



MICHAEL COMBS

PAYING IT FORWARD

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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EPISODE 17



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MURRAY: Welcome to my podcast. I'm Murray Wright and this is Leadership Moments, real people stories about the people and the moments that have influenced and shaped their leadership.

My guest today is Michael Combs and I'm delighted to have Michael. He is CEO and founder of CareerTrackers and of a new organization CareerSeekers.

Michael, welcome.

MICHAEL: Thanks Murray. It's good to be here.

MURRAY: Michael, I think it would be really useful for our listeners if you could give a bit of a background about CareerTrackers, CareerSeekers, what they are and what's your role within them?

MICHAEL: So CareerTrackers is a non-profit organization in Australia that supports aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students as they make their way through university and into professional careers. It's an internship program where these students undertake paid internships at different organizations during their summer holidays with the aspiration of returning to that organization each year of their university degree and then graduating and going on to full-time employment. The program is very much a program and not a placement. It's not an approach where we think we can take someone, put them in an organization and hope for the best. It's about preparing the individual and the organization as they embark together in this sort of new path of employment. I started CareerTrackers going on eight years ago. I started the program as a national program here in Australia in our first year with 18 interns in our program and nine companies who were willing to give this model a crack. Today, the summer that's about to come, we will have 1,354 students working across 108 different organizations. Out of CareerTrackers and its' growth has spurred a new initiative that makes us think, "Well if we've had success in this model, can we make it relevant to other pockets of our community?" And that has developed CareerSeekers, which is again a non-profit organization that is working with asylum seekers and refugees and supporting them as they arrive in Australia and using employment as one of the key factors in their resettlement. So again these individuals who are tertiary qualified; they've had careers in their home countries; they've arrived in Australia; they don't have an Australian company on their CV; they don't have a local reference; they don't have a network. CareerSeekers is giving them 12 week paid internships that essentially take those three obstacles off the table for them. So at the end of 12 weeks, they certainly have an Australian company on their CV; they have a local reference; they have a network and ideally those internships either converting to



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ongoing roles with that organization or that network will activate itself and help these individuals resettle with a professional job.

MURRAY: That's fantastic. And you've had a marvelous trajectory with CareerTrackers. Are you starting to see the same sort of take up for CareerSeekers?

MICHAEL: Even faster. CareerSeekers is two years old and we're just about to place our 200th intern. We have just under 40 organizations that are employing those individuals. I think corporate Australia is starting to understand that diversity goes beyond a policy and a statement, it must be enacted and when it's enacted and when it's enacted well, it has tremendous benefits for the business, for the culture of the organization and that awakening is really, I think, spurring the growth of CareerSeekers.

MURRAY: I've known you for quite a few years now and had little bits to do with CareerTrackers and the one thing I love is your underpinning philosophy about ownership and accountability. And you've got a few stories and it would be great to share one about how you really don't want things given to you. You want to earn it. So would you tell us a bit more about that?

MICHAEL: Absolutely. I think... I mean we're sitting here in the boardroom of CareerTrackers and just on the wall behind us there is a check from the New South Wales government. When I set CareerTrackers up, it was very important to not build this organization on the back of government funding. It was important that we didn't subject ourselves to a government change, a policy change, a budget change where you build all of this good will and then these factors that you have no control over, they take away your ability to run your organization. When I set the organization up, we had no money; we had nine companies that were helping to keep us going. And what I mean by that is the organization is set up with the social enterprise model, so while we don't take government funding, we expect companies to pay a sponsorship fee for the interns that they employ, which is about them having some real investment in that person and in this program. It also lets us charter [?] on futures. So in the early days we were really principled about no government funding and then the reality of cash flow comes into place and we said, "We need to apply for a government grant. And we did. And we got that government grant. When the paperwork came, we looked at this check and cashing it didn't feel right and we never cashed it. It's in that frame hanging on the wall as a reminder that we must stay true to those principles and those beliefs even when times are tough. What that meant by us not cashing the check is that we had to get really innovative around our business model. We had to get really innovative around our value proposition. We had to make sure that we actually developed something that people wanted to pay for and I think that those are



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one of the absolute defining moments in the history of this organization and certainly setting the foundation for CareerSeekers as well.

