

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. We're honored and delighted to have another chance to visit with American digital media guru, Scott Ross, as an extension to our previous episode. And if you haven't listened to part one yet, be sure to do so. Please enjoy part two of my conversation with Scott. Welcome Scott.

Scott Ross:

Hey, how are you?

Charlie Mechem:

Good. To refresh our listeners, the approach we take is for me to read various excerpts from my book, Total Anecdotal. And I will quote a particular anecdote and then ask the person I'm speaking with to relate how that anecdote might have impacted or influenced their career. And we're going to use that same format. It seems to work well.

The first one, Scott, is under the category of arrogance, on page 33 of my book. And it goes like this. One night at sea, the captain saw what looked like the light of another ship heading toward him. He had his signal man signal to the other ship, and said "Change your course 10 degrees south." The reply came back "Change your course 10 degrees north." Well, the captain answered "Hey, I'm the captain. Change your course south." To which the reply was "Well, I'm a seaman. Change your course north." This, of course, infuriated the captain so he signaled back "Damn it. I say change your course south. I'm on a battleship." To which the reply came back "I say, change your course North. I am in a lighthouse." I love that one, and Scott, I'd love your reaction to it.

Scott Ross:

Well, I'm in the movie business, and the guy on the battleship is the captain, and the title in the film business is director. There are times where there are these things, and I know it's been quoted a bunch by, I forget the officer who wrote the biography of Steve Jobs. The concept of a reality distortion meter, where reality is so far skewed, to the point of, they distort the heck out of it.

I've had the opportunity of working with several directors who had severe reality distortion meter issues. There was one in particular, reality distortion mania. And that person, while he was on the battleship, and I think it's an appropriate analogy to say on a ship. It would have been the Titanic. He said "I don't care if you're a lighthouse, I'm a battleship and my battleship going to crush your lighthouse." There are times in the movie business where arrogance gets you into trouble a whole bunch, but there are also times, unfortunately, in the movie business, where arrogance comes with the weightiness of who the person is.

And at some point, everybody is going "Okay, I'm not a lighthouse. I'm not a lighthouse. I'm not a lighthouse, because the captain says so." And that creates an incredible amount of dysfunction in our industry.

Charlie Mechem:

Very, very interesting. I hadn't thought about it in that light, but that's a very interesting comment. And thank you. The next one that I want to get your reaction to, is under the category in the book of experts, and it's on page 56. This will take me a minute to read, but it's one of my real favorites.

There was a renowned chemistry professor who was out on his annual lecture tour. He went from campus to campus, discoursing on his field of expertise. To help him with the mechanics of the trip was his long time loyal chauffeur. The professor always gave the same lecture to various stops, and towards the end of the tour, both he and the chauffeur were getting a little weary of the whole exercise. So as they approached the site of the last lecture, the chauffeur said "Let's have a little fun tonight. I know your lecture by heart. I've heard it 38 times. I'd like to deliver it." To which the professor said "That sounds like a wonderful idea. You do that. I'll put on your chauffeur's uniform. I'll sit in the back of the audience, and pretend to be you. It'll be great."

Well, the chauffeur did a marvelous job of giving the speech, and no one was the wiser. When the speech was over, there was a great round of applause. The chauffeur nodded modestly, and was about to retire, when from the audience came "Question, question." Well, of course, all lectures are followed by Q&A, so the chauffeur looked at the raised hand, and said "By all means, go ahead." The question was from a chemistry professor at the university. And he said "What is the coefficient of plutonium times the valence of copper as a factor of stress in the early curve of nuclear fission development, where the reactor is led based?"

Well, the chauffeur didn't miss a beat. He said "Sir, I recognize you from photographs that I've seen in trade journals. And I know you're very renowned and respected, but I must say I'm astonished that a man of your reputation could ask such a simple question. Why, my chauffeur in the back of the room can answer that."

Scott Ross:

Love it.

