



Livelihood Show

*Creating what's next on
your personal career path*

Title: Michael Dobson

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Announcer Intro

The Livelihood Show invites you to make the journey from job to livelihood by finding the intersection between your strengths, your purpose, and your niche in the marketplace. Be inspired by guests who found satisfying alternatives to underemployment, burnout, and too early retirement. Move beyond the ordinary tools of resume writing, job hunting, and interviewing and learn about the new resources that will help you identify your portfolio of skills and how to market them to people and organizations that will pay well for these services.

Your host, Marcy Rosenbaum, is a management and organization development consultant whose company, Consulting Alliance, designs workshops to help people imagine problems differently. Her guests are pathfinders and authors who are at the leading edge of thinking differently about work, professional life, and career paths.

This month, we're bringing back some of our favorite episodes while we're recording new shows for the year ahead. You'll always hear interviews from experts and pathfinders designed to inspire you and help you take back the ownership of your career path, find the right path and the right directions for you.

Check out our website, www.livelihoodshow.com for new material, helpful tools, useful resources and cool products. Now, here's your host, Marcy Rosenbaum.

Key

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<p>Host (Marcy Rosenbaum)</p> <p>Welcome back to the Livelihood Show.</p> <p>Michael Dobson's career path includes <i>Dungeons and Dragons</i>, The Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, and the creation of the Good Samaritan Medal. Michael talks about how he started with a deck of skills that included writing, theater and project management and played that hand in a variety of different settings as a marketing director, a writer, a teacher, and the go-to guy for managing complex projects and decoding office politics.</p> <p>Recently, he's been sharing his perspectives on how to imagine problems differently in a series called <i>SideWise Thinking</i>. He talks about the power of being unrealistic, being chutzpadic - that's the adjective form of being chutzpah - and how career paths go up and down, but always forward.</p>	00:01:36
<p>Host</p> <p>People reinvent their professional lives at different stages of their careers for very different reasons. Sometimes because they've been doing something for twenty years and they've had enough. Sometimes it's because they can't do what they were doing anymore. The job has gone away; their work-family-health balance has changed. Sometimes, people wake up one morning and they say, "I must do this. I have discovered my purpose and it's not what I'm doing, and I must do this."</p> <p>I'm interested through these podcasts in telling the stories of both people who are walking that path, creating personal career paths, and people who have approaches to thinking and planning and career-building. Whose models can help folks think outside the box or think sideways, as you would say, so that they can look at the idea of their livelihood in fresh and innovative ways.</p>	00:02:26
<p>Michael</p> <p>All right, well, I've done it for myself obviously as you know. I've actually counseled some other people at different times so, I've got a variety of stories</p>	00:03:32
<p>Host</p> <p>That is a wonderful segue into the whole concept of <i>SideWise Thinking</i>. Edward de Bono was one of the first to really talk about how the way we think about problems, and the way we conceptualize and lay out the nature of what it is we're thinking about and how we ought to consider it, develop tools for people to use. You and your usual way of being able to take a big topic and distill it down to very manageable pieces.</p> <p>You have been doing a lot of writing lately, and a lot of speaking lately on <i>SideWise Thinking</i>. Tell me a little bit about how <i>SideWise Thinking</i> can be a tool for people who are reinventing their professional lives.</p>	00:03:43
<p>Michael</p> <p>Thinking is a multi-dimensional model. There's often a brick wall right in front of you. It doesn't mean you can't get to the other side; you just have to take a different path. The law</p>	00:04:30

of gravity makes things fall to earth. It doesn't mean we can't fly. We don't fly by ignoring gravity; we fly by leveraging other forces, and actually responding to gravity. Pilots are very sensitive to gravity. They pay a lot of attention to it.

You can create a fair amount of your own reality, not by ignoring the things that are around you, but by choosing to think differently about it. Our cognitive biases and decision making disorders tends to gives us a faulty picture of the world around us. There are a lot of advantages in altering that.

Sometimes being unrealistic is valuable. It helps you achieve the things that you wouldn't do otherwise. My dad went from being a high school mill worker dropout to an insurance company vice president, thanks to World War II and the GI bill and the willingness to stand up and do the long con.

Host 00:05:47

What does that mean?

Michael 00:05:48

The long con is when you lay the framework and you build it over time. I came from this, again, a little Southern town. My family did not have any particular money or anything else. I've managed to take myself into a different world, a world I wanted to live in. I grew up in a small town, I was usually the smartest guy in the room, but now I work a better class of room.

There's one thing that's worthwhile, it is self-esteem. Self-esteem is believing that you can, not believing that you have, not believing it's easy. Not being afraid of falling in your face, not being afraid of making a mistake, and being able to sell yourself. You think about yourself as a brand, as a package. How do you add value, how do you build on whatever it is you've got.

When I look at the people who do surprisingly well, or succeed against expectations, it's usually that if you want to find your passion and live your passion, there's a lot of good stuff. I have so many different passions and I like change in variety so for me it's not like, it's right livelihood, finding my one true central passion in life. I don't know that for me, there is necessarily any such thing. Having a series of interesting jobs, doing interesting things, meeting interesting people, if I had to value my life, I would value it by making a list of all of the interesting people I know or have come in contact with.

Having lunch in an hour with the son of the first president of Pakistan, who is the rightful king of what became British East India, a neighbor of mine. A lot of people know him in this area but they don't know this. I read his book, I asked questions about this, and I can make lists of people. Dean Koontz, I'm well connected in the underground cartoon scene. One astronaut knows me, but I've met a large number of them; rode in an elevator once with Jimmy Doolittle.

