

Partners Transcript: Kevin & Mike

Kevin: I said, "Mike, I really want to work together." In my head I was probably like, "I really want to work together and I really need this \$50,000, so I need a cofounder too." I asked him this question and I just remember his response, he's like, "Count me interested." I don't know how you proposed to your wife, but when you asked her to marry you, if she had come back and said, "Count me interested", would you have been like, "That was a yes?" I mean come on.

Mike: I would have asked for clarification.

Mike: I'm Mike Krieger. I was cofounder and former CTO of Instagram.

Kevin: I'm Kevin Systrom, former CEO and cofounder of Instagram.

Hrishikesh: Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger cofounded Instagram in 2010. A year and a half later, they sold it to Facebook for a billion dollars. They stayed on to run the company for another six years. And then, in 2018, they left together. And even now, they still work together. The first time they met, though, they had no idea that it would lead to something so meaningful. In fact, Kevin doesn't even remember that first time they met.

Kevin: I'd like to say I do, I really don't. The first time I remember meeting Mike was in Coffee Bar, this small café in San Francisco. It became my go to office because I had left my job and I was working on this app called Burbn. I knew of Mike. And I had seen him around, like we were in the same circles. And I recognized Mike. I walked over to say hello. But the first thing I noticed was the thing he was working on. It was like this beautiful website. And I didn't realize he was working with a designer. So anyway, in my mind Mike was like this amazing designer. Little did I know that actually he was an amazing engineer. I don't know that you've ever touched Photoshop actually, so.

Mike: No. Actually that's not true. I built the shutter on the very first version of Instagram and it was very basic.

Kevin: Wasn't the shutter literally just like two gray sliders that just closed and opened?

Mike: That's what I said, very basic.

Kevin: Yeah, that was not that good honestly. But that was the first time I remember hanging out with you because I remember being so impressed. And I asked you what tool you were using. I don't remember the tool, but I remember using it and just being like, oh man, it's so good to have a Mike in your life where you can ask them a question and they just always have the best answer. And it turns out years later I still feel like that's true.

Mike: I remember thinking, "Oh here's somebody who's actually pursuing something that he's excited about and actually building it and like a kindred spirit that's here

on the weekends not just to check Facebook or do something but is building." So having another builder was exciting. I'm like, "Oh, somebody else cares about this stuff."

Kevin: I think maybe where Mike and I overlap most is the fact that we both love to make things. My dream was always to build something that a lot of people used. So our friendship revolves around that. And it just so happens that that also happens to be a profession.

Mike: I did know that he was working on Burbn. I think I already had maybe installed it and was playing around with it.

Kevin: It was a check in app, it let you check in at different places.

Mike: It was a way of sharing what you were up to and where you were with the twist that you could add photos and videos to it, which in 2009 was actually the only one I could find that could do that. And even though you had to jump through all these hoops to upload a photo on Burbn, people were doing it, and all of a sudden it wasn't just this person is here, but oh that's what it looks like there. So that was to me the inkling of something interesting in Burbn.

Kevin: You know, I was pitching it to investors. One of the investors was like, "Here's 50 grand. You can go work on this and take a small, small, small stipend." "But you have to get a cofounder, these things work best when you have a cofounder." He was saying, "Hey look at all the best companies in the world. The ones that really work are the ones where generally there's more than one solo person running the ship." Google was a cofounder pair. YouTube was a cofounder pair. The point is when you have a team you're more likely to succeed. And I agreed with that. I mean the pattern was clearly there, the evidence was there. So I kind of went through the Rolodex in my mind of like who do I know that could be a cofounder? And I remember running into Mike and I think the next time I ran into him I floated the idea, "Hey maybe we should work together on this." We basically decided we were going to prototype working together. We would get together at a café near Mike's house at night and we created a fake project. Why we didn't just work on Burbn, I don't know, but we created a fake project with a fake outcome we wanted to accomplish that night. Mike would do one half of it, I'd do a different half of it and we'd come together and we'd ask questions, figure out how each other worked. And we really enjoyed that experience. So I remember this fateful day, standing at the Caltrain station before Mike had to go to work. I said, "Mike, I really want to work together." In my head I was probably like, "I really want to work together and I really need this \$50,000, so I need a cofounder too." I asked him this question and I just remember his response, he's like, "Count me interested." I was like, "Count me interested? Are you in or are you out?"