Charlie Mechem:

Again, experts come in all sizes and shapes, but what's your reaction to that?

Scott Ross:

As I said, my career is being a CEO. And a CEO stands for basically, expert of nothing. Expert of nothing. Because we're supposed to have all this knowledge. I remember one time, going for an interview at one of the leading head hunter firms. And they started asking me questions, and they said "Well, are you a financial guy?" I say "Well, no." "Well, are you a sales guy?" I say "No." And they went through a litany of different job descriptions. And I was basically saying "I'm not an expert in any of them." And they said "Well, then what do you do?" And I said "I listen to a lot of experts and then make up my mind. I'm a CEO."

Charlie Mechem:

Very, very true.

Scott Ross:

That's my take. You have to listen to a whole bunch of so-called "experts" and then your ability to go and weigh them all out, as to what's real, and what's not real, and get an understanding of the situation.

Charlie Mechem:

Scott, I couldn't agree with you more. I had the same experience. And I remember once saying, in my old company, we had a lot of financing over the years. Investment bankers would come and do their thing,

and I used to say the investment bankers "Look, you can put together the agenda, except for the last item. I will handle the last item." And they said "Well, what do you mean?" And I said "If you handle the agenda and the last item, the last item is always going to be your fee. And that's going to be mine."

So the next one is under the category of forecasting the future. Actually, I have two of these, on pages 58 and 59. Over 40 years ago, one of the nation's biggest airlines announced that it would be the first to take people to the moon. This seemed fitting, in view of its strength and stature at the time. Guess what airline it was? Pan-American. The next one is... Which of course disappeared from view. The next one is, when the Yankees signed Babe Ruth in 1930 to a two-year contract worth \$160,000. And this one just blows my mind. Then general manager Ed Barrow, proudly exclaimed "No one will ever be paid more."

So there you are on forecasting the future. What are your thoughts on that?

Scott Ross:

You can look at it in two different ways. One is forecasting the distant future. One is forecasting of the near future. And I always have fun, especially with software engineers and engineers, they have a really hard time understanding forecasting the near future, but they're very comfortable in forecasting the distant future.

One example comes up. I remember, we were doing a movie and it was called Dante's Peak. And the studio came back to us, and there was another movie called Volcano, by another studio. And they wanted Dante's Peak out sooner. So they came back to us, and I went to my head of production, and I said "So how much additional will this cost to move up the schedule?" And he forecasted it, and he said "X millions of dollars." And I said, are you sure we're covered? He said "Hey, listen, they can't spend that amount of money in the period of time that they're asking us to do the film." "So do you feel very, very comfortable?" He said "Yes."

Well, we lost several million dollars on that project, because he forecasted. And oftentimes, he was wrong. Needless to say, he no longer works for me at all. But now, he's the head of feature animation at the Walt Disney company. So he learned his lesson.

Charlie Mechem:

Wow, that's incredible. Well, I wasn't going to quote this particular anecdote, but you've really made a point. It's also under the category of forecasting the future. And this was an experience that I had many years ago, when I was attending a conference in Cleveland, Ohio, during which we heard a speech from the much acclaimed business leader and visionary, Dr. Simon Ramo.

One of my good friends from Cincinnati was also in the audience. Now, it's important before going on, to note that the speech was given in September. Dr. Ramo gave a superb, thought-provoking talk and shared his vision for coming decades, and even longer. When he finished, he asked for questions. And my friend raised his hand and said "Dr. Ramo, I have truly enjoyed your vision in the future, but let me ask you this. How do you see October?" And that's exactly the point where making.

The next anecdote is under the category of patience and forbearance, and it's on page 91 of the book. A man had a good friend who owned a cabin, deep in the woods. Occasionally, his friend would allow him to stay in the cabin for a week or two, to enjoy some rest and solitude. Late one night, the man heard a noise at the door. He opened the door, but saw no one, until he looked down on the doormat and noticed a snail. He reached down, picked up the snail, and threw it back in the yard. Several years later, he went back to the cabin on another visit. Once again, he heard a noise at the door.

