

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
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Ep. 142: Airbnb Global Head of Hosting on Travel and Work, What Some Of The Most Fabulous Airbnbs Are, And Curiosity As A Core Value

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INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways Podcast which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be with Catherine Powell, global head of hosting for Airbnb. I'm looking forward to finding out how travel and work have changed, what some of the most unusual and fabulous Airbnbs are, and also how a company actually executes on core values like curiosity. Welcome, Catherine, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Catherine Powell: Thank you, Lynn, for having me. I'm delighted to be here.

LT: It is my pleasure. Catherine, what's the founding story of Airbnb?

CP: Well, that goes back to 2008 when two RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] students were trying to pay their rent in San Francisco, and that was Joe and Brian. And they decided that there was the design conference in town and they would open up their room to basically house attendees for the design conference. However, they didn't have a room. They didn't have a bed. They had air mattresses, which they blew up, put in their shared area, and had their first three guests. And that was the founding story.

LT: That is such a great story. Can you describe three of the most unusual and fabulous Airbnb places to stay?

CP: Oh, there's fabulous and interesting places to stay, but I think more interestingly for us, there are fabulous and interesting listings to stay in. And one of the things that we did when we introduced categories last year was to enable our guests to browse and be inspired by the listing itself. And we have wonderful categories. We have design categories. We have tree houses. We have cabins. We have my favorite category, which is OMG! , which really has extraordinary listings, a submarine, a UFO. We even have the Spice Girls bus from the film Spice World for those who watched that back in the '90s.

CP: And it's really about having our hosts, who are incredibly creative individuals, showcase their creativity in their home. And it's the design of the home. It's often the interior design of the home. And we've really seen guests respond well to that. Since we launched categories last year, we've had over 500 million views of these listings. And it's through being inspired by a listing that you then discover a place you wouldn't have gone to because you didn't think about it.

LT: And do you go and check out or stay in some of these new listings?

CP: I definitely go and stay in them. And I've stayed obviously during the pandemic, had a chance to travel and work remotely and have stayed in amazing listings across the US, but also in Paris, in Hawaii, in the UK. When I go back to the UK, I'll try and stay in a listing in London. So it's a chance to meet hosts, which is really important for me as global head of hosting and to just see these different homes and how they come to life for our guests. And it's interesting. I've stayed in private rooms as well as entire homes. And I actually love private rooms. One of my favorite ever of Airbnb experiences was staying with a private room host in San Francisco when pre-pandemic I was going and spending Monday to Thursday in San Francisco. I live in LA so I was commuting and I stayed with a private room host called Linda, in her spare room in her home. And it was just wonderful every evening going back to a warm home where the lights were on. Linda was there. She was very well traveled, so she knew Europe really well. She loved European films. So we would discuss Cinema Paradiso or La Bella Vita [movies]. And I remember coming back one evening and interrupting her book club and I sat down and joined them for a bit.

CP: So it was just it was very welcoming and felt very cozy and warm. And you've been on business trips coming back to an empty and dark hotel room. It's functional, but it's not necessarily cozy and doesn't make you feel like you're coming to a home whereas Linda really did.

LT: That sounds very special. How is travel different now from before the pandemic?

CP: I think travel has become something that is so important to people. I think it was one of the many things that we were deprived of. I think that and human connection and obviously they go hand in hand together was something that people were deprived of during the pandemic. And we all saw when borders started to open up, all those hard lockdown restrictions lifted, that pent-up demand exploded. And together with that, also with this new sound flexibility, people were not tethered to their office, to their place of work. Obviously, the pendulum has swung back a bit now, but I think this flexibility to travel, this ability to say, well, actually, I want to travel somewhere for maybe a weekend, but I'm going to stay a few days more so that I can work from home and I can end up spending five or six days in a place. Whereas pre-pandemic, it may have just been your holiday period or your weekend or a business trip. That business and leisure is blurring. People really are able to fuse the two. During the pandemic, we saw a spike in people spending six, seven weeks somewhere, especially on Airbnbs. And one of the things actually I did as Global Head of Hosting was work really closely with our hosts to tell them how travel was changing, to create a dashboard to show the new behaviors with guests.