Mike: I vividly remember the moment he asked because I had one of those life flashing before your eyes, but not the past, the future. I was like, "Okay, I can be working with somebody who I have come to really start respecting and I want to work

with." That's where count me interested came from, which to me sounded like a yes, but maybe I was a little coy. But to me it was just like, "Oh yeah, of course."

Kevin: I'm going to ask you a question, okay. I want a little bit of understanding here. You're now married. I don't know how you proposed to your wife, but when you asked her to marry you, if she had come back and said, "Count me interested", would you have been like, "That was a yes?" I mean come on, man.

Mike: I would have asked for clarification. I look back on a lot of the major decisions in my life that I've made. This one was an easier one where I knew that it was what I wanted to do and then the next week was logistically can I do it? You know, I come from Brazil, I was on a work visa.

Kevin: You were taking on so much risk because you had everything set. They gave you a job, you had this work visa and everything. And you were jumping in... I think back how crazy we were to do that. We had to form a company so that the government would be like okay you can have this visa.

Mike: I think this was the first moment where I think I really started feeling this sort of mutual trust with Kevin. The count me interested moment was January and we applied soon afterwards. 80 days goes by, 90 days goes by. I was like, "Kev, look, I know you want to get this off the ground. It's like March, it's April now. Three months is forever in startup land. If you want to cut this and be like I'm just going to find a U.S. cofounder that can make this work, I'll get it." And I remember Kevin was like, "No, man. We're going to make this work. Let's email the lawyer. Let's keep pushing forward. No, we'll wait, we'll figure this out." That meant so much to me. I mean it still does. Because you could have easily been like, "Yeah, man, this is too hard. I need to get this going." And that would have been a rational decision to have made. But instead he was like, "No, let's figure this out." But it finally came and at that point it was like all right, I can actually join and actually do this stuff together.

Kevin: We had been working on Burbn for a while, probably eight, nine months or something by that time. We were meeting one of our early investors. He was like, "So, what are you building? What's up? What's new?" And we're like, "Well we have these features. It does this thing and it does this thing." His face was just blank. Like he's just looking at us like what are you talking, I don't understand what you're trying to build. We were so sad after that meeting because it was so clear to us that we couldn't explain what we were working on. So we went back to the office, we sat in front of a whiteboard and we said, "Okay, we have to focus this thing. It's trying to do too much all at once." So we stripped everything away that day. We focused just on the components that would effectively become Instagram.

Mike: I spent far more time with Kevin than any other human being for that first year of Instagram, easily right, we were in there every single day for 13, 14 hours, sometimes over night.

Kevin: Mike would be brushing his teeth in the employee bathroom at 4:00 AM because we had been there all night.

Mike: We got to launch day, we launch it to the world.

Kevin: October 6, 2010. I know that date and the date of my daughter's birth, those are the two dates I will never forget, right.

Mike: People liked it. People started using it.

Kevin: And I was taken aback because I mean I had worked at a company before that struggled to get 10,000 people to use it over a year. And we got to 25,000 that first day. And I remember turning to Mike and I said, "I think we've created something." I'm usually the pessimist and Mike is usually, I'm not sure optimist, but you're a pragmatist, right? But like I had this moment of clarity that there was something special 'cause I had never seen people react this way. And Mike just looked at me like, "I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe this is all going to come crashing down."

Mike: The one little dinky server that we had was like metaphorically and perhaps physically melting by all the traffic that was coming at it. I really felt like we had squandered this opportunity. I'm like, "We should probably add another server." Kevin was like, "No, we don't need another server." In retrospect I think it was like we didn't know if this thing was going to take off and it was expensive to add another server, did we really need it? And I was, "No, I think we do." And then like later he was like, "Oh, man, sorry. I was a little heated." We had been up for 36 hours at that point and kind of fighting off sleep and also excited. It was both the best and worst days of our lives. The thing was working, but it also was crashing. I think that was the only time we've ever raised our voices with each other. It was brief. It was like a probably 30 second interaction.

Kevin: I approve this message. Which is true. That was the one time that it was heated, it was the heat of the moment.

