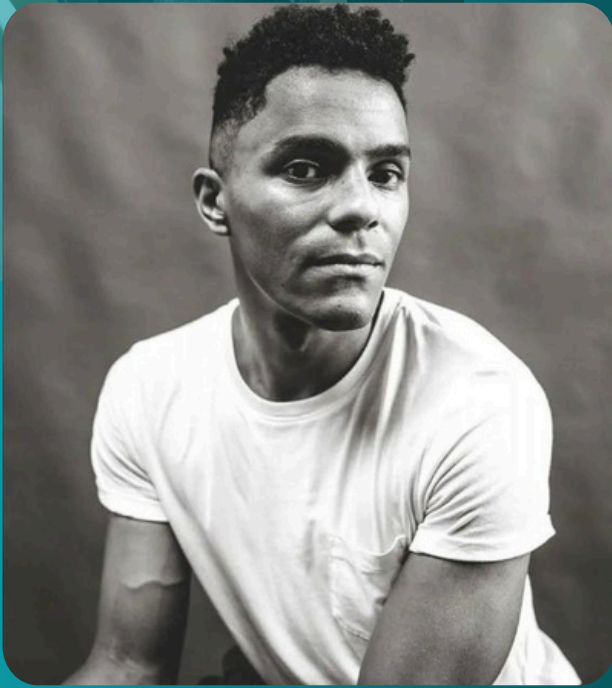# The Human Conversation

## Podcast Newsletter



Get To Know Our Guest
# GEOFFREY VAN DER VEN

**Geoffrey van der Ven** is a *spoken word artist and theater maker* known for his sharp, critical, and activist voice, particularly within the queer and BIPOC communities. He often focuses on bringing unheard stories to the forefront, especially those related to queer history and identity. He is recognized for his solo performance *"Het is niet nieuw" ("It is not new")*, which explores the queer history of Africa, and is currently working on a new show called *"What's the Difference,"* which delves into queer shame.

Geoffrey has received accolades such as the *Poet of the Year* award at the Queer & Feminist Poetry Awards and an honorable mention at Button Poetry. He has performed at major venues and events like the Nieuwe Luxor Theater, Rotterdam Pride, and the Amsterdam Fringe Festival.

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## HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- *KG:* You have such an interesting career in product management. You also handle innovation and strategy consulting. You also are a huge advocate and a spoken artist and a speaker, just the name of you. *Is there a red thread that ties all of these activities for you? What's the driving force behind all that you do?*

- *GEOFFREY:* What I actually do at every company that I've ever worked at is I look at what we do, whether that's the systems that we use internally or the systems that we provide to our clients or users. And I see where it does and it doesn't work for the people that are using it. And then I take action because I get really itchy when I see something that doesn't work. Well, we can probably fix this so that I, come up with an idea. We test it and we fix it and we make it better.

- *GEOFFREY: I think that human aspect is what seeps through also on the artist side of the story. I think that personal, human, there's always, the human, people are gonna be like, there's humans everywhere, but there's always the human thing, the human aspect of it, the human story, whether that's your own story or the story of your clients, that's always present.*

- *KG: What do the terms ethics and integrity mean to you?*

- *GEOFFREY: Integrity because I think that's the easiest one to carry. Do what is right. Not what's easy or what comes the fastest. Just do the right thing. Do the right thing with that responsibility. Come up for voices that don't have that stage. It's gonna sound very holier than thou, but speak to the greater good. Use your story in the right way and then be aware of the dynamics that are at play and of the space that you take and the space that someone you maybe shouldn't take or should pass over to someone else.*

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✦ HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- *GEOFFREY:* There's moments where you might have two user groups that have conflicting needs, or where despite all the right intentions, you have a line in a poem that does hurt someone or offend someone. I think that we need to get rid of that idea that there's no ambivalence in this. There can be multiple things that occur at the same time. But then again, I think it comes down to how you then deal with those situations.

- *KG: Is there an example that you feel comfortable sharing where you navigate an ethical dilemma? And then maybe you can share what you learned from it in how to deal with these difficult conversations?*

- *GEOFFREY:* I think that when it comes down to staying aligned with your values, that's easier for me to speak on.

- *KG: Is there a blueprint in your mind where it's almost like an algorithm and that's how you find it fairly straightforward because that's consistent in everything you've said so far that in your mind it's a straightforward thing. Did you work on it to make it straightforward to unravel how we tend to over complicate things and worry? How did you get here?*

- *GEOFFREY: I am almost to a fault solution oriented as a person.* And that's great and like 90 % of the time until I run into a problem that I cannot solve and then I crash. I think for me, after a while, I started working somewhere where I had a lot of agency, where I had a boss that went, or a line manager that said, do what you think is right, and if it's wrong, learn from it. Which was amazing, because for once I could see these innovation projects and these product management issues and go, this is what I think we should do. *90 % of what I think we should do is talk to the users. And not talking to the users is never an answer for me.*

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⭐ HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- *GEOFFREY: Convincing people that you're right never works. Or sometimes it works, but then you win the argument and you lose the working relationship. It is worth convincing them that it's a path worth exploring.*

