the rain, as we point out. [laughter] But I am struck by how the city is constantly changing, which in itself is fascinating, right?

Karin: Let's turn here. I think mostly, for me, the thing is, is that there's no judgment. Everybody walks at their own pace depending on what you're doing in the day. Normally I'd be walking much faster than this but actually this is what I'm doing right now. Everybody can do it, to some extent or another. Kids are learning how to do it.

David: It helps put things in perspective in a crowded environment. You're seeing people from all walks of life, if you will-

Karin: All "walks"?

David: Karin and I had been walking for about fifteen minutes when we turned a corner and down the street we saw the edge of a structure poking out from behind some buildings. We were looking at something called the Oculus; it's a new building but it really looks more like a massive sculpture by the architect Santiago Calatrava. It resembles a bird's wing in flight and we were getting an unusual perspective on it: we were seeing just the tip of the wing poking out from behind the buildings.

David: If you're designing a product that's intended for a broad market, does the walk help you sort of, remind you that there's more to humanity than the couple dozen people in your office?

Karin : Yeah, I think that's a great way of putting it. You look and you're like, "Huh, I wonder if they meant for that to do that." So we've got the PATH Station peaking out a little bit down the street here.

David: Oh yeah, it's a nice view.

Karin: "Oh, I wonder if that was intended," and the answer's surely it was. But these are things that need to be considered, right? This wasn't the money shot of the beautiful building. This is the side approach on a street. Right?

David: Oh, that's cool. It's not the postcard view of it by any stretch of the imagination, but you're saying that on this walk you've become aware that the architect probably took this view into consideration as well, right?

Karin: Right, exactly. So when you design an object or a product or something, the back of the product is just as important as the front of the product. How a plug goes into a product is just as important as what the buttons look like. This is, I think, what designers are always doing, is just looking at those finer details, asking why those things are happening.

David: So I wanted to ask you, I do walk sometimes. I think when I walk, I'm kind of stuck in my head though, like, I could easily bump into this pole right here or this lady who just passed us. Am I doing it wrong?

Karin: No, I think that's great.

David: Oh okay.

Karin: I mean, I think- the thing for me is is that walking is an inherently social thing, even if you're not being sociable.

David: So what are some creative challenges you're wrestling with?

Karin: One of the design challenges I'm dealing with right now... And it's a big one, is- What are the design implications of interfacing with AIs? This is a big question because now we have to figure out what are the new tools and rules for these entities?

David: By the way when Karin says interfacing with AI's she's talking about artificial intelligence but she also means things like smart phones, smart listening devices; it's all about the ways we interact with that.

Karin: These are actual design challenges that people forget. Somebody had to design that, it just didn't automagically happen, right? So you have to design how I interface with something like that and historically, it's been with buttons and screens. We're trending away from that. Right now it's one of those things that we're dealing with which is: If I can't touch the object because it doesn't exist, because it's an AI, to make it do something with voice, sometimes I don't always wanna say something, right? So is there an opportunity to use gesture which would be swipe or head nod or something like that and these are all new design tools that we have to work our way through. When I mean tools, I mean genuinely tools. I think that this is, sort of, the industrial design of the 21st century and it may not be creating a physical object, it maybe, you know, how we interface with those objects.

David: That is really exciting. I'm especially excited to have learned the word "automagically".

[Karin laughs]

David: I see our feet led us back to the Fast Company offices. We've come to the end of our little journey and I'm wondering, did you automagically-

Karin: Solve it?

David: Have any epiphanies with respect to the next generation of how we interact with computers?

Karin: Um. I don't know that I have but I'm getting closer.

Karin: How bout you? Did you have any epiphanies? I mean, I think you might be better at walking than you've let on.

David: I think you told me not to expect an epiphany during the walk but I'm definitely gonna be disappointed if I don't have one in the next 5 to 10 minutes.

David: OK I'll just tell you now, I didn't have a big epiphany five or ten minutes later, but I did enjoy the walk with Karin and over the next few days I started to think about my walks in a different way… I started to get out of my head. I started to pay attention to my surroundings. I tried to appreciate little moments of serendipity. So I decided I want to dig into this more: how could walking help me solve problems in my life and work? Specifically now in this era when I am constantly connected to my phone, to my email; when mentally at least I am sprinting all day long from one task to the next.

Jon: I actually went on one of these yesterday.

David: This is John Friedman a general manager at Microsoft. John leads design in research for some of the most used work applications on the planet: Word, Excel, Powerpoint. And he spends a lot of his day on the Microsoft campus outside Seattle taking walks incredibly productive walks.

Jon: I had a colleague of mine reach out and say, "Hey, we're trying to figure out how to think about ambient voice intelligence and really start to tune all of Microsoft 365 around each individual. We're trying to figure out how to approach doing this in a way that's really grounded and can build off of our service today."