Host 00:08:03

I'm sorry, I don't know who Jimmy Doolittle is.

Michael 00:08:05

<p>The Tokyo Raid, flew B-25s off a carrier and bombed Tokyo in the early days of World War II, first man to pilot a Gee Bee Racer and lived to tell the tale. One of the great heroes of modern aviation.</p>	<p>Host 00:08:20</p> <p>I have a cousin who's an Air force pilot who's going to love hearing about it.</p>
<p>Michael 00:08:23</p> <p>I was Arthur C. Clark's chauffer for a couple of days once. As I said, my writing professor in college went on to write <i>The Joys of Lesbian Sex</i>. A lot of this is that I ask these questions, I find out if there is one thing that I'm happy in my life is that I have these kinds of connections, that I know these kinds of people. I've always wanted that.</p>	<p>Host 00:08:46</p> <p>One of the ways I would answer that is a model that I'm using to help explain livelihood and that is a Venn diagram of three circles that overlap. One circle is all the skills that you have. Another circle is the things you're really good at. The third circle is needs that need filling. The intersection between the three is an opportunity to do good and make a living.</p>
<p>Michael 00:09:13</p> <p>I'll add a couple of things to that. Number one, it's not fixed; you can expand it. What you need is Chutzpah. It's more than anything else. The jobs go. The things that get you a job have almost nothing to do with how well you're going to do the job, which is why so many incompetents end up in high paying positions. The ability to interview is a separate skill altogether. The self-confidence, the ability to present yourself.</p> <p>In any job, whether it's in your field or not in your field, I mean, you go in there and you're saying, "Hey, I'm really well qualified," but the fact is you don't know. You don't know anything about the job. You have no idea what the politics are, you have no idea what the personalities are, you have no idea what the hidden traps and pitfalls are. Again, it doesn't matter whether it's in your field or not. That's always true. When you get up and say, "I can do this job," part of that is a complete fabrication because you don't know.</p>	<p>Host 00:10:11</p> <p>Wishful thinking in a non-judgmental [inaudible 00:10:13].</p>
<p>Michael 00:10:14</p> <p>The word is the father to the deed. "I could do it." What is it? I don't know really, but I'm willing to stand there and say, "Sure, absolutely."</p>	<p>Host 00:10:24</p> <p>I think part of the key to success is it's possible to get hired for a job that you're not going to be any good at. I remember years ago, there was an organization development position that was in the market. People were hiring for it all the time. Anyone who was really</p>

<p>qualified for the job wouldn't take it because they knew that this was a job that could not be done.</p>	<p>Michael 00:10:45</p> <p>Right. Yes, there are plenty of those.</p>
<p>Host 00:10:48</p> <p>They ended up hiring a newly minted graduate student, gave them a big title and a lot of money for that job. Of course the person failed because the job couldn't be done. One of the keys to the "thought is the father of the deed" and this whole idea of bluffing, if you will, is if you understand the rules of the game, and you're bluffing in something that you think you can win.</p> <p>In other words, you're bluffing into something that, "I know I can do this." "You may not know I can do, but I know I can do this," that's one thing. The key is not to bluff your way into situation where once you get there, you're lost.</p>	<p>Michael 00:11:32</p> <p>I'm not sure that's always true.</p>
<p>Host 00:11:34</p> <p>Really? Tell me more about that.</p>	<p>Michael 00:11:37</p> <p>When I asked for the promotion back at TSR and I got to be the head of marketing, frankly it looked like the company was basically going down the tubes. When I went in, I figured, merely asking would lower my position on the lay-off list because I'd looked enthusiastic. No harm. When they offered me the job, what's the worst that can happen? I fail, I get fired, and the company collapses. Now what do I do? I say, "started as an editor, became head of marketing." That's on my resume. I win.</p>
<p>Host 00:12:11</p> <p>Let me continue this challenge. You went it, and you volunteered for a position not in software programming, not in technical engineering, not in banking, finance and treasury, but in marketing. You went in for the one job that you may not have ever done but where you had a set of competencies. As you said, writing, reading information, absorbing and being able to present it in a way that others could understand and a sense of knowing the product.</p>	<p>Michael 00:12:43</p> <p>Yes, but notice as you said some jobs "can't be done." Usually political or circumstantial, it may be impossible. But if I had failed, if I had [flubbed] [ph 00:12:58], I'd still be better off than I would have been without it because I get the title, I get to claim the promotion, get to claim the experience. Nothing provides experience like a complete disaster.</p>

