

# Craig Kostelic, Condé Nast



Craig Kostelic, Chief Business Officer of US Advertising and Revenue at Condé Nast, has always been a team player. While playing football in college, he learned that team sports would serve as a good preparation for the real world. “You have a coach who isn’t necessarily on the field with you, but you have to take direction from,” he told Narativ founder Murray Nossel, Ph.D. “You could be doing an awesome job but somebody else isn’t doing their job, and because of that you end up losing.” “Anyone who’s

played football has been humbled many, many times,” he explained.

His experiences as a high-school football player formed the basis for the story generation work he engaged in with Nossel, who coached him in the shaping of the origin story of his leadership style. He would then use that story in a keynote at a departmental gathering meant to explain a strategic shift and reshuffle.

Craig remembers that, growing up, every Sunday afternoon his family would gather in the living room to watch their team play. Early on, he decided to enroll in a team with older kids. “Playing with the older kids will force me to play against bigger and faster competition, and it will get me used to the speed of the game for high school,” he reasoned with his father. Yet, in his sophomore year, after his team endured a humiliating defeat, his coach benched him. Craig cried in the

locker-room shower afterwards, later telling his father that he wanted to change school districts. “Son, you have some physical talent, but you aren’t mentally strong. One thing didn’t go your way. You took the easy way out,” his father told him. “Most people run away from failure; they want to deny its existence. If you want to be successful, not just in football but in life, embrace your failure.” Failure, his father reasoned, when used properly, is the single greatest gift one could ask for.

He heeded his father’s words, to such an extent that, once he finished high-school, he had the words “Blessed Is He Who Accepts Failure Without Despair” tattooed above his heart. Now decades later, Craig returned to those experiences when began working with Murray on a story, Condé Nast was undergoing significant change

and Craig's would be at the helm of a large transition. Several teams that used to work separately were now going to be under the same umbrella. Considering that he found himself overseeing teams that used to operate independently from one another and now had to come together, he wanted his strategy to be "less about individual blame and more about collective accountability." He believed that his experiences on a team were ripe for conveying this message. He sensed that the vulnerability of his story would communicate that message particularly well.

After the keynote that began with the story he created with Murray Nossel, they sat down together to review the engagement. Their conversation touches on themes such as a prevailing culture of insecurity as opposed to vulnerability, which leads to blame and an every-man-for-himself environment; the need for mutual respect and a collaboration-centered approach; and the need to develop a sense of empathy, which, for Craig, is "one of the essential attributes of a leader" and a way to enable employees to work together more collaboratively. How storytelling was pivotal for Craig in supporting these cultural changes is at the heart of the conversation. (Note: This interview took place on DATE, and since then Craig has stepped up to an even broader portfolio at Condé Nast.)

Q

*What is your mission now at Condé Nast, given that the "Lifestyle Group" has many different brands that used to work separately under one umbrella?*

A

The vision here is to have one team with one mission under one roof. How we do that is [by] creating opportunities for one another to be honest and share stories. Everyone is not going to have an identical story, but everyone has a story from childhood in which they were let down or they didn't live up to the potential that they thought

they had. I want to communicate that I've also been through that. I understand that feeling and that pain, but, we have to work, we have to understand what is the silver lining and what are the two

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or three things that we need to learn from those types of experiences, in order to move away from that experience as a better version of who we are.

*Why do you want to tell a story, and why now, when there are so many other things you could be doing?*

To me there is so much change that is happening with our industry. And with all of that change and disruption, sometimes we can feel pressure to deliver short-term quantitative results. It can

be overwhelming for people. A lot of times I think, when the pressure is high, we have a tendency to become isolated, only thinking about ourselves and our own problems and injustices that happen to us alone. The thing to me is that, in order to succeed as an individual, it takes a ton of selfless acts in order to reach that potential. As an individual, in order to reach my potential, I have to care less about myself and care more about others. Sometimes you have to sit back and actually communicate to people how much you give a shit, and how much you care about them.

**Q** So why now? Why is this the moment to be introducing your team to the skill or the skills of listening and storytelling?

**A** If you don't have a playbook or a blueprint, you need to create one. There's a strategic aspect to it, which is crossing t's and dotting i's; of course, we need to do that and be successful at that in order to win. But there's this huge other component of it, which is how can I stop myself from thinking about myself during all of these changes and really give myself to the process, give myself to my team and to other people in order to accomplish something greater?

