



Episode 2

Published: November 19, 2014

Interview with Michael Dolan

Amiel Handelsman: I am very happy to be joined here today on the show by my friend, Michael Dolan. Welcome, Michael.

Michael Dolan: Hi, Amiel. I am glad to be here.

Amiel: I would love to have you start off by telling us the story of how you got into this line of work of productivity and coaching.

Michael: Well, actually you fit into this story a bit. Let's see, about eight or nine years ago, after spending most of my professional life in the realm of consumer products, marketing, advertising, and a little bit in design, I had a bite of what I tend to call a “career moment of truth” at a point where I had just done some what I call “wandering” in my work life after leaving a large corporate job. I spent some time working in more creative pursuits. Working in film production representing an artist, being a bit of an artist myself. And then I realized, "Hey, Michael, you know you actually got to make some money." I kind of sort of turned back towards more of a professional focus. Coaching and counseling were always something, maybe not always, but it was an emerging thing that I was beginning to notice as a possibility for what might be a good fit for me and who I am.

The moment of truth came when I had just been married, and we were expecting our first child. It was a time where years of longing for work that was a better fit for me came to a head. It was a sense of, if I am going to make a big move, I got to do it now, or else the momentum of being a parent may make it so difficult to make a big change that it might never happen. I had this imagined scene of my daughter coming home from school when she is five or six and saying, "Daddy, what did you do today at work?" And not wanting to be a hypocrite when I say you should follow your passions, and you can do anything your heart is attracted to.

I decided to make the jump into coaching, which I've been thinking about for several years, and you were one of the old friends. We know each other from business school, from a few years prior to that. You were one of my reference points for the world of executive coaching. And soon after some conversations with you and a few other friends remember my time when I was still working as a brand manager at this large consumer products company, my time being coached by a guy named David Allen. David is well known for a book called *Getting Things Done*. He is kind of known in the business world and beyond as one of the kind of top productivity gurus out there. I realized, "Oh, I'd love his stuff." My time spent with him a few years prior really changed the game for me in terms of how I managed my attention and got stuff done without being so stressed.

He has a staff of coaches and trainers. I reached out, and it turned out that they were in need of a coach, and it was a good fit. Within a couple of months of my declaring that I wanted to become a coach, I was being trained in his organization, doing one-on-one work helping mostly people in business situations manage their attention and manage their commitments.

Amiel: Tell us about some of the engagements that you were on early on, because often these early experiences in a new line of work are really pivotal in shaping how we view our work. I wonder if you can remember back to the first few months, first year, with the David Allen Company and talk about some of the work you did.

Michael: Yeah. I have not thought about that for a while. It's been eight years. I will say that I owe a debt of gratitude to David and a few other people of the company, including Marian Bateman, who's been with David for a long, long time and a few other folks there who really took a lot of care in training me. They had a very gradual and hands-on approach over the course of probably a couple of months, starting with me being coached again by one of their master trainers and experiencing the work from the perspective of somebody who's about to be giving and delivering that kind of coaching.

Then the path of becoming trained in that kind of coaching was very much about a path starting with doing a lot of observing of another person doing the coaching with the client. Then slowly, over the course of a few weeks, it was always me and usually Marian Bateman, this woman who trained me. I'd watched her do the coaching and work with the client. A few weeks later, ahead of time she might say, "You know, why don't you take this part, and you take that part, and I'll let the client know Michael's going to handle this right now, and I'll watch." These clients were all getting the coaching for free. They have some kind of relationship with the company where they needed and wanted that kind of help but also weren't paying because of the training that was going on behind the scenes with them.

It was a great process of building confidence in a steady way. By the time, maybe after about three or four weeks it was just me doing the whole thing with Marian just observing, watching, and giving feedback afterwards. One piece of perspective about this kind of coaching, and your

listeners probably know a little bit about your work as an executive coach. I do a lot of similar coaching to you in terms of helping leaders develop as better leaders. This side of my work around productivity I usually talk about this as lower case c coaching versus what I call capital C coaching which is usually working on developing deeper competencies and not as much about these kind of very black and tackle behaviors like productivity, making lists, getting things out of your head, keeping a calendar, keeping your systems up to date.

This kind of coaching is...I saw it as a great first step for me to learn to become really good working with people one on one in a business situation. There's one memory that comes to mind in terms to your question about that first year. I remember I was being coached by Marian, and she was walking me through. This is all about productivity and kind of core nugget that were probably going to talk about as soon as realizing how much we accidentally keep in our psyche about all the commitments we have. All the intentions we have about things we want to or need to do. She was walking through, helping me collect all those things I had the attention on and decide and process and define all of them.

At a certain point, I was doing a bunch of work, and she was just observing me doing a bunch of processing for a few minutes. After about ten minutes I pause and I said, "You know Marian just for my own learning as a coach, what was going on inside of you while you were watching me do what I was doing?" I will never forget this. She just smiled at me and with a total sense of grounding she just said, "Just love," which has really stuck with me as a coach. Because even working with somebody on seemingly practical practices that may not be going deep under the surface or working with the emotional landscape, it taught me the lesson of always, always, really in a way, love your clients. Start with relationship, love and respect. The techniques, the practices, the insights that arise if they come from that ground, it is almost like the method and the practices—the what to do in the world—will take care of itself. It comes naturally.

Amiel: Yeah. I love that, and I had not heard that story before. My memory, just to share—I do want to lead into your describing the work. My memory of our conversation at that time was when you were considering working for the David Allen Company. You told me he wrote a book called *Getting Things Done* that I might have heard of, but I really did not understand and definitely did not appreciate. I do not remember what I said to you—hopefully, it was encouraging, but I will say that since then not only do I appreciate the *Getting Things Done* and productivity work, but it is incredible. I am almost a little embarrassed to share that I poo pooped it originally, but that was the case. It was because it seemed, "Ah, getting things done, it is mundane; it is just about productivity, big effing deal." But it is much more than that. Let me give you a lead in to talk more about what it offers.

Michael: Sure. Before going into this, I always want to give full respect to David, who really was the one who did such a magnificent job articulating these principles that are kind of universal principles, but he articulated them in a workable, clearer...he created the simplicity out of the complexity of what does it mean for human beings to be productive. Just to give a

full caveat, I no longer work for David and the David Allen company. I often send folks to him in terms of training and some coaching. In my own individual coaching practice now, which I call *Truly Productive Leadership*, a good portion of the work I do with my clients includes helping them with these kinds of productivity practices, very much influenced by what I learned from David.

The other part of the work I do is more about that capital C coaching, working with leaders, uncovering what they may not be totally conscious of that is getting in their way and then practicing new behaviors in their leadership.

But let's get to the productivity practices. The basic nugget or driving principle behind this approach to being productive is recognizing one of the biggest barriers to relaxed productivity, or to getting the right stuff done in the world without getting so stressed. That barrier, which I alluded to before, is that it is not so obvious actually when folks hear this first. It is not quite so obvious, but the barrier is human beings who have more to do than time to do it in have this sneaky little habit where we often unconsciously end up keeping reminders and tidbits in our psyche, in our brain, about all the things we've got attention on. All the commitments we have to ourselves and other people. I call that the agreements we have with ourselves.

When you and I talk, I love the way that the productivity approach that I teach, in a way, it goes hand in hand with all of the great work that you've extended around language and agreements and conversations for action and possibility and relationship. The principle here is how I manage the agreements that I have with myself in a way that they are not spinning in my psyche and kind of unconsciously kind of yanking on my consciousness and stressing me out. Instead, make my agreements with myself clear with language and park them outside of myself in a trusted external system, a.k.a. a pretty simple set of lists and a calendar like everybody already has, or most people.

So that is the nugget that the whole approach is built around: recognizing how much stuff is swimming in our psyche. When I teach this either one on one or sometimes in a group setting, one of the first "aha" moments for the clients or the participants is when we talk about the first steps of the approach which David Allen calls "collecting." Which just means not leaving that thing you've got attention on in your head. Learning just to write it down. Collect it outside of yourself somewhere, even if it is just one or two words on a napkin. Collecting that stuff and getting it into your own inbox, so to speak, so that you can then make sense of it in a new way. The "aha" moment, usually I give folks plenty of time, maybe five or ten minutes or more, and help them with a trigger list. Lots of kinds of generalized triggers like the projects you mean to start, things you need to get back the focus on, things you've been looking into, things you are waiting for from key people to move things forward in a certain project. Anything from deeply spiritual things to a very, very practical things and, man, it is like the log jam just gets freed.

Amiel: Oh yeah.

Michael: They are just writing down thing after thing. It is almost like, I love comparing it to microwave popcorn. After the first minute or two it's like, one or two things here and there, like pop, pop, pop and then it is just like pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. Then they have a whole sheet of paper that is just filled with all these things that with a little bit of help were loosened from their psyche. So the approach is about, OK, once I recognize that, how do I sustain the ability to not keep that stuff in my psyche, to remain really clear about my relationship to all those commitments and those projects and actions and keep it up. Usually, what people report after they get up and running with this kind of approach is that they feel, the first thing I usually hear is, "I feel so much more relaxed!"

Amiel: Yeah.

Michael: Lots of folks report a change in the way that they sense their bodies.

Amiel: Just from collecting?

Michael: No, this is after they've actually gone through the whole process and not just collected it. But also then basically emptied the inbox of all that stuff that's collected by clearly deciding and defining what those things mean to them. It is closing the loops, so to speak, and then parking those in a trusted system. After that, I have clients coming back and sharing how they are sleeping much better or how their neck pain is gone. They're able to be much more present in the moment and sometimes much more creative because there is just not as many stuff swirling and creating tension.

Amiel: Right. This is true not only for physical objects, but also electronic stuff, too, right?

Michael: What do you mean by that?

Amiel: In other words, it is not just that people are collecting physical things around that they have to do something about. But we are talking about voicemails, emails, and text messages. It is everything coming in.

Michael: Yeah, anything, whether it is digital or physical that has your attention is something that you want to or need to do something about or change in some way. At first glance or, maybe, with your listeners, on first hearing, might sound like, "Oh my God, that's sounds so anal. That sound just like overly detailed about life and work."

Amiel: Right. Let's chill. Let's enjoy life. What's the point of this? It's a lot of work.

Michael: Exactly. Why not I just focus on doing whatever I want to get done and not make all these lists and define all this stuff?

Amiel: Right. There's this sort of stereotype I remember from years ago about that person who spends twice as much time putting their list together as they actually spend doing it. That

stereotype, we actually have people in mind like that. Whether they like that or not is debatable. But we do not want to be that person.

Michael: Right. That does still happen even with an approach like this. Everybody, if I think about all of the clients I've helped get up and running with this kind of approach, the thing that really fascinates me and that I think I am adding to this work is that sure, there's this productivity. There are these practices about getting things out of your head and defining them clearly and tending to those lists, and a calendar and making good choices. But everybody comes to the table with their own personality structure, their own habits and ingrained ways of doing and looking at the world and tasks and work. Those patterns, like the one you are pointing to about, in the language me and David Allen use, like overly focusing on the processing and organizing rather than the reviewing and doing.

Amiel: Yeah.

Michael: They will often still be happening after we get fully up and running. But the nice thing is that then there are very specific practices that I can focus on with the client. For instance, for those folks sometimes the simple practice of having a couple reminders on the calendar or setting aside some general doing time on the calendar. And the practices is, okay, for the next two weeks I want you to put those times in your calendar, and the first part of practice is just look at your lists.

Amiel: Yeah.

Michael: Just look at them. With some time set aside, which is basically just reviewing your commitments. Just looking, all the sudden it is a little bit like smack in the forehead and kind of obvious like, "Oh, I actually have to do some of this." Then it can start to balance that. I am really fascinated by, and I've done a bit of research around in, the intersection of how our personalities, the patterns that we operate in the world in terms of, not our core deeper selves, but the personalities that we have, how those, each of us have our own patterns and difficulties around productivity.

If we understand ourselves a little bit more deeply. If we understand and can see some of the mechanics of our automatic patterns happening can also go a long way toward not just being a great list maker and not just ticking off our boxes sooner, but having the things that we are actually focusing on doing be much more meaningful, more connected with something deeper in us or something much more for a greater purpose beyond ourselves. That is why I call my business Truly Productive Leadership, which is really meant to be a bit of a conversation starter about, "What do you mean by truly?" It is not just about efficiency and getting as much done as you possibly can. But it's about are you getting the right thing done for you and not losing presence along the way?

Amiel: Yeah. Let's just talk about what I call the basic case for evoking truly productive leadership. You gave some examples of people's neck pain getting cured. They are feeling more relaxed. I think it is really important to, at least as I've learned about this kind of work and as you taught me a lot, to really appreciate how much pain and stress, even suffering, takes place when we do not have a way of collecting all these agreements with ourselves, when we do not have a trusted system.

One of the reasons why that are so useful is you are asking people to put some attention and even some time on building and using a trusted system. What we generally don't do is name, much less quantify, the waste and suffering from not having that kind of a trusted system. You probably see a lot of that in your first meeting, when you meet with your clients. You see what they are stuck in the middle of. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Michael: Yeah, that's an interesting way of looking at it. The first thing that comes to mind regarding that is my own experience of going through the process of learning these principles and starting to work in this way. It is actually quite difficult for me to remember how I got stuff done before I shifted in this way. [Laughs]

Amiel: [Laughs] Did you get stuff done?

Michael: The reason that I ended up getting the coaching in the first place is that I had a fairly good review, when you were at this large company. But the worst part of it was a fairly low mark on this rating that said “planning and organizing.”

Amiel: Yeah.

Michael: I think what was true for me is very likely true for my clients. When you're in that place, I mean it can be a variety of situations, but when you're in a place of kind of reacting to the latest and loudest things and being a bit caught in the immediate rather than having a bit of perspective about the collection of your agreements and having more of a choice of how to focus—when you are in that, some people would call it kind of being in the state of stuck in immediate concerns, when you are in that place, it is kind of what you are swimming in. Like the fish can't distinguish what water is? It is just is all, everything that's around. So sometimes walking clients through the initial process can be a bit jarring and can help them start to see the water they're in. For instance, with the client who may be overwhelmed. Maybe they've been pretty successful, but have all of a sudden been promoted to a position where they have to manage twice as many direct reports. The level of complexity and the amount of projects and initiatives has increased a lot. It can be very overwhelming. Sometimes just an initial process of just doing the big brain dump and collecting everything that has their attention can be quite stressful. But it is a process of becoming conscious of the water. Becoming conscious of, “Oh, my gosh, I had no idea how much stuff I was trying to manage!”

Amiel: Yes.

Michael: So sometimes the realization or the pain becomes more conscious as we go through the process.

Amiel: Yeah

Michael: I mean, of course, there often is a sense of difficulty or pain and suffering. Before that, when the client realizes, “I need help with this. I am dropping balls. I am feeling stressed. I am getting a lot of flak from my spouse, because I am not there when I am there at home. Because I am spinning on everything else in my head about everything else.” Often folks are experiencing a lot of the side effects, but man, once you go through the process, they can see everything objectively that they have been swimming in. It is really important part of the initial part of the process of coming to grips with.” Oh, wait, hold on a second. This is not even possible. I've got to change something. I've got to re-negotiate here with myself or others.

Amiel: Michael Dolan, thank you.