

Episode 3

LEADING WITH CREATIVITY WITH SUSAN BLACKWELL



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Michael: Hi Susan.

Susan: Hi Michael Keeler.

Michael: Welcome to the Business for Unicorns' podcast.

Susan: I'm so happy to be here.

Michael: Oh my gosh! I'm so excited to have you. I've been so looking forward to this. I've been such a huge fan of yours since even before I moved to New York City.

Susan: Is that true?

Michael: It's true. I don't use the f word lightly. I think in my pantheon of who I'm a fan of, it's kind of like, it's Elon Musk and Celine Dion, Susan Blackwell, and maybe Bea Arthur. So, I think those are the greats for me.

Susan: That's the Mount Rushmore of – it's the Michael Keeler. *laughs*

Michael: *laughs* It's the gay Rushmore of Michael Keeler.

Susan: That's also some deep cuts too.

Michael: It's also aging me a little bit but I'm okay with that. So anyway, it takes a lot for me to say that I'm a real fan but you just kind of rocked my world.

Susan: I'm not fishing, why, why?

Michael: I think Broadway. I think theatre world.

Susan: Broadway, got it.

Michael: But I think also just since I've seen you on camera and on screen, I want to talk about Side by Side by Susan Blackwell in a second. But ever since I've seen you, I feel like now I have the words from RuPaul that you are just such a great mix of that, what did she say, charisma, charm, uniqueness, and talent. That's what you look for in a drag queen. That's what I look for in humans. Ever since I've seen you both on screen and since in person, it's been like, you know what, this is someone who just really has that full package. I've just been, you know, every time I see you I feel like I'm fanboying.

Susan: Likewise.

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Michael: So, thank you for being here.

Susan: It is my joy because I love you. Let's just cut to the chase. Are we allowed to curse on this podcast?

Michael: Oh please, yes.

Susan: Are we?

Michael: Get it all out girl.

Susan: Fuuuudge. See, it's all bait-and-switch.

Michael: No, it's true. I thought for a little while when I first started doing this that I would offer what they do, like on NPR, like little warning in the beginning like this is going to have curses. If you want the bleeped version, go to our website. I was like, "Fuck that. I'm not making a bleeped version."

Susan: It's not your audience.

Michael: Children aren't going to be listening to this anyway.

Susan: Children who are interested in growing their own business, entrepreneurial children.

Michael: So, our listeners will have just heard me introduce you. They will have heard that you are a lady who wears many hats.

Susan: Many tiny hats.

Michael: Many, many little, tiny hats. So, how did you both get interested in and so good at just so many things?

Susan: First of all, that's a really nice compliment. I just feel very complimented this morning, so thank you.

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: *laughs* I don't know how to answer that question. I am a curious person. Some of that is born out of curiosity. But a lot of it was born out of necessity. So, for instance, there are – I'm good at, for instance, running a business. That's born out of necessity when I moved to New York to be an actor. I, of course, started temping in an office as so many actors have to do. We found a job to pay the rent and was good at the job, and through a chain of events sort of kept ascending the corporate ladder. I'm decent at that. So that was something that was born out of necessity.

Then there are things that are just born out of just curiosity. I've thought about it and had a discussion about it fairly recently about if I had to choose like gun to head, I hate that expression, but like if I had to

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choose one thing that I would devote my time to, I think it would make me, I don't think I would be entirely happy. I like, literally within a single week, I like being on camera. I like not being, you know, I like interviewing somebody. I like working on my business and building that. I like teaching. I like doing a lot of different things and having different parts of my brain activated. And I'm not sure if what, chicken or the egg, I'm not sure of that. I don't know.

Michael: Yeah. I know just so often, this was the case for me at least, and I feel like this is totally the case. Kind of in growing up and in our educational system and through our parents, I often feel like really, really encouraged to like pick a path, pick a thing you want to get good at.

Susan: Totally.

Michael: Who gave you permission to be curious and to experiment? Can you think back like who opened that door and said, "Yeah, Susan, go try stuff. Play." Was there a moment?

Susan: Maybe myself but also I have to say I have parents who never dissuaded me from going into the arts. And I feel like that is critical to what we're talking about here. I know that my – I teach a lot and I meet a lot of students whose parents are not supportive of them going into the arts, which on one hand I totally understand and I think is born out of real love and concern for the child. On the other hand, I'm sort of like, "Ooh, this is just like a recipe for everybody beyond unhappy." In any event, I think that's the initial permission to be curious. And then, I don't know, I think it's just, I don't know. Like it's just the way my brain is built maybe.

Michael: Yeah, Well, I mean we've talked about this before because I'm similar in this way. My resume reads kind of like a Choose Your Own Adventure novel on acid.

Susan: Yeah.

Michael: So, how do you practically manage that when you're in an environment you have to sell yourself and talk about yourself and kind of connect the dots of your life for people in interview setting? How do you do that because I know a lot of our listeners are similar. A lot of entrepreneurs, business leaders, they start their own businesses because they just can't figure how to work for one other person.

laughs And they try lots of things to get there. So how do you sell yourself and kind of connect the dots of your life for people?

Susan: That's a really good question. In this, I don't know if it's just living in New York City or if it's just because the world is sort of savvy to branding and messaging and all of that stuff. I have felt a need, an external need and an internal desire to be clear about that messaging and be able to tell as a succinct story about my origin story and how that informs all of these things.

The way, something that has really worked for and it's orders in my mind, and it seems to I think make sense to others is I talk about my purpose. That yes, I do a lot of different things but there is a heart that beats, that it just informs all of them and that is my purpose. I've done a lot of work around this and

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given it a lot of thought. My purpose, my personal purpose is to free myself and to free others. What does that mean, Susan Blackwell?

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: It means to free people's understanding, to free their self-expression. Sometimes it means to free laughter. Sometimes it means to free self-expression, to free connectedness and connection between people, to free, to free, to free, but to free myself and free others. So, that is interesting. When I look at, for instance, one little piece of work that I do, one tiny hat that I wear, I like to picture it as a tiny sombrero that I wear is that I do – I'm an interpretative artist. So that means I can take a script that you have written, a film script, a TV script, whatever, and I can interpret it. I'm also an originating artist, meaning I can make something where nothing existed before. But when I'm actually with either of those things, whether I'm an interpretative artist or an originating artist, I gravitate towards work that is about freeing one's self or freeing others.