<p>There was no way for me to lose. That graduate student that you're talking about has a much better job title and a much more powerful credential than she would have had if she hadn't gotten the job in the first place. If she spins that right, she'll get paid for it.</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:13:30</p> <p>But she also has to be willing perhaps to take a step back. Sometimes what happens is some people won't do that.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:13:39</p> <p>Well, that's a big disadvantage if finding your right livelihood. My career resembles the Dow Jones Industrial Average. The general trend line has been positive, but I have had recessions and depressions on the way. I've been fired twice; I have fallen flat on my face in more than one job. I'm better for it, and I wouldn't trade having made the attempt.</p> <p>People really don't embrace failure enough. If you're talking about a right livelihood, if you're talking about making a difference or career for yourself doing interesting things, a lot of these are nasty, unpleasant, booby-trapped jobs. I've always thought the secret of creativity is being willing to belly-flop.</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:14:33</p> <p>...and to bounce.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:14:35</p> <p>That's right. I mean, can you get back up again? You can't get back up again if the failure's going to finish you, your options are limited. I guess there's one other one. I mean, we're talking about getting jobs for which I'm not qualified.</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:14:50</p> <p>Let me re-challenge that for a minute. How I see it is you get jobs for which you are not yet experienced.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:14:56</p> <p>Well, there's qualified and able.</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:14:58</p> <p>Yes. Let's take a look at what that means.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:15:01</p> <p>I'm frequently not qualified and that I do not have the check-the-box criteria that you would normally expect for someone who can walk in on day one and hit the ground running. Able, well, I read quickly. I learn and I'm not nervous.</p> <p>My father who was insurance executive, liked sailing. He couldn't afford a sailboat. He went on to a print shop and ordered up letterhead and business cards for the Tennessee</p>	

Valley Boat Building company and wrote letters to a bunch of sailboat kit manufacturers saying that he was thinking about going into the sailboat manufacturing business. He managed to acquire a kit for significantly below wholesale.	
Host	00:15:44
...because he was in the business.	
Michael	00:15:45
Yes, because he was in the business. From that, I learned the value of letterheads and business cards. I always have at least two business cards for different businesses on me. I am whoever I need to be.	
Host	00:15:59
All of that is true.	
Michael	00:16:00
Well, that's right. A good con always has truth in it because if you can't create the truth, you can't get people to buy the con. Whether being a con-artist is moral or immoral depends on what the con is and what the buyer is left with at the end.	
Host	00:16:22
Then con becomes a neutral world. It becomes a style of acting under conditions of inexperience rather than the purpose of defrauding someone intentionally.	
Michael	00:16:38
"Sales" is a nicer way to say it. I've always liked the idea of being a travelling medicine show.	
Host	00:16:46
I now understand much more clearly why you write alternate history fiction. It's a very interesting genre of writing. But it's basically a historical novel with a twist. What if something that did happen didn't happen, or what if something happened that didn't happen, and now how does history unfold? You're like writing historical cons.	
Michael	00:17:09
Yes, counterfactual is the other name for the field. It's also the case. I don't have a degree in history, and the stuff in my books I learned while I was writing the books. I didn't write them because I was already an expert in the field. I read, I learn, I translate. I come up with the big picture. I'm not afraid of it.	
But I'm thinking about what use this is for someone with a different set of skills. I have my skills. I leverage them as best I can if you happen to have the same set of skills, then perhaps my experience is directly of use to you. A friend of mine who has his doctorate in pre-Columbian art, he is probably one of the ten most knowledgeable experts in the	

country. The problem is there is about five jobs.

Host

00:18:06

As a professor of pre-Columbian art.

Michael

00:18:10

Right. I was talking to him about this. I couldn't get him to do this. This is how I would have handled it. I was saying, "Well, obviously to be a professor, it's publish or perish. Where do you publish?" He said, "You know, there's no journal of pre-Columbian art. You do general art history, or general history, or other kinds of things."

I said, "Wait a minute." The reason I knew this guy is he was in the same amateur mimeograph magazine community that I've been part of. I said, "Why don't you start the journal?" He said, "Well, I'm not this qualified person." Of course, my reaction was, "What does that got to do with anything?"

You can get a grant or not get a grant; you don't care if it makes money. If there's a game of musical chairs and there's ten outstanding people going for five opportunities, roughly, number one, the other nine will happily give you articles. If somebody's going to say, "We need to hire a professor," do we compare these apples and oranges, or do we also acquire as a secondary value, we then become the sponsors and publishers of the journal of pre-Columbian Art.

He couldn't quite feel that he had the gravitas to do it. Actually, he's done very well for himself because he acquired a secondary skill in comic books. He became a comic book editor for Kitchen Sink, which is one of the older underground [publishers] [ph 00:19:39] and he's actually curated several major museum exhibitions of comic art, and is very well-respected in the field.

So, he went in a separate area but he had not a lot of people with gravitas in that field, and he's got real substantial thing, and he's very happy.

Host

00:19:55

What he did is he took his skillset, and he said, "Pre-Columbian art can be the focus or it could be the outcome. But underneath my knowledge of pre-Columbian art, are my skills at like understanding the importance of exhibitions and what's important and what's not and how to present them in a way that's meaningful and contextually accurate."

"I have an ability to see nuance in visual images and to be able to make meaningful comparisons," and if you just substituted cartoon images rather than pre-Columbian art, all of a sudden he's the best qualified guy in the country.

Michael

00:20:40

Right. He's done much better. But again, if you want to be something, be a value-added professional. You bring something in addition to yourself to a job. You become more than just a person, you become a brand. You become a package. Almost anything that you can do that differentiates yourself from the crowd.

(Sound Bite)

Host

00:21:10

Following Michael's approach, presenting yourself should be more than giving a list of your former responsibilities. It should be a demonstration of the skills and competencies you bring with you which can be applied to future responsibilities. Your ability to learn, to master new environments, to do successfully which you've never done before – that's the essence of moving ahead. Michael used his course skills of research, clear writing, personable entrepreneurship and a passion for quirky knowledge into a series of opportunities.

As he tells his story, you'll hear how he leverages these skills into a series of increasingly productive work experiences.