MURRAY: I think part of that not cashing the check was because the money was given to you and it was just you take it and go away. There was no accountability, no reporting requirement, nothing. It was just take it. We don't care what you do with it.

MICHAEL: It was very much a... It was given, not earned.

MURRAY: Yeah.

MICHAEL: And that's the bit that didn't sit right for us is that, we want to make sure that even the sense of pride that we have an organization that we are earning what we're doing. We are respecting the money that comes into this organization. I think we respect it really well because we have earned it and it hasn't just been given to us.

MURRAY: Yeah. Fantastic. So Michael, you're originally from the US and you've made your way to Australia and set up CareerTrackers. It would be really interesting to learn a bit about your journey that brought you here.

MICHAEL: People ask me all the time about why do I believe in these programs and these models. "What's your motivation?" "Why do you do this?" And... I was an intern and I did the same thing that the students in our programs do every summer. I did that and that opportunity changed, not just my future, but the future of my family. So I'm originally from the US; born and raised in Colorado Springs, Colorado. My dad is African American. My mother is Italian American and there is a program in the United States called INROADS, which does the same thing that we do only they've been doing it since 1970. So there is 37 years worth of evolution of this model and I did my internship through INROADS. My brother did his internship through INROADS and that process; it gave our family a very different future than had we not participated in that program. So I did an internship with Hewlett-Packard right out of high school every summer of my degree, graduated to a full-time, got accepted into a leadership development program within the organization, eventually got transferred to our office in Melbourne and realized that we did not have indigenous executives and managers within the business. I said to my boss at the time, "We should try the INROADS model. We should go to universities, meet with students, bring them into the organization, build them up each summer. We as a business are going to create a great pipeline of talent and we're going to have a good impact on these individuals, not just in their bank accounts, but at university as well. And so we did that. We brought in a student



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and it was successful. We brought in more students the following year and then I got transferred to our office in London. I worked there for a year. I transferred back to our office here in Sydney. When I got back, the first thing I did was look, "Where are the interns?" And they were gone. No one in the organization carried forward the model or the initiative. So I thought to myself, there's an obligation that I failed to repay that debt of the opportunity that INROADS gave to me. So I will leave and start CareerTrackers as a national program and here we are eight years later.

MURRAY: And the rest is history.

MICHAEL: Yeah that's right.

MURRAY: That's fantastic. So let's get to that first question. As you look back on your career life, who would you say has influenced you the most?

MICHAEL: It's an interesting question because... You know, oftentimes we take inspiration from one area and trends like that to another area. For me, one of the greatest influences and inspirations in my life has been my grandmother and while she has no real formal education, she is deep-rooted in values and principles and those values and principles being instilled and passed on, they are the things that... You know, if you talk about leadership and as a leader my values and those fundamentals actually come from my grandmother. They weren't imparted in me in a seminar or workshop or a university course, but through my whole life. When I talk about having this sense of obligation to repay the opportunity, it comes from the things that I've learned from my grandmother in that, if somebody helps you, if somebody does something great for you, you need to repay that favor. That is how I approach this business. That's how I approach this organization. That is why... You know, oftentimes as leaders of non-profit organizations there is criticism about not wanting to partner, wanting to do it all, wanting to control your own patch. For me partnership is essential; partnering with as many people as we can, sharing the things that we've learned all come back from my grandmother in the things that she instilled in me over my whole life.

MURRAY: I think there are a couple of pieces in that. There's obviously been a clear understanding what your values and beliefs are and how important that is as a guide. But I love the piece about partnership because we do tend to think as leaders, we got to do it all ourselves when actually if we really open our eyes and open ourselves, there's a lot of people we can work with and help each other.



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MICHAEL: Absolutely.

MURRAY: So it's a great outlook. Now you're a very modest person and I'm interested to see in your bio that you in fact were awarded the US Congressional Medal of Service for community outreach and development. How did that come about?

MICHAEL: Well it's a program in the US that recognizes young people for personal development for community outreach. It was all part of... You know, when I talk about I was an intern, it was again the opportunities that INROADS in my internship afforded me was to have access to a number of opportunities and that underpinned by those values of wanting to give back enabled me to... You know, it didn't matter where I was, I was always starting or engaging in some other initiative. When I was at university it was about setting up clubs that would go into, around our campus, a very low socio-economic community and we were taking our INROADS colleagues and we were going into those high schools and we were running different workshops and different school programs. It was again... You know, and I think also this idea of giving back and why I've sort of held on to this vision of INROADS, if you will, is... that was the notion that I was brought up with and it's also very much the notion that INROADS imparts in you as well and it's what we impart in our students in our programs. You just see that continual, I guess, evolution and development of people getting an opportunity and using that as leverage or really a ladder for someone else to climb on their back and take it to the next level. Those are the things that have just always driven me.