So, I've been doing a lot of movies lately. And I'll be damned if the parts that I gravitate towards, the parts that I book are usually parts where the character is in some way freeing themselves or freeing somebody else. I mean not in a veiled way, in a very, very direct way. So, it struck me that that for me is the magnet and a lot of things magnetize towards that. If the themes are around freeing myself and freeing others, I'm at that party.

So that's how I've organized it for myself and also conveyed it to people so that they can understand. I guess it's not so weird. Maybe it feels more like an acid trip from the inside but it also feels organic from the inside so that people can understand that I actually am a person who can contain those multitudes. It is not so Cuckoo-Loca. Does that make sense?

Michael: Yeah. It's beautiful. And I think it's a really great takeaway for our listeners. So what I feel like I hear you describe is what your work looks like is very different from time to time. There are all kinds of work that you do. It looks very different. But there is this kind of through line, this thread that runs through it that is about what motivates you to do the work, right? And I think that's a great way of explaining how your work all connects.

So, I think it's a great takeaway for our listeners is that if you find yourself doing all kinds of work that looks differently, there might be something at the root of it that is the real thread. That is how you talk about yourself. You've said it so beautifully, right, kind of free myself and free others. And I think that's something people can connect with. Yeah, that's so beautiful.

Susan: It took a minute to -. I knew it was something I wanted to. It was like a riddle I wanted to crack for myself just for this very reason. I really had to – I did some real work and sort of gently rested my mind against like what is that purpose, what is that theme, what is the thread that runs through all of it? It was such a great aha. It was like I remember exactly where I was sitting, where it all – it all just like came together.

Michael: Yeah.

Susan: Yeah, satisfying.

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Michael: Good for you. So, one of the first -.

Susan: Good for you.

Michael: Good for you. I mean it's so satisfying. So I know yeah, it was good.

Susan: *laughs* No, I'm just teasing you.

Michael: I know what it's like to look for something like that, you know, to want to have that. It's so satisfying when you get it.

Susan: Yeah.

Michael: One of the first times I saw you and I mentioned this before was you have been doing interview series for broadway.com, Side by Side by Susan Blackwell for a long time. How many episodes have you done?

Susan: Somebody just told me recently that, I don't know how many episodes it is but I've been doing it for eight years.

Michael: Yeah.

Susan: Eight years.

Michael: Wow!

Susan: I was shocked.

Michael: Can you just tell people who maybe haven't seen it what Side by Side, Susan Blackwell?

Susan: So, Side by Side by Susan Blackwell is a web series programming that's on broadway.com. So you can just dial it up on the interwebs anytime you want, day or night. It's basically a friend date between myself and somebody who is – usually it's a Broadway film, television personality. And we go on a friend date. I sort of ask them questions and play games with them while we engage in some sort of activity like rock wall climbing or crafts or cooking maybe.

Michael: Well, I remember from the very first episode I saw, the thing that stood out for me was like wow, this lady has real superpower of just immediately connecting with people. Because I made the assumption that you're not actually, actually best friends with every single person but it seems like you are in every single interview. I think there is one I remember where you got Daniel Radcliffe to like wash your windows.

Susan: Scrubbed my toilet.

Michael: Scrubbed your toilet.

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Susan: He scrubbed my toilet.

Michael: I was like, “How do you get Harry Potter to do your windows?” So, you know, what’s your secret? How do you connect with people so quickly in an environment that can be really artificial?

Susan: Yeah, thanks again for all these nice compliments. First of all, there’s that heart that beats underneath all of it to free myself and free others. In that instance, what I really want to free is that most relaxed, authentic, what I think of as effervescent, like ticklish version of the person. I think it’s something, it’s sort of a skill that I had innately from a young age but I’ve studied on it. I have studied on the art of communication and engaging with people with a real emphasis on listening, not just like little ear listening but like full body listening.

Then you like put in a dash of improv which at P.S. I have no training in. You put in a little bit of all these and it’s – I don’t know. I do think of it as like sort of like a low key superpower to be able to. And it doesn’t work on everyone. It doesn’t work on everyone. I just want to be clear. But with a lot of people just knowing that I come with good intentions, I fight for the powers of good, I’m not like an expert who’s a journalist, who’s trying to get them in a gotcha. I’m just really there to bring maximum fun and get them to that ticklish place. I don’t know. The fun thing now is that because there’s sort of like an eight-year body of work, people kind of get what the tone is.

Michael: Sure.

Susan: And so, they know what they’re getting into. It’s not hard-hitting journalism. They know what it is. So they kind of show up ready to play.

Michael: Yeah. So I mean eight years is a lot of experience in that. I also know that at the same time and now even more, you’re working in a business setting. And so, how do those same skills of rapport building and trust building kind of play? How do they apply in the workplace? How do they apply in a business setting?

Susan: Well, a couple of ways I feel like they manifest. If I am a presenter who is leading a teambuilding workshop in a corporate setting or I am a conference moderator who may be leading a conference, moderating a conference where I’m not a subject matter expert and these are things I do a lot of. There is a performative aspect to it. I want to build rapid trust as quickly as possible in that room, whether it’s 30 people or 1000 people. I want to get that trust working and not just trust in me, like they’re like, “Oh, she’s good. She’s smart. She’s funny. This might be a slightly more interesting conference than usual.” But also I build exercises and execute exercises in the group to get people interacting with each other, cross-pollinating with each other like breaking down ice and walls as quickly as possible. And I want it to be fun and ticklish. I always think of it as sort of like the balance between highbrow and lowbrow.