Let's start with your story. You have done some of the most interesting things of all the people I know, from *Dungeons and Dragons* to the Smithsonian and the Moon. Tell us a little bit about how you made certain decisions, or how you found yourself facing certain choices that gave you the chance to do what you've done?

Michael

00:22:13

Well, I followed John Lennon. "Life is what happens to you while you're making other plans." A friend of mine found the ad first for a weekend planetarium show operator in Charlotte, North Carolina. I don't know much about astronomy, I've never worked in a planetarium. He didn't get a call back. Once it was clear that he wasn't going to get the job, it was cricket for me to go after it. I basically sold myself into it on the grounds that I was a theater guy, and I had a good speaking voice. I became a planetarium pointer show operator.

The director of this little, tiny museum in Charlotte, North Carolina – I was talking to him about what I wanted to do – suggested that the previous planetarium director before the one I worked for was now running the planetarium at the Air and Space Museum, and he thought he could get me a courtesy interview. I got a courtesy interview. Absolutely no traction at all.

I went back and I said, "What do I do?" He says, "Don't give up, and write him a letter." I said, "To whom?" I wish I could tell you I did this because I'm smart. This is dumb luck being exploited. He said, "Well, here," and he gave me a copy of the American Associations of Museums Directory, opened it to the National Air and Space Museum, and says, "Here is a list of all the managers."

Well, I didn't know whom to send it to, so I basically sent one to everybody except for the head of the Aeronautics department because I'm not an airplane guy. As it happens, the head of the Aeronautics was the only guy hiring. Every single manager who got my application put a buck slip on it, sent it to the head of Aeronautics; he ended up with a stack of eight copies, and decided I was the most enthusiastic guy he'd ever met. That's how I got into the Air and Space Museum.

This wasn't any particular career fascination or career focus. Obviously, I thought it would be really cool. I went up, interviewed. I never mind pitching myself for anything. I'm sort of pleased to say that I've never once in my life gotten a job for which I was actually qualified

at the time I got it. But I can do it. Aside from the fact that I wouldn't sell myself as an airplane pilot or a brain surgeon, for any job that requires basic literacy, nerve and willingness to learn something, I can do it. So can you. So can most people. I'm not really afraid of a lack of qualifications.

I got to the Air and Space Museum, worked there for a number of years. I had joined during the period that the building on the mall in the early 70's was being built, so I got to do stuff that no sane person would have ever let me near under normal circumstances except they had a dearth of qualified people. Once we opened, I realized it was going to take me 10 years of climbing the ladder to get back to do stuff I'd already done.

So, I went to a resume service to try to help me make a career transition. They weren't much help, but they were doing a book and because I had some editorial skills, they asked me if I would proofread some galleys. I proofread the galleys; caught some technical errors and they offered me a job.

Host 00:25:28

Now, what did you study in college? I've heard theater and I've heard proofreading skills.

Michael 00:25:34

I went to the University of North Carolina in Charlotte; I was in the fifth graduating class which was brand new. It was a very small campus at the time. Now it's the largest campus in the system. It was out of state, and they were about to double out of state tuition. I had no money. I had to get out before the new fees came in. I had two years and change to get a bachelor's degree, or else...

I found out that you could sit any final for any class for five dollars a credit hour. If you passed the final, you would get the hours with a grade of P for Pass.

Host 00:26:15

That's not [inaudible 00:26:17], that's called life experience credit.

Michael 00:26:19

I took my major that way. As an English Major, which technically I am, I didn't even have to read the books. I mean, if it's an essay quiz and all you have to do is fill up a blue book, well, it's not that hard. I did that. I needed money; I found out that the editor of the Literary Magazine paid. I ran for and got that. I found that you could take Creative Writing every single semester. It was a three hundred level class with a guaranteed A. Theater was great because these were six-hour classes where you do a play with a guaranteed A.

As it happens, my Creative Writing teacher, the late Bertha Harris, author of *Lovers*, *Catching Sarah Dove* and co-author of *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* was the lover of my Theater professor, Catherine Nicholson. Then I found out that the English department had planted some of their department budget in the student activity fee. As Literary Magazine Editor, I had the signature authority. I traded that for an independent study class to get some more hours that way. When I found out that they wanted to add Science Fiction to the English curriculum, I knew more about it than anybody in the faculty.

While as an undergraduate, I became a TA, again for credit. I graduated a little over two years. I wrote two five-page papers in my bachelor's degree, walked out with a 3.25 average. I have a degree; I'm still working on a college education.

Host

00:27:49

What's so ironic about this is once you've left college, you have been writing like a writing machine. Like a warrior, writing machine.

Michael

00:27:59

Actually, I learned how to write production stuff when I was a resume writer. Especially the old government job application form-171, sort of a combination of blue book, a legal brief and a resume. I would crank out a couple of thousand words a day. I was playing – there was a brand new game out, it was like these complicated hobby games. While I was at the Smithsonian, I was introduced to this thing called *Dungeons and Dragons*, an absolutely illiterate piece of work, but a great idea.

Some years later, I started writing articles for their in-house magazine. When they were looking for an editor, I became an editor. I got there at the perfect time because we were imploding. Our fad had peaked. We went through five rounds of lay-offs and shrank from 380 to 80 people. I had no seniority, there was nothing I could do, so I went to the vice president and asked for a promotion.

Good luck is camouflaged. I know what a lay-off is like. In a lay-off, They lay off people, but they never lay off the work. I knew they had a lot of work to be done. Everybody else was demoralized and panicky. They said, "Well, what do you mean, you want a raise? You haven't been here that long." I said, "I don't want a raise, I just want a promotion." They looked at me kind of funny.