CP: And at that time in 2020, 2021, it was much longer term stays where people were travelling in groups with their families, with their pets. They wanted to work from home. So we were letting hosts know that Wi-Fi is really, really important. Now, of course, you couldn't imagine not having incredible Wi-Fi. Pets, if you're ready to accept pets do, because they want to travel with their pets. If you have a place where people can work comfortably, not sitting at a dining room table on a hard chair, then merchandise that. And that was already important. And that was part of the resilience that our hosts had during the pandemic. And us, obviously, we're a tech company in travel, creating and innovating for our hosts so they could respond to these changing travels. And the pendulum is swinging back a bit. I think we haven't yet found what the right balance between office or remote work will be. But I think certainly it's not going to go back to the five days a week. And I think

where people can extend either a business trip to do some leisure travel or a leisure trip to do some business travel, we will continue to see that.

LT: How else do you think that the future of work and travel will be different?

CP: If I look at Airbnb and our live and work remote policy, it has been incredibly popular, not just for our own employees, but for people interested in coming to Airbnb. I mean, the day we announced it, we had something like a million visits to our jobs page. And what I think that means is we are unrestricted in terms of who we can recruit and where they can live. And so you get the best talent. And it's something that Brian has been very, very focused on is we want to attract and retain the best talent. And this talent wants to have more flexibility and wants to be able to stay living wherever they live, whether it's within a different state in the US, even if it's in a different country. I have members of my team at the moment living in Mexico or living in Argentina, and you can see how engaged they continue to be with their work, but also how happy they are with life. And I think happiness is an incredibly important part of this. So I think responding to workers, employees desire to live and work remotely, or at least to be able to travel for some part of the time, is going to be an important part of attracting and retaining talent.

LT: Can you give some idea of the scale of Airbnb?

CP: We have over four million hosts. We've just announced our earnings. We have over 6.6 million listings. This is 900,000 more listings last year than we had the year before. We are in 220 countries. In fact, over 100,000 towns and cities. And interestingly, since the pandemic, over 10,000 cities and towns have had their first ever Airbnb booking, meaning their first ever Airbnb host. And this really tells the story of dispersed travel, people being more curious, wanting to discover new places. And my role as global head of hosting is making it really easy for people to become hosts, people like you and me. Around 90% of our hosts are individual people, and we want to make it easy for them to become hosts. A lot of the innovation that we've done since the pandemic has been about tools to list your space and then to be a successful host.

LT: And who stays in Airbnbs and who hosts guests? Mostly younger people stay in Airbnbs. Mostly older people host guests. How do the demographics work?

CP: The demographics have been shifting, and honestly, we have hosts of all types. There are retirees. There are students. We have health workers, a lot who work in education, health care, other types of social work. So I think that lends itself to hosting and looking after people. But we have a lot of Gen Z hosting. In fact, given the rising cost of living, which we're all seeing and experiencing, people have been turning more and more to hosting to earn that extra income. In fact, in the US, it's something like 40% of our hosts tell us now that they're hosting to cover those growing costs.

CP: And our guests too, range from the individual young Gen Z, the millennials with family, the larger groups. We see a lot of group travel now as friends and families want to travel together and do it in a cost effective way. Means they can rent a large house, share it, have the space to share. And it becomes more expensive if you're renting and paying for individual hotel rooms. But what I think is really important in terms of what we have to offer is really that we offer everything for every budget. So if you are a student, if you are a frontline worker or a health worker who needs somewhere to stay, we have private rooms all the way through to these beautiful design homes

where if you want to splash out and stay somewhere really special for a very special trip or anniversary, you can do that.

LT: What are some things about Airbnb that would surprise people?