- *I think that honesty, that human side of the story, your own human side of the story, your willingness to take responsibility and admit that maybe you're not perfect and that if you're wrong, you will let them know that you're wrong. We miss that sometimes. But it aligns with a part of me about being open. And that part of me, that value of being open is what I carry through. The more that you start being honest and open about all aspects of your life, you also get to be honest and open in your work itself. And that starts, then things fall into place.*

- *KG: It sounds to me like what you're saying is one, it's actually quite straightforward to do the right thing. Keep in mind that it's the stakeholders who matter the most. If that's clear in your mind, sense of purpose, goal orientation, that's number one. Number two is to yourself be open, because if you're clear on what your goals are, you stay open and grounded and pragmatic about solution orientation. And number three, you seem to be saying is clarity in communication.*

- *KG: Is there anything you'd add to this list or anything that I've missed that you've shared already that would help early-career, mid-career product managers to successfully persuade people to follow their advice because you work with so many clients and organizations?*

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- *GEOFFREY: Sit in the other people's chairs. I think everyone on any team can agree that as a company you have customers. And that as a company you want to make those customers happy, and you most likely want to get more customers. So whether you agree with me or not, we can agree on this. It's a shared value between yourself and your stakeholders. Keep whatever discussion you're having focused on that. It's not about me and it's not about you- keep it focused on that. And then look at that goal through the eyes of the people around you.*

- *GEOFFREY: I always, always, always have a problem backlog. It is a list of all issues that we know our customers experience with the product, of all problems that our customers have. Prioritized according to how many customers experience that problem and how frequently they experience that problem.*

- *GEOFFREY: We all agree, happy customers, more customers. So how do we make them happy? Solve these problems. Those are two things I want to add to that is empathy and prioritize the problems.*

- *KG: Do you have any perspectives to share in terms of ethics and integrity? Customer orientation or user orientation in terms of responsible innovation or the future of this sector field?*

- *GEOFFREY: There will always be people that we're trying to make happy with our products, which means that you will always need an advocate for those people within companies to make sure that you're building your right product.*

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✦ HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- *GEOFFREY: I think in ethics, you end up in the same tale of just listen to your users. Learn to admit and see that everyone makes mistakes and everything can be wrong and consider the fact that you're working with people.*

- *KG:* As a tech aficionado and perhaps a subject matter expert as well, *are there examples in the public domain where you've observed companies or products are doing what you're recommending here?*

- *GEOFFREY:* There was recently a company that I saw literally do this and it made me so happy. *Cool Blue* does this quite well. They have a really fun personality as a company. I think they do admit it when they're wrong. But mostly they go about everything with a sense of humor. I think another company that does this quite interestingly is *The Nothing Phone*. Their CEO literally on YouTube, like he records himself live watching reviews and responds to these reviews. And in some places he gives context for choices which I like because it's context for choice. So he's not excusing a problem or an issue. He's going, these are the constraints and these were the choices made based on those constraints, hence indeed this issue.

- *GEOFFREY:* I've had this as a product manager where you see a massive problem with your product and you don't have the resources to solve it within a week and you're like, it's big problem, but just being able to go to a customer, I'm gonna put in my best effort and attempt to help you. That already changes the interaction that you're having because it goes from the experience of you working against them and making their life harder for something that should be simpler to, okay, let me see if I can stand on your side of the story and help you. And even if I can't help you, maybe relieve some of your frustration.

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- *GEOFFREY:* Every time I work with a development team, I need and want them to be able to read the interviews with the customers and to understand the customer's problem. First of all, you end up with creative solutions that anybody else on the team would have never thought of. And second of all, aligns them on the mission.

- *GEOFFREY: The more empathy you have within your company towards the users that you're trying to solve problems for, the better that solution ends up being and the more motivated people end up being.*

- *KG: Is there a book, a quote, or any advice that you hold close to your heart right now and you'd like to share?*

- *GEOFFREY:* I'm currently writing a theater show about shame. And to write that show, do research and part of the research was reading a book called *Velvet Rage*. This research on shame, it's incredible because you realize that it's present in so many layers of society and there's so many examples that you see and so many responses that people have to things.

- *GEOFFREY: I think that we don't talk about shame, which is one of the mechanisms of shame is that we hide and we don't talk about it. And because we talk about it so little, it's not on our empathy radar. We very rarely go, what if they're ashamed? And that's why this is the response. And not talking about shame keeps shame intact. So that's a silence that I think we need to collectively break in order to make working together easier, in order to help you understand the world, in order to make makes life easier to have that extra little insight into this one emotion that we kind of keep aside and even when we do talk about shame we very frequently incorrectly define it so then we're still mischaracterizing it.*

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## REFERENCES & LINKS

- **GEOFFREY's LinkedIN/Website page**
**LINKEDIN**
**Geoffrey van der Ven**

- **GEOFFREY's Book/Suggested Article**
**VELVET RAGE by ALAN DOWNS**

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