About a month later, the vice president came into my little cubicle, sat down and said, "You still want a promotion?" I said, "Yes," and he said, "Well, I'm firing all 50 members of the marketing department today. How would you like to take their place?"

That's how I became director of marketing for a \$20 million company with frankly no marketing experience whatsoever. I could write; I was pretty much the only guy in the game department that they could let out in public. About a year or so later, I came back to head game design.

Host

00:29:55

What did you do? Just give me a hint of some of the things you did as you were inventing what it was to be the marketing department for *Dungeons and Dragons*?

Michael

00:30:03

It was very simple. They had 50 people, and as nearly as I can figure, all they ever did was send memos to each other. I looked at all the work and decided that there were two things we needed – catalogs and sales sheets, which I could do. We had messed up our relationship with Walden Books, which at the time was important. It was a quarter of our business.

<p>It wasn't that hard. All they needed was somebody to pay attention to them. I didn't do anything else. But I saved a quarter of the company's business. I got the sales sheets out on time. It was enough.</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:30:35</p> <p>There's something about doing what needs to be done as opposed to doing what you think is interesting or doing what you did before.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:30:47</p> <p>Well, there's no such thing as a promotion. There are only career changes. Everything that you did to get you where you are is not what will get you to the next place. When I went back to head up the games department, I had to throw away mentally everything I knew about how to do a good role playing game and everything I cared about there. We simply had to push out the production to keep the doors of the company open. I was willing to do what it took. There's any number of people who still won't talk to me because I did...</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:31:22</p> <p>They're purists.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:31:23</p> <p>Yes. That's the way it goes.</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:31:25</p> <p>There's a place for purists.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:31:27</p> <p>There is.</p>	
<p>Host</p> <p>00:31:28</p> <p>There's a place for pragmatists.</p>	
<p>Michael</p> <p>00:31:29</p> <p>Right. Management. I didn't stay in the game of business because I enjoyed <i>Dungeons and Dragons</i> quite a lot. But that was what I wanted to do, I did it. I won an H.G. Wells award for Best Miniatures Game with my partner Doug Niles. I did it. I was ready to do something else. I'd taken a couple of jobs out of desperation. One is, we had been sold to the Eris, to the Buck Rogers Fortune. I ended up the highest ranking guy in the company that actually never played the game. I could see the handwriting on the wall. TSR went under.</p> <p>My team turned it around, and we had a stable company. A few years later, they missed the move to collectible card games like Magic and Pokémon. The wreckage of the company was bought by an outfit called Wizards of the Coast, which was subsequently swallowed up by Hasbro. I still got a lot of friends in the business. A number of my friends</p>	

went into computer games. I could've, I suppose, but I didn't really want to.

(Sound Bite)

Host

00:32:39

I've never thought about the game of *Dungeons and Dragons* as a metaphor for career planning until I learned a little bit more about it. Here's how it's described on the official D&D website. They say, "D&D is an imaginative social experience that engages players in a rich fantasy world filled with larger-than-life heroes, deadly monsters and diverse settings."

They continue, "Players create heroic fantasy characters – mighty warriors, stealthy rogues or powerful wizards - which they guide through an ongoing series of adventures working together to defeat monsters and other challenges, and growing in power, glory and achievement." They say each player chooses the character that he or she plays. Each character has unique strengths, weaknesses and abilities. For example, some characters have the power to cast spells. Some have combat experiences. Others have special skills.

Your character starts in the adventures you play just like the heroes of a book or a movie. Your character might be a savage barbarian from the frozen wastes or a clever rogue with a quick wit and a quicker blade. You might be an archer trained in survival techniques or wizards who has mastered arcane arts. As your character participates in adventures, he or she gains experience and becomes more powerful. Interesting.

Identify and leverage your strengths. Develop new skills in response to the monsters of problems you encounter along the way. Create alliances with people whose skills and interests complement your own and play out the situations, intended and unintended, anticipated and unanticipated, using your shared knowledge and imagination. Sounds like career paths in the workplace to me.

But in addition to this imaginative spirit, Michael has a clean sense of pragmatism. His expertise as a project management specialist is in a sense the integration of imagination and realism. One of these central tools of SideWise Thinking, Michael says is to understand why. Why is someone reading this book? Why would one candidate be more likely to succeed in this job than another? Why should the good Samaritans matter? Why doesn't he want to be like Tom Clancy?

Michael

00:35:02

I ended up answering a blind ad for Fred Pryor's seminars. I believe it is the cause of that that you and I [inaudible 00:35:15] and became a stand up road warrior trainer in what I think of as the Earl Scheib corner of the Seminar Market.

Host

00:35:21

Who is Earl Scheib?

Michael

00:35:22

Remember Earl Scheib, the "I'll paint that car for \$99.00." If it's Fred Pryor, "I'll teach that seminar for \$99.00." That was our price point.