CP: I think the range of listings that we have, if you spend time in our categories, and it is an absolute pleasure to browse our categories, I think you would be amazed at the range of listings that we have, as I've already said, every price point, but really every type of home. One of the things I think people would find most surprising, and I reference my favorite day with Linda in San Francisco, is what it is like to stay with a host in a private room. When you have a host who is there to greet you, when you feel that you're at home, when you connect in so many different ways that you didn't know. As I said, Linda and I were talking about foreign films and our favorite foreign films.

CP: If you are a curious person and many, many of our travelers, the Airbnb type of traveler, is curious, is very open-minded, then you really meet incredible people when you stay in private rooms. And the other thing I think that people would find surprising is that our hosts, even if they're not there, are incredibly proud of their neighborhoods and their communities. And they go through an incredible effort to connect guests to their community with recommendations, with their guidebooks, with tips, with introductions. And that also makes you... 'Cause one of our missions is to create connection and give that sense of belonging. And I think that's very special and very uniquely Airbnb.

LT: That special sense of belonging must be hard when you give all your employees the option to work remotely. How do you build that culture and that community among employees?

CP: It's so important, and I'm sure if you've spoken to anybody who is managing an organization where you have remote workers, that connection and the culture that you want to create is so important. And absolutely, remoteness, remote work, Zoom, frays at the fabric of that culture. So we are very intentional about bringing people together. So you can work remotely, but we will make sure that we encourage in-person meetings, we're calling them gathering weeks, where people will come together. People still meet on a regular basis, especially if you're brainstorming something strategic or you're doing a creative review. That often will happen in person, and you can go to the San Francisco headquarters and you will see people there a lot. So people are meeting in person, but on top of that, we will have intentional gatherings. We have one coming up in March where people will come together. We have large meetings, large teams. We want to make that fun and interesting and encourage people to do it. So it is very, very important.

CP: The other piece I think is incredibly important as a leader is to ensure that you lead with empathy and that you are very focused and intentional with your communication. I think one of the things I learned during the early days of the pandemic was how much Zoom and Zoom backgrounds in particular hid from the reality of what a lot of people were going through. Young families, shared rooms, young children, pets, all in a small space sharing the internet. People would get up from their bedroom, go to work in their bedroom, stay in their bedroom, try to juggle childcare. It was very, very stressful. You know, the toll it's taken on mental and physical well-being. And I think it was for me personally, I had to be super intentional about asking them how they were, making sure that they knew what resources they had to help them. Because if they had a jolly Zoom background behind them, you just don't necessarily think of what's going on. So I think

that empathy and communicating consistently is so important as well.

LT: I find Airbnb's hiring process just fascinating. Most companies, when they hire people, they look for people with very specific experience that is very closely matched to the job they're hiring for. And Airbnb doesn't do that at all. Can you describe your hiring process and what you look for?

CP: Well, certainly if we're hiring people for a role, we want them to have expertise in that role. If you're hiring an engineer, you want somebody who can code. However, what is really important to us are our core values. And we will interview a candidate, every candidate, whatever their level, including our board members for these core values. And we have four of them. There is champion the mission, and that is about making sure people are passionate about connection and belonging. Being a host, and that is about obviously being empathetic, caring and open with the people that you work with, as well as with our host community. Embracing the adventure, and this is the spirit of curiosity and travel. And then the last one, which I love, is be a cereal entrepreneur. And that's about being scrappy and entrepreneurial, but cereal is spelled C-E-R-E-A-L. And this goes back to a story in 2008 when Brian and Joe needed to raise money. Airbnb was about to go bust. And so they created novelty cereals.

CP: They bought cereal packets and they wrapped the cereal packets with Obama and John McCain, Barack Obama and John McCain, who were running for president that year. And they created Obama O's and Captain McCain's and sold them to raise money and also to raise awareness as there's a huge amount of buzz. And so that's about being the cereal entrepreneur. So going back to the example, we want to hire an engineer, we need to make sure that they are an expert in engineering, but they need to pass the core value interviews. And if they don't, if we feel that they're not a fit, no matter how great they are, they won't be hired.

LT: But how do you assess those core values? How do you assess empathy or curiosity?

