Trust Yourself First: Bozoma Saint John on Leading Without Permission

What if the most powerful career advice is to stop listening to everyone else?

In this episode of Adspeak by Adweek, recorded live at Brandweek, host Ryan Joe sits down with marketing powerhouse Bozoma Saint John to unpack how intuition and not approval has guided her career across Apple, Uber, Netflix, and beyond.

Bozoma shares why traditional mentorship is overrated, how fear often disguises itself as “good advice,” and what it really takes to assert authority in rigid corporate environments.

From building intuition through everyday decisions to planning intentional pivots, this conversation is a masterclass in leading authentically and confidently on your own terms.

What you’ll learn:

- How to assert authority in established organizations
- Why traditional mentorship and champions are overrated
- The practice framework for building unshakeable intuition
- How to distinguish fear-based advice from intuition
- The strategic planning method for pivoting
- How mentoring reveals leadership blind spots

Bozoma Saint John is the founder and CEO of Eve by Boz, a culturally rooted hair and hair care brand celebrating Black women and women of color, and a Hall of Fame–inducted

marketing executive, author, and unapologetic badass. She built an iconic career at SpikeDDB, PepsiCo, Apple, Uber, Endeavor, and Netflix, where she served as Global CMO.

She’s also the author of The Urgent Life, a Harvard Business School case study subject, and creator of leadership programs including The Anatomy of a Badass. She serves on multiple boards, is an Ambassador for the African Diaspora to Ghana, and proudly considers motherhood her greatest achievement.

Episode highlights:

[03:53] Applying the Molecular Theory of Change to Lead with Authority – Bozoma Saint John introduces the idea that leaders function like molecules—when you enter an organisation, you fundamentally change its structure. For CMOs in established companies, this reframes authority: you are not a supporting element but a catalyst. She warns against shrinking yourself to gain acceptance, noting that withholding perspective weakens both leader and organisation. When she joined Uber as its first Chief Brand Officer, she immediately defined the brand problem and acted decisively. Embracing your full experience positions you as essential to meaningful organisational evolution.

[11:04] Learning to Separate Fear-Based Advice from Real Guidance – Bozoma explains that much career advice, even from trusted mentors or loved ones, is rooted in fear rather than insight. People project their own risk tolerance and experiences onto your decisions. She shares how nearly everyone discouraged her from leaving PepsiCo after a personal loss, advice that would have blocked a pivotal opportunity. For leaders facing major pivots, the lesson is discernment. Understanding where advice comes from allows you to protect your agency, move forward with clarity, and access opportunities others cannot imagine for you.

[14:40] Building Strong Intuition Through Daily Decision-

Making Practice – According to Bozoma, intuition isn't mystical; it's trained. She challenges leaders to stop outsourcing small daily decisions, like what to wear or which meetings to attend. Constantly seeking opinions weakens internal judgment and creates dependency. By practicing self-trust in low-stakes moments, leaders build the confidence needed for high-stakes decisions. She applies this by listening closely to her gut when evaluating opportunities and walking away when something feels off. Over time, this discipline turns decision-making into confident, grounded action.

[20:35] Planning Career Pivots with Strategy, Milestones, and Intention – Bozoma pushes back on the myth that successful career pivots are spontaneous. Meaningful change requires planning, especially for leaders with real responsibilities. Her approach is to quietly set three-month milestones: specific outcomes that signal whether a role is improving or it's time to move on. If progress doesn't materialise, the exit plan activates. This method allows leaders to stay intentional rather than stuck or reckless. By preparing transitions in advance, pivots happen from strength, clarity, and readiness, not burnout or impulse.

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https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/trust-yourself-first-bozoma-saint-john-on-leading-without-permission/