Host	00:35:32
In New York, we had Crazy Eddie, "Crazy Eddie, it's insane."	
Michael	00:35:36
<p>Insane, right. Again, I could speak but I've never done training. I had no training background. This was a huge advantage for me. The purists at Fred Pryor thought their job was to teach a seminar. It was clear to me because of the way the financial incentives were structured, that the job was to sell the \$59.95 audio cassette albums in the back of the room. I moved those tapes. I sold quite a few of them. I did quite well with that.</p>	
Host	00:36:11
Then you realized somebody was making money off of those tapes, and somebody was writing those books in those tapes.	
Michael	00:36:18
Well, I always wanted to write back in my teenage and college days. I was semi-active in the Science Fiction fan world. One of the things the Science fiction fans did in the day was published mimeographed magazines.	
Host	00:36:33
Mimeographed?	
Michael	00:36:34
Mimeographed absolutely. You know the hand-cranked mimeograph.	
Host	00:36:38
You pick up the paper and it smells like really, really great?	
Michael	00:36:41
<p>No, that's Ditto. Ditto, the ink is on the master, and the fluid erodes the ink one layer at a time. That's that purple stuff. The mimeograph is a wax over tissue paper and your typewriter cuts little holes in it, and the ink is squeezed through the holes. There's quite a subculture in this. Anybody you know in Science fiction – the chances are Harlan Ellison, Robert Silverberg – all these people started off with mimeographed fanzines. I know a number of people who've become fairly well-known Science fiction writers because we were all in the same subculture.</p> <p>One in particular, my best friend in college was publishing his own fanzine. He had a humor columnist in it named Dean Koontz. Dean was a schoolteacher in Allentown at the time, trying to make it as a writer. He'd sold his short stories at Atlantic and finally sold his first novel for \$750.00, it was B-side of an Ace double, those forty-cent-two-books thing. In fact, I have somewhere in my files the original, typed-on-erasable-bond, original Dean Koontz manuscript celebrating his first novel sale which he had sent to my friend. I ended</p>	

up collecting all of his files.

Dean quit his job as a school teacher to become a novelist. I know what the economics of writing are, I always have. I always wanted to do it, but I had a dread of poverty. I moved from Fred Pryor to Skill Path specifically because Skill Path had its own internal publishing, and I broke into that. Then I did some pseudonymous hackwork to get myself broken into fiction. Again, that wasn't for money. I had always wanted to do it.

Host

00:38:32

One of the things I found interesting about the books that you publish for Skill Path, and later for the American Management Association is they were readable and they were usable. As a management consultant who was often designing training or delivering training, we know that some people are auditory learners, and some people are kinesthetic learners and some people are visual learners.

It wasn't just enough to have people in a workshop. I always wanted to have good material that I could send home with them, or I can ask them to read in advance and then come to a workshop to really work the issues. The books that you wrote on everything from project management to office politics were accessible. They were college-level in terms of the impact of the ideas, but they were breezy reading.

Michael

00:39:27

Thank you very much, because it's certainly the goal. In terms of managing any career, you've got to play to whatever your strengths are. I'm a good writer and a good speaker. Other people have other talents. Those happen to be mine, and I've leveraged them wherever I possibly could because it's what I've got. I don't have much of a technical background, but I can read something, I can translate it and I can explain it meaningfully in a popular form.

I think of myself especially in non-fiction as I write books people don't want to read, but must read. You read a book on project management not because, wow, it's the latest Michael Dobson. You read it because you need to.

Host

00:40:13

I do.

Michael

00:40:15

Well, I appreciate that. There are not many in that category. But you read it because you have to. As a result, speakers, NSA members often talk about the privilege of the platform, the service role that you have when you're in the front of the room. I think of that as you're not there to read my depth with prose or to absorb my brilliant insights. You're there because you've got a mission. A lot of the rules that I follow, I never write more than 200 words without a subhead. I try to make the skeleton very visible. If I were an architect, I'd have all the duct work where you could see it.

I want you to be able to read my books out of order. I want you to be able to flip through and find the section that you want. Maybe you know part of project management and you don't know another. You want to be able to breeze through all the parts that you already

understand and you already know. You don't need me, and you want to be able to stop and say, "Here's the part that I really want to focus on."

I care about indices; I care about table of contents. I mean, a lot of that technical structural stuff is very important to me as a writer. But in terms of career transitions and in terms of career management, I play my strengths.

(Sound Bite)

When I was at the Smithsonian Institute, I picked up - because it was in the garbage - a space suit that never went into space. Which I've got hanging up here. But I tell you, I had it put out in my resume, I'm the world's only private owner of an Apollo space suit.

Host 00:41:53

If nothing else, I might bring you in to interview just to hear more about that.

Michael 00:41:59

That's right. When I was writing resumes, one of the rules: you never put references on a resume, right? One exception: I met this young woman when I was writing. She was the niece of Coleman Young, former mayor of Detroit. One of her references she brought in was Aretha Franklin. "How did you know Aretha?" I asked. Well, she'd been her babysitter.

Host 00:42:24

Unbelievable.

Michael 00:42:25

Michael

Now, would you normally put babysitting experience on a resume for a professional job? Of course you wouldn't. But wouldn't you call someone in for an interview just so you get a chance to ask somebody about Aretha Franklin?

Host 00:42:38.

Maybe even call for that reference? "Miss Franklin, Miss Franklin..."

Michael 00:42:42

Absolutely. I mean, people do it badly. Another guy who tried to push me because one of his references was Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor under Jimmy Carter. I said, now the problem with that one is you're going for a federal job, what do you want? You want to hire some kid out of college whom if you make him mad will call the White House on you? In a way, a reference like that can backfire on you. But Aretha was a great one.

I mean, value-added can take almost any form, any hook. I had another client once in the resume business who wanted to become a journalist. She'd gotten a degree in journalism, and you know how much that's worth.

