

# Business901

Podcast Transcription

Implementing Lean Marketing Systems



## Handling Impossible Projects

Guest was Michael Dobson

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## Transcription of Podcast

*Joe Dager: Welcome everyone; this is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast. With me, today is Michael Dobson. He is an internationally known project consultant, author and lecturer. He's the author of twenty books on various aspects of project management with his latest book being "Project Impossible". This is a great history lesson as well a learning tool, that I could see being used for schools and businesses. Michael, I first wanted to interview you about the book "Creative Project Management" which we may do at another point in time, but I am glad you sent me this book as I have had a great time with it. I hope you had as much fun writing it as I have had reading it.*

**Michael Dobson:** It was a lot of fun. It does combine two of my interests and passions, Project Management and History. It was an opportunity to do some fun research and tell some interesting stories.

**Joe:** *I have to admit that I did not read it cover to cover or even every chapter so far. I pick times when I just wanted to read something interesting. I hope that's a compliment.*

**Michael:** I hope so too. I think it is. It was designed to be kind of episodic in there. The chapters are largely self-contained. So, you can pick up one, read it, digest it and then come back some other time. I tend to think a business book or myself, as an author as I write books people don't want to read. Nobody says: "I'm going to take that great new project management book to the beach this

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summer and, you know, curl up with a good business tome" and a lot of time the best thing to do is to make it bite size, make it into something you can read episodically. So, I'm perfectly fine with that and I think, frankly, that's how I read a lot of books myself.

**Joe:** *I think it is a great beach book or a pool book. In 10 to 15 minutes, you get a great story and then you go just take a dip in the pool and think about it a little bit.*

*You have a unique way of delivering the message. You start by giving out an overview of what makes up an Impossible Project. Then, the methodology of an impossible project and then you mix in about 10 stories of impossible projects. You end it up by giving a "lesson learned" summary from all of them. Would you say that overview is correct?*

**Michael:** As an overview in project management or at least in this context, we always say "Nothing is impossible". What that means in practice is that you have unlimited time, unlimited money and really flexible performance standard, you effectively can do anything. That doesn't describe the reality of any project manager or frankly business manager that I've ever met. We operate under constraints, and the project is operationally impossible for the purposes of this book or this discussion. A project's operationally impossible if they can't be done within the envelope of constraints that are set up around it. So, what can you do? You can figure out a creative way to accomplish it within the

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constraints. You can change the constraints, or you can do something altogether different and attack the problem from another direction.

A project is never an end in itself, it's a means to an end, and it is the end that matters. If you can get to the end in another direction that is easier, faster or in this case possible. Well, so much the better. You still win.

**Joe:** *How did you make the cut? How did a project become one of the impossible projects?*

**Michael:** Well, frankly, there were more stories that I could tell than I did. Some of the stories, I picked because they were already famous that I knew something about. I am a novelist as well, and George Patton appeared in three of my books. I was well familiar with his story and the Battle of the Bulge, the impossible project of moving three divisions in 48 hours in that battle. The Charles Lindbergh's story, my first professional job out of college was being part of the team that helped build the National Air and Space Museum in the Smithsonian. I had studied Lindbergh rather exhaustively. In fact, one of my souvenirs from those days, we all got one, is I have a square inch of the fabric from the Spirit of Saint Louis. I started with some of those and then picked other passions and interesting projects that marched through history so that I had a nice little lead up from BC to more or less contemporary.

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**Joe:** *You mentioned that fabric from Lindbergh, but you have something special. I mean, you are one of the few people if anyone that actually has a real life space suit don't you?*

**Michael:** I do. I have an Apollo space suit from the Apollo 7 mission. It didn't go into space. Every astronaut was given five or six suits. The ones that they actually travel with, they are all in museums, and they are all carefully accessions. But there was a big warehouse full of used space suits that had been worn during training and they were all donated to the Smithsonian on the day I happened to be at the warehouse, and we didn't need 250 space suits. So, we picked, or we cherry picked a selection that would form the basis for somebody's future doctoral dissertation on the evolution of space suit design. They are located in a meat locker to be preserved. The rest, we slashed with razor blades and threw in the dumpster. As soon as they were in the dumpster, I jumped in and fished one out. That's hanging in my office and as far as I know, it's the only Apollo space suit in private hands. You can buy Soviet space suits on eBay, but the Apollo ones are a bit rare.

**Joe:** *I have to ask you just a stupid question. Have you ever tried it on?*

**Michael:** I can't. I'm too tall. There was a very strict height limit in the early days all the way through Apollo. I worked for Mike Collins, who is the Apollo 11 command match pilot. He was the director of the National Space Museum when I was there, and I have to say the very first time I met him at the Christmas party,

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the first year I joined in 73, and I was shocked. Here in my mind, he's 10 feet tall, but, you know, he was kind of built like a jockey. They are all really short guys. So, I don't fit in it, there are a lot of reasons I would have never qualified to be an astronaut, but the height alone would have put me out of consideration.

**Joe:** *The first chapter I read, and I was thinking about space, was the story of Easter Island. I remember when I first read about Easter Island was in the Chariots of the Gods. The people from outer space were the original culprits that built the statues.*

**Michael:** Right. That was Von Daniken's claim because there was no easily explainable way that the people on Easter Island could have actually done it. It took some time before the solution was actually uncovered and then it turned out that they can't do it anymore. But they could do it before because they had a lot of big trees that allowed them to roll it.

**Joe:** *When I read the story about Easter Island, I remembered reading being updated after the Chariots of the Gods. I thought you did a nice blend of stories. You picked stories across a pretty large spectrum with politics, crisis management and others. I think that added a lot of context for a lot of different people.*

**Michael:** Well, to be honest, if it hasn't happened in your career yet, I'm saying this to

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the audience. I'm sure you've been there. If you haven't been given a project that is sort of absurdly impossible on the face of it, well, you haven't been around for a very long time. Impossible projects in any field in any discipline, well, this is just one of those little situations in life that sooner or later we are all confronted with for better or worse. Win, lose or draw, we all have to face it.

**Joe:** *You mentioned the Tylenol Story as a marketing one. That was the second one I read right away. It really did set the standard for how you handle corporate crisis management for the last thirty years.*

**Michael:** Well, I love that quote from Jerry Della Femina "If anybody thinks they could salvage the Tylenol brand, I want to hire him because then I want him to turn our water cooler into a wine cooler".

**Joe:** *I had forgotten that there was never a conviction or even someone brought to trial in that case.*

**Michael:** Well not for the murder. One guy was convicted of trying to extort some money by making threats regarding it. But there is no evidence that that's the guy who actually did the original poisoning.

**Joe:** *When we think of a crisis like that, how much project planning goes into a crisis, such as Tylenol? Were they just winging it in that instance?*

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**Michael:** Well, the part of the background of the Tylenol situation was that a lot of the executives of Johnson and Johnson had just gone through training or some workshop about corporate ethics. Their vision and mission statements and all these good management practices and they really only had one question to ask themselves, "Did we mean all this stuff that we were saying?" Once they said "Yes, we did mean it," then they had a basis to go on.

You'll see this as a theme in a couple of stories. In Apollo 13, you know the famous CO2 exchanger that we all remember from the Apollo 13 movie, the fact is, that there had been tremendous amount of training in crisis response, there was an emergency kit. They couldn't very well have done it without duct tape. Somebody had to think about putting together an emergency kit that included things like duct tape that was available generically. With Patton in the Battle of the Bulge, he didn't do it in 48 hours. He anticipated it and had his planners hard at work. With Caesar at the Battle of Alesia, it was the long term training of the Roman soldier that allowed him to take on the absurd task of building this amazing set of fortifications in a very short period of time with very little in the way of supplies.

If you don't start early, if you don't have the foundation, if you don't have the vision, if you don't have the training, if you don't have the emergency kit, well, your ability to handle a crisis when it shows up is extremely hampered. Normally, crisis management by definition is reactive rather than proactive, but a lot of the training, a lot of the prep work, a lot of the mind-set comes well in

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advance and in most cases by the time the project officially starts, it's too late. If you haven't started early, if you haven't built a foundation early, well, there's not much you're going to be able to do to recover.

**Joe:** *I think in the Apollo 13, I think of in the movie where the person said something to the effect, "gentlemen" . . . .*

**Michael:** Failure is not an option.

**Joe:** *Failure is not an option. Yes, exactly.*

**Michael:** Gene Kranz, who never said it. He never said it. What he did do, he was the guy who developed the NASA response following the Apollo 1 capsule fire that killed Grissom, White and Chaffee. There is a long story about the origins of that. Some of it is in the book and it was after that he developed and announced what he referred to as the Kranz dictum that was a preparation and mind-set tool for NASA. He insisted and focused on it from the immediate aftermath of Apollo 1. So, by the time Apollo 13 came around, he had achieved what he did call, perfection in the art of crisis management. Simply no way to make space travel or, any kind of, going up explosive powered rocket, there's no way to make that inherently safe, if you're not ready with crisis management. You have no business going.

**Joe:** *In your book, you say that failure is an option.*

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**Michael:** That was the most likely option of all. When you look at the number of problems that had to be solved to get the Apollo 13 down to earth, I ran some numbers on this. If there was a 90% chance of solving each individual problem when you multiply that times the number of problems it worked out to something like 37%. If there was a only a 75% chance of succeeding at every single one, the overall chance went below 25%. This was a tough miraculous achievement made possible only by the Kranz Dictum and all of the prep work that went into it. I heard Mike Collins say that the thing that surprised him is that with everything they had to face, they did not have any dead colleagues in orbit.

**Joe:** *Was there a project that was omitted because it was too impossible?*

**Michael:** I could have chosen a wide range of failed projects. Some projects had failed, not that they are impossible, because they are badly handled. The goal in the book was to develop as you pointed out in the first and last chapters or the second to the last chapter involved the development of and the teaching of a methodology, a mental attitude and a process to attack potentially impossible projects to see if an answer exists. I'm not saying that every single project in the world can be accomplished no matter what under any circumstances. There does come a point in which impossible is impossible. My goal in teaching this and in writing this is to point out that where our minds say it's impossible, we tend to jump into that conclusion prematurely. We can't see an immediate

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answer. If we can't see an answer that fits within our existing paradigms or our existing methodology, there is this mental attitude of wanting to give up. It's like being confronted with all of those puzzles where they are all seemingly impossible, that's structurally impossible because normally we approach it with blinders. We can't do it within the straight forward envelope that we would normally approach something like this and the job here is to change the game.

**Joe:** *When I think of the younger generation, I think that's one of the things they've been taught so well in gamification that is to try things and reiterate. I always talk about Luigi hitting the wall till he finds an opening.*

**Michael:** I think I noted in here. I was in the game and toy business myself for a number of years. I was head of product development for Wisconsin company called TSR famous back in the days for Dungeons and Dragons. Dungeons and Dragons is a role playing game. You are given a scenario that your players play through and one of the things that kept happening is that our designers would come up with challenges that "Oh, no one's ever going to be able to get through this" and sometimes we'd weaken it. We found out that if we didn't make something as impossible as we could imagine, it wouldn't even slow players down. Whenever we came up with an absolute "No win, No way out" absolute challenge, we normally figured we'd actually gotten the difficulty level in the right place because the players always manage to solve it no matter what we threw at them. They would always find a way around it.

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**Joe:** *I'm always amazed to watch how that learned by doing type of approach seems to be built in the culture of gamification. It is one of the reasons gaming is so interesting to me because I was never taught that way. What did you learn from writing the book?*

**Michael:** There's nothing like writing a book to let you know how little you know about any given subject. I have been working on this. I had been delivering seminar or workshop on various PMI Chapters on managing a possible project. You'll find a section in *Creative Project Management* on the impossible project. In all of that sort of boiling around, I thought, you know what, there's a whole book to write. By the time I wrote the book, I had already done a fair amount of work on the principles. I had already been teaching it. I'd written other things about it and this was my opportunity to tackle the whole thing. When I was wrestling with each individual project in the book, each individual story, I had to figure out, I had to put myself in the mind of the project manager, whether it is Julius Caesar or Charles Lindbergh or George Patton or the Tylenol executives and say alright how do you systematically break this problem down so that you can find a direction. I ended up discovering in each chapter that there was a different avenue that they took. Lindbergh, for example, flying the Atlantic wasn't the impossible project. Beating better funded, better trained, better known competition with better equipment who had, in some cases, 6-9 months head start, that was the impossible project. In Lindbergh's case, because he had more to gain, he was willing to accept a risk profile that the other participants in the prize competition were unwilling to take; it made no sense to

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them. His gain was different because he had to attack it from a different perspective and that enabled him to win against really overwhelming odds. Nobody in the world would have credited Lindbergh as the guy who's going to win this.

**Joe:** *You've been around the block a little bit on project management for a few years. I want to ask you a few questions about current project management. One of them that just jumps out; are we becoming too reliant on software?*

**Michael:** There is no such thing as project management software. There are project scheduling software and a lot of different varieties but the scheduling; the mechanics of project management are the easy part. In fact, the reason why I learned them in the first place is that was usually the task given to the junior person, in the pre-software days with sitting down with the straight edge drawing up charts and taking index cards and creating a network diagram. It was not the job that the executives did. It was not the jobs that leaders did. I was something you took and handed-off to somebody else. This is a continued argument in project management. That the project manager ought to be the project leader and I disagreed completely. Certainly, somebody can do both. If you think of in a movie, the director versus the producer or in a theatrical production, the director versus the stage manager, the project management function is a COO's responsibility. It's mechanics. It's logistics. It's the organization and then the director, the executive, the leader, the policy function. Well, you can hand off that other stuff. But you have to keep that for

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yourself and there are no automatic reasons why it's ideal for one person to do both jobs. Frankly, they frequently required different mind-set. It's the PMBOKification of project management, the idea, the Project Management Institutes, project management body of knowledge. It's not that it's bad. It's not that it's wrong, but you can learn every single word of it by heart and it still doesn't make you much of a project manager. Although, it makes you a heck of a scheduler and that's not a trivial accomplishment, but it's not the same thing as project leadership, project creativity, problems solving and all of the things that you can do or not do regardless whether you know how to draw a Gantt chart or fiddle around Microsoft Project.

**Joe:** *Well, I see a lot of organizations now really struggling with projects. It's amazing because you'll see, I just use myself as an example when I work with an organization, they'll have two or three different software package within an organization that do not even talk to each other. I'd probably work on over twenty software packages in the last year working with different customers and so forth. Is there a way around all this? Is there a simple way to look at this differently from what I am seeing, it's like we got too many software package or too reliant on software. It just seems that every day there is a new package solving everyone's problem, but they really don't.*

**Michael:** They don't. They don't. Project management software is again it's not that it isn't a useful tool. It's not that I don't use it myself. It's not that I don't recommend it. I had a guy that come up to me once at a seminar. True story, a

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guy comes up and he says: "The reason I'm here to your seminar is I need a recommendation on the right management software package. I've got Microsoft project. I'm completely dissatisfied with it and I'm thinking about moving to Primavera which is of course a really up scale, main frame oriented, you're going to build an aircraft carrier, Primavera would be what you use." I said: "Well, tell me about your project?" and he says: "Well, I run 4 to 5 projects at that time budget's around \$10,000. They have 20-30 tasks. I'm scheduling 6 to 7 people". And, of course, in my mind I'm thinking of graph paper. On the theory, that if you don't have a problem, you don't need to solve it with a computer. I finally said "Alright, tell me, what is it exactly about Microsoft project that is not meeting your needs?" He said "Well, it keeps trying to do something called a Gantt chart but it refuses to tell what a Gantt chart is". So, the impolitic as the speaker to say to a customer: "Listen buy a clue first and software second" but that wasn't in this case the right answer. It was trying to solve the wrong problem or at least he was trying to solve it in the wrong order. There are a variety of software packages and it is not one size fits all.

Some people have different kinds of issue. Some people also have greater familiarity and comfort and confidence with the stuff. There are people who can make their software do wonderful useful tricks. But in most cases it is not worth your while to become the world's leading authority in project management software because most projects don't require it. A friend of mine gave me a metaphor, if you talk about mix martial arts and you have these mix martial artists and they mastered 20 or 30 forms of fighting styles, but 80% of what

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they do is limited to 3 or 4 core techniques. They know the others. They can use the others if needed. But mostly, it is not necessary. It's not the best use of your time and resources. Proliferating the amount of paper work on your project with the number of computer files is not the same thing as advancing your project towards the actual goal.

**Joe:** *In all your experiences, is there a sorting type of individual that manages the project better? To me there always seem that if you get the right guy heading the project, it gets done.*

**Michael:** Yes, absolutely. But the right guy does vary project to project. There are projects in which say construction, nice classical project. The discipline, I am there's a lot to be discipline. I don't mean to trivialize it in any way, shape or form. It's understood as a discipline. If you want to master it, you can master it. The mind-set is highly organized, forceful and detail orientated. You get somebody running R&D projects in the game business, since I'm familiar with that, what you need is somebody who's out of the box thinker. The number of tasks and the complexity of tasks are normally not great. All of the brain's sweat, all of the effort is on that creative side and frankly Microsoft Project does relatively small amounts of good in the environment like that. It's a very different sort of situation. It is certainly the case that you want the confident right person. But project vary so much that the correct answer is different. Who do you need? I mean notice somebody like Steven Spielberg still has a team of staff producers. Kathleen Kennedy, people like that, who can run all the



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logistics to free him up to do the things that only he can do. If I'm a project management professional in here, yes I can lead the project in the areas in which I am confident but a lot of times the help I can give you is I can help somebody else set up the organizational component for you to get that off your back. It all varies; political skills, forcefulness, persuasive ability, negotiation. I tell people all the time that the best follow up for basic class and project management is a class in negotiation. I mean, project managers are basically all Blanche du bois; we rely on the kindness of strangers.

By the definition of a project, it's something outside the normal routine. So, it's mostly the case that a large part of your team are not people who report to you in some formal standard supervisory sense because the project is of limited duration, it will end and those resources would have to be released to somebody else. In most cases it's true, if you've got a job to do, it's almost always the case that you cannot possibly get it done without the willing and essentially voluntary cooperation of people over whom you have no direct official power or control and I know you've been there to, I'm sure.

**Joe:** *Oh, I've always been very convinced. It's not about having the best idea. It's about what can get implemented. Not the best idea always can be implemented.*

**Michael:** Absolutely. Politics is very simple. I have a test if you have office politics in the organization. It's very simply. You do a head count, number exceeds 3; you've

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got it because people do not check their humanity, self-interests of goals at the door when they punched in to go to work. It never has been the case, never will be the case. If you can't work with that, your effectiveness as project manager is going to be incredibly limited.

**Joe:** *I appreciate the time and I could probably go on another hour talking to you Michael. What do you have upcoming?*

**Michael:** Couple of things, I just sent back the contracts yesterday. I am writing, I think it's my 9th book for AMACOM, American Management Association. This is basically a basic project management self-study program that you go through and you do this, you work the exercise, you actually get CEU's for it. I've got a couple of others. I did a good book with them called "*Project Risk and Cost Analysis*". Risk is another one of my passion areas. I am also publishing more in the straight history line. I've been doing a series of books; what happened, who is born, who died and what the big events are for everyday of the year. That's about a 5-year project to get all of that done. But they're fun. They don't teach project management lessons as such or management lessons at all, but history is incredibly entertaining and involving. I stay, reasonably busy, I was working on a peace medal with a Samaritan, the indigenous Samaritans. They are actually 750 of them left did not go particularly well. That was my contribution to Middle East's peace. I'm always picking up something interesting to do because, I mean the world is filled with opportunities and the world is changing so fast and so completely. It's been said that if you've been out of college for

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20 years, 80% of what you learned has become either false or irrelevant today.

I find the decayed rate of knowledge and the opening of doors as the doors close and slam shut behind us, there are more opening every day. The mind-set of tackling impossible projects, the mind-set of thinking like a project manager, the mind-sets as you mentioned creative project management, the mind-set of thinking creatively about the structured environment of a project. All of these are, to my mind, fundamental life skills and the ones that we have to master as some level to have any hope of succeeding and prospering in our fast changing world.

**Joe:** *Where can someone find the book and how can someone contact you?*

**Michael:** Well, thank you. I've got a website at [sidewisethinker.com](http://sidewisethinker.com) also a blog at [blog spot](http://blogspot.com) of the same name on linked in, Facebook and everything else. Just about all of my books are available through Amazon and your other favorite E-retailers, available at many at eBook form also in print, available for speaking opportunities any time any place. Project Impossible is published by Multi-Media publications. Its part of the series called "Lessons from History" [mmpubs.org](http://mmpubs.org) and they've got some other fascinating stuff, a project management analysis of the Great Escape, several books on the Titanic, Winston Churchill's management of the British World War II effort and many others.

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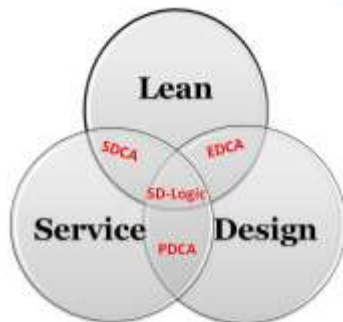
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**Joe:** *This podcast will be available on the Business901 [iTunes](#) store and the Business901 blog site. So, I would like to thank you again Michael and I look forward to talking to you some more.*

**Michael:** I look forward to it as well. Thank You and you and your listeners have a wonderful day and best success in your projects and challenges.



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