He went to the door, opened it and looked down, and saw the same snail. The snail looked up at him and said "What was that all about?" Patience.

Scott Ross:

Again, speaking from the position of a person has worked in Hollywood for the last 30 to 40 years. There's really, very, very little patience involved in the film industry. You have a deadline that you have to meet, and you've already put out ads, and you've locked up theaters. And except for a very rare time when you push a film, the film has to be released at that date. And so, there are a lot of people running around, as my father would say, like chickens with their heads cut off.

The opposite of patience is impatience, and sometimes people get so impatient, and I'll give you a quick anecdote here. We had a guy who was working for us. He was a PA, a production assistant. And we needed to be able to get a script over to paramount studios, and it needed to get there as quickly as possible. So he had three choices. One, he could drive the script over there. Two, he could mail the script over there or messenger it. Or three, he could send it Federal Express. Well in his mind, Federal Express was the quickest. But he didn't realize that when he sent the scripts Federal Express, it got flown to Nashville, Tennessee. And then it got flown back to Los Angeles, and then driven to Paramount Studios. Sometimes impatience gets in the way of actually being successful.

Charlie Mechem:

That is wonderful, and it's so true. Well, the final anecdote for today is under the category of sense of humor. And it's on page 106 of the book. This has always been a limerick that I have loved, and quoted hundreds of times over the years. It goes like this.

He was a very cautious lad who never rocked or played. He never smoked, he never drank, or even kissed a maid. So when he upped and passed away, insurance was denied, for since he had never lived, they claimed he'd never died. Sense of humor.

Scott Ross:

Oh yeah. No, humor is a tricky thing.

Charlie Mechem:

It is.

Scott Ross:

Obviously, a sense of humor is critical, I think not only to success in business, but I think it's critical to being alive, and feeling comfortable in one's own skin, and being able to relate to other people in all kinds of situations. But it's a tricky one, because what you might find to be funny, somebody else might not.

And what comes to mind is definitely, in foreign countries, outside of the United States. Don't ever try to tell a joke, because you'll be looking at an audience of five thousand people with stone faces because they didn't get it at all.

Charlie Mechem:

Very true.

Scott Ross:

The best way to have a sense of humor that I've felt for me, was being self-deprecating. The ability for me to make fun of myself, especially as the leader, you're standing in front of a thousand people and they have all these ideas of who you are, who they think you are. And if you can make fun of yourself, and make fun of your foibles, it builds community. And I've been very good at that over the years as well, making fun of myself.

Charlie Mechem:

I totally subscribe to that. And I've always tried to do that myself, and the one line that I've used more than once that fits right into what we're talking about. When I was with the LPGA, and after that, I was frequently on a dais with a lot of well-known sports figures, and later business figures. And the line that I first used, I think at a sports dinner in Rochester, New York with a star-studded head table. And I got up and I looked up and down and I said "You know, as I look up and down the dais, as I realized, I'm the only one that I've never heard of before."

People loved it. As you say, I've always felt in making speeches, if you can get the audience to smile or laugh a little bit, right at the beginning, that's half the battle. Because they'll decide right then "I think this guy or this gal is going to be okay, let's really listen to him or listen to her." So I totally agree with what you said.

Scott Ross:

You bet.

Charlie Mechem:

Well, listen, thank you again for your time and your wisdom. It's been another wonderful podcast. If you're not careful, we'll ask you to do a third one.

Scott Ross:

I kept thinking that the last one was so bad, that you wanted to do another one. But it's good to hear that actually the last one was so good you wanted to do another.

Charlie Mechem:

We disabused that notion, totally.

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, the Fun Guide to Help you Become a Better Speaker and Writer. Learn more at charliemechem.com/book. That's charliemechem.com/book, or you could acquire the book, either through Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Thank you.