Host	00:43:27
It's a great set of skills, though, I must say. People I know that have a degree in Journalism and have a Law degree have a real advantage in getting through life. The journalists because they can write and the people with the Law background because they can read contracts.	
Michael	00:43:40
It doesn't help you get a newspaper job. She'd been a dental assistant. I turned around and said, "You know what? She knows how to interview people under pressure."	
Host	00:43:52
As a dental assistant?	
Michael	00:43:54
You bet you.	
Host	00:43:56
You mean interviewing people while she has things in their mouth?	
Michael	00:44:00
Yes. I just spun the whole thing around this and she did fairly well with interviews because it was unique, it was creative. How do you make being a dental assistant relevant to being a reporter? The answer is you can make it fit.	
I told you about creating an international peace medal.	
Host	00:44:24
Is this the Good Samaritan Award?	
Michael	00:44:26
Yes, that's right.	
Host	00:44:27
Okay, tell me the story.	
Michael	00:44:30
A friend of mine called me up one day and said, "I've got the Chancellor to the High Priest of the Israelites Samaritan People coming to town, and wondered if you'd be willing to put them up for a couple of days." Well, why not? That's also a good attitude for finding out opportunities. We're not used to having unorthodox Shabbat in our house.	

Host	00:44:56
Do you have any kind of Shabbat in your house?	
Michael	00:44:57
No.	
Host	00:44:58
Okay. It's not like you have a Humanistic Shabbat in your house, or Sephardic Shabbat in your house.	
Michael	00:45:06
<p>Right, we have no Shabbat. We end up with a Samaritan Shabbat. We had a situation where we invited a bunch of people over for dinner. I got them a speaking gig, and all this other stuff. But, unless we began cooking after sundown, on Saturday, he couldn't eat anything.</p> <p>The speech was so terrible. He was doing such a bad job of representing his people. I took out my anger by writing this sort of eight-page explanation of how badly he was bungling his US public relation.</p> <p>But still, you look up Samaritan in the dictionary, good and kind actually comes before the definition of who these people actually are. The idea of a Samaritan far outweighs the reality. I said, "It's a brand. It's the best brand name in the history of charity." They're not using it, they're not exploiting it. I said, "What should Samaritans do?" I mean the problem is half of them live in Israel, half of them live in the West Bank. I said, "Well, give a Peace Medal. Right? Who better?"</p> <p>I bankrolled it, I set it up. Who am I to do this? Answer? Why not? I don't know if you remember, it was one of those old Edward de Bono creativity deals where what you do is you open the dictionary and you point to a random word, and you say that word is the answer to my problem. Your job is to figure out how that's true.</p>	
Host	00:46:29
It's like an I-Ching with that source.	
Michael	00:46:32
<p>Right. The idea is through brainstorming, through trying to build the connection, your mind starts coming up with different lengths. That's a generally valuable skill when especially if you think of your career as deficient. Career changing is always the toughest thing because, by definition, you don't have the qualifications that would normally be the case.</p> <p>Your job is to draw the bridge. It's to be able to say to yourself, first and foremost, "Why am I wonderfully qualified for this job?" You turn that around by saying, "I am wonderfully qualified for this job because..."</p> <p>You just have to figure out what the link is, what the value-added is.</p>	

<p>Host 00:47:16</p> <p>It reminds me, Michael, of one of the things that I took away from your training in project management. That's the concept of the Triple Constraints. You taught me that in a project, there are three things that are important. The quality of...</p>
<p>Michael 00:47:29</p> <p>Time, cost and performance.</p>
<p>Host 00:47:31</p> <p>Time, cost, performance. When you ask the owner of a project, which is the most important, they always say they all are. But you taught me that one always rules. There are ways of figuring it out. You say, along the way, you suddenly realize that in order to hit that level of quality you have to spend a little bit more money, you ask them, shall I spend a little bit more money? Should I hit this quality thing? They'll tell you which one is important and that's how that gets resolved.</p>
<p>Michael 00:48:00</p> <p>You ask them, why? Why do you want the project? For every project, when you know why, why do you want this thing that you want? That is going to tell you where your hierarchy is, where you have to put the emphasis. Why? You want this job, you want this career, you want this life, you have to say why? Is it because you want a certain amount of money? Is it because you have to feel a certain way about yourself? Are you in a race? Why do you want it?</p> <p>"Why?" is the question. "Why?" is what leads you through the steps of the process. If you know that about yourself, why? I want to meet interesting people and do interesting things. Do I like to make money? Sure. Will I take more interesting over more money? Yes, I will because I care about that. That's what I value.</p> <p>Am I in a race? Well, I just turned 59. I figure, I've got at least another 30 years in the workforce. I'm not in a hurry; I'm not in a race. I'm in another period of transition. I've written 25 books. I'm wondering about writing 26. I've written them, I know how to write a book. I'm comfortable writing books. That's not a good thing for me. I don't know how much I necessarily have to say. I don't want to be Tom Clancy, who's been rewriting the same book since the early 80's.</p> <p>Is it time to do something different? If so, what is it? Well, I know what it has to be. It has to be quirky and unusual. It has to be the sort of thing for which there isn't a normal, natural career progression so that I can make my eclectic background work. It's got to bring me in contact with people I want to meet. It's got to be something that I'll have fun talking about or claiming to be part of why I want it. I'll do that for 10 years and I know at that point I'll be ready to do something else.</p> <p>I always wanted to retire so I could write. Now that I've written, I figure in any essential form, I've already done my retirement.</p>

