Slim’s Profile

1. Beginning: The Need to be Understood and the Need to Understand.

“I felt misunderstood, so I became obsessed with understanding.”

Life guided by curiosity

Looking back, my entire life has been guided by a sense of insatiable curiosity to understand people.

I think the reason is because I have felt deeply misunderstood since childhood.

Childhood

I was born in Seoul, Korea, but moved from country to country every 5 years.

The first country I moved to was Cairo, Egypt. It was 6 at the time.

After living in Cairo for 5 years, I moved back to Seoul.

I then moved to Beijing, China for high school.

Then to the US for college, where I have been living for the past 31 years since 1995.

Feeling Misunderstood

Every time I moved to a new country, I felt misunderstood.

I, on the other hand, tried hard to understand the people there.

I felt like I had no other choice, since I considered myself a “foreigner.”

But I felt hurt that others did not reciprocate.

This did not deter me from trying to understand other people, though.

If anything, it fueled my desire to understand why others would not reciprocate.

This helped me develop a great deal of empathy for people with diverse cultural backgrounds from the age of 6.

Choosing a Field of Study

I excelled in mathematics in high school, and I loved to play video games.

So I chose computer science as the subject to pursue in college.

Got accepted to Carnegie Mellon University to study computer science.

Feeling Misunderstood Again

In college, I felt misunderstood again.

I felt that my professors were trying to teach me computer science without really trying to understand me.

Feeling Understood for the first time

Then I met professor Randy Pausch[1].

What I learned from Dr. Pausch was that I didn't have to be interested in computers to learn computer science.

According to him, all I had to be interested in was connecting with other people through shared experiences. Experiences that may include such feelings as joy, sorrow, surprise, or even fear.

For him, the computer was nothing more than a means to that end. It was a medium to facilitate empathy.

And that resonated with me. Profoundly.

It was during this time my lifelong pursuit of understanding and connecting with other people started to come out to the forefront of what I do professionally.

And the word to capture it was "empathy."

Finding MAYA

At the time most computer science students went to work in Finance (i.e. Investment Banking) or Big Tech (i.e. Microsoft).

But meeting Randy and taking his "Building Virtual Worlds" class led me to seek out a company that I saw as having empathy at its core.

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[1] I wrote about my regret with Dr. Pausch, here.

Through recommendation from my advisor at the time, Mark Stehlik, a wonderful human being, I interviewed at a company called MAYA, which stood for “Most Advanced Yet Acceptable.”

During the interview process I felt deeply understood.

Which was an odd experience to have during an interview at the time

Interviews I had at Investment Banks or Big Tech were mostly about testing me.

The interview I had at MAYA felt like they genuinely wanted to understand me.

I felt that the company embodied empathy, so I decided to work there as a software engineer.

What I did at MAYA

MAYA was what we would nowadays call a “deeptech” startup.

Its founder, Pete Lucas, wanted to revolutionize computing through a whole new paradigm he called “Information-centricity.”

It’s basically getting rid of what is commonly accepted as the primary currency of computing like files and applications to make structured information the primary currency of computing then allowing users to directly manipulate such information without the use of applications.[2]

But to bring about such a revolutionary paradigm shift would require a lot of R&D and a lot of money.

The company received DARPA grants, but it was not enough, so it had a consulting arm, which made the money it needed.

By working with clients like Digital Equipment Corporation, it kept funding its efforts to revolutionize computing.

I contributed to both the deeptech R&D as well as the commercial consulting arm.

Understanding “Strategy” as a byproduct of empathy.

What my experience with the commercial consulting arm of MAYA taught me was the meaning of “strategy.”

The consulting arm of MAYA was guided by a philosophy called “human-centered design.”

It is the kind of philosophy that makes people go “Duh!”

But it was counterintuitive to most of our clients at the time.

What most of our clients did was to make whatever products and services they wanted to make, then spent a lot of money on advertising to convince people to buy it.

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[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9F17JrG-SE

“Human-centered design” suggests you do the opposite.

It suggests you find out what products or services people needed so much that they would be excited to buy it. Then make those, so you would have to spend less money and effort on convincing them to buy it.

From my perspective, “human-Centered Design” reframed “business strategy” as being less about winning **against** the competition and more about winning **with** the consumers or the purchasing decision makers who spent money to buy your products & services.

I felt another deep sense of resonance with this, because it aligned with my desire to understand other people. In this case, it was about understanding consumers and the purchasing decision makers enough to find out what they needed.

