

Charlie Mechem:

Welcome to 15 Minutes with Charlie. I'm your host, Charlie Mechem. This is a series of podcasts that I've been doing in connection with my recently published book, Total Anecdotal, in which I sit down with guests to discuss anecdotes from the book. If I were to properly introduce my guest today, frankly, we'd have to rename the show as it would take much more than 15 minutes to do. His name is Scott Ross. He's an American digital media guru with an impressive career spanning three decades. In the 1980s, he led George Lucas's companies, and in 1993 founded along with James Cameron and Stan Winston, Digital Domain, one of the largest digital production studios in the motion picture and advertising business. Under Scott's direction from '93 to 2006, Digital Domain garnered two Academy Awards and three nominations. He received his first Oscar in 1997 with a groundbreaking visual effects in Titanic. At present, Scott sits on multiple boards and he's an advisor to companies and schools. Scott, I'm just delighted and honored to have you on my podcast. Welcome.

Scott Ross:

Happy. The same way.

Charlie Mechem:

Thank you. We'll start with an anecdote that appears under the category of Ego in the book. It's a very short one, but a very provocative one.

Just remember, the cemeteries are filled with indispensable people.

I'd like your thoughts on ego. I'm sure you've run into some massive egos in your career, but give me your thoughts on ego.

Scott Ross:

Oftentimes when people ask me, how did it work out with James Cameron, I always say to the people that I felt that Jim and I had religious differences, and he thought he was a God, and I didn't agree. It depends how we're looking at ego. Now at the ripe old age of 68. Today's my birthday.

Charlie Mechem:

Oh, my.

Scott Ross:

Thanks. I've always looked at other people's egos and understood them, and oftentimes didn't handle them very well. And now at my age, I'm looking at what role did my ego play in it?

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah.

Scott Ross:

So on one hand, ego I think it's very, very important for success because it drives us. It makes us want to do better. It brings up that competitive spirit. I think there's a lot to be said about that, especially in these days when helicopter parents give awards for kids that come in last because they at least participated. I always wanted to come in first. I think that came in as a result of my ego.

However, I also now realize that from my perspective of my ego, that my ego got in the way of really being successful. For example, had I been much more mature and had less ego and understood that one has to use the old adage, win the war and not the battle, I might be the guy with the Academy Award standing next to Jim Cameron as my partner on Titanic and Avatar. I didn't know how to handle Jim and his ego, and the only way that I knew how, it was 20 some odd years ago, was to be that New York City street kid, which was to fight back.

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah.

Scott Ross:

And I didn't fully understand that there's something about then, of the harder somebody pushes you, the less resistance that you give them the easier it is to deal with them.

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah.

Scott Ross:

So ego can be both a good thing if it's contained, and understood, and mature, and one uses it to the benefit of the good of the company, as well as how it imparts valor on you, but it's also oftentimes a bad thing because when ego gets out of hand at that point, there's harm and damage to everything and everyone.

Charlie Mechem:

That's as insightful a response as I have ever heard to this particular question. I've over the years confronted the same sort of issues that you speak of. And the people that I have noticed who learn to manage their ego either right out of the box or later on managing an ego is the key, and you have certainly alluded to that. The next anecdote comes under the category in the book of, Hard Work. And it goes like this.

A man prayed and asked God to help him win the lottery. Every day he renewed his prayer and finally he said, "God, please help me win the lottery." Well, it was absolute amazement, the skies darken, lightning flashed, and a strong, deep voice said, "Would you at least buy a ticket?"

We so often expect good things to happen without effort and they rarely do. Your thoughts on the importance of hard work.

Scott Ross:

I've been praying to the wrong God because my God's never spoken me. If we look at hard work, I mean, there's a reason why it's called work, right? And work, I think, connotes toil, and effort, and it's hard. If it was easy, it wouldn't be called work. The fact that when things come easily to someone, I think that it's not embraced or valued as much as that when you work for it, when you work hard for it. I think, again, there's a fulcrum point. At one point, hard work is great because it pays off creatively and psychologically to who you are and what you're doing, and I think it sets an example for the rest of your team. There also comes a point where hard work crosses the line and now the work overtakes you and doesn't allow you to be the father, the husband, the community citizen that you also have to be. So, I

think you have to monitor that hard work, work hard when it's time to work, and then when it's not time to work in that, do other things that bring the value to your life and to your family.