Host	00:50:27
You've done your novels.	
Michael	00:50:28
I've done my novels. I've always wanted to do that.	
Host	00:50:31
We will feature your novels for people who'd like to learn more about them.	
Michael	00:50:36
Wonderful. Even then, they didn't do that well but...	
Host	00:50:38
I enjoyed them, and I know who have read them, especially people who are World War II buffs.	
Michael	00:50:44
I ran into a guy who's a moderately well known Science fiction writer. To my shock, he said MacArthur's War was his favorite book in the last 10 years. That means more to me than another 10,000 copies sold. Now, I know I have a new friend. It turned out his daddy actually worked for MacArthur. He was the G2 who had to go up to tell MacArthur that the North Koreans have crossed over into the South starting the Korean War. To get a story like that, makes my whole day.	
Host	00:51:17
Absolutely.	
Michael	00:51:20
<p>That's what I want out of my life. A lot of it's been a series of happy accidents. But luck, I mean, I depend on luck. I rely on luck because good luck is a skill. The structural difference between good luck and bad luck works like this. Imagine you lose \$100. Without any effort on your part, all the consequences of losing that \$100 flow to you effortlessly.</p> <p>But now let's imagine someone else lost \$100 and it's somewhere on the street between your house and your car. You might walk past and miss it. Maybe it's raining, maybe it's stuck in a pile of mud and all you see is a little corner of green paper so you don't bother to pick it up. If you do pick it up, and nobody says you've got to spend it wisely.</p> <p>To suffer the pain of losing \$100 is effortless. To gain the benefit of somebody else's lost \$100 takes attention, focus, effort and the willingness to act on your part. There's nothing automatic about it. You can leave the feet on the rabbit and the shoes on the horses, but you can choose to be a luckier person because good luck is a skill. Random is still random. But good things and bad things both happen randomly.</p>	

The problem is with the good ones, they don't actually pay you unless you actually exploit them, unless you see them for what they are and reach out and take them. It's raining soup. Go grab yourself a spoon.

Host

00:53:03

Michael, thank you so very much for sharing this time with us. We're going to have a link on our show website to your site to your books. You're one of the few people that I follow on Twitter. I don't really get Twitter. I love your sidewise thinker, and every day you say something that makes me think differently that day, and I consider that a day well spent.

Michael

00:53:26

Well, thank you so very much. Appreciate it, always a pleasure.

Host

00:53:30

Always a pleasure, Michael. Thank you.

Michael

00:53:31

Bye-bye.

Host

00:53:36

If "why" is an important question, "why not" is essential. You can develop good luck as a skill, Michael says, by asking "Why not?" and using the application of focus, effort and willingness to act to uncover unexpected opportunities in unfolding situations.

Focus. What do we mean by focus? Do we see only what we want to see? Can we focus and see what's really there and imagine what could be there?

Effort. Inertia is the tendency of an object to resist any change in its motion. It's the first law of physics. Things like to keep on doing what they're already doing. Only when it is acted upon by an external force, that's effort, can the status quo shift in favor of something different.

Willingness to act. The willingness to act includes the willingness to be surprised out of your comfort zone and to be open to learning and to not knowing. The willingness to act is the willingness to take chances.

Luck is what happens they say when preparation meets opportunity. Satisfying personal career paths, it seems, create luck for their pathfinders.

Michael Dobson is the author of over twenty books on leadership, project management and alternate history. A former researcher at the Smithsonian institution and head of game design for TSR Inc., Dobson specializes in thinking differently about business problems and opportunities. You can find a link to his blog, Sidewise Thinker, and to his website, Dobson Solutions on our website, www.livelihoodshow.com.

If you're wondering what kind of Dungeon and Dragon character you would be – a fighter, wizard, cleric, rogue – there's a link on our website that will take you a survey that will reveal your ability scores, your fantasy race, your class alignment and character level that you would be if you were transformed into a *Dungeons and Dragons* character. Find out and post your results on our forum or on our Facebook page.

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Here's a shout out to some of you who have been listening and commenting on our shows. Anna Dresin from New York City, Stephanie Tire from London. Marty Rosenbaum from Albany, New York. Spencer Le Frou from Orlando, Florida, and Linda Oman from Miami, Florida.

Join us next week when we explore how you can expand your vision of your personal career path and apply your professional skills to meet different challenges and unexpected opportunities. You can find links to the books we highlight, bios of our guests, past shows, and a link to our Facebook page right on our website, www.livelihoodshow.com.

We're going to end our program this week with another song from our featured band, Little Atlas. This week, the song is called *Changeover* from their Surface Serene album. Until next time, keep up the good work. I'm Marcy Rosenbaum.

(Sound Bite)

Announcer Outro

Thanks for listening to today's program. You can find more information, past programs, helpful tools, resources, and cool products at our website www.livelihoodshow.com. Marcy Rosenbaum is your host, Dave Jackson is our technical producer, Steve Katsikas is the musical director, and our program features music by his band Little Atlas.

If you want to contact Marcy Rosenbaum to bring her innovative style to help you and your organization imagine problems differently, you can reach her at www.livelihoodshow.com/marcy. Until next time, keep up the good work.

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Marcy Rosenbaum, Host of [The Livelihood Show](#)

Marcy Rosenbaum uses her senior consultant experience to provide inspirational and practical advice to help listeners connect the dots among their passions, skill sets and market opportunities.

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