Developing empathy with the Founder

While the consulting work was fun, the deeper impact MAYA had on me was due to the fact that I worked 1-on-1 with the Founder.

The Founder had a challenge, which was that his vision was not easy to understand for most people. So aligning the organization around his vision was no easy feat.

So while my day job was to be a software engineer who contributed to building the revolutionary technology that he wanted out in the world, I spent a lot of my own personal time to meet him frequently on a regular basis to understand him so I can find ways in which to align the rest of the organization around his vision.

Needless to say, this work resonated with me deeply because it was about understanding the Founder.

I wanted to understand him so well that I could translate that for the other people in the organization so that we all understood each other.

The Burning Question

Working at MAYA gave me much insight into the challenges and struggles of being a Founder.

What I found most surprising was that the primary challenges of being a Founder of an innovative tech startup was not technology. Rather, the challenge revolved around people.

At MAYA, the primary challenge was getting people aligned around the Founder’s vision so that they can realize the vision on behalf of the founder.

“The founder could see something. The challenge was getting everyone else to see enough of what the founder saw that they could act on it.”

This led me to a burning question, which was “Why is the process of innovation so difficult?”

2. Middle: Perspective as the Hurdle to Understanding.

Challenged to Attend Art School

In 2007, I met a wise man & woman at a conference in Beijing. It was through a mutual acquaintance.

Given that I had the burning question in my mind, I complained how difficult the process of innovation was and how the problem was human beings getting in the way.

They challenged me by saying that I perceive people as problems because of the perspective I have.

They challenge me to see from a different perspective.

> *"Maybe people aren't the problem. Maybe the way you're seeing people is the problem."*

Then proceeded to suggest I leave behind the world of "tech" to attend an art school.

The argument being that in order for me to see from a different perspective, it made sense to go embed myself into an environment I considered opposite of science & tech, which was an art school, especially one that uses hands-on craft education.

The "Experiment"

While the suggestion did not resonate with me, it bothered me.

It was the kind of thing that I could not brush off.

The thought rang in my ears that night as I could not fall asleep.

So I eventually decided to conduct an experiment.

The experiment was simple.

I will attend an art class at the nearby Art Institute (there was one right near the office).

If the experience blows me away and forces me to see from a different perspective, then I will drop everything I have, leave behind the world of science & tech, to attend art school.

And the class I chose to take was "Drawing from observation."

Guess what happened?

It blew my mind and forced me to see from a different perspective.

It was the first time I felt that the very thing preventing me from understanding people, may indeed be the perspective through which I was trying to understand them.

The irony of someone who is obsessed with understanding others having a perspective that prevents him from achieving that very goal.

Attending Art School

After that experience, I spent the next year both visiting as many art schools as I could and also preparing the portfolio required to get in.

I eventually decided to and was accepted to attend the Rhode Island School of Design.

After 9 years at MAYA, I was off to a new journey.

The Research

The research I conducted is well documented in my book "The Journey of Realizing Empathy: An Inquiry into the meaning of making."

Long story short, I coined the phrase "realizing empathy."

It was coined in contrast to "having empathy."

"Having empathy" is referring to the potential people have to connect to other people through understanding and appreciation.

"Realizing empathy," on the other hand, refers to an **event**. One that happens by **surprise**.

We **realize** empathy, when we discover a surprising or unexpected way of seeing someone (including ourselves) or something through a sudden realization.

When this happens, it often makes us go "Ah ha!" "Oh..." or "Ha ha ha!" concerning something we either did not or had incorrectly **assumed** to have understood or appreciated enough about that someone (including ourselves) or something.

And what I discovered was that at the heart of **all** innovation was a series of such events.

I say “someone or **something**,” because art school taught me that realizing empathy did not happen only in relation to other people. It happened in relation to **anything**. It was a subjective **experience** we had as human beings. It did not matter who or what the experience was in relation to.

For example, artists who were working alone with raw materials, they often realized empathy with the raw materials they used. I saw this pattern everywhere in art school.

Now, if you are a programmer this shouldn’t surprise you.

Because as a programmer you experience these moments of realizing empathy in relation to the computer, all the time. Debugging is the easiest example, where you realize empathy with the computer’s behavior after spending hours trying to understand its undesirable behavior.

There is a reason why the term “grok” is used among computer scientists.