Michael: Sure. *laughs*

Susan: I want it to be fun. I want people laughing. Then I want that messaging to come through, whatever that messaging is that we’re working with. So that’s a way that it can work. And then when I’m

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working with a smaller group and we're really doing interpersonal stuff, sometimes the nature of the work that we're doing is teaching them to how do you communicate in a way that is going to build rapid trust with another person. How do they embody that? So, it shows up in some different ways. Does that answer your question?

Michael: No, that's great. What I imagine is some of our listeners are hearing you talk and thinking like, "Wow! I want to be able to do that. I want to have that super power. I want to be able to go in front of a room of 5 or 500 people and build that trust." So, how do they get started? How do you get good at that? What are some of the skills people can work on to get good at that?

Susan: Well, you get your Master's in Acting. It really helped. I think if we're talking about basic building blocks, how do you get there?

Michael: Yeah, great.

Susan: I would think some type of performative experience or class would be super helpful. So that could be – it could be sort of an acting for non-actors. It could be a public speaking sort of course.

Michael: Speaking, yeah, like a Toastmasters kind of -.

Susan: 100%. This is actually, this is actually the heart of a lot of work that I do with my business which is how do you take those creative and performative skills and apply them to real world challenges. This is at the center of it. Thanks for the tee up. But it's a bit of being comfortable in your own skin, standing in front of 5 people or 500 people or 5000 people and learning. If that makes you feel like you have to go to the bathroom, learning how to manage that, learning how to manage the adrenaline that might come with that. And so that is a very performative line of study, how do we breathe through that. How do you prepare to circumnavigate that as much as possible?

I also think a key building block to gaining that sort of expertise would be communication. Also another course that I designed and taught is communication with a real emphasis on listening.

Michael: Sure.

Susan: Improv training might be helpful because a fair amount of the work that I do, I realize recently a fair amount of the work that I do is crowd work. So, a standup comedy, it's called crowd work. What that means is sort of going off script, going off material that you have prepared, and just really using what's in front of you and the things that people are saying and sharing in the moment, it's so present moment to fold that back into the conversation. Sometimes that's to get a laugh and to sort of fill the room with bubbles. Sometimes that is to make a point and to help people connect the dots of the subject matter that's being explored. Yeah.

Michael: I just love how you described it. Those kind of off script moments are so valuable. As a facilitator, as a teacher, to be able to really connect with what people are saying and thinking in the room requires you to just really be present with them. There's no way to practice that. What you practice, I think as you said is it's just being comfortable in your own skin, being comfortable kind of

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flying by the seat of your pants or was it Richard Branson, right? He says, "You jump off a cliff and build the plane on the way down." I think those moments feel like that to me in workshops. Does it feel like?

Susan: Yeah, you know, there are a few things I want to impact on what you just said. I think another piece, another building block to all of this is something that has helped me enormously is meditation. So being able to – it chills down just like de-excites the nervous systems. You're coming from a place of – it sort of allows you to practice presence a little bit. And also, it just calms your shit down which is good if you're going to be in front of a camera or in front of a room of 500 people, whatever. So, I think that is a way to practice presence.

But I love what you just said, Michael, which is what I call trust. So, I think I'm sort of a very studious, meticulous preparer when it comes to whether it's designing a workshop or -. So, if it's a class I'm going to teach, an interview I'm going to conduct, et cetera, if I'm going in front of the camera and doing somebody else's words, like I am a meticulous preparer.

But something that I've gotten better at now at this point in my life is trusting that I can do all of that work and then just sort of letting it go a little bit and letting what's happening in real time, in the room rock. I always call that, I just think of it as trust. So, I'm going to go into the room and we may go off road. We may go renegade but just the trust that I can navigate that. I can, what I think of is holding the room in the palm of my hand like I can still maintain a measure of control and leadership. But I can also really let the room go where it wants to go.

Michael: Yeah. The word that also is coming to mind as you're talking is a little bit like faith. It's a little bit like a leap of faith. You know that like I have confidence in myself and I trust that I'm in a room of people who care and for the most part, hopefully, want to be there.

Susan: Want to be there!

Michael: Literally *laughs*

Susan: Sometimes I lead mandatory like you must report to this leadership development conference or some professional development workshop that they have to attend and you're fighting a little bit against people's resistance to being there.

Michael: Well, you know what? I think that's a question's that's coming to come up in a second. So, let me make this pivot which is I've actually been fortunate to have been in a few of your workshops. I think I've been in one on communication, creativity. They have been, honestly, and you know I'm fanboying today but this is true. They've been some of the most fun and the most memorable learning experiences I've had in my adult life. What you do when you create workshops is you create such special moments. There are elements in your workshops that I don't see in a lot of other places. There's music. I sang at one of your workshops.

Susan: Mnemonic learning devices, yeah.

Michael: Yeah, and there are also moments of quiet, personal reflection and kind of writing, and interaction, kind of deep connection with other people who I just met. So, how do you, just for the

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people who are listeners who are in the business of creating moments for their teams to learn or they're in the learning profession, what is your approach to that process of creating a learning experience and making it so engaging and multifaceted? How do you even start that?

Susan: Typically, it starts from - I have this phrase. I did not make this phrase up. I saw it on Pinterest. It just really stuck with me.

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: Which is if you know the way, light it for others, if you know the way, light it for others.”

Michael: Love it. Love it.

Susan: But it gets at, it sort of answers your question. When I feel like I have studied on something and gained even a little, I hesitate to use this word because I'm not too big for my britches, a little bit of mastery around it.

Michael: Sure.

Susan: That's when I'm like I think I want to make a workshop around this. I think I want to really help free myself and free others. Really help to make the path a little bit easier for people. If you know the way, light it for others. Light the way. So, it starts with that. It starts with something that I have. There's usually been some painful learning around it if I'm honest. So, that's where I start.

Then once I've done some study and I feel like I have a point of view or a point of access that's going to be helpful for somebody, I use all my many years on the planet in the show business to try to make something that's going to be engaging and sticky. Meaning, I'm going to teach you something and I'm going to teach it in a way to hopefully make it as sticky as possible so that a year from now, when you're like, “What was that thing we did in that Susan Blackwell workshop?” You'll be able to summon it up.

Michael: I think I can still sing the song from Die Vampire, Die Workshop.