MURRAY: I think that's really clear in what you're trying to do, as you say, with CareerTrackers. It's about getting the kids to go back into their community and be the leaders there and impart what they get.

MICHAEL: Yes.

MURRAY: Yeah. It's fantastic. You talked about... Yes, you were brought back to Sydney. You saw that your interns had gone and you felt this debt and we were chatting before the interview. I've known you for all these years and I just worked out from reading your bio that you were actually American. I always thought you were indigenous to Australia. You're so committed and integrated, if you like. What... I am a bit naïve with these things at times, but what is it that, for you, gives you that connection to Australia beyond the giving back? Because there's something very special there. I've seen the students around you and how they respond to you. There's a real sense of connection. What is that?

MICHAEL: I think... because I had grown up like these students and I think that...



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When you talk about disadvantaged, it knows no borders and I can relate to these students. I know how they grew up. I know what's happening in their households. I know what's happening in their communities. So there is, for me... I can relate to where they come from and I can also see an internship as a rocketship to a very different future. I think that's the connection that I can make whether it's with our 19/20 year olds, aboriginal students or with 40 year old Syrian refugees. It's that understanding of disadvantaged and how that makes you feel and how what I think is a very simple tool and vehicle can transcend you into a different world.

MURRAY: Okay. Second question: what's been your aha moment when you suddenly understood what leadership is all about?

MICHAEL: That's an interesting question because it stirs a lot of emotion. I think that, for me, the aha moment was... it was actually... I was sitting down with my staff, which were the two other people in the early days and we had started to get a bit of criticism of our work and our program and those were really hard for all of us and particularly hard for me as a leader. It makes you question yourself as an African-American setting up an indigenous program, "How is this going to work?" It really... It took me a while to understand that the critics are always going to be there. You can either listen to them and try to modify who and what you're doing to appease them or you stay very dedicated on your path to achieve your vision. That was the thing that, for me, being able to give that release of, I know that there's going to be critics as a leader. I know that you're going to be judged. People are looking at your... everything all the time and it comes with the role. You can either accept it and move on and find grounding in your purpose and in your beliefs or it will consume you. That I had to learn very quickly, very early on and that I think has enabled us to one, stay focused on this journey and number two, it's also made us realize... You know, we don't do media for example. We don't have a marketing promotions person because I know that the moment that these initiatives start to become about, let's just say me as the founder of this organization, then we get so distracted by the opinions of other people that we can't just execute on what we're doing. So our philosophy is fly under the radar, just get the job done. If people want to talk about it, brilliant, we're happy to engage in that, but we never ever ever are going to seek out publicity. We're not going to seek out recognition. We take great satisfaction in seeing our students on their first day of work. We take great satisfaction in seeing our students graduate. Now we're taking great satisfaction in seeing... One of our students has just won a United Nations Women Scholarship. That's where we take our satisfaction, not in seeing ourselves all over the media.



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MURRAY: So that's a really powerful message about staying true to purpose and not being distracted. When I hear it also... Criticism can be useful because you learn from it. So how do you strike the balance?

MICHAEL: Yeah. I think that... You know, it's a difference between being distracted and consumed by the criticism to finding out where is the genuine learning in the critics? Sometimes it's noise. Sometimes it's very true and valid and we must listen, process, internalize, decide, is that something that is even in our realm of control and if it is, do we believe it and do we change and do we modify? We've made lots of small turns along the way because we've gotten feedback, I think, different than criticism and it's the feedback that we're always interested in. It's very core to the values of these organizations and what I believe as a leader is that we must make mistakes and we will make a lot of them and we have made a lot of them. We must not make the same mistake twice and we must always learn from those mistakes.

MURRAY: So talking of mistakes... That's a nice segway to the third and final question. Failure, and as you say we all make mistakes, we all have failure. What would you say has been one of your biggest failures, but the one that actually still informs your leadership today?

MICHAEL: I think one of the biggest failures, particularly early on, was having too much input into the vision. What I mean by that is not being closed off to ideas, but as the leader I see where we're going and I know how to take us there. A lot of people will say, "CareerTrackers should be working with long term unemployed." "It should be working with this." "The model should be working with this group of people." And while we get pulled, particularly in the early days, we're getting pulled in so many directions and we were going that... In many ways we lost sight of purpose and vision. We had to pull that back. Today I'm so conscious of the fact that we do one thing and one thing only and that is, take individuals, put them into paid internships and support them in the process which... How that's informed us is that... You know, people say, "Oh you should work minute high schools." "Oh you should work with blue collar workers." "No. This is what we do, but we're happy to partner. We're happy to share. We're happy to give away, even, the model." And we've done that. There was an instance about three years, probably going on four years ago now, where I got a phone call from a group in New Zealand and they said, "Hey Michael, we're really interested in the success of CareerTrackers. Can you expand to New Zealand?" I said, "No. This is what we do." They called back a couple of months later and they said, "Oh, we really like the model. We've got some people who are interested to commit to money. Would you do a social franchise? Can we pay you for the model to bring it over?" I said, "No. But if you come over here, I will give it to you for free. We'll teach you everything." They did. They



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came. They brought their elders. We sat in this very room for a week and we just gave them everything and we have this amazing dialogue. Last summer they had their first summer. They had 29 interns and this summer coming they will double that number. That for me, you know, learning very early on not to get pulled and stretched or to get overly confident in our ability to solve all of the world's problems, we had to stay true to this, but we had to develop a philosophy of partnership and a philosophy of generosity. I think that that's what makes this organization what it is today.

MURRAY: So some great things coming through there. Clarity of purpose and vision. Staying true to your values. Keeping that focus and seek out partnerships. Right?

MICHAEL: Definitely.

MURRAY: Great talk. Thank you. So for you, for the organization... because you won't sit still and be happy. What's next?

MICHAEL: Well we... I mean there are four CareerTrackers. There's a lot of... we've got to get now our systems right. We've got to get... we are scaling, we are growing so fast that we need to really focus on, how do we make sure we have consistency in our programs? So that is a real big challenge and it's not my natural skillset, so that is something that keeps me very energized because I'm learning quite a bit there. In CareerSeekers, we've developed this model in Australia with the very clear intent that if we can develop what this model looks like for employment as a key factor to resettlement, can we give that model to the world? Can we give that model to, particularly Europe, which has experienced a mass migration of people? Can we work this out and say to organizations in Germany and in Italy and in the UK, "This is a way that you can use employment as resettlement both for individuals and for the country," because at the moment I think globally, asylum seekers and refugees, they're painted with a not so positive brush and the more that we can get people resettled in employment, as economies, we can take advantage of the skills and ideas that they bring with them, then we can help rebrand the migration of people into something that has traditionally been really great and I think you look at Australia and you see the very positive influence of Italian immigrants and Greek immigrants and I don't know about you, Murray, but I eat some sort of Asian dish at least two or three nights a week and it makes us I think a more rich and a better society.

MURRAY: I think the other piece about that... People are people and they just want to feel a sense of belonging and that they're actually contributing. If we can give them that, whether it be... when people come in to work or arrive at a country it just... it changes so much.



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MICHAEL: Absolutely.

MURRAY: It gets that engagement.

So Michael, thank you very much. Great insights. Thank you for sharing and if someone wants to get in touch with you and contact you, we'll put, obviously, CareerTrackers, CareerSeekers information up on the show notes. How could people reach out and find you?

MICHAEL: All of my contact details are on our website. So if you go to CareerTrackers.org.au, go to Team, you'll see my face there. My mobile number is there. My email address is there. I think that again it's important that we're accessible for collaboration and for connections. It's all there.

MURRAY: Lovely. Thank you for your time and thank you for sharing.

MICHAEL: Pleasure. Thanks a lot.

MURRAY: Thank you.

Thanks to Michael. An inspiring example of the power of having a clear purpose and really staying true to your values.

That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening. Head to murraywright.com for the transcripts, key learnings and resources from today's and past episodes. Once you're there, why not subscribe to the Leadership Moments podcast. That way, you never have to miss one. Until the next time.

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