Charlie Mechem:

Did you feel that you balanced those considerations effectively in your life?

Scott Ross:

When I was an executive, whether it was at Lucas, saw more when I was the CEO and Chairman of my own company, I put in a considerably more time into my work than I did into my family, and as a result, I'm divorced. I'm remarried happily now. I think that I didn't put in the time, effort, and energy into my children's lives that I wished I would have. They've all turned out to be great kids.

Charlie Mechem:

Good.

Scott Ross:

I feel that I didn't participate in the moment that things were happening. I was much too interested in what the future was going to bring as it related to my company and not really being in the moment of experiencing my five-year-old, two-year-old, one-year-old, seven-year-old. And as we all know, those times are fleeting and you can't recapture them.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, it sounds to me like you've done a pretty damn good job of it. So, the next anecdote comes under the heading of Intelligence in the book, and it goes like this.

Albert Einstein had little use for Roche Learning. Instead, his creative genius stemmed from his ability to imagine concepts. He summed this up once by stating, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

Your thoughts on that.

Scott Ross:

One of my heroes and I think he's absolutely right once again, that at the end of the day, sometimes people where I grew up in the South Bronx and Queens, we called it, "Street smarts."

Charlie Mechem:

Yeah.

Scott Ross:

And if you don't have street smarts, you can have all the book learning in the world, you might be an interesting conversationalist, but you're not going to be creative and you're not going to fit into this great machine called the movement of society and civilization. You'll be an observer, and a studier, and not a player.

Charlie Mechem:

Good, very good. And I knew when I selected this anecdote to speak to you about that imagination has obviously been a very critical part of your career and your success. So thank you for that. Now, it's interesting because this sort of in a way plays into the next anecdote, which is one of my favorites. It's in the book under the heading of Marketing, and this fits in with what we were just talking about in terms of what's important. Goes like this.

The President of a dog food company was addressing the annual sales meeting of his company. He was not happy. Sales were poor and he was giving the group a stern lecture. He said, "I simply don't understand it. We have the finest product of the business, our packaging and marketing are second to none, yet sales are terrible. You guys must not be doing your job. Just tell me what's wrong." Well, there were several seconds of silence. One little guy in the back raised his hand and the President said, "Okay, so you think what's wrong? Then tell me," and the fellow said in a somewhat frightened voice, "Sir, the problem is that the dogs don't like it."

I've always loved that because if the dogs don't like it, forget everything else. But your thoughts on marketing and bringing a product to market.

Scott Ross:

The things that I think for Digital Domain when it started because I came out of Industrial Light & Magic, the market leader, had about 80% of market share at the time, so I started this new company. Everybody told me they thought I was crazy in doing it, but I looked at what the problems were in the market based upon ILM's perceived sensibility. A lot of people said, "ILM stands for, It Loves Money" because it was a Lucas Film Company, the leader was never really there. George never showed up much. It had lost its spirit and it had lost its competitive nature, and I recognized that was a problem. And what I was going to do in my company internally, was I was going to create a company and the best way to describe it was one of my employees said, "Scott, you created a company that was a cutting edge technology company, but it acted like it was a rock and roll band."

We thought of ourselves as ILM was the Beatles and we were the Rolling Stones, and we were the street bad boys and we created great music, but we were going to party, and have a good time, and we were going to treat our employees like it was a big blast and that we were looking at changing the world. From the outside, our marketing was, we were the fresh new kid on the block and we were going to try new things that the existing companies were unwilling to try because they were sort of set in their ways. So we were the fresh new face on the block, and we were scrappy, and we were going to do it through a good price, and we were going to when the clients said jump, we were going to say, "How high?"