Jon: I said, "Hey, meet me outside at one o'clock, let's go for a walk." A couple of people met me outside and we ended up walking for about 45 minutes. The conversation certainly meandered around a bunch of different things, but at the

end of it we had a very clear picture of the next step we could take to go learn and grow our thinking in this space.

David: This notion of going on one on one walks, taking meetings while you walk, so to speak. Whether it's to take a break or whether it's actually to talk out a problem, is there an art to that? To the scheduled walk with a partner?

Jon: The walks I take with other people tend to be more ad hoc. There is often a lot of subjects to talk about, maybe even an overarching subject that we want to cover, but we allow space and time to not actually go down the list of checkpoint things we want to talk about, but let the conversation flow.

Jon: Typically it starts with some just general observation of things around you. "Gosh, it's a really nice day out." "It's nice to get outside." "I loved these woods when it's sunny." That's kind of where the conversation starts. The big ideas, the big thoughts, the big problems start to come out. "How do we do this?" "Can you clarify?" "what are we trying to accomplish here?"

Jon: It turns into a discussion and in many ways when I go on one on ones with people they usually are looking for answers, and instead when you're walking what you do is your explore the problem area together. And allow it to sort of open up for a while. Once it's opened up you sort of have a shared context. This is sort of an amazing thing. We tend not to do these in meeting rooms together. But actually allowing the conversation to start with shared context and kind of bigger thoughts, and then finding a path forward for the conversation. For us, that's what happened yesterday when we went on a walk.

David And that path forward John says, it often leads to a more creative place. Like Karin John believes that new ideas and new thinking often spring from being away from the office away from an all too familiar environment.

Jon: What I've found in my own sort of creative process and leadership role is my best thinking comes when I give my brain a break. We often think when we're under stress and we want to be professional, we want to do what we think we're supposed to do, that we're supposed to put our head down and stay inside and crank through our long list of things to do. But what happens to me, and I think what happens to a lot of people is you just get really stuck in your frontal lobe. You're sort of rattling around the same things over and over again. Even a five minute walk outside, just a little bit of a break will change your perspective dramatically.

David: Is there a story behind how you developed that habit?

Jon: I started walking probably because I got busier and busier. And it just dawned on me that being outside is a better place to connect with people, and a better place to sort of step outside of where my head is. Kind of break a cycle of thinking that might be stuck when I'm in the same sort of spaces all day long.

David: Do you have a specific story that comes to mind of a moment, a breakthrough that happened after a walk?

Jon: I think one for me, a big breakthrough sort of in my life, in my career came after about seven years working on different new consumer incubations at Microsoft. I came in doing industrial design and I got really excited about hardware, software, services, how they all come together. And I got to work on a lot of new cool products.

David: But those projects weren't satisfying to John, either because they never launched or they didn't last. That's just the nature of business and well the process of innovation. But it wear on John a little.

Jon: When I kind of got tired and realized, this isn't working, this thing that I'm doing is not working. I had a good mentor who said to me, "hey, take a break. Think about what it is you want to do and...

Jon: I took a lot of walks. I remember, it was actually summertime so I remember meeting a lot of people at work to talk through life, to talk through the things that I've learned. It dawned on me that there was an opportunity to think about how I approached creativity and product development in a way that could unblock me.

David: So, then you took like little sabbaticals sort of, and went for these walks with colleagues to really step back and think?

Jon: Yeah.

Jon: The ah ha moment for me was I was too vetted and married to the new shiny object versus making the thing that was there that lots of people relied upon every day great. That's what I was stuck on for a bunch of years. I kept wanting to do the new and next thing versus making the thing that needed to be great, great.

David: And you sort of realized, you know what, i can bring my super powers to work on something that is already at Microsoft, has users, but can grow and can be refined and perfected.

Jon: Yeah, that's a good way of thinking about it. It was a redefinition of what is sexy? In my mind, the thing that was sexy in my early career was this new amazing object that was going to change the world and just blow up. The reality is, when it comes to design, helping people every day in their life is actually the sexiest thing you can go do. The walks helped me change that mindset.

David: Cool. So among your many responsibilities you manage a lot of people, right? I think you lead a team of over 250 creatives, right?

Jon: Yes, that's correct.

David: I'm curious, so you were a master of the one on one walk, but you would be taking one every day if you were going to meet with everyone of your team mates. I'm curious, have you sort of, tried to scale, what you do, how you encourage people that you manage to go out on their own one on one walks and try to emulate the experience that you had yesterday on their own?

Jon: Yeah, absolutely. Actually one of the nice things about our campus, is it actually encourages this to happen in some ways on it's own. I've seen, in our campus, a lot of people kind of take those walks from building to building with another person in and ad hoc way on my team. I've seen a lot of people go take meeting outside. We have these new tree houses that connect in between the nature walkway and so, I see a lot of people walking to those, sitting up in the trees and sort of discussing or silently reflecting.

David: Okay. Well I want to come visit your treehouse someday at Microsoft.

Jon: There’s some really amazing little tree villages going on here. It really is to encourage people to get outside and move around.

David: You know, we've talked a lot about one on one walks. I am just curious, are both those kinds of walk important to you? Do you get different things out of a solo walk versus a team walk?

Jon: Oh, absolutely, and I go on a bunch of solo walks too, I tend to put some earphones in and just blast some music and walk faster when I'm by myself. Something about moving quickly, getting my body moving, listening to music kind of gets me into a flow.

David: One question I have, I mean, what is the role of technology in all of this? We’re talking about something that has existed literally as long as human beings have walked upright: walking. And what role does walking and sort of the creativity that walking can spur play in this highly technological future?

Jon: As we invest further in things like artificial intelligence we have to think about the human need. The human need to create is high. And as technology can do more and more of the basic tasks and we don't have to do them, the thing we double down on is who we are as humans. Doubling down on empowering our creativity is our most important thing. We've been doing some amazing research on thinking about the whole human. So, we go to workplaces and we talk to people about themselves. Their emotional state, their physical state, not just are they productive and can they knock down 30 things on a list.

Jon: And what we've found is that people who think about their whole self, their emotional state, their mental state, the physical state, and take time to go for walks and take care of themselves are much more productive and achieve at a higher level. And the companies that encourage it also achieve at a higher level. It's got us stepping back and saying, "Hey, our job isn't to make people more

productive by getting more tasks done in a day. Our job is actually to empower people to be creative." It's technology’s job as we design it for humans, to give them time and space and give them breaks. To actually put technology down to help them be better creatives.

David: So, how does that look like in practice, because I mean, so much of technology today is about maximizing time on site, making products that are sticky. What is Microsoft going to do to make sure technology is driving creativity and helping us?

Jon: I remember the first time I played Nintendo Wii and I got very addicted to it with my children, and we were -- I was losing hand over fist in bowling to my five year old at the time. The thing told us to go outside. It told us to take a break. Nintendo didn't have a responsibility to do that from a business perspective. But they chose the responsibility from a human perspective.

Jon: We have the same responsibility at Microsoft. We have to think about when people are stuck. We have to think about how to shut the noise off. You could imagine, we could think about ways to help mute the world. Help you focus on the one thing that matters. Maybe encourage you to go for a break because we know you have time right now and we know you'd benefit from it.

Jon: I think our responsibility is far beyond just the cells in Excel to help you mathematically compute things. I think it's about giving you the space and time to connect new neurons in the back of your brain that help you think better, so when you go back into Excel next time, your ideas are better.

David: That's great. Thank you Jon so much for your time today.

Jon: Oh, thank you so much. It was great chatting.

David: After our conversation I kept thinking about that sense of corporate responsibility that John had talked about. It actually reminded me of something that Karin from frog had told me after our walk - about the responsibility she feels as the leader of a creative team.

Karin: In my role at Frog I can see teams just struggling, and I'm like when was the last time you guys were out of this project room? You guys need to get up, and go. We work in Dumbo, and sometimes it's as simple as just taking everybody out for ice cream, or sending somebody on a quick errand. Just to disrupt the pressure cooker of being in a team room with post-it notes, and the expectation of creativity happening. Sometimes you have to gut creativity out, and sometimes you just have to side eye it. Knowing when to do that is how you evolve in your career.

David: How do you fine tune your gut or your radar for when you choose one over the other? How do you know, okay we got to let this room out and go for a walk?

Karin: I think it's something that I'm still learning. I have to help the studio understand that as well by being the one that usually catalyzes it and giving permission to have others do that as well.

David: So we've heard about the benefits of getting outside from two very successful creativity walkers. And now? It's your turn. if you're leading a team try giving permission to your colleagues to take these sorts of walks and for everyone else, well I'm giving you permission. So get up and get outside, see what happens. I'm going to do it more myself and I hope to see you out there.

David: Creativity Unlocked is a collaboration between Fast Company and Microsoft 365. Microsoft 365 is a family of offerings designed to unlock the creativity and ingenuity of everyone in an organization. The show is a production of the FastCo. Works team including Chuck Salter, Casie Lesser, and Shannon Boerner. Our editor is Laura Morris. Our music was created by Chuck Lindo. Special thanks to studio center and to Chris Arbisi.

David: Join us next episode as we explore a practice that might not seem to fit in the workplace: improv comedy.

Student 1: My.

Student 2: Advice.

Student 3: Is.

Student 4: Learn.

Student 5: How.

David: To.

Student 6: Eat.

Student 7: Well.

Student 8: Under.

Student 1: Duress.

Student 2: And.

Student 3: Forget.

Student 4: About.

Student 5: Everything.

Chelsea: Alright good good good. [applause]