Susan: I wish you'd sing it now.

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: *laughs*

Michael: If we have time maybe I'll woo everyone at the end.

Susan: Just an outro, bring back those musical theatre chops but here's a for instance. So, there's a workshop that I developed around communication with an emphasis on listening. I would teach it sort of – it could be a little painstaking. There's a group that I worked with, a great, big, global company who knew me and trusted me. I've done a lot of leadership development and team development with this group. So, I knew that there was mutual respect there.

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So we've done all this work and I pitched to the leader of this group. There's this new workshop on communication with an emphasis on listening. I think your team can really benefit from it. So, we did it. Flew out to California, did this workshop. And these people who knew me and loved me and trusted me, I could just see their eyes rolling back into their head. There were people getting sleepy. There were people getting cranky. They were like this doesn't – it just seems awkward and they were very resistant. I was like, "Where is my group? We all love each other."

Michael: I thought we were friends! *laughs*

Susan: It was a fail. I gave myself a big, hard. It was painful like painful, like real pain like flying home on the airplane, like just headshaking, maybe a little tear. It was painful. It was a painful fail. I have lived long enough that I was like, "How am I going to -? What am I to learn from this? How am I going to take this painful failure and make it into something, a learning opportunity?" It came to me. It came to me.

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: I was like I need to make this more fun and more sticky. So what I did is I took all the instructions from this particular workshop. And I wrote them into a song like a stupid campfire song that you could learn pretty quickly and pretty easily. I wrote to the leader of this group. I was like I would just want to acknowledge that was not successful, that the team seemed sleepy and cranky and resistant. I want you to know I really took it to heart. I've made changes and I'd like to try it again.

I can't believe it but they brought me back. I taught it with the music, with the mnemonic, learning device of music because we all were raised on Sesame Street. We all were raised on Electric Company. And with that mnemonic learning device of music, it was like an entirely different experience. So, that's just a for instance of how a little bit of show business, a little bit of like I know enough about pedagogy to know that this will make it stickier. It was just a huge success.

Michael: It's such a great story. What a great example of just, you know, your resilience, right, to like, you know.

Susan: Ooh! Resilience is hard but P.S. Here's a P.S. to the P.S. to the P.S. of that. I've subsequently with my collaborator, Thomas Schultheis. We've been developing this workshop called "Let Me Try That Again" about how to process failure because, girl, I've had failure, we've all had failure. I was like there must be some real keys, just a bag of tools that we could help people to process failure.

Michael: I can't wait. I can't wait for it.

Susan: Workshop on workshop on workshop.

Michael: I'm first in line. So, I wanted to just go back to this. You mentioned this earlier, which is people in workshops and learning experiences don't always want to be there.

Susan: No!

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Michael: And not only do they sometimes just not want to be in the workshop entirely but even people who want to be there will sometimes be resistant to certain topics, certain exercises. It's for so many reasons, right? So many reasons, it's impossible to know in the moment exactly why you're getting resistance. So generally, what's your approach when you see someone nodding out or getting tired or actively being defiant and pushing back? How do you deal with that in a moment?

Susan: Well, here's a failure moment, here's a failure moment and what I took away from it. So, I was again leading a workshop for – am I allowed to say these clients' names? I don't know.

Michael: It depends on your relationship but I would say go for it. *laughs*

Susan: Oh, I hope this podcast gets super popular. I was leading a workshop for Disney Resorts in Anaheim. All salaried cast members were required to take the workshop. So, over the course of not quite two weeks, just like hundreds and hundreds of people were required to take this workshop.

Michael: Wow!

Susan: And at the beginning of the workshop, I think it's important that everyone speak at the beginning of – everyone in the room has to make a sound so that they know they can. They have personal agency. They can pipe up later in the class. The way that I was having people make sounds is we're going around the room. The person would say their name and say how they were feeling. It doesn't have to be positive or aspirational. It can just be authentic to how they're feeling. We're going around the circle and we get to this woman and she's like, "Janet, bored." Literally had been in the room for three minutes.

Michael: *laughs* Janet is not having it.

Susan: It was like an arrow to my heart because I could tell, this was a mandatory requirement, she obviously did not want to be there. And you can't know all the back story. You can't know if she has work at her desk that is just crushing her. You can't know if she has a parent who is sick. Like you can't know what's going on. But I was also like, "Wow, Janet, it's just rude." I'm like wow!

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: But I've lived in New York for 20 years. I know what's what.

Michael: And the funny thing is I know in those moments you want her to like be her authentic self. So just be genuine.

Susan: But I'm like can you be genuine but not punch me in the nuts.

Michael: Can you just edit like 10%? *laughs*

Susan: Ooh! But I really like, clearly, I've stewed on it. I was just like besides just being like, "You be you, Janet. You do you." What is the response to that? Here is where I have arrived. It actually has been successful for me anyway. When someone is being their true, authentic self and expresses

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resistance and that can manifest in different ways, the question that I ask them - I'd say, "I hear you. That makes sense. Are you open to that changing?" Because it puts it right back on them. It's sort of like if they're like no, I'm like, "Okay. I know that this was mandatory and you've signed in. So there's record that you were here. Maybe you go back to your desk." I also have like a no obligation policy. Even if a company, a host company has an obligation policy, I'm like I don't need that turd in my punch bowl.

Michael: No!

Susan: That's some pretty hard resistance to overcome.

Michael: Yeah, I love that question. I love that. It's so great. So, are you open to not being bored, you know?

Susan: Are you open to that changing?

Michael: It's a great place to start. *laughs*

Susan: Yeah! And if they're like, "Yeah," I'm like, "Cool! It will be interesting. We'll check in with you later, Janet, and we'll see how this rolls out for you." Also, when I see people, because also you have to remember somebody might have a sick parent. You just never know what's going on for people. My first inclination when I see faces that are sleepy or like they have that sort of like resting bitch face or something, I'm like, "It's me, right? It's me." There's something I'm not doing. I'm not enough for this. But I also now, this is a lesson I've learned a thousand times and keep learning. You can't know what's going on for people. So just remembering it may not be you. That might just be their face. You don't know how people experience things.

But also I will ask people in workshops. Like if I'm leading a day-long workshop, I will say around about 2:30, siesta time, I'll say, "Who is sleepy? Can you just let me know who is sleepy?" Hands go up. I'm like I'll pick a sleepy person and say, "Will you be my partner for this next exercise to demo this?" Like just to acknowledge that yes, we get sleepy and we get resistant. I'll just say, "Who thinks this is a bag of bullshit? Is there anybody that's like this is a bag of bullshit or you're not sure how it would work in your life?" Like just to go to the center of it instead of pretending like people don't have those feelings of fill in the blank.

Michael: Yeah. And this is the thing I think makes this super power come to shine so brightly in workshops for you because the opposite of this, I see a lot which is a lot of presenters, just like I come in, I got my material. I do my material. It will be over 90 minutes. And your experience is not all that important to me. That's like the opposite of building trust and rapport but you're really getting in there even when it's not comfortable, particularly when it's not comfortable. They are sleepy or bored or not paying attention, that's the moment where you're like, "No. We're here to do something together. Are you still in this with me?" I think that's so powerful. I think it's so powerful.

So, I'm going to ask you a very interviewee question. Are you ready for this interviewee question?

Susan: Yeah, nervous, Oh God!

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Michael: *laughs*

Susan: Michael, what's it going to be? *laughs*

Michael: I know you've talked a few times with this great, big bag of tricks you have for making meetings and learning experiences fun and interesting. So, if you were going to give advice to business leaders and entrepreneurs for making their meetings more engaging, more fun, more memorable, more sticky, what are three things you would pull out first of you bag of tricks? See, this is like got really interviewee real fast. What are the three things you would pull from your bag of tricks so that here leaders, try these three things in your meeting. This will help it to be more fun, more memorable, and more sticky. What have you got?

Susan: Oh God! Three things, I'm going to try.

Michael: Numbering things.

Susan: I'm going to do my best. I would say really the foundational concept. Now, this is a lifetime of study but it really is the listening. I think of it as having, it's like having invisible tentacles. They come like from all different sides of me. I have a gentle awareness of she's sleepy, she's digging this. We need to take a bathroom break soon. Like I am just this person is getting activated emotionally. I listen with my entire body. I feel like that's sort of being, call it what you want, I call it listening but you might call it being keyed in.

Michael: Awareness.

Susan: Or being attuned, awareness, presence.

Michael: To be fair, you can't see these listeners but as Susan is talking about this, she actually did unfurl her arms like tentacles.

Susan: Make a giant squid. *laughs*

Michael: *laughs*

Like a squid that she's filing the whole room, so yeah.

Susan: Hardcore listening.

Michael: Great.

Susan: Presence, whatever you want to call that. I feel like you want like the easy hacks and these are all like, it's like a lifetime of study.

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Michael: No, it doesn't have to be easy. I just think the things that are most important. If you're going to focus on getting good at this, really things, you know, if I just focus on a few to get started that are most valuable.

Susan: Okay, here is one. And some people, you might be like, "I got it!" So, this might be an easy one which is fighting for the powers of good. By that I mean having positive, pure intention behind the work that you do. I think that people have an innate sense that I mean them well. I want the best for them. I want the best version of them to emerge during the course of our time together. And I think that goes a long way to unlocking, freeing if you will, people's building rapid trust, their enjoyment of an experience. I do think, maybe this is my number three, get hilarious. *laughs*

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: If you could all just be hilarious.

Michael: Be funny as fucked.

Susan: Humor for me is a magic key. My friend, Tammy, who's an amazing speaker says, "If you're laughing, you're listening. If you're listening, you're learning." I think it's true. I think that being funny, these are not easy. Three easy hacks for owning a room! These are not easy. So, be an amazing listener. *laughs*

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: Fight hard for the powers of good. Be pure of intention. And be hilarious. *laughs*

Michael: *laughs*

No big deal. You've got this, guys. You got this.

Susan: NBD.

Michael: I think it's so useful. And this is part of why I love you so much as a presenter and a speaker is because, again, it just provides some contrast. If you're thinking, "Well, isn't that, isn't that, isn't that what I do?" Well, you might want to think there's a lot of conferences and workshops I go to where the person on the front of the room really seems like their agenda is making it clear that they know more than me. You know? And it doesn't feel like pure intention. Or they're so serious about the content that they don't have any fun, so there's no humor.

Susan: You know, I've recently, I've had some opportunities, some professional opportunities. And I just want to offer this. This might be an easier mental adjustment for people to make. So, I've been called upon to be a conference moderator, basically like a conference Sherpa for conferences where I don't have subject matter expertise. So, I partner with the Metropolitan Opera here in New York and lead their educator's conference. And I'm getting ready to partner with an amazing organization and lead a diversity and inclusion summit.

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I know some – I know opera exists. I know a little bit about diversity and inclusion but I'm like I'm not a subject matter expert. But with their permission, the role that I take is kind of everybody's favorite dum dum, which means I'm very clear from the outset both with the client and with the audience, I'm not a subject matter expert. But I'm curious and I'm looking forward to learning alongside you today.

What I am expert, I'm an expert moderator. So, I can really keep the conversation engaging and hear many, many voices in the room. I do that crowd work and hear as many voices as possible, introverts, extroverts, everybody. But trusting, back to your word – trust – like trusting that I don't have to be the smartest person in the room on a subject matter. Actually, it seems like it's counterintuitive but it actually has provided, I think, a very, very vibrant learning experience for conference attendees.

Michael: 100%.

Susan: I'm just like I know less than all of you, except when it comes to moderation then I'm an ass kicker.

Michael: *laughs*

I think this is such a huge takeaway for leaders and managers listening is that you don't have to know it all.

Susan: No.

Michael: Or be right all the time or have all the answers to be able to lead people and to lead a conversation, to lead a room. In fact, you may get more out of it and everyone there might get more out of it if you're actually curious.

Susan: Curious and listening, yeah.

Michael: And listening and has been following their agenda. I love that, so, so good. We can keep talking about that. I'm going to switch gears. There's one more topic I really want to cover.

Susan: Oh Lord! Oh Michael!

Michael: And in fact, this might be the topic I was most excited about talking to you about. We've been touching on it throughout our conversation. But I want to talk about creativity. For a lot of business leaders, creativity is kind of like some elusive, magical thing that they always seemed to be chasing but never really catch.

Susan: It's very chic. It's like creativity is trending.

Michael: Yeah. Everyone wants it. And they want their teams to kind of like think of more creative solutions or do kind of out of the box thinking. I'm not sure what that always means. Now, I think particularly with content marketing and social media being so important, people have to be creative storytellers, have to make kind of compelling and fun one-minute video or 15-second clips of videos on Instagram. So, having a real sense of, having a real creative approach in business is like I think more

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vital than ever. So, if you had to start talking about your approach to creativity or your approach to a creative process, how do you even begin talking about that?

Susan: Good question. If you hear weird sounds in the background, which you may or may not, there is some heavy shit going on next door.

Michael: Yeah, there are some shenanigans happening.

Susan: There are some shenanigans. When I teach creativity and I do think that I have workshops that really focus on making something where nothing existed before or even you have an idea on how to birth that into the world. I like people to start by thinking about what gives them a visceral, physical response in their body.

So, what I mean by that is when you think of something, it could be something, a memory. It could be something – a memory of something that happened to you once. It could be the face of a teacher that you had in fourth grade. It could be as specific as your first kiss or as random as that pair of jeans you tried on that one day. I encourage people to consider those things and to really - as creative thought are those things that actually give you a feeling in your body. Meaning that it makes water come out of your eyes, or it makes your ears ring, or your face heats up, or you're sitting absolutely still just with a pen in your hand, a pad of paper, or your fingers on a keyboard. And all the sudden, you feel a bead of sweat drip down your side or you feel like a little tingle in your pants. Like what are those things that, to use your terminology, Michael Keeler, like really get you boned up? What are those things that give you a visceral physical response?

I think those, that's a great starting point for what makes you feel or what feels worthy of explorations, creative explorations. And so, say you're trying to make a one-minute marketing video for Instagram about you, entrepreneur, I'm speaking to you.

Michael: Great, let's make my video.

Susan: Let's make yours. I would ask you if it was for Business for Unicorns and you're doing this. I would ask you to consider when you think about why you are building this business and who – whom you hope to reach. Bad grammar.

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: That's not right; or the impact that you hoped to have. I want you to start with the thing that makes your heart literally beat a little bit faster, that makes you go, "Who!" That you're sitting still and you're just like thinking your thoughts and you go, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha," like you make that sound. That's where I would start. That is the starting place. I feel like those are the things that cut through. I think those are the things that like if it gives you a visceral response, there's a good chance it's going to make your business avatar your target client. It may cut through all the chatter in the world and give them a response to.

Michael: I just love it because so much of creativity is about conveying a story or a message.

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Susan: Yeah.

Michael: And stories are emotional, right?

Susan: Yeah, good ones.

Michael: Good ones, they're rarely rational and often our approach to a kind of creative process in a business setting. It's like a strategic plan and we approach it like this, like multifaceted, multi-tiered plan. And often, I love what you're saying. The best starting place for creativity is how do you feel? What is this sensation in your body when you think about this topic or you talk about this topic? I think for a lot of business leaders, that's a very different place to start because it usually starts with kind of the end in mind. And it's hard to do when you're getting creative and you're really trying to tap into something meaningful. It's got to start with some feeling or some emotion somewhere in the process.

Susan: Yeah.

Michael: So thinking again about creativity in the workplace, I know a lot of leaders ask the question, "How do I just build an environment that fosters creativity? How do I build the environment where my team is encouraged to be more creative and think more creatively?" So, what do you think more about the environment around creativity? How do people create a space where it's safe to be creative?

Susan: I would think like a real foundational building block of that would be the way that creativity is received. So, when somebody had - we know that you've sat in brainstorming meetings where you're trying to come up with, say, this face of a marketing campaign or something like that. You know that all those ideas are not going to be used. You know that some of that cream is going to rise to the top.

Actually this is something I shared with your group when I did a workshop. The trick is to not white jeans ideas. And what I mean by that is -. So, my friends and I were building this show that ended up on Broadway called [title of show]. There was an idea that was floated for just a moment that at the end of the show, it was a musical, at the end of the musical, we would come out for the curtain call very much like Mamma Mia. We would come out in sort of like all white versions of our costumes and do like a megamix medley.

Michael: Like Joseph mega mix. *laughs*

Susan: *laughs* Yes, of the songs you had just heard in the prior 90 minutes. One of the collaborators in this creative process, so the idea was sort of this great fun, sort of effervescent idea was floated. One of the collaborators said, "How are we going to quick change into white jeans? We don't have time." That was the first response. And we were like, "Wow!" Like a way to bust the creative, fun bubble and we laughed about it. But after that, heretofore, we called that white jeans-ing an idea. Meaning before the idea even gets a chance to breathe its first baby idea breath that somebody shoots it down for logistical reasons, for cost reasons, for very well-meaning reasons.

It goes back to that sense of - I didn't say this earlier - I guess I said in my mind, a sense of fun or a sense of play, having a sense of play. Oh add the number four, that's another foundation for like super fun meetings, having a sense of play. But having, even if it just to lives, you have that sense of play with

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it. You play with the idea. You battered around a little bit. I'm not talking about like a 45-minute just sort of discovery session. I just mean like let it play for a second and you could even write it down. It doesn't mean it's going to be the cream that rises to the top. But don't white jeans it.

Michael: Yeah. I love that. I've been in so many "brainstorming sessions" that were not really brainstorming sessions. So, I think the takeaway for our listeners is if you're going to say, "Let's be creative. Let's throw all the ideas out." Don't start editing right away.

Susan: That's right.