Mike: I'm actually going to take it way back at our first disagreement, which actually I haven't thought about in many years. But maybe two or three weeks into working together I remember coming in and saying, "Hey, Kev, what do you think of us one or two days a week just working from home because I can just jam on stuff and I'll stay up all night and code and I'll be up until noon. I think I'll work better that way." And you're like, "No, I'd really like for us to be in the same office together. I think that matters a lot." I remember being annoyed for like 10 seconds. I was like, yeah okay. Sure, we'd give that a try. In the end it was great. We were able to jam on ideas and move really quickly. But I think if I had to abstract it and what I learned about working with Kevin over the years it was, I don't think you're ever a person that will just agree to something because it will make somebody else happy. But you also make sure that in disagreeing you're also not being a jerk and making them feel about feeling differently. You're like,

"No, I've thought about this and here's what I want to do forward. Is there a reason why you really feel differently?" And then we can have the conversation. That sort of like detoxified ability to disagree is really important.

Kevin: I get annoyed really easily. But, the interesting thing is Mike doesn't annoy me. Like he really doesn't. I really don't get annoyed with Mike because he has ... character and integrity. Those are the two things I care about. You're just a generally good person and when you say you're going to do something you do it. Who cares if Mike chose the wrong X, Y, or Z to solve a problem or maybe he introduced a bug, I don't care. Mike has never made, except for that one time on the server issue, Mike has never made me angry. I don't think we ever actually had titles for the longest time. I guess once we started doing public events and we had to talk about what our titles were, I think there was a time where we were like okay you're CTO, I'm CEO and we kind of divided it that way. But you always say cofounder first. That's the title.

Mike: When I thought about my identity and like what we were doing in the company, it was like cofounder, maybe technical cofounder if wanted to put an adjective in front of it.

Kevin: Required technical cofounder.

Mike: Designated technical cofounder. But I do also think, and again this speaks to our personality and our relationship, it is really important for any company to ultimately have one final decision maker. And I've seen so many companies not have one and it become a mess. Sometimes there's a tie break needed or sometimes like a call needs to get made. You really need to find somebody who's willing to make that call and you all have to be ready to make that person successful in that role or else it's just not going to work.

Kevin: We had a bunch of people that really wanted Instagram inside their company. But we were having so much fun doing our own thing that like we just didn't want to be part of any other company. We didn't want to be a wing of a building. We wanted to be the building.

Mike: And I remember you turned to me at one point and you're like, "I really don't think we should pursue any of these. I think we're better off independent but if you feel differently let me know. Let's have that conversation." Which was helpful because it made me reflect and be like, no, no, this is really fun. I'm working with somebody I deeply respect, we're starting to build a team that's working. Yeah, let's keep doing this thing. We've still got money in the bank.

Kevin: So for the longest time we were just like we're going to do this thing ourselves. The only time we literally had a number to face was the Facebook offer. When we were like, oh, a billion dollars just sounds funny to say, right? You think of like Dr. Evil or one of these movies, right? But someone comes along and offers you a billion dollars for something you've been working on for, I don't know, a year

publicly and then you've got 11 employees and you're just like, man, how do you even do that calculus? What do you even say to that?

Mike: I really remember being in sort of like a daze. Everything was just very strange.

Kevin: We had long conversations about what we wanted to do. At the end of the day the thing that mattered the most to us was that they wanted us to keep running it independently like we had been doing. They were like, "No, Instagram's a thing. You're a community, you guys have effectively a team and a company and a culture. Keep doing that." And we stayed six years. So there was a lot of like, "Hey, checking in. How are you feeling? What do you want to do?" We only wanted to be at Instagram if the other person was at Instagram.

Mike: Every January I would decide, I wanted to consciously recommit to still being there. I make it an intentional choice. I come around in January and I say is this still what I want to be learning? It's funny the vows you make to yourself when you're 18 years old. I vowed to myself when I was 18 I wanted to have a life full of unique years, not the same year over and over again. That was my biggest fear. And I looked and I was like, "I feel like we've done incredibly hard things. I've learned a ton, but it feels like we're on some like diminishing returns curve of learning." And I remember I had dinner with Kevin and I was like, "Hey, man, I feel like it might be time for me to try something different." It's a scary conversation to have. I remember Kevin turned to me and said like, "I get where you're coming from. Is there anything that you think would still feel like a new interesting thing?" And I like listed a couple of things. And then I had the interesting experience of kind of doing part of Kevin's job for a few months because he went out on paternity leave. And he was out and he said, "Mike, I'm on paternity leave. I really want to be present with my kid. Can you make sure things go well while I'm away?" It was interesting because in my head I always had this question like is the one thing that would make me stay like to have this very different experience of being CEO rather than CTO? And I got to have that experience for like two months. I remember Kevin getting back, I was like, "Kevin, I do not want your job at all!" And we'd always joke that one of the reasons we work together is that we didn't want each other's jobs and at some point it had felt like a thing I had always said and I wanted to make sure it was actually really true. But I remember at the end of that experience being like, "No, I'm really glad I got to try it because it made me realize where my happy spot is is not in that role. It's in the role I was in and in that role I feel like I've accomplished what I wanted to accomplish."

Kevin: And I wanted something hard. And I wanted to be bad at something again. Maybe it won't be as big as Instagram—it probably won't be as big as Instagram, let's be honest. But maybe it'll be just as fun to learn along the way. That's ultimately what made me want to jump. But we had no idea what we were going to do. The first thing was rest and recovery. We were kind of off doing our own thing. We wanted to just chill out and disconnect a little bit. But we reconnected and it was like, "Yeah, what do you miss the most?" It's like well I miss hanging

out of course and you say those nice things to each other, but you also say I miss building stuff.

Mike: I learned a big lesson, I think, in the middle months before we really reconnected, which was I think I'm holding this idea of Kevin in my head of, like, I bet he's already thought of what's next and he hasn't told me about it. And I realized like—

Kevin: Oh no, really? Wow.

Mike: No, I created this thing of like oh we haven't talked in a few months. And if you think about it, I've never actually thought about this, but like, that was the longest we went without really talking in nine years.

Kevin: That's true.

Mike: So I think in that time I was like man we haven't talked, which must mean that, I don't know, he doesn't want to talk to me. And I remember having this phone call that was so, like, what a relief. We talked on the phone and you're like, "Yeah, I'm where you are. I haven't thought about what's next and I'd love to work with you," and I was like, "I'd love to keep working with you, too." To me, the lesson learned was like if you have a very close relationship with somebody and then you just don't talk to them for a few months, like, your brain is going to start assuming that that silence means something that it absolutely doesn't. It just meant that we needed some time to clear our heads and have our own thing. And once we talked it was like, okay great, he feels the same way I do, which is like we had some time to clear our heads, now we're excited to prototype. We don't know exactly what it is yet, but we want to do it with each other and that was a real relief for me. I was like great, we're on the same page and now we can just spend the time to explore and figure out what we're excited to build next.

Kevin: Both of us wanted to do something together again. That was rare, like most cofounder pairs find themselves in some sort of fight along the way and break up and... The idea that we could have a new challenge together potentially I think was what made it way more exciting. I'm not sure we were like looking for personal relationship when we started, like a friendship. But the bond we have now is one I think I'd liken to people who were in the military together. And I'm not saying we did anything even close to as important as that, but when you go through things with someone, when people try to kill your company, when people try to throw you under the bus, all this stuff has happened to us, and then some. And I remember very specifically this moment... we were having a disagreement with an investor. We were so stressed out and we went to this really terrible taqueria on Market Street. We sat down and we both ordered like the greasiest thing we could possibly imagine. And honestly, that might have been a low in the company, but it was a high for me. Like, I look back on the moment really fondly because it was us against the world. It was like we're going to win this thing, even if people don't believe in us, even if we're having this thing go on, we're going to

make this work. Call it friendship, but that is like a bond that you don't form hanging out.

Mike: The fact that we still like each other this long I think speaks to like a deeper trust and real bond. But I think the fact that we liked each other after that first year, which was pure exposure, spoke to trust, but I think also just to, we have a way about each other that is not one that we find annoying. Which sounds trivial, but actually when you're around somebody for that long, for that many days, when you haven't showered in three days sometimes and you're eating the same lunch you've eaten every single day, it's actually really important and hard to screen for in a couple of nights in a coffee shop prototyping. I think that was a regard where we probably got lucky.

Kevin: Couldn't have said it better. That's exactly it.

Hrishikesh: Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger are partners. More than fifty billion photos have been uploaded to Instagram so far, and you can find both Kevin and Mike on there. Kevin is @kevin, and Mike is @mikeyk. Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I produced, edited, and made the music for the show, with editing help from Maureen Hoban and production assistance from Olivia Wood. This interview was recorded at Women's Audio Mission in San Francisco. Special thanks to Helen Saltzman and Sarah Green. Partners is a Mailchimp podcast, made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.