If you look up “grok,” it uses the word “empathy” in its definition,

Computer scientists intuitively understand that programming is not merely a technical endeavor, it is a deeply psychological one where you are spending much of your time trying to think from the computer’s perspective or the language designer’s perspective or what have you.

> *“I had thought empathy was primarily about understanding another person. Art school made me realize that we can experience this sudden change in perspective with anything.”*

So for me to complain that people were getting in the way of innovation was akin to saying:

I’m willing to spend an exorbitant amount of time and energy realizing empathy with computers, but I’m unwilling to spend even a fraction of that time and energy realizing empathy with people.

4. Discovering Kinship with Founder-CEOs

In 2013, I was fortunate enough to have done a world tour with the book “Realizing Empathy.”

During that time, I came across many Founder-CEOs in the audience who resonated with my journey.

All of them shared the same challenge with “people” and had the same complaint I had toward them.

But what I argued in my book was that people aren’t the problem.

The theory behind realizing empathy is that there is a perspective we are using to see our situation as “problems,” which prevents us from solving the real problem.

And this led some of the Founder-CEOs I met during that time to hire me as their coach.

Thus began my practice as a CEO coach for the past 13 years.

Starting a CEO Coaching Practice

The underlying principle behind my CEO coaching practice was that I was there to help them realize empathy.

The idea was that they would bring me a problem they were having difficulty solving, I would help them see from a different perspective, and they would get value out of my help if that new perspective directly led them to solving that problem.

And I have done that successfully for the past 13 years, specializing in working with Founder-CEOs of tech startups.

3. Recent Development: A New Kind of CEO Peer Group

CEO Peer Groups

Over the past 13 years practicing as a CEO coach, I kept hearing about CEO peer groups.

CEO Peer groups are usually composed of 8-10 CEOs who meet every month to help each other solve whatever problems they have.

Many Founders I knew were members of YPO or other similar membership organizations, where they took part in such CEO peer groups.

But they often complained that most of their peers in these groups were not Tech Founders.

Their peers had built traditional brick and mortar businesses or were doing real estate.

And while most tech founders have a bent toward building products and services that could change the world for the better, many in these peer groups were merely accumulating wealth. So they didn't feel inspired by their peers, either.

So I had the idea of providing a peer group exclusively for tech founders, who were building products and services that could change the world for the better.

And I piloted the first prototype of such a program back in 2021 after the pandemic had hit.

Pilot Test Results

But what I learned from feedback was that they disliked that everyone was living in different countries. Because I had curated people from all round the world.

The monthly meetings being virtual was fine, but they also wanted to be able to meet in real life. But they could not, at least not easily, because people lived very far from each other.

So I had to pick a country.

But I did not know **how** to decide which country, so I felt stuck.

Until I received a suggestion to start it in Korea.

The argument was that there is a high density of Tech Founders in Seoul. And even those who do not live in Seoul tend to live within a couple hour drive from Seoul, which makes it much easier for them to meet in real life.

So in 2023, I launched my first CEO peer group under the name of **Kru**, which is both short for

Crucible and a play on words for Crew.

Value of Peer Groups

The basic value of a peer group arises from the fact that Founder-CEOs feel like there are problems they cannot share with others.

So the peer group becomes a safe space, where they bring problems they feel like they can only share with other Founder-CEOs who not only have wrestled with similar problems, but also have no stake in the outcome, thus neutral.

> To make sure the peer group is indeed a safe space, they make sure there is no conflict of interest (i.e. no competitors, no vendors, etc).
>
> The facilitator also makes sure that there is strict guidance around how to help. For example, giving unsolicited advice is prohibited.

With such a peer group, the burden on the CEO’s shoulders can be lessened because peers are there to help you think through it together.

Without such a peer group, you may feel overburdened with deciding what is the “right” way to solve the problem, by themselves.

Unmet Need

That format alone, I believe, is valuable.

But I don’t think it’s enough for some people.

Having run Kru for 3 years now, I have found that certain members crave more.

Traditional CEO peer groups deal with problems on a monthly basis. Whatever problem they are faced with when the peer group convenes is the problem they address.

To some Founders, this is not enough.

These are Founder-CEOs who have already proven that they can build a growing company, but have reached a point where operating the company they have built is consuming all the attention they need to strategically build what comes **next**.

These are overworked CEOs.

To them, while sporadic problem solving is valuable, what they also want is to make sure they are consistently making progress toward the longer-term strategic objective, not just the problem of the month.

To them, the traditional peer groups merely treat the symptom or act as a bandaid to a much larger problem.

Designing Kru

To fulfil their needs, we do a few things differently at Kru

First of all, our groups are smaller.

Instead of 8 to 10 per group, we are 4 to 6 per group. Roughly half the size.

This allows us to go deeper into each CEO's issues in the same amount of time.

Some worry this reduces diversity of perspectives, which is why curation is even more important for Kru.

Some worry what will happen if members miss a meeting. Well, our attendance is 100%.

Our philosophy around how to prevent members from missing the regular sessions is to make the sessions invaluable, not to cram it with more CEOs so there is redundancy.

Next, we create a shared language around a handful of key business concepts:

1. Company Level Focusing problem
2. Winning Vision
3. Strategy

Company Level Focusing problems is the most pressing problem faced by the company, that the CEO wishes for everyone to use as a focus of their contribution in the mid to long term. The kind of problem that, if not solved, can mean the company stagnates or maybe even becomes extinct.

Winning vision is a vivid description of the different lives they wish to see their customers live, supported by the company's products and services.

Strategy is the company's current theory around how they are going to solve the company level focusing problem, guided by the winning vision.

Before a member is assigned to their Kru, they all go through a process, where the above 3 things have been clarified as much as possible.

So when everyone meets for the first time, everyone shares these 3 things so they each know much more about each other's companies than they could in any other peer group setting.

Then during each monthly session, we also update each other on the progress everyone has made toward solving the focusing problem with the use of weekly leading indicators.

The accumulation of weekly leading indicators give everyone measurable insight into how each other's company is doing.

This gives everyone more context than they can get in any other peer group when it comes to helping each other better diagnose problems and to solve them.

Finally, the members meet 1-on-1 with another person in their kru at least once every 3 months to

1. Share updates to the above 3 things
2. Help each other clarify their top 3 priorities as CEO.

Philosophy

At the heart of Kru's design is the belief that more context leads to better help.

Not just context that is shared once, but one that is continuously updated as things change.

With this additional context that is continuously updated, each member need not explain their situation over and over again.

Everyone already knows the company's Focusing Problem.

They know the Winning Vision.

They know the strategy.

They know what the CEO has identified as their own top priorities.

And they have been watching the leading indicators that tell them whether the company is actually making progress.

So when a new problem arises, the conversation can begin much further downstream.

Instead of:

> "Let me first explain what's happening in my company..."

it can be:

> "Given everything you already know about my company, this happened. I'm trying to figure out what it means and what I should do about it."

That difference is enormous.

The members aren't simply responding to an isolated problem.

They can ask:

> "How does this relate to your Focusing Problem?"
>
> "Is this actually a problem, or is it distracting you from the problem you're supposed to be solving?"
>
> "Does this change your strategy?"
>
> "Is this something you need to deal with personally, or is it something you should delegate?"

And because they know the person as well as the company, they can also see when the CEO is drifting away from the priorities they themselves said were most important.

That is why I think **context is the fundamental unit of value in Kru.**

The more context we accumulate, the more specific the help can become.

And the more specific the help becomes, the less the relationship feels like a generic peer group where people happen to meet once a month and exchange advice.

It becomes a group of people who are actually **accompanying each other's journeys**.

On Track

There is another important consequence of this design.

The goal isn't for a CEO to solve every problem during the monthly session.

The goal is to make sure that, over time, the CEO continues to make progress on the problems that matter most.

A CEO will always have urgent problems.

There will always be fires.

There will always be things that pull them away from the longer-term.

Kru provides a structure that repeatedly brings them back to:

What is problem is the company trying to solve at the corporate level?

Where is the company trying to go?

How are we currently trying to get there?

And what should I be doing, as CEO, to move it forward?

So in a sense, Kru isn't trying to eliminate the chaos of being a CEO.

That's probably impossible.

We're trying to make sure that the chaos doesn't determine what the CEO spends their life doing.

The CEO can step off the track when something urgent requires it.

But they have a track to return to.

And that, ultimately, is what I think makes Kru different from a traditional CEO peer group.

A traditional peer group can help you with **the problem you happen to have this month**.

Kru is designed to help you **continuously make progress on the company you're trying to build.**

And the way we do that is not by giving CEOs better answers.

It's by creating a small group of people who know enough about one another, and stay close enough to one another, that they can actually think together.

And help them get back on track whenever they lose focus.

By helping them realize,

“That’s right. This is where I was going.”

The AI Era

AI has changed the environment in which CEOs are operating.

The cost of creating software has fallen dramatically.

The barriers to entry have fallen.

A very small team can now build something that previously required a much larger organization.

That means the advantages a company has accumulated can become vulnerable much faster.

A company that took years to build can potentially face a new competitor that didn't exist six months ago.

And this doesn't only apply to startups.

It means that even a successful technology company cannot simply assume that what made it successful yesterday will continue to make it successful tomorrow.

The CEO therefore has to spend more time asking:

> What are we actually trying to accomplish?
>
> What vision are we uniquely positioned to realize?
>
> What game are we playing?
>
> Is the strategy that got us here still the strategy that will get us where we want to go?

And then they have to translate those answers into action throughout the organization.

The irony is that the environment also makes the CEO **more operationally distracted**.

There are more possibilities.

More experiments.

More competitors.

More technologies.

More things the company could build.

More things the CEO could react to.

So the danger isn't simply making the wrong strategic decision.

It is **losing the ability to stay focused on any strategic decision long enough for it to matter.**

That's where I think Kru becomes particularly valuable.

It creates a recurring environment in which the CEO has to step out of the stream of immediate events, reconnect with the fundamental problem the company is trying to solve, examine the strategy, and decide what deserves their attention next.

AI makes that discipline more valuable because the world is changing faster.

Next Step

The challenge I now have is bringing this into the US.

Having started it in Korea, I now have to pick a city in the US.

Entropy

I've become increasingly interested in the idea of **entropy**.

In physics, entropy describes the tendency toward disorder.

And while I don't want to pretend that organizational life is literally thermodynamics, I think there is a useful analogy.

Things don't naturally become more coherent.

If you leave an organization alone, you don't get increasing clarity.

You get fragmentation.

People develop different priorities.

Different teams develop different interpretations of the strategy.

The CEO gets pulled into whatever is urgent.

The strategy becomes less clear.

The organization accumulates exceptions.

And eventually, people are all working very hard, but not necessarily toward the same thing.

Coherence requires work.

Clarity requires work.

Alignment requires work.

Focus requires work.

In that sense, leadership is partly an act of continually fighting entropy.

And this is where I see Kru's role.

The Focusing Problem has to remain clear.

The Winning Vision has to remain alive.

The Strategy has to be revisited as reality changes.

The CEO's priorities have to be reconsidered.

And progress has to be observed.

None of these things stays true automatically.

They have to be continuously maintained.

So Kru isn't designed to give CEOs one brilliant answer.

It is designed to create a **system of reinforcement** around the things that tend to decay when nobody is paying attention to them.

You come back every month.

You revisit the important questions.

You update your peers.

You look at what has actually happened.

You notice when you've drifted.

You make a decision.

Then you go back into the company and act.

And three months later, you do it again.

In that sense, Kru is not really about creating certainty.

It's about creating enough **continuity, clarity, and coherence to keep moving through uncertainty.**

Hope

When I started Kru, I thought I was creating a better CEO peer group.

I don't think that's what I want anymore.

I want Kru to become a new kind of institution for Founder-CEOs.

Not a networking organization.

Not a club.

Not a place where CEOs collect contacts.

And not a place where experts tell CEOs what to do.

I want it to become a place where exceptional Founder-CEOs can find a small number of people who will **actually know them and their companies over many years.**

Because I think there is something powerful about continuity.

Imagine joining Kru when your company has 70 people.

The other five CEOs know what you were trying to accomplish then.

They know the strategic decisions you made.

They know what worked.

They know what didn't.

They know what changed.

And five years later, they are still there.

They have watched the company evolve.

They have watched **you** evolve.

At that point, the relationship becomes something very different from a monthly peer group.

It becomes a kind of **long-term thinking infrastructure for the CEO.**

And I want to see how far that idea can go.

Perhaps one day Kru becomes a global network of these small groups.

But I don't want it to become enormous simply for the sake of becoming enormous.

The fundamental unit should remain small.

Four to six people.

Deep context.

High trust.

Continuity.

And a shared commitment to helping one another build something meaningful.

My ambition is not to build the biggest CEO community in the world.

It is to build **the place where a certain kind of Founder-CEO goes when they realize that the company they are trying to build has become too important, too complex, and too consequential to think about alone.**

And if we can do that well, I think Kru can become something that doesn't really exist today.

Not a community.

Not a peer group.

But **a long-term thinking environment for Founder-CEOs.**