Michael: Let the ideas come out and flow. Write them on the whiteboard even if you think they're ridiculous. Let them live for a little while. Give them some life. Once in a while, I think people get surprised that that idea that initially feels absolutely absurd -

Susan: Has some legs.

Michael: Has some legs. We were just talking about this recently related to MFF. In the Mark Fisher Fitness, we've had our fair share of ridiculous ideas.

Susan: Yes, right now, it sounds like we're next door to a chair-moving factory and their entire body of work is around just moving chairs and just like moving them some more. *laughs*

Michael: Should we pause or something?

Susan: I don't think so. I think we should keep this all in please. Please do not cut this.

Michael: It sounds like there are elephants rumbling.

Susan: I'll pay you a million dollars if you don't cut this.

Michael: Let's just leave it in.

Susan: Ooh! It's not a chair-throwing factory. They've expanded the scope of their business.

Michael: *laughs* See, this is like a sense of play you're so good at.

Susan: That's what I'm talking about.

Michael: This is it. You just got to roll with it.

Susan: Just fold it in. This is what I'm talking about. Be present. Trust and fold it in.

Michael: So MFF, I'll give you an example of ridiculous idea we had. We've had these parties once in a while for our Snatched in Six Weeks program. We've thrown around ridiculous ideas. One year we're like, "Wouldn't it be so fun if we just brought in like a bouncy castle inside to our party?" Immediately, I think I was probably the person who shut it down the first. *laughs*

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Susan: Yeah.

Michael: I was like, guys, not only is that a poor choice for insurance reasons but like what space is big enough. And to even have that in the city, isn't that mostly in the suburbs? We did it. We totally wound up doing it.

Susan: How about that?

Michael: And then a year or two later, we had the idea of doing like a mechanical bull riding.

Susan: And you like never cut to -.

Michael: Never, totally did that.

Susan: You on that bull?

Michael: Yeah.

Susan: Yeehaw!

Michael: And we did it at the New World Stages, in the lobby, we brought in a mechanical bull.

Susan: Amazing.

Michael: So, we never would have had that fun or those shenanigans if in our "brainstorming session" we just white jeans-ed it right away.

Susan: Yeah. I just want to say it super clearly for the listeners in case you missed it because the chairs were being moved that what Michael is saying is you are going to make sure that the creative, sort of like the idea generation process and the idea editing process are not enmeshed. They are two separate, distinct ideas. You allow time and space for that idea generation to occur and then you can edit.

Michael: Yeah, 100%, 100%. So another kind of common question when it comes to creativity is in many creative endeavors, there's going to be a roadblock. Like the muse has left the building. So can you just give me example of a time when you really came up against a wall in a creative process and what do you do to get past it?

Susan: Yeah, there are times when you – there's something that I want to write or make and I will sort of just gently -. I think of it – this is just kind of a bastardization of a John Cleese quote. But I will gently rest my mind against whatever the subject matter is and just see what my mind coughs up. There are times when it's like I got nothing. Then sometimes if I just wait a little bit longer, it will come to me. I was asked. This is really specific but it's just what I'm thinking of. I was asked to do a benefit for, it was like Broadway. This is not the name of it. Broadway stands up to fill the blank. Can you guess what it's going to be Broadway fans? There are so many of these benefits.

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Michael: *laughs*

Susan: But it was around breast cancer, women's cancer, lady cancer. I think that's the technical term. They reached out to me and said, "Would you be interested in making something or writing something or appearing in something?" I was like I've got nothing. Like luckily I'm touching wood, I don't have a personal relationship to this. So, I don't have anything.

Then I realized, actually I was like, "Oh! No! My friend Jessica has got breast cancer. What am I?" I was like, just by, I didn't completely shut the door. I just sort of let my mind gently rest against the subject matter. Then through the confluence of events, I'm sorry you got cancer, Jessica, I actually do have something to say about this. Just it was a funny outcome. So my friend, Jessica is not a performer. She is a civilian. But I was really interested in instead of, and this is also a hallmark Susan Blackwell moment, not like the hallmark channel but like a - this is like -.

Michael: Quintessential. *laughs*

Susan: Quintessential Susan Blackwell moment. So Jessica got cancer and instead of being like, "I don't know what to say to Jessica. I don't know. It's hard. It's hard to talk about something like that. I'll send her a fruit basket. I'm not sure." I was like, "You're in the middle of cancer treatment. Is this a bad time for us to write a piece together about your experience having cancer?" She was like, "I'm so in." The two of us really explored her cancer and what it was like for her. I wrote this really, at first really silly, dumb piece. I was a dum dum, not her. But became a very interesting exploration, you know, like a 10-minute exploration of what that experience had been like for her.

She went on a Broadway stage in front of people with her little wig, her little chemotherapy wig on. During the course of the piece, she took it off and talked on her own voice about what that was like for her. And it ended up, these are her words, not mine, it ended up being the best experience she had come out of that cancer moment, that cancer chapter in her life. That would not have happened if I was just like I got nothing and the door shuts. So the way I think of it is just gently resting my mind against the subject matter. Sometimes it takes a little longer but seeing what pops up.

Michael: Yeah, I love that. Just staying focused on it but don't push too hard.

Susan: The poetic Buddhist description is it's like you're holding a bird in your hand and you want to hold it just so if you open your hand too much, the bird can fly away. If you hold it too tight, you crush the bird. But just whatever that subject matter is, whether it's a marketing campaign that you're chasing or a chapter in a novel that you want to write, a character that you're trying to figure out, whatever it is, it is just resting your mind against it, holding it just so until something bubbles up.

Michael: Yeah. We could keep talking about this topic for so long. Anything else you want to share about creativity? Anything I didn't ask you about?

Susan: I like it. I like it. *laughs*

Michael: It's really fun.

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Susan: Creativity is fun!

Michael: Believe it or not, we're coming up on our hour mark.

Susan: That's bullshit.

Michael: So I think it's my duty to try and start to close this out. The way I close it out is I have a final five questions that I ask everyone.

Susan: Oh no!

Michael: Kind of inside the Actors Studio oriented.

Susan: But you're not as creepy as James Lipton.

Michael: Well, we'll see. We'll see what these questions are. You'll tell me afterwards. So, are you ready for your final five?

Susan: I'm nervous but I'm ready.

Michael: Great.

Susan: I don't know why this is like. When it's gets game show, I get nervous.

Michael: This is the part. *laughs*

Final five number one, what is your morning routine?

Susan: Oh, what a good, productive question that is.

Michael: Thank you so much.

Susan: Michael Keeler, look at you, I love this. My morning routine is as follows: Usually the dogs wake us up at 6:00. I get up. I give the dog his little food. I take out my night guard, sexy, yeah. I get back into bed and I meditate for about 32 minutes every single day without fail. Then I go to the kitchen and I mix up an Athletic Greens. This is not an advertisement or an endorsement. I just mix up my little Athletic Greens and have that for the day.

I need to fold exercise back into this but I'm keeping it real so we relocated. So I've got to work out my exercise situation. But I think like moving your - getting your blood flowing for 30 to 60 minutes seems like super critical. And then I try, when my schedule will permit it, I try to do whatever my day contains that is going to require the most brain capacity. For me, whatever I do before I eat lunch is going to get like the very best of my brain. So I try to when it's possible and it isn't always possible, but when I can influence it, I try to schedule whatever is going to require the most brain power for the before lunch period.

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Michael: I love it, I love it.

Susan: That's it.

Michael: In our time Time Ninja course in Business for Unicorns, we talk about that time as being magic time.

Susan: That's it.

Michael: Magic time for morning people, oftentimes it's in the morning. I'm a night owl.

Susan: Are you?

Michael: So for me, it's totally in the evening when I do some of my best, most creative work. But the takeaway there is you need to know when is your magic time.

Susan: Know thyself.

Michael: When is your magic time and trying to protect it for the things that would require most brain power. I love that answer. Number two, what activities give you a sense of renewal? By renewal, I mean it kind of fills you up, fills your cup, gets you excited and energized for your life, your work. What gives you a sense of renewal?

Susan: This is a basic bitch answer but meditation does totally.

Michael: Great.

Susan: It's like a sleep supplement and kind of like plugging in a cell phone. It recharges my battery. But I will also say I, and I am as surprised to say this as anyone, I love cleaning.

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: I like to clean and organize things. It gives me just this sense of like all is right in the world and everything has its place. And that my world is lovely. That makes me feel kind of ready to tackle other things.

Michael: That's so great. That's so great.

Susan: I can't believe I just said that. I'm throwing up in my mouth.

Michael: *laughs* You know what? I feel similarly in some ways because I feel like when things are messy or unorganized in my physical space in my life, it creates mental clutter. I think about I have to reserve some energy for thinking about that pile of papers sitting on my kitchen table. That is a distraction.

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Susan: Yeah. Also, just a quick side note, I grew up, both my parents are hoarders, like hard core hoarders. So I had to learn. This is one of those things. If you know the way, light it for others. To clean, that's something I had to teach myself kind of as a young adult and an adult. There's something that feels so good about it and it feels like I have a little bit of power and control on the world. But I'm not like out-out, damn spot, these hands never be clean. I'm not crazy about it. I'm bathed in Purell, I'm not.

Michael: Final five number three, question number three is this one is hard. But if you can, what is kind of the one, the one book or the one learning experience that kind of taught you the most? So if you had to pick one book, one learning experience that was the most influential.

Susan: I'm going to say two.

Michael: Great.

Susan: I know I'm leaving somebody out, some teacher, and I apologize because I feel like there was early formative -. Let me do a quick spin through my past. I had a great teacher, Julie Maynard. Shout out Julie Maynard who I was like, "Oh there is a sophisticated life outside of the country living." But my meditation teacher, Emily Fletcher, Ziva Meditation, I feel like that has influenced me everyday in every way and I love that.

I'm going to also go ahead and say and I'm not just buttering your bread and shining your apple, Mark Fisher Fitness. I thought I kind of knew about health, fitness, nutrition. Then I really went and studied on it at Mark Fisher Fitness. That was a life changer. When I am in full swing with Mark Fisher Fitness and those teachings, I have never been older than I am right now and I've never been in better shape. That, I can see how that's going to set me up for, knock on wood, because you never know what curved balls you might get thrown health wise. But I feel like that gives me that feeling. I did make up this term, the older I get the younger I get. That gives me that feeling.

Michael: Yeah, amazing. Well, thank you.

Susan: You're welcome.

Michael: Number four, this one's more fun. If you could have a super power, what would it be?

Susan: Okay, this is my low-key superpower. I would learn lines really fast.

Michael: Oh yeah.

Susan: That would be my low-key superpower. I would be able to read a script twice and know the lines. That's what my super power would be.

Michael: That's amazing.

Susan: I would save so much time on that.

Michael: Yeah, memorizing stuff is hard.

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Susan: I can do it but oh baby, it's like yeah, that would be mine. And flight, and flight.

Michael: Of course, yeah, of course. Number five, what is the last thing you typically think about before you go to sleep? What was the last thing you typically think about right before you fall asleep, or the kind of things?

Susan: Gentle things. I think of well, I kiss my person and I - don't tell my dog trainer but we sleep with our dog. So, usually there's like a situation. I'm a good sleeper so I can fall asleep pretty fast anywhere. And we just kind of, I kind of wrap around usually like a dog on my heart like a dog somewhere else. Get your mind out of the gutter. We just all sort of wrap around each other and fall asleep and I fall asleep fast. So, it's usually something sweet like - this sounds Pollyanna. I'm wincing even as I prepare to say this. But I usually think of a good thought like we're really lucky. Life is good.

Michael: What a great thought. I love it. Susan Blackwell, this has been so magical. I wish we could do it for another few hours.

Susan: I love you. The sounds you hear is the heater clanging and this other sound you hear is a fart sound I made.

Michael: *laughs*

Susan: I love you. I could do this forever.

Michael: Thanks for being my guest and I'm excited to do it again sometime in the future.

Susan: Rock on!

Michael: Have a good day!

Susan: Bye!