

**Expert Interview I** with James Whatley, Chief Strategy Officer, Diva Agency  
**Including |** thoughts on keeping true to your beliefs, solving problems, and that perfect moment when everything clicks.

>> *James guest curated Strands on September 29, 2022 . [Read it here.](#)*

### **Tell us a little bit about yourself and what keeps you busy. How did you end up doing what you're doing today?**

I'm chief strategy officer at an integrated creative agency called Diva. We specialize in video games marketing. And my God I love it. Before I switched to Diva, I was ten years into a network agency career. Seven years with Ogilvy/WPP and then onto Digitas/Publicis. Three years into Digitas - and doing some of the best work of my life (and winning the awards with it), I was ready to commit to being a long-term network agency strategist. Felt loved, appreciated, and looked after. I liked it. A lot. But then out of nowhere, this friendly little independent agency comes along, with huge ambitions, and an amazing culture to match - oh, and by the way, the category is the one thing that you ADORE - and I was smitten. And now? Well, I work in video games. Creating marketing and advertising campaigns for huge AAA titles and teeny tiny little indie games. Anything and everything. Even if I have a bad day, I still work in video games :)

### **What excites you most about what you do?**

Solving problems. Digging. Our industry generally I love love love being able to be in a room or on a call or in a meeting when *\*the moment\** happens. When an argument is made, or an idea put forward, or a one-liner is said out loud and suddenly everything clicks. And then that click? That click gets *\*made\**. The thing that didn't exist before now exists because some smart people *\*willed\** it into existence. Amazing. THAT's what I love about what I do. No two briefs are ever the same.

## **What beliefs define your approach to work? How would you define your leadership style?**

My belief, my vision if you will, is simple: I believe in great work, with inspiring people. Everything that I do, every act, thought, and deed \*must\* relate back to that overall vision. If the work isn't great, then how do we make it great? If the people I'm working with aren't inspiring or inspired - then what can I do to inspire them? From that process comes empowerment, freedom, and autonomy. I like to help people find their way and offer guidance when they need it. Stress does no one any favours, so I work hard at keeping stress out of everything. Life is too short and what we do for a living isn't worth it.

## **What has been the most rewarding project you've worked on and why?**

The DICE Charter. A few years ago, some friends on Twitter were having a proper moan about how shit it is that whenever an all white, all male panel (aka a 'manel') happens, loads of people tweet about it but no one actually DOES anything about it. So we did. And now we have a ten point charter that helps event organizers make their events more diverse and inclusive. Events are BETTER because of it. Hundreds of them! And the feedback we've had is bloody amazing. You can't be what you can't see, right? So we changed that and continue to change it and when we look back at what it's done in the short time it's existed - well, that's a bit bloody rewarding.

## **We are big believers in diversity -- Not only because we believe in equality, but because we also think it's better for business. The Black Lives Matter movement has shaped industry conversations around both global injustice, and also lack of representation in our industry. How do you frame these kinds of conversations, both internally and with clients? Is there an emphasis on action, or are the conversations really more about communication?**

In my own work, as co-creator of the DICE (Diversity & Inclusion at Conferences and Events) Charter, I learned there's only one way to frame these kinds of conversations and is this: plain and simple. Nothing else. State facts and figures - or lack thereof.



And be honest. Shying away from hard truths only makes them harder to deal with. If a client is racist, you have to say 'that is racist'. You have to. I had to call a client out once for something that was said about race. I was the most senior agency person on the call and I knew it was a risk but I took the leap, called it out, and the rest of the client team backed me. It was scary as hell. But I did it. I shared it privately with a member of our DE&I team and they made me tell everyone. These things ARE hard but if you don't grab them by the horns then how the fuck do you expect anything to change?

**Switching gears a bit, how do you find time to balance personal interests with your career? Do you believe work/life balance is possible? Anything you've implemented that you recommend that others try?**

I have work/life flex, not balance. Now don't get me wrong, my working life and my hobby covers the same thing - VIDEO GAMES! - so I'm always in my element, I'm just using my day differently. That said, it is important to have red lines. 1730-8pm in the evenings is family time. I have two small children and if I have to work late, I pick it up after 8pm. I'm clear with my team that bedtime and bathtime come before literally anything else, and they're clear with me with their own red lines. Mark them, keep them, and only ever cross them on your own terms (ideally never).

**What's your media diet? Where do you find inspiration?**

I have an on/off (mainly on) relationship with Twitter but I've spent 14yrs building up a feed I trust, so I'm happy with that. I removed Instagram from my life a couple of years back. Haven't missed it. I watch movies, I play games, I seek out new writers. I know everyone has the 'links of interest' newsletter (me included) so I subscribe to them ALL. I want to find the story not many others have read. There's no one source, it's many different sources, all sourcing in their own way - providing source-ry just for me.



**As you know, we believe there is so much value in having a wide range of teachers. What's the best piece of advice/knowledge you've stolen, and who/where'd you steal it from?**

Everybody is making decisions about today based upon what happened yesterday. The trick is to try and make decisions about today based upon where you want to be TOMORROW. Mike Straw told me that. On a training course called 'Achieve Breakthrough' - completely changed the trajectory of my career, almost overnight.