

Daniel Hall Presents



Episode 86

How to Write a Book, Even When Dyslexic

with Christopher Lochhead

Welcome to this episode of the Real Fast Results podcast! Christopher Lochhead is today's special guest. He's the co-author of HarperCollins' instant classic called [Play Bigger: How Pirates, Dreamers, and Innovators Create and Dominate Markets](#). He's also the co-host of the [Legends and Losers podcast](#). On top of all of that, Christopher is a former three-time, public company CMO and entrepreneur. As a matter of fact, *Fast Company Magazine* calls him, "The Human Exclamation Point".

The Marketing Journal also says that he is one of the best minds in marketing, and *The Economist* call him, "off-putting to some". At 18, he got thrown out of school, and with no other options, he started a company. He wanted to add value to society, and now he's been in business for over 30 years, even though he's mostly retired these days. He can quote most of *The Big Lebowski*, but he can't even remember his wife's telephone number. However, he is an excellent speaker and a surf and ski bum, as well as a proud advisor to the non-profit [1 Life Fully Lived](#).

Promise: A Dyslexic can Write a Bestselling Book

Today we're going to talk about how even a dyslexic can write a bestselling book.

Well, listen, if you have something to contribute to the world, as we all know, books are transformative. When I was a young man... I started early, at 18, with no money, no education, and no experience, of course. It was just me and my buddy, Jack. When you start like that, you only have a couple of ways of learning. **That's learning by doing, learning by seeking out mentors, and coaches, and friends that can help along the way, and then there's learning by reading.**

Reading was so hard for me, and still is, frankly. There were a handful of books that I read between the ages of 18 and 25, or 26, and had those authors not written those books, you and I wouldn't be having this conversation. A few years back, some friends and family started to tell me and my co-authors, "Hey, you guys should really write some of this stuff down." We got convinced that we had something to contribute, so we decided to do the book, and that's really how it all happened.

What motivated me was that if there were a chance that I could make even 1% of the difference that some of those authors made for me, then I should do that. So, we embarked on that project, and writing [Play Bigger](#) was one of the most extraordinary things of my life. I think that if you have something that you want to communicate, whether you are dyslexic or not, you know, business books still really matter.

If You are Dyslexic get a Good Coach

I'm happy to share. What I would tell you off the top is that, years ago, I got encouraged to write by a guy named Dan Farber, who was the editor of a tech news site of the time called CNET. It ended up being acquired by CBS, and he actually was, on the editorial side, the Head of CBSNews.com. So, he asked me to write for them, and I was like, "What?" I sort of explained my situation, and he said, "Look, I think you have some great things to say, and I'll team you up with a wonderful editor." He really pushed me to do it, and so, in a lot of ways I have him to thank for getting me started.

So, that got me started, and even though it was incredibly hard... **I mean, with dyslexia, it's hard enough to read, let alone write.** I'm reminded of a quote from Peter Drucker, who was asked towards the end of his career why he kept writing and speaking, and he said, "It's the only way I can know what I'm thinking." When we are forced to write, and I'm sure it's the case for many others... If you are forced to do a presentation, you have to actually sit down and say, "Okay, what the F* do I really think about this," and it applies a set of rigor to your own experience and your own learnings that if you didn't have to, you wouldn't have. I think for anyone, writing is powerful in that regard.

So, the first thing I'd share, other than that is, if you are dyslexic, get a great coach. In my case, it was Dan in the beginning, and then when we went to write the book... So, I continued to write. I wrote for a couple of years, for CBS news. I've written for *Fortune*. I've written for *TechCrunch*. I've written for *Forbes* and many others. For me to write a 1,200 or an 800-word blog, it's probably a 4-6 hour process. It may not be in one shot, but over multiple laps, and then someone, of course, has to edit it, and in

multiple edit cycles, normally. **But, I go through it because I think it matters and it crystallizes my own thinking.**

When it came time to do the book, my situation was a little bit unique, I think, in that I had two business partners, and the three of us wanted to collaborate on the book together. We also knew, because we were running a boutique consultancy, as my partner, Dave, at the time said, “If this is left to us, this book will come out in 20Never.” So, we needed some help. For me, personally, the combination of being dyslexic and working full-time (this was before I retired), and really wanting to collaborate with my partners... We said, “We have to bring in a professional.” We did. He was a guy named Kevin Maney, who is the lead tech commentator at Newsweek and the author of multiple bestselling books.

We sat down with Kevin, and we shared with him our ideas for [Play Bigger](#), and we asked, “Do we even have something here?” When he said we did, we said, “Okay, let’s really start to unpack this.” Kevin came on as the fourth co-author, and that may sound like a crazy thing to do, but we actually developed a process, which I’m happy to share on any level of detail, for how four guys can write a book. I guess the big “ah-ha” is that if you’re going to write a book, surround yourself with legendary people.

In our case, it started with Kevin, and the fact that we got Kevin meant that we could get an extraordinary agent named Jim Levine. Most people consider him one of the top five agents in New York, in the book business. The combination of Kevin and Jim is ultimately what led to us partnering up with our publisher at HarperCollins, Hollis Heimbouch. She’s Gary V’s publisher. She is Jack Welch’s publisher. You know, Harper only publishes 12-14, or so, business books a year. So, they really have to make them count. They try to pick authors that they think will make a difference.

