

Episode 4

THE SCIENCE OF MOTIVATION WITH STEVEN M. LEDBETTER



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Michael: Well, hello Steveo, welcome to the Business for Unicorns' podcast.

Steveo: Thanks! I'm happy to be involved with Unicorns as often as I can.

Michael: *laughs* I've been so stoked preparing for this conversation because we've known each other for a few years and we've spoken together at a few other events but I've never really been able to pick your brain for like an extended period. So, today is that day. I'm so stoked. So thanks for taking the time to chat.

Steveo: Yeah!

Michael: So, I've always thought that what you do at Habitry is just so incredibly unique. So, how do you explain your work?

Steveo: Well, the work has changed as, I would say the mission has followed its due course. But the way that I explain is we, we are behavior change consultants. We help people who want to help people. In fact, our mission is help the most people help the most people. So, we help now mostly tech companies and other businesses who are usually involved in things like healthcare, financial, education, and teaching, develop technology and programs that will keep their customers or keep their employees motivated to complete them. So, it's not just slap some push notifications on it and hope that they use the app. It's how do we develop push notifications that actually promote high quality motivation and encourage people to change their health behavior. So, that is predominantly what we do.

Michael: That's amazing. Can you just kind of go through, kind of like give me a case study as a real life example that our listeners can wrap their brains around in terms of the kind of work you do?

Steveo: Sure! We were contacted by a company that makes a chatbot for people who have recently been - had a heart attack and are being released from the hospital.

Michael: Wow!

Steveo: This is a population that has a lot of new stuff to worry about. They've got drugs to take. They have things about their health they need to monitor. They're in a really precarious, weird state emotionally. The rates of Recidivism are really high. So, this company contacted us because they wanted to maximize the probability that people would use the chatbot, and that the chatbot would be genuinely helpful and help them with not just the day-to-day things that they needed to do. Like you should weigh yourself today and here's why. But also screen for things like mental health and emotional state and do it all in a way that's the most evidenced-based approach to keeping them motivated for the entire duration of the program.

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Michael: That's a pretty big task. I mean, that last thing one wants is a heart surgery again.

Steveo: Exactly, exactly. So, we came in and we did workshops for the product team, the product team and the writers for the chatbot. We worked with them to develop what we call a motivational style guide - a way that everyone on the team can understand what the purpose is and what the evidence is for motivation, sorry, evidence-based approach for a motivation. Then everyone was on the same page about what the job of the bot was to do. Not only that, all of the freelance writers who worked on various other bots would also have the same document.

Then we audited every piece of content they'd ever made for the bot using kind of a fancy way that we audit things to see if they promote basic psychological needs and promote long-term sustained motivation. We ran it through our system. We gave them feedback on every single line of dialogue, every single situation, every single piece of content that they were pushing to users, and gave them feedback about how to make it more need-supportive and more motivating.

Then we helped them with ongoing teaching of this approach to new employees and whenever they sell the products to new users of the products, so hospitals, and nurses, and things like that. So, they understand what the product does from a motivational standpoint and everything like that. So, that's pretty common. That's kind of what we have done the most of so far but that is definitely one of the coolest ones, to be sure.

Michael: Yeah, wow!

Steveo: It's something I'm really proud of that worked out.

Michael: That sounds incredible.

Steveo: Yes, really good work.

Michael: So, for our listeners who are maybe kind of new to motivation science, what are like kind of the core concepts you think they should be familiar with?

Steveo: Oh sure. The core concepts of motivation science is we kind of coined the term. But it's a field that has been studied for about 45 years really seriously in social psychology and psychology. The main theory that has evolved from this research is called self-determination theory. Self-determination theory has some pretty basic principles, which is that humans are organismic. We're organisms just like deer and bacteria and whatever. Like all organisms, we have an innate desire to grow in complexity and explore our environment and also to integrate that into a sense of self.

While we're doing that, we are seeking out what self-determination theory has identified as basic psychological needs. Needs in our social environment from our relationships that inform us that we are in what's essentially a safe relationship, a safe relationship to explore ourselves, to explore the world, and that we will get our basic psychological needs met. Those needs are the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness. If you're in relationships where those needs are met, then you feel motivated. It is a cause and effect. If you're in those conditions, you feel motivated.

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The motivation is actually higher quality over time. Meaning, it feels like it's coming from inside you. It's more intrinsic. It's more internal than external motivation which is feeling like you're being forced to. But as you spend more time in these environments, these relationships that support your basic psychological needs, you internalize the values, beliefs, morals, and motives of the people around you. So, you essentially learn what to value by being in relationships that support your basic psychological needs.

When we help people create these conditions, what we're actually doing is creating a space where people can learn from the situation or from people they're in a relationship with what matters and what's important. Because when you are in those conditions, that's the mode you feel safe to explore. So, in a weird way, motivation science is a kind of - basically a way of promoting someone's autonomy so that they'll take on your beliefs about what matters. It's a jiu-jitsu-ninja thing, where instead of making someone do something, you're supporting and empowering them so much that they turn to you and go, "Okay, what should I do?" It's the opposite of forcing people to do things, controlling them, or making them do stuff.

Michael: Yeah, when you talk about it, it does sound like some sort of voodoo magic. But I've been following Steveo for a while now, so I've heard you talk with this topic so many times. But I'd love to just go back and pull it apart just a tiny bit because you've mentioned the three basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Can you just talk briefly about each starting with competence?

Steveo: Sure! I think competence is probably the one that people immediately latch onto just like "Oh yeah, totally!" It's that feeling of being effective, a feeling like you can actually exert your will in the world. It's the feeling of being capable. So, that feeling, people associate it with getting good at stuff, learning things, learning new skills, and things like that. Competence, that is [0:08:59], the basic psychological need of competence feels really good but the opposite, when it's being thwarted, people feel ineffectual, they feel stupid, they feel impotent. That's not a good feeling and you want to get away from relationships like that. I'm not saying that you should get away from them. I'm saying that that is what the feeling is.

Michael: That's the impulse, yeah.

Steveo: It's the impulse. So, that's competence. Relatedness is the feeling of mutuality of care. A feeling like the people that I'm with like me and that they've got my back and then I've got their back. It's the feeling of being involved with other people in a way that is not transactional, that is genuine. The opposite of feeling relatedness is feeling isolated, or alone, or betrayed.

Michael: Sure. Would you say that relatedness is kind of synonymous with like connection?

Steveo: Connection, belonging, yeah. Any of those good, warm, fuzzy words, I would definitely, definitely think that is what, how people report it. But the main feeling that I think [0:10:11] is being liked. Like that's kind of a weird, hokey way to say it, but I think that it's a common thing about belonging and connectedness is that you feel like people genuinely like you as a human being.

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Michael: Yeah, I think it's a great way to say it because it's a sentiment that I think we've all said at some point. I don't know if I ever said I want more relatedness in my life, you know.

Steveo: Yeah, it's a hokey word, advertently.

Michael: I know. But I think if people have said, "I just want to be liked. I just want people to appreciate and like me, and enjoy being around me." I think that's super easy to resonate with.

Steveo: Yeah, and I think it's important to understand that that feeling is effortless. It's feeling like I want to be liked and not have to earn it, like I don't want to have to prove myself. I just want people to like me, instead of feeling like I have to earn their like, which is a different feeling. That's not transactional feeling.

Michael: Yeah, makes sense.

Steveo: That is not supporting. Then the other basic -.

Michael: Yes, autonomy.

Steveo: Oh yeah. Autonomy, the basic psychological need that is first among equals. *Laughs* The psychological need that while they're all equal is probably the most important and tricky to understand is autonomy. Autonomy is the perception that you have volition and will, that you're doing something that you are endorsing with your whole being. I actually like to think, to summarize the feeling of autonomy as the feeling of giving a damn. You give a damn about what you're doing, and you value it, and you are internally endorsing it.

This is the basic psychological need that is easiest to thwart. It's the basic psychological need that is also necessary for the perception of the other two. So, it's kind of the first thing you need to worry about if you're trying to promote motivation. It's also the easiest thing to accidentally thwart. So, autonomy is not necessarily freedom, not necessarily independence. Autonomy is the feeling of value, and purpose, and meaning, and giving a damn. Although it's usually found in conditions that are independent and free but that's not necessarily a requirement.

Michael: Got it. Yeah, that makes sense. I think you, I even wrote down a quote that you have, I think on one of your blogs talking about self-determination theory. It was, "The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for." That, for me, just gets so perfectly to that kind of what autonomy really means and feels like to us is that sense of purpose.

Steveo: Yeah. In fact, most people report the highest levels of feeling autonomy support in conditions where they're acting with such integration that they don't feel like they have a choice. So, if someone, like if you're loved one, or not a loved one, but someone, you just see someone fall over on the street. You rush over to help them out of a compulsion to help someone. If we gave you a questionnaire and asked you about that experience, you would probably report feeling a very high amount of autonomy, even though you also say you that you felt like you had no choice because it was such an integral part of your humanness and a part of your personality. If you're the kind of person who likes to help people

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who fall over on the street, that's kind of an assumption of that story. But that is that feeling, that feeling of like, I have to do this. I must do this.

Michael: Yeah. It's so interesting. I was listening to a podcast recently. I can't remember which one it was. But it was one about heroes and the common thread. Oh no, this must have been - I can't remember the podcast. But it was one about heroes, people who have done extraordinary things like pull people from burning buildings. What the sentiment you just expressed was the common thread through all of them, which is like it wasn't a choice. I just had to do it. There was a sense of agency within me that was a purpose that just drove me to do it, without really thinking, not reasoning or feeling through the decision. Just kind of ran towards the burning building kind of experience. And it's just such a powerful moment.

Steveo: Yeah. It's that transcendent moment. It's a moment that people will define their identity for their entire life. That is how powerful a force this is internally. Like this is - when they're described as basic psychological needs, basic means foundational, meaning you can't reduce them any further.

Psychological meaning non-physiological, but need means need in the same way that a basic physiological need is vitamin C. You need vitamin C to survive. If you don't get it, you get scurvy. The basic psychological needs are the same way. It's not a drive. It's not a desire. It's not a want. It is a thing that you seek and need the same way that you need vitamin C.

Michael: Yeah, that makes sense. So when I've read your writings on self-determination theory and heard you speak about it, often you will kind of leave this dot, dot, dot at the end, that the three basic psychological needs so far are competence, relatedness, and autonomy. So, what is that dot, dot, what is that so far? I know there's obviously an ongoing research here. But what do you think there is left to be discovered?

Steveo: There are two candidates right now that people, that researchers are throwing around, one that I don't agree with and one that I think probably might have some merit. The one that I don't agree with is actually meaning and purpose. I actually think that meaning and purpose are a result of having your needs met. There's something separate. There's something different. It's not its own thing. However, a current candidate for fourth need that I think is very interesting is benevolence.

Michael: Oh!

Steveo: And not just the feeling that people like you, not just the feeling that you're in a relationship where you are liked for who you are, but the need to help and contribute to the lives of others. This is wrapped up and kind of hard to pull out the way that the others - it took a while to find the current three needs. It started out with just autonomy actually. So, I think this is an interesting avenue. But I wouldn't be too surprised if there is something to that concept of benevolence being a basic psychological need.

Michael: Yeah, fascinating. I'm curious to see how it pans out. So, most of our listeners are business owners, and entrepreneurs, and business leaders. So, if they're kind of hearing about self-determination theory for the first time and these three basic needs and you were going to build kind of like a starter kit for them, a series of kind of tools or ideas they can take back to their business and kind of start trying stuff out, what do you put in the starter kit? What are the basic tools a business leader can use in conjunction with these ideas?

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Steveo: Well, I guess if I was building on a complete kit, I'd probably put in some books and probably that would be helpful. And Ed Deci's 'Why We Do What We Do,' Ed Deci is the co-founder of self-determination theory, it's a fantastic place to start. When my co-author and I get finished with it, our book, whenever it comes out would be great too, sneak preview on that.

But other than just tools, other than just books to read, I would say some actual things that you can start using are some of the recommendations that self-determination theory based interventions have. These are randomized control trials where people have been trained to support basic psychological needs in various contexts including work. The workplace is one of those contexts. There's a lot of SDT research. The things that they teach managers and bosses and even team, people who are just on teams to do is support basic psychological needs in these super basic ways.

For example, when giving an order or a directive, always give meaningful rationales for why you're asking people to do it. It seems super easy but it's also the first thing that a lot of people forget when they have any power is how helpful it is to ask for things and then give reasons why. It's also one of the things that people report as missing when they feel like they're in an environment where their need for autonomy is being thwarted. Like they have no control and they don't know why they're being asked to do anything. So, just a simple act of giving reasons is huge for supporting basic psychological needs.

There is a caveat to that which is meaningful rationales mean meaningful to the person that you're giving them to. It doesn't mean meaningful to you. It means meaningful to the person that you're asking to do stuff. So, it's not do this because I said so, or do this because it would really help me get promoted. It's please do this because in an appeal to the common mission or the reasons that the person that you are talking to would find meaningful. That's probably the easiest thing to do for autonomy.

Then for competence, an easy thing to keep in mind is to give specific, meaningful, juicy, positive feedback whenever you can, as often as you can, especially, especially, especially about things that are hard. I don't mean hard as in difficult, like you perceive them as difficult, hard for the person. When they perceive they've gone above and beyond and you noticed it, even if it's not particularly "impressive." Letting people know that you noticed promotes that need for competence but it also promotes the need for relatedness right at the same time because people feel that they've been noticed.

These are two super simple things to do. Then, sort of a good gut check for if you're supporting basic psychological needs. Like if you can honestly say answer this question is, "Am I interested?" If you're genuinely interested in the experience of the people that you're trying to foster motivation in, you're probably going to be doing all the right things. If you're not genuinely interested, if you find them boring or tedious or anything like that, you're probably going to be accidentally thwarting their needs, what we call the accidental asshole problem. You can be genuinely interested in the people that you're trying to motivate then you're probably going to do a lot of the right things. So, that's what I would put in that tool kit. Be interested, give meaningful feedback, and give meaningful rationales.

Michael: Yeah, that's huge. I love that, I love that, starting with that gut check because I think you're right. That's a really great parameter. Just am I dialed in here? Am I engaged? Do I give a shit? You

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know, I think it's a great place to start. Then I love that, when giving directives, give some reasoning why. That's an easy one to take away and to start. Not easy to do but easy to understand and try to start doing. Then the one you mentioned just to me sounded a lot just like, "When you see something, say something. When something good is going on, say it out loud."

Often, I know, I'm a culprit of this. I'm really good about calling out all the shitty things that happen in the business on a regular basis. But I have to really work almost twice as hard to see all the great things and be just as vocal about those. So, I love that you brought up that tip.

Steveo: Yeah! Actually one of the pieces of pushback that I get in a lot of presentations, and I've probably given over 200, 250 workshops on this topic is people think that the environment that I'm describing has to be touchy feely. It has to be, you know, super. It has to be hugs everyday and that kind of thing. But actually some of the most need-supportive environments are very surprising. Marine Corps boot camp is one of the most need-supportive environments that we've done measures on. West Point is another need-supportive environment.

Interestingly, the Marine Corps in the 80s realized that they had a huge problem with keeping recruits. So, they actually brought in a bunch of scientists. This was before self-determination theory had really been codified but the basic ideas were the same because the whole field of social psychology was kind of pointing in this direction. So, one of the things that they have trained drill instructors to do is to only give feedback, only give positive feedback to someone when they noticed that they've done something that was exceptionally hard for that person.

So, it's not enough to say good job. It's not enough to say you did better than everyone else at this task. It's going up to someone who you never compliment really and saying, "I noticed that you struggled all week to do this thing to your own standard. And you've gotten better. I just wanted you to know that I noticed that you got better. I noticed it was the hard work that you put in." That one specific piece of juicy positive feedback is way more powerful than all of the negative feedback, all of the good jobs, all the high fives that you're going to give out. That one, I noticed you.

Michael: It's so true. What I love so much about that is it's just such a powerful way to say kind of, "I see you." You know what? You have to know the person well enough to know what is hard for them, what is their experience of what they're working on right now. Then to see them really push themselves and call it out, it's such a powerful way for people you manage to be seen and, you know, hard to do. But you can imagine if someone does that for you, how great that would feel. To have someone know you well enough, watching you well enough, and care enough, be kind of dialed in to the work that you're doing. To say, "Hey, I see that that was so hard for you and you really crushed it this time." It seems like it's such a superpower.

Steveo: Yeah, exactly. In fact, the drill instructor said in the Marine Corps say that it's actually the hardest thing to learn. It's how to not, it's how to hold back on all the sort of, I don't want to say useless compliments but less effective ones and really target those meaningful gestures. They say they actually practice and take notes and keep each other on track for making sure that they're noticing the things that people are struggling with, so that they can give then give them compliments or feedback on them. It's not something they do casually. They really, really work as a team on finding out the things that people are struggling with and giving a feedback on that. It's not a thing they take lightly.

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Michael: Yeah, that's great. I imagine it just takes time and it's a real discipline. So, switching gears. Before our conversation today, I asked you a few topics that you really loved talking about most. You gave three very specific topics. *laughs* I'd love to just kind of chat about each because I get the sense that you have a lot to say probably about all three.

The first thing you said that you love to chat about is the idea of processes, not goals, processes, not goals. So, just say, what do you mean by that?

Steveo: One is I try to write down stuff that I either had to learn the hard way or learned, or knew but didn't understand. This has been one that I'm always trying to relearn is that I know from research that process, goals are better than performance goals, and are better than outcome goals. I wouldn't even bother by getting into the details of that. But every time that I feel like we're lost or every time that I feel like things have gone off, or we even noticed that things have gone off, it's because we got obsessed with an outcome instead of getting better at the thing we were trying to get better at, the process.

So when for example, we noticed, well, we didn't notice, we get most of our leads and most of our attention from our writing. So, when we made a decision to start a new blog and to start writing specific to the audience that we were trying to get to with our consultant services, we started trying to set goals and go, "Oh okay, we're going to put out this much stuff. We're going to write these kinds of things" I actually had to take a step back and say, "Let's just write one great article. Let's just start with one great article." The point was we were trying to make a conscious pivot towards quality not quantity and to write really good articles that would be shared frequently because we're using medium as our medium for writing. We know that the algorithm really promotes high quality content. That's one of its superpowers.

So, by focusing on the process instead of the goal, we're able to keep our interest in it. Know what works and what doesn't. And keep what I would, not I but David Schön calls a reflective practice of doing something, looking back on it, see how it went, and then improving it. And always being focused on the practice of getting better at the skills and mastering what we want to be great at, which is being the best in the world at explaining this stuff and helping people get the tools they need to support other people's basic psychological needs. The process for that is a process of learning and a process of practice. So, we need to focus on the practice, not the goals. Focus on the process, not the goals.

Michael: That's great. That's great. That's a concept we use a lot in the fitness spaces while working and kind of what Mark Fisher Fitness would call health and hotness space. It's just to focus on just the showing up, to focus on just the practice of showing up every day and doing the work, and get at being excellent at showing up and doing the practice of working out and eating well. Focus on the practice, the results will come. The 10 pounds will come.

Steveo: Yeah!

Michael: But just focusing on the process, so that's a really great one. I love that. Number two thing you mentioned that you love talking about was - and these are your words. They are you're the fifth priority and that's a good thing. I love that. I'm not exactly sure what it means but I love it already. You're the fifth priority and that's a good thing. So, what's that about?

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Steveo: That's a lesson that I learned as a coach that keep showing up everywhere else in my life. That is a Zen state of realizing that people have other things to do. They have other things that are important in their lives. I always joked that as a coach, I knew in a session when I was working with someone that in the moment, I might be their number one priority. But sort of in their life, I was at best their fifth priority. Their children, their family, their job, their mental health, these things matter more. The more I realize in working with them is that that's a good thing.

I don't want someone who has me and my businesses their number one priority. That's scary. That's an unhinged person. I would much rather be very good at integrating into someone's life in a holistic way. And that includes as a business then I would like to be their number one priority. So, it changes the thinking from "engagement," how can I get their attention to how can I earn their trust and earn their attention and do well with it. Like how can I help them live life well instead of just giving me the attention that I want? So, that is, remember that they're your fifth priority and that's a good thing.

Michael: That's awesome. That's awesome. How do you think that kind of applies in the customer relationship? You hinted a little bit that customers really want a business that they're paying for their time or they're paying for their services to treat them like the only person that exists on the planet.
laughs

Steveo: *laughs*

Michael: That when people walk into your deli, they want your undivided attention even if you're only buying a sandwich. So, how do you apply that in that setting?

Steveo: Well, I mean in the deli setting, it's interesting thought experiment. In the deli setting, do you want to go to a deli, like you want to go to a deli that cares about getting your sandwich and is clearly making that a priority. And that, you know what, you want to get that right, definitely. But my idea of a deli that would be violating the – remember your their fifth priority – would be the deli that gets you your sandwich, also is pushing their brand loyalty card, is sending you emails about how great the deli is and why you should come back to the deli all the time. And is also trying to get your attention about the greatness of the deli as opposed to when you're there, when you're at the deli, asking about you, asking about what's going on in your life, telling you neat things about the deli that you think the person might find interesting like where the meat comes from.

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: And treating their experience as you have 100% of their divided attention at this moment because they need you. They need to order a sandwich but you're not going to waste it and you're going to take that time to make their life just a little bit better by remembering that you are their fifth priority and not trying to be their -. You're the number one priority in this exact moment but then trying to stay their number one priority at other times when they don't want you to be. I think that would be how I would look at the deli situation.

Michael: I love it! It really, it seems that it comes on to a little bit of a conversation about boundaries.

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Steveo: *laughs* Yeah, it usually does, doesn't it?

Michael: Yeah. I think they all do. *laughs*

Steveo: You know, a funny thing like I've noticed as a business consultant, a lot of the consulting we do now, we're booked out for time periods. So, people will say they want to get in to some of our time. We'll be like, "Oh, we're actually, we're too full right now or we can get to you in March," or things like that. Setting those boundaries but with genuine excitement about their needs is kind of, it hasn't gone rolling yet for us. It's one of those things that we say, "Yeah, this is an exciting project. We'd really love to talk more about it. Our first availability is March. Let's get it on the calendar. We're really excited about it." Just setting that and not trying to sell them there on anything. Just be real about what the relationship is. And that's weirdly enough resulted in more sales for us than less.

Michael: Sure.

Steveo: Just because we're honest, we're very upfront and we're honest about what the relationship is and what it's going to be like.

Michael: That's great. That's great. So, number three, topic number three you gave me was it's all an experiment. It's all an experiment. Talk about that.

Steveo: Yeah. This one might need to be a tattoo.

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: It's I think secretly one of the best ways to put yourself in the mindset of supporting people's basic psychological needs weirdly. Like telling people it's all an experiment is being real about the uncertainty of life, which is another great way to support people's basic psychological needs. Reminding people that it's all an experiment actually helps get them involved. If you say this is an experiment, people want to help you learn. They want to help with your experiment. And you're being honest about the expectations that you have for it. You're excited about it, excited enough to try. But it's also everything is an experiment. Everything you try is going to be work or not or it's going to turn out completely different than you think and you got to change how you do things. So, having that mindset of it's all an experiment for internal projects, external facing projects, like even when I'm talking to a client and they're like tell us what works. Tell us how to motivate people. I'll say, "We'll help you figure out some experiments to do. But that's what it is."

Michael: Yeah.

Steveo: Like we're going to give you some best, some cutting edge advice based on our rather sense of expertise. But it's still going to be up to you to integrate it, to implement it in a style that makes it you and it's going to be an experiment.

Michael: Yeah. I found this to be such a powerful mindset when working with management team because I feel like when you set at that framework and that context of, "Guys, this is just experiment," suddenly, people's anxiety about getting it right starts to fade away.

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Steveo: Oh great, yeah!

Michael: Suddenly, people are more creative. Suddenly, people are more willing to take risk. You know, it's just all of that just from the framework of guys, this is just an experiment. They're willing to play more. I feel like you could touch better results when everyone's guards are down from having to get it perfectly. *laughs*

Steveo: Those are all indications that they're in a highly supportive motivational climate. That's a great thing about supporting those needs is the work you get out of your employees is higher quality. It's not just more. It's also better, more creative, more interested, more engaged, more everything. So yeah, it doesn't take much. It just takes just a little bit of going, "I'm a person too and this is an experiment."

Michael: Yeah. Well, you know what? It's also been really great for me because oftentimes, well, I'll say this. I'm sure my team, some of my teammates at Mike Fisher Fitness will listen to this so surprise to them is I've often done this and said things were an experiment, even though I didn't really think they were.

Steveo: *laughs*

Michael: You know, you know? That I was also trying to let myself off the hook from saying, "No, this is really like canoe. We're just testing out this. We're piloting this in my head. But I'm going to tell them it's just an experiment. *laughs*

That we're still just playing. I found it really helped me and them to get in the head space of being creative and playful and not too locked into any one idea. So, I found it good for brainwashing myself and others. *laughs*

Steveo: Yes, it's funny how that works. *laughs*

Michael: So, switching gears a little bit. I want to get something really tactical which is many of our listeners and people we work through with Business for Unicorns, one of the challenges that we talk about a lot in service-based businesses is retention. People struggle with retention. They're great at getting new customers but they just don't stay as long as they'd like. So, what do you say to businesses with this challenge? You know, where do they start to try to improve retention and create an environment where clients do want to stay for the long haul?

Steveo: There's kind of a full suite of tools available for that specific customer success problem. But I would summarize all of them in under the category of find out what they needed and how you didn't give it to them. That is trite but it's the answer. Every tool is going to be helping you answer that question. So, there's lots of things you can do but that is going to be the strategy is find out what needs you weren't meeting and then find out how, figure out how you can meet those needs. Run some experiments to figure out how you can meet those needs.

By way of example, we have, we've done work with people who make apps that people stop using. In fact, this is a super, it's probably the most common problem with health apps and apps you want

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people, you need people to use a lot is that 25% of apps are deleted after the first use and 72% are deleted after 11 uses.

Michael: Wow!

Steveo: So retention is a cataclysmic problem for that market. A lot of the work that we've done for helping people figure that kind of stuff out is auditing their content to see if it works - the basic psychological needs, to see if it's making them feel stupid, isolated, or controlled. And what we call being an accidental asshole.

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: We just kind of do a run through to see if people, if you've accidentally been an asshole. You don't need a graduate degree in psychology to do that. You can just watch someone use your app or talk to people who've left and ask them questions. This always seems to be something that people never want to do but I kind of don't know how we'd run a business without talking to customers.

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: Ex-customers, like I just -.

Michael: I'll be surprised too. We talk a lot about, you know, feedback and getting feedback.

Steveo: Yeah.

Michael: And people are like, "I'm supposed to ask them about their experience?"

Steveo: *laughs*

I know. And it's weird. I would say this is actually the number one question we get asked in new contracts is tell us again why we need to talk to our customers. That to me is like asking, "Tell me again why I need to breathe." It's just a fundamental thing. But going to your customers and ex-customers and ask them.

You can do full-on qualitative research to figure that out if you've got hundreds of thousands of dollars lying around. You can hire real experts, PhDs to do that work for you. You can also write a survey and figure it out, although I would say that there's nothing more misleading than survey data because it's really hard to write a good survey. My co-worker, Omar has a graduate degree in writing surveys. Like that's his degree. And that's how much work it takes to learn how to do that well.

I would actually skip that and just schedule interviews. I would schedule interviews with five to seven people who've left and have a deep, open conversation where you're actively listening and this is its own skill. Actively listening means listening with the understanding that your mind might be changed by the interaction and listen to them about what their experience was like. Record it, take notes, and dig, dig into your own assumptions about what you thought your experience was and what their experience

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actually is. Then use that information to create a new story for what you want your customer's experience to be like.

Use your experience. Designers use things like user journeys to do this. But I don't think you need to get wrapped up in the toolkit because really what you're doing is you're writing a new story. You're writing a new story for what you want to happen. That story has to involve your users, like it has to involve the experience that they actually are having. Then you make the things, make the changes necessary to make that story come true.

You make sure that everyone on your team knows that's the story that you want to happen. Make sure that everyone, all of your customers know that this is the story that you hope will happen. And really get everyone involved in the story of your customer's success and how it involves being around for long enough to be successful and to get their needs met and not just living because they got tired of your product or tired of the experience. I don't think there's any more valuable metric for a business than lifetime value for customer.

Michael: Yeah.

Steveo: And that's just been my experience. The way to maximize that value in terms of retention is to make sure that you're meeting their needs for as long as they need them met to get done what they need to get done. So, find out what went wrong.

Michael: Yeah, I mean that advice is gold to all you listeners. Let's just go do that right now.

Steveo: *laughs*

Michael: Go schedule five to seven interviews with people who've left. And yeah, maybe even do a group of people who've stayed, right?

Steveo: Yeah, oh definitely do that!

Michael: What's keeping you here? What is the most valuable about it? And just listen with an open mind. If you don't think that you're really at a place where you can listen with an open mind, open heart, pay someone else to do it, right? Just get the feedback because you'll learn so much from it.

I'll say that at Mark Fisher Fitness, we do this ways both big and small and they always pay off. In small ways, things like having a feedback box where people can really just drop in the things that are working and not working for them. Then we can address it publicly and make changes on a regular basis. Just, you know, that one little tool hub has driven so much change and I'm willing to bet has kept people around Mark Fisher Fitness for much longer than they might have stayed if we didn't make those changes.

Steveo: Yeah, exactly.

Michael: Yeah.

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Steveo: And I know it's hard and it's valuable.

Michael: Yeah, completely. It's worth pushing through the discomfort. So, I want to talk just briefly kind of about personal productivity and how we apply some of this to ourselves. So, as you know, at Business For Unicorns, we offer a course on personal productivity called Time Ninja. One of the issues that come up repeatedly in the scores that people know what to do. They know what tasks are most important on their to-do list. They know how ideally they want to spend their time and they don't. They don't do what's on their to-do list and they don't spend their time the way they want to. I've heard you many times articulate this problem and write about this problem. I think you defined it as I already know what I need to do. I just can't make myself do it. *laughs*

Steveo: Yeah.

Michael: I think we've all experienced that problem. So, how do you start working on yourself with some of these, some of these skills?

Steveo: Well, full disclosure, I have ADHD. That actually impacts this thinking a lot. In fact, I was diagnosed as an adult. A lot of the things that I thought about, it really forced me to be introspective and to be reflective about how, what I need to get this stuff done that I want to get done and that I feel like I need to get done to complete my mission. It's been five years now of really deep reflective practice on this.

One of the things that I noticed as for weird aside is that as I talked about it with people who did not have hell, ADHD, was that it seemed to resonate with them. I thought, oh, that makes sense because I was approaching this from a self-determination theory perspective. So, of course it would. These are universal things. So, that's a fancy way of me saying speaking personally, this is what I've noticed works for me. But then also, there seems to be some carryover.

One of the things that I've done in my approach is I am an interest-based learner. That is one of the symptoms of ADHD is your attention follows your interest. So, I go with that. I actually ask myself at the beginning of the day what's the most interesting thing I'm going to do today? I prioritize the things that are interesting and find that that bit of hyperfocus is really great for me to kick off my day with. Then when either that's completed or when that is on its course, I still have a lot of energy left for doing the other things. I feel like I've gotten so much done because I've had this bout of hyperfocus in the morning.

In my case, it's usually writing. Writing is how I start my day. In fact, usually, I'm so excited because I can't sleep the night before because I've figured something out. So, I want to start out writing and that I want to get that done. Then I usually [0:46:50] where my writing is not productive at a kind of natural time within two or three hours. Then I go and look at what else is on my list. It actually feels good to do stuff that's a little more mindless. It feels good to reply to email. It feels good to do those things that aren't as incredibly taxing as creating something is writing. Weirdly enough, like I go like, "Oh man, I can't wait to go, you know, do accounting and hit up my customers for their unpaid bills."

Michael: *laughs*

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Steveo: Because that's so much easier than writing. So, it's such a mental shift. But then the other thing that I had to build my day around was I used to do lots and lots and lots of phone calls, kind of all throughout the day. But as my roles switched from lots and lots of little deals to a couple of big deals and then making big things for those clients, I had to divide my time between make your schedule and manage your schedule.

This is a concept from Y Combinator. A maker schedule is the minimum time on the calendar is a half day. It's a four-hour chunk. That is making time. There is not a smaller division of making time than four hours for me. Then I have two hours where I can do phone calls. That's when people can schedule phone calls with me. Then I either have four more hours of making time or a sort of, you know, yak shaving, doing those other stuff, the to-do list time after that making time. But that was a big thing for me was realizing that a maker schedule was different than a manager schedule.

Michael: Yeah, that's great. So I heard two big real takeaways there. I mean, the first was just to really look at your to-do list and say what are the things that I'm actually interested in. *laughs*

Steveo: Yeah.

Michael: What are the things that I'm most kind of passionate about that I really can't wait to work on? See if you can prioritize those during those times when you feel like you have the most energy. The second part was really just thinking about chunking out your schedule. Essentially, if you are a maker and you need time, creative time to produce content, that you make time for that in blocks of time that you can actually be productive in. I know so often when I hear people talk about, oh I need to really up my game on social media. I want to make all this great content. I want it to be amazing. I want it to go viral. I left 30 minutes on my calendar on Friday to do it.

Steveo: *laughs*

Michael: It's like well, I don't know how you even get into the head space to do something like that in 30 minutes. So, I think those are both just fantastic takeaways.

Another thing I asked you before we started this conversation and your answer again was fascinating was what's kind of one of the biggest challenges in this work. What you said was one of the biggest challenges in this work is the fear of emotional labor. I just, I love that phrase, the fear of emotional labor because the idea of emotional labor is just such a great visual for me. So, say more what you mean by that and why, why this fear of emotional labor makes this work challenging.

Steveo: Emotional labor is a concept that I get from sociology. I'm kicking myself because I can't remember the person who coined it. But emotional labor, because it's from sociology that summarizes the work that people do that is not physical labor but that is mentally and emotionally taxing. This has traditionally unfortunately usually been the work that women do - caring for people, caring for children, caring for the elderly, customer service, HR. All of these things involve difficult conversations and vulnerability that has an actual psychic cost. It's work. It's work to worry about a conversation you need to have with someone. It's work. To try to get to her pants is work. It's a different kind of work than picking a petty stuff or loading a truck or making website but it is work.

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One of the things and I guess this is related to the conversations we just had about why don't people want to talk to their customers is the fear of emotional labor. Once you've realized that it's emotional labor and once you start actually doing it, the first you realize is you get better at it real fast. It's not as hard as you think it is to have difficult conversations, set boundaries, that kind of stuff. It's way harder in your head before you actually start practicing it, much the same way that loading a pallet of water onto a truck is probably really hard until you've done it a bunch.

Michael: Sure.

Steveo: I think that the biggest problem and I was actually responding to that from the point of view of tech. Because this were a lot of the consulting work we've done lately has been is everyone seems to be really into creating algorithm than using machine learning to either discount the value of emotional labor that others are doing, or hide it, or avoid it. A lot of the advice that we've been giving the people is saying you don't get out of it. If you do try to avoid it, you just make a crappier product. You just don't actually end up helping people.

It was so funny to go from teaching coaches how to ask open-ended questions and do reflective listening in those things and then to go to be doing presentations for product teams and realize they don't know how to have these conversations either. And then doing role plays, teaching them how to have, ask open-ended questions, and do reflective listening like engineers and stuff. I realized that it was of the same piece, people that want to be vulnerable. They didn't want to have their ideas threatened. They didn't want negative feedback. They didn't want to have hard conversations. And they didn't want to be wrong. Now that stuff is emotional labor. It was a fear of emotional labor that was holding most people's businesses back and causing most crappy products to be filled.

Michael: Well, it makes sense. The challenges we have interpersonally when we're not in the apps are going to translate to the apps we design, right? They're just going to stay with us into our technology. But the thing that you said I really want to underscore because this has been so true for me personally is that while this emotional labor is taxing, and it does take a lot of work, and it could take a long time to get good at, it is like a muscle you can develop, you know. For example, I used to work in hospitality. For many years, my job was pretty much to be the person that talked to all the angry guests.

Steveo: *laughs* Yes, that's some emotional labor.

Michael: Everyday was to write apology cards and meet them face to face in the lobby for when they were the most mad or when they've told off five staff members already. I was often kind of the end of the line. So, they were at their most pissed by the time they got to me. But I did it for years, you know, six years in hospitality. I got really good at it.

You know and to be fair, I was terrified at the beginning. I would get in that lobby. Get them to talk to a client who, you know, spent thousands of dollars at our hotel. I would be just kind of sweating and a little pale in the face. It was just horrifying amounts of discomfort to just go have a conversation with someone about how their stay was at a hotel. But I knew they were upset and they were maybe on the honeymoon or special occasion and their whole trip was ruined because of x, y, and z. So I started that job just being really bad and uncomfortable. I ended six years later being relatively unfazed.

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The work it took to do that, the labor that it took to do that six years later is just tremendously different. Now, as I talk to people on teams that I work with about how to have those conversations with guests, they look at me like I'm some sort of super hero. Like I have some sort of super power to not be fazed by the emotional labor it requires to have those difficult conversations. I try to tell them which is why I'm so glad that you said it, that you can get better at it. You just have to keep doing it repeatedly like anything.

Steveo: Yeah!

Michael: You can get better.

Steveo: Yes, it's like anything else like dating.

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: *laughs* If you want to get good at it, you got to go on a lot of dates. You know, it's just you got to get in the wraps and there's no way around it. You can't outsmart it. You just got to get in the wraps.

Michael: And it's counterintuitive because we run from any moment of discomfort. It's very easy to run from where I think we're designed to run from most discomfort and fear. And so to really lean into it repeatedly and get good at leaning into it takes a while. It takes a while.

Steveo: Then a weird thing happens when you do it enough is that you actually start to give a damn about your customers and their problems.

Michael: Yeah.

Steveo: And it has this feedback loop of making you more excited. Maybe I shouldn't speak for you. That's for me.

Michael: No, it's true. I get excited for the feedback.

Steveo: I can get more excited for the feedback.

Michael: Yeah, because I'm not afraid of what they're going to say.

Steveo: Right. The worst they can say is, "I'm mad." And you go, "Yes, I can see that. That must be terrible for you."

Michael: Yeah, exactly.

Steveo: On the other hand, it doesn't actually impact my life in any way.

Michael: Exactly.

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Steveo: So, I can just be here for you and be present with you and be interested in why you're so angry because it doesn't matter to me. I mean it matters. It doesn't – It's not going to hurt me. The worst it's going to do is I'm not going to learn from this moment but the best that can happen is I'm really going to learn a lot from this moment.

Michael: Yeah, and helping professions talk about this a ton as therapists, as coaches, the idea of kind of detached engagement. I can be engaged and present for you and here to be empathetic and listen without having it destroy me. *laughs*

Steveo: *laughs* Yeah, and I forgot where I heard this distinction was.

Michael: It's both.

Steveo: But the distinction between empathy and compassion, empathy being really like deeply trying to understand and being emotionally involved in the understanding which is a requirement, but it's not as much as people think. And compassion, that detached listening but genuine caring is the lot, it costs a lot less emotionally.

Michael: Yeah.

Steveo: And it's usually more productive. It just takes a while to learn how to be compassionate instead of always empathetic.

Michael: Yeah, it's so true. Oh my gosh. Well Steveo, we're coming up on about an hour and I could keep doing this for another five hours. So, I'm going to be disciplined. I'm going to start to wrap it up and move on to our final five questions.

Steveo: Oh, great!

Michael: So final five and I do this kind of in the spirit of inside the Actors Studio, I ask everyone these five questions. So, let's dive in to your final five. Number one, what's your morning routine?

Steveo: My morning routine, when things are going well, my morning routine is waking up having slept all night which hasn't been happening lately, and going out to my – I live in an artist cooperative. We have this big, giant hallway, community hallway. We actually got [0:58:15] me and my wife in. I have a whole bunch of kettlebells. I roll around on the ground and work out. I drink my coffee and then get to come in and start my – because I work from home – start my day having moved.

The first think I'll do is write down the stuff that I had, write down the ideas that I came up with while I was working out. If I need to shower, I'll shower but then I want to write down all those ideas that I had while I was rolling around on the ground. Then I do the first interesting thing I want to do. I just let myself be interested for a couple of hours. That usually results in me making something good. That's my maker's time. That's my morning routine. It has been disrupted lately because of sick dogs and whatnot. But when things go well, that's what I like to do.

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Michael: Awesome! I love it. Number two, what activities give you a sense of renewal? By renewal, I mean a sense of being kind of refueled and reinvigorated.

Steveo: Big things like going on two-week vacations with my wife to new countries. That's very invigorating. Any time on a plane really is very invigorating to me. I love time on planes. In fact, I love flying more than I love traveling if that could make any sense. If I could just fly somewhere and fly immediately back, I'd be happy.

Michael: Fascinating! That's a whole, another podcast. I'm so curious about that.

Steveo: Yeah, I love planes and I love hotels.

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: I don't like necessarily being in the places. I like the travel part. Another thing that makes me really refreshed in a smaller way is reading something challenging as in like hard to read, difficult to read. I'm an old philosophy major so I love reading difficult philosophy texts and really having to -. It's humbling and that's recharging to me. And then on a lighter note, hiking and seeing movies, I love movies. I go to movies all the time like in the theater and it's incredibly recharging.

Michael: I love it! Those are all wonderful. So, number three, what one book or learning experience taught you the most?

Steveo: Oh gosh! That's -.

Michael: That's a tough one.

Steveo: I don't even know. *laughs*

There are too many choices – taught me the most. I'm going to say losing my grandfather about two years ago taught me the most. It was my first real, big loss. And having been through that experience really helped me understand what matters to me and why in a way that was different than I thought having gone into it. So, that experience taught me the most. Book! I don't know. I read a lot. *laughs*

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: And I've read some great books but I don't know. The book that I read lately that has influenced me the most, maybe that's easier, it kind of was a big, profound thing was David Schon, S-C-H-O, with an umlaut over at n, Schon, The Reflective Practitioner which is a kind of difficult to read book. On the other hand, it's incredibly valuable about the way that knowledge is actually transferred in mastery, in professions in a way to constantly get better and create an environment of constant improvement in teams and in life. It's not just learning things from books but a way that you create a practice of reflection is great.

Michael: Great. I haven't read that one yet. I have to put it on my list. Awesome! So number four, if you could have one super power, what would it be?

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Steveo: Oh it's telepathy. I want to know what people think.

Michael: *laughs* that's easy one.

Steveo: Oh yeah, I think about it all the time. There's nothing I love more than watching people and wondering why they're doing what they're doing. I love people-watching. It's like my constant obsession is why do people do what they do. So, it's just an actual telepathy to hear what's going on in their heads. Maybe, maybe it would solve that riddle or not but I would just love to know what's going on in people's heads.

Michael: That would be a good one. That would be a good one. Last question, number five, what is the last thing you think about before you fall asleep?

Steveo: The last thing I think about before you fall asleep – breathing. That sounds dumb but usually I'm trying to breathe. If I'm working on a hard problem or trying to figure something out, I'll be restless and might have trouble falling asleep which is weird for me. I'm a super-fast sleeper. I can sleep in any condition but lately it's been breathing like actually conscious breathing. If that is not the case, if I'm not struggling to sleep, the last thing I think about is usually what the condition of my coffee set up is the night before.

Michael: *laughs*

Steveo: If I had cleaned out my coffee.

Michael: Clean the coffee on point or not.

Steveo: Yeah, yeah.

Michael: That's awesome.

Steveo: Because that's like the first place I go right when I wake up.

Michael: That's amazing. Awesome! Well, great answers. Thank you so much for your time, Steveo. This has been a real blast. You know, we could keep talking for another few hours. I'll have you back again and we'll keep the conversation going.

Steveo: That'd be great.

Michael: But in the meantime, thank you so much. And how can our listeners, if they want to keep in touch with you, learn more about your work, how can they do that?

Steveo: Easiest way is probably habitry.com, habit, R-Y, dot com. That's where our blog is. That's where all of our info about what we do and how we do it is. It's also where, you know, it's a great nexus point if you want to find out other stuff like my personal website and LinkedIn and I don't know, all those other, Twitter. It's all on habitry.com. Try to check that out.

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Michael: Great! I know you've also been doing a lot of work recently with Lift The Bar magazine. Do you want to say something about that?

Steveo: Yeah. This would be especially for coaches and people out there who are trying to help people in the health and fitness space. We write a quarterly research review of self-determination theory and motivation science specifically for health coaches. That is published every quarter at Lift The Bar, in their magazine. That's free for any members of Lift The Bar which is a great community for personal trainers and coaches out in the UK. I will admit that even though it's focused on health and fitness for people who are doing that practice, it's all universal things. Like if you want to learn how to support people's basic psychological needs, it's a cutting edge of that science is Lift The Bar magazine. Lift The Bar would be a great place to look.

Michael: Yeah, it's fantastic. I think I recently had an article in there too. They put out some really great content. Obviously, they put both of us in there.

Steveo: They do, don't they. It's great!

Michael: So you must be doing something right. *laughs*

Steveo: *laughs*

Michael: Well, thank you again for your time. This is a real blast. I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with me today and thank you so much.

Steveo: Thank you, Michael!