Charlie Mechem:

Obviously, it worked and worked in spades. The next anecdote. In fact, there are two of them here under the chapter in the book called Meetings.

I have a plaque in my office that sums up my attitude regarding meetings and it reads, "Any simple problem can be made insoluble if enough meetings are held to discuss it." And the second anecdote comes from the inimitable Dave Barry, who said, "If you had to identify in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved and never will achieve his full potential, that word would be meetings."

Well, I'd be fascinated by your thoughts on meetings.

Scott Ross:

They're a complex issue.

Charlie Mechem:

It is.

Scott Ross:

The idea to have a meeting for a meeting's sake is absolutely stupid. You shouldn't block out time to have this as our standard meeting. We should have meetings when things are important and need to be discussed. Obviously, meetings should be kept to a timeframe with a bare minimum of time, but it's important as the CEO of a company to get the insight from each one of your Vice Presidents and understand the direction. Help them formulate your opinion of the direction that it should go.

And more importantly, the meetings that I always enjoyed and I always stayed with is we had a meeting that happened once a week, and it was an entire company meeting, and it wasn't really a meeting. It was more like a communication device to be able to have the 900 employees or whatnot get fed a lunch and see its President and its Vice President talk about the state of affairs of the company which was more of instilling excitement, and opportunity, and a reason a *raison detre* of what the company was all about to lift their spirits so that they would work the days that they worked and as hard as they work.

Charlie Mechem:

That's very, very helpful and I agree with you. My feeling, and I've been in eight million meetings over the years as have you, I always felt that meetings could be very helpful if you limit it to the number of people who really were needed to be part of it and communicating. Secondly, that, and maybe most importantly in my mind is, I like to end every meeting by saying, "Okay, what is the next thing that we do? Who's going to take responsibility for moving forward on the various items we've suggested?" And I always like to end every meeting by having a list of, "Okay, Joe, you're going to do this. Mary, you're going to do this," and so on. Too many meetings that I've been involved in over the years, Scott, and I'm sure this has probably been true in your case as well in meetings with other people, is that the meeting is great and everybody kind of walks away without anybody feeling responsibility for helping it move forward.

So thank you for your thoughts on that. I think we're in 100% agreement.

Scott Ross:

Yep.

Charlie Mechem:

This next one I'm really intrigued with your reaction. It comes under the heading in the book of Passion, and it goes like this.

The great playwright, Neil Simon gave a marvelous speech. Frankly, I'm not sure he ever gave anything but a great speech at a Williams College commencement. And it goes like this.

Whatever path you follow for the moment you take off those long black gowns, do it as though Gershwin had written music to underscore your every move. Romantic and idealistic, yes, but I can't think of anything worthwhile in life that was achieved without a great deal of desire to achieve it. Don't listen to those who say it's not done that way. Maybe it's not. Maybe you will though. Don't listen to

those who say you're taking too big a chance. If he didn't take a big chance, Michelangelo would have painted the Sistine floor and would certainly have been rubbed out by today.

So your thoughts on the importance of passion as you pursue your endeavors.

Scott Ross:

For the company, I think one of the things that the leaders of that creative company has to do is instill the passion of the group and take away the fear of failure. In fact, you have to honor failure because only through failure will people take risks. And if people take the safe road all the time, you're not going to win Academy Awards and you're not going to do cutting edge work.

So, I made it my effort to be able to challenge people to do something greater, but at the same time, if they failed at it, not sort of undress them either in private or in front of the crowd, but to say that it was a valiant effort. If it was unless it was a stupid effort, it was a valiant effort, and that we honor those valued efforts. So passion is critical. And I think as the CEO of a creative company, if I was to say my strongest suit would not be technical, would not be financial, would not be marketing even, but it would be instill passion in my workforce and make them understand that we're doing something really, really special.

Charlie Mechem:

Boy, that says volumes about why you've been successful. I totally agree with that. I think to undertake a job in a sort of rudimentary kind of way, and just say, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," passion is critical. And particularly in entertainment companies, and I was as you know deeply involved in one for many years, it's particularly critical. The final anecdote is one that I'm really looking forward to getting your thoughts on. It comes in under the heading in the book of, What's Really Important? And here it goes.

I ran across a wonderful quote. The sad part is I have no idea who said it. If I did, I certainly want to give appropriate credit because I think it's a wonderful statement. It goes like this, "In life you will realize there's a role for everyone you meet. Some will test you, some will use you, some will love you, and some will teach you, but the ones who are truly important are the ones who bring out the best in you. They are the rare and amazing people who reminds you why it's worth it."

Your thoughts on that.

Scott Ross:

Big statement. I think, again, now in the third stage of my life, I think every single thing that you said there, the ones that test you, even the ones that turn their back on you, the ones that hurt you at the time, are all teaching you a lesson. And I'm a better person for the pain, disdain, and anger, and hurt that I had in various relationships where I felt that I went to the match for somebody or a group of people, and then they flipped on me, and they left the company and took company's secrets, and all of that stuff. But I learned a lot from falling down and standing up. Of course the rare, rare ones are the ones that bring it all, and make it all worthwhile, and give you meaning to live, but usually I marry those.

Charlie Mechem:

Very good point. Well, I don't think I've ever used this example in any of my podcasts, but it pops in my mind now how sometimes a criticism is critical in one's evolution, and my favorite memory is when I joined my law firm right out of law school. I joined the firm in July of 1955, and I knew at the time that I was going to be drafted and I'd go in the Army in about eight or nine months, which I did. When I got to the firm, they knew that I'd be leaving in a short time that I'd come back, but that I would be leaving. So

they thought it was silly to hire a full-time secretary. So what they did was make available to me, they called them secretaries then and executive assistants now, to the senior partner of the firm who had gone into Washington DC to become in President Eisenhower's Cabinet.

So this lady was kind of an Auntie Mame type, and I was terrified of her because here she was the Executive Assistant to the founder and leader of the firm, but I thought, what the heck I can learn from her. So, I dictated my first ever letter to her, and I felt kind of good about it when I finished. And I sort of sat back after I dictated and waited for a nice comment, and she looked at me and sort of smiled and said, "Well, that was certainly a little gem, wasn't it?" I never forgot that. I had the wonderful experience many years later of speaking to a group in which she was involved. And I told that story and she turned a hundred shades of red, but I said, "You taught me right then that you cared enough about me to let me know I had a lot of work to do in learning how to dictate a letter."

Anyway, we all learn. And sometimes it's hard, sometimes it's easy, but it's always informative and you always need to be looking out for the people who are meaningful to you. Well, Scott, I can't thank you enough. You've really had some very insightful things to say, and I think everybody can learn from your life in a variety of ways. I'm hoping that we can get together again soon so we can talk about even more of these things. I admire you and really appreciate your taking the time to do this podcast.

Scott Ross:

Charlie Mechem, I look forward to getting together with you again and sitting down over a glass of scotch and hearing your stories because your life is fascinating and it gives me hope that there's life after 68.

Charlie Mechem:

I guarantee you there is. As I may have alluded to earlier, I'll soon be 90. And mercifully, God has been good to me, and I'm in good health, and I try to stay as busy as I can, and I'm sure you understand this. You can learn every day. You can learn something new every day. You can meet somebody new every day. Profit from reading. And that's one of the tragedies I think of today's young people is that they're not reading very much except on the internet, and I think that's sad. But anyway, those are all subjects that we can take up and I'm going to plan to be around until we have that chance.

Thank you for joining me for today's conversation. If you'd like to listen to more episodes, please visit charliemechem.com or search for 15 Minutes with Charlie in your podcasting app. And if you're enjoying the show, you should check out my book, Total Anecdotal: A Fun Guide to Help You Become a Better Speaker and Writer. Learn more at charliemechem.com/book. That's charliemechem.com/book, or you can acquire the book either through Amazon or Barnes & Noble. Thank you.