CP: The part of the core value interviews themselves. So the interviewers will ask questions that will draw out how they might think about being a host or examples of entrepreneurial. I mean, that the interviews are straightforward. What is more important is that we continue to ensure that our employees show these values. And when we have performance reviews, as well as reviewing the value that they have added, how they have performed their role, we will look at how they have shown up with these values. So what are the examples when they have acted like a host or they have been entrepreneurial or they have championed the mission. We think of ways in which we show up with our diversity and belonging within the company. That's part of championing the mission. So we're pretty rigorous about coming back to those values and ensuring that people are showing up in a way that reflects and respects them.

LT: Before I ask for the takeaways that you would like to share with the audience, is there anything else you'd like to mention? What else should I have asked you, Catherine, that I have not?

CP: I think one of the things that's really important that people kind of underestimate with Airbnb is we are a tech company in the travel industry. And our product, we have the app, but our product, my product is, hosting people. And one of the reasons that we are able to be so resilient and help our hosts and we have carried them through the pandemic is that we innovate. We innovate all of the time. I mean, since the pandemic, we've had 340 upgrades and innovations to our app. And these are all in the service of our hosts and our guests. And I spend my time listening to our hosts,

hearing what they need, sharing with them what's going on in the context. And I would say more than half of these upgrades and innovations are for our hosts and based on what we have heard from our hosts. And this tight and close partnership and transparency helps us become better, helps our hosts become better and therefore helps the guest experience become better.

LT: Catherine, what are the three takeaways you would like to leave the audience with today?

CP: The first one that I would start with is embrace vulnerability. I am a huge proponent of vulnerability. I've talked about vulnerability being a superpower for me because I think it gives you courage and strength to do things, to get through things that are difficult and to take risks or make tough decisions that you may not have made without that vulnerability. If you're worried about things going wrong, if you're worried about making a fool of yourself, if you're worried about being a failure, you just don't move forward. You don't take risks. If you are comfortable with being vulnerable, you can do that. You can make tough decisions. And I've done that many, many times in my career where I've moved into a new role and moving from a large corporation like Disney to a tech startup when I don't have an engineering background, that felt pretty vulnerable. And I had to spend the first few weeks earning that credibility, learning a different language from what they spoke at Airbnb. And if you're self-conscious, if you're worried about being embarrassed, you're not going to move forward there. So I think vulnerability and embracing that and the courage that it gives you is an incredibly important takeaway.

CP: The second one is so important to where we are now with the post-pandemic travel, looking at it from Airbnb's point of view, and that is be curious. Be curious about where you might want to travel, about the places you want to stay in, about the people you can meet. And that might be your guests, that might be your other hosts, it might be the communities. But being curious and being open-minded, opens up so many more opportunities and learning. And in fact, one of the pieces of advice I often give when asked if I'm doing townhalls or Q&A sessions is, don't necessarily think of your career as a ladder where it goes up, you can see the top, you know what's at the top, and you just need to kind of climb that ladder.

CP: I would say don't do that. Think of your career as a series of stepping stones that can take you sideways and take you places that you had no idea where they were going to go. And curiosity is part of that. Be curious about what a move could mean. If you don't know what it means, if you don't know what that job description is, if it's not an extension of what you're currently doing, it's something new. Be curious, embrace that adventure. I'm going back to Airbnb's core values. And that could open up so many new doors that curiosity will enable and empower.

CP: And then the last one, just on a different note, is just about the importance of connection and the fact that we are in the middle of a loneliness crisis. A third of Americans say that they're lonely. 60% of these are young adults. And this has definitely been exacerbated by the pandemic, but there was loneliness and isolation before that. And it is so important for people to be able to connect in person wherever they are. And I think just enabling, empowering that connection, which is what Airbnb is very focused on. But also just anybody, if you connect in person, you will become a happier and healthier person.

LT: Catherine, this has been great. Thank you so much.

CP: Thank you. Thank you very much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

LT: It's my pleasure.

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OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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