*One of the obstacles to listening that's going on with a larger team is a pressure to be delivering: "Deliver, we've got to deliver the numbers, the business has to succeed." And in the face of that, you lose sight of yourself and your colleagues. "Soft Skills" is the term that sometimes gets used when describing storytelling. Do you see it in that way? Do you see this as crucial*

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*or something that's nice to have?*

It's hard to overgeneralize, but for me, I think storytelling is an absolute need-to-have. It is a differentiator because ultimately, the difference between winning and losing is about inches. There is a very thin margin between winning that deal or having the best idea or having the best solution and losing out to a competitor. Those "inches" end up being how much you care, how passionate you are, how good of a listener you are, how good of a communicator you are.

*Some people would say that, as the chief business officer of all the brands, it's your responsibility to pull it all together. You have to be the one*

*to create the umbrella and everyone else will just follow you. It seems like your approach is very different than that.*

Good ideas come from everywhere. And usually the people that have the best ideas are the people that are closest to the problems. I usually have to go seek out problems; they aren't landing on my desk because everybody wants to make it seem like they're doing their job and everything is okay. And so, for me, of the utmost importance is creating an egalitarian kind of culture in which everybody feels like they have a seat at the table and they have a voice and they're able to move our business strategy forward based off of their purview and their ideas. What I'm trying to do is create a meritocracy in which everyone has a voice and the voices that care the most and have the best ideas will continue being able to drive the strategy more and more. And, and for me it's really about taking an

aggregate of all the information I'm getting from all the people on my team and using that to help actually make business decisions versus me sitting in my office and making decisions in a silo.

**Q** *It's much more comfortable to rely on a sort of assembly-line mentality about business, where one broken cog in the wheel causes the whole assembly line to break down, therefore you just fix that cog, so it's a very instrumental approach. Whereas this is much more about really recognizing the value of everyone. You can't just be replaced like someone in an assembly line.*

**A** It would be much easier probably in the short term to just wield power and just make declarative statements and just do what I thought we needed to do and not care about the ramifications of that. But again, that has a short-term benefit. And what I'm trying to do is build a long-term culture that is sustainable, year in and year out. And when you're trying to build something like that, it's tough and it can be exhausting. But what's the point of doing this if you're not willing to do that? It feels like cheating myself, cheating these brands, cheating everyone in the organization, you know, and look like sometimes people aren't going to stick around because it's hard to embrace that kind of reality. It's hard to say I fucked up. It's hard to admit that to your boss. It is scary, you know? But ultimately, every mistake that we make or every

problem that we uncover is like this little like token, and as you continue collecting these tokens, it leads you to the ultimate truth or the ultimate promised land.

*So, how do you create that kind of atmosphere where people are going to feel free to show the vulnerability of not knowing?*

It's very challenging: there's a lot of blockers at times that can stop you from kind of hearing and listening and embracing that truth. Ultimately, from a psychological perspective, we need to really understand what is wrong because only when you understand what is wrong, can you actually fix it. You can put a bunch of band-aids on things, but at some point it's going to break. And being able to have a culture in which people feel honest and comfortable communicating what's wrong, well this is a culture in an organization that is going to nip problems in the bud faster than the next organization.

*Are you hoping for as many people as possible to learn to tell the story or just connect with some aspect of the division of storytelling?*

I would like to start creating more opportunities and more environments for people to

get up and tell their story, whether that's with a small group or a larger group. But I think the more we are able to make people feel comfortable telling their stories, the more that brings to me a level of

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vulnerability that is the path to empathy. And I think empathy is that ultimate gateway for different people in my organization to work together more collaboratively, to have more clarity around their communication, which I think is, obviously critical to the success of our group.

*It takes a tremendous amount of confidence in yourself and confidence in your team. Is this something that you're going for, that people should really learn how to trust, be willing to trust one another?*

Absolutely. And I think that right now is such a critical moment because as we were individual groups that have come together under one umbrella with one goal and one focus. There's always that inherent disconnect in terms of we did things this way and I did things that way. And then when you have to work together and something doesn't go your way, well that was your fault or that I'm not taking accountability for that. And so I think now more than ever, I have to put all of that bullshit to the side and realize that when we mess up, we mess up and it doesn't matter who sent the wrong email. It doesn't matter who messed up the media plan. It matters to all of us collectively. I think moving past individual blame to collective accountability, well that shift is a critical thing for us in order to be successful.

*What's your intention? What do you want people to get out of your story?*

What's the point of living if we're not focused on being a better version of ourselves? There's always things that we can improve on always, Intellectually, spiritually, and physically. I want to be surrounded by people who also have a similar type of drive and purpose.

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Narativ is a storytelling company and consultancy that uses the power of story to address business and communication challenges. We use our method to help businesses and organizations develop stories that connect with audience and change human behavior. For 25 years, the Narativ method of storytelling in business has delivered measurable impact and value - we have transformed teams, cultures and individuals.

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