Somehow this cast of misfits convinced both Jim and Hollis that we actually had something that would deliver. I’ll tell you, the combination of us getting three legends in the book business, Kevin Maney, our co-author, Jim Levine, and Hollis at HarperCollins. Those are the things that made the biggest difference.

How Would I Make These Types of Deals?

Great question. We were lucky that both myself and my co-author, Al Ramadan, had known Kevin, although Al knew him way better than I did. I’ve met him briefly, but Al really had a strong connection with him. One of our good friends, Peggy Burke, who runs the premier branding agency in Silicon Valley, called 1185 Design, sort of smacked us in the head and said, “Listen boys, you need to write this book.” So, we started to take the idea seriously, and Al said, “You know, maybe we should talk to Kevin.”

Kevin had written [The Maverick and His Machine](#), which IBM considers to be the preeminent book on the history of IBM, and [The Two-Second Advantage](#), which was a

big hit and so forth. He writes for *Newsweek* today, and for years he wrote for *USA Today*. He's just an incredibly accomplished guy. So, the four of us met with him, and this is going to sound like a ridiculous way of saying it, but it was sort of how I might imagine how The Beatles were when they met Epstein. It was meeting the fourth guy in the band, so to speak. We had a very good connection, and he got very enrolled in the ideas of the book [Play Bigger](#), and what it meant to design a category, and the things that we wanted to share with the business world, with the marketing world, and so on.

When that happened we thought, "Okay, well, maybe we have a chance." He got excited, we got excited, and we began to talk about how we would do it. Then, as we worked on the economics... For example, when we began discussing how the book would be positioned, [Kevin] said, "Well, it would have you three guys' names on it, and it will be something like, 'as told to,' or 'with' Kevin Maney." We said, "No. No. *F that Kevin. This is going to be four guys writing a book. We want you to be an equal partner."

So, we paid him some upfront money because this is how he earns his living, and we had to respect that. Another thing that we did, and I think it was smart, was we wanted Kevin to have complete ownership, just like the three of us did. In addition to paying him the fee to write the book, all of the economics are split a quarter each. So, it's as much Kevin's book as it is Dave's, Al's, and mine.

You know, it's like anything. If you want it to be a true partnership, then part of making it a true partnership is in the economics. I can tell you, and I think that I can speak for the other guys, this is not my book... It gets called that, and I'm sure that when people talk to Al, it's called his book, and when people talk to Kevin, etc. But, it's our book, and something magical happened, right? So, if you really want to collaborate with somebody, make them a true partner. Give up the need to want to be the center of attention. There's that old quote, and I forget who said it, but it's, "It's amazing what can happen when no one cares who gets the credit."

So, you give up all that shit, and what you focus in on is, "How do we write a legendary book that is more than '1+1+1+1=4'," you know? That's what we strived to do from the beginning, and we put a process in place to do that. I can tell you, other than *Legends and Losers*, it was the greatest collaboration of my working life.

Can You Walk Us Through the Process?

As we were stumbling around and trying to find a process to make this work, [Dave] had this "ah-ha". He said, "Hey! Why don't we let the professional author write the book?!" I live in Santa Cruz, California, a couple of blocks from, what we like to call, the "Specific Ocean". So, we decided to make my place the, sort of, "Book Central". Kevin lives in New York, and Dave lives in San Francisco, and Al lives just north of San Francisco. We would get together on a very regular basis, normally for two

days, and we would do a jam session on the next two chapters, focusing on the chapter that was in front of us.

We would jam for a few hours, and if we hit a roadblock or our energy was getting low, we'd jump on our cruiser bikes and drive along the Pacific Ocean, or take a quick walk along the beach, or go grab some lunch. If the surf was good, we'd head out and catch some waves and come back. You know, my wife, Kerry, God bless her. She is an incredible cook, and so she would make us amazing dinners. We would have beautiful bottles of wine. And so, when we were together, unlike jamming your ass into a conference room and treating it like you were dealing with an accounting audit, or some other equally miserable thing, we made it fun. We made it creative. We made it playful. We made it silly, and we gave ourselves time.

While we were doing all of that stuff, we would tape things, and we would write stuff out, and we would have flip charts, Post-its, and all of the things that you might expect from, sort of, a great brainstorming session. Then, Kevin would go back home, and on the flight back to New York, he would begin to put all of it together. He would use that as a way to do a draft of the next chapter. Once that draft was ready, he would email it to the three of us, and on the next Monday, after we got that, we would get together and talk about each of our comments on what he had written.

Here's the other fun thing that we did. The three of us decided that not only were we not allowed to talk to each other, we weren't allowed to talk to Kevin about that chapter. So, when the four of us got on that debrief call, we each went through our own comments. Then, here's the other thing... We would let Kevin know, if we felt strongly about something, or how we felt about whatever comment we were getting, and we would negotiate, and debate, and argue, and all of that stuff during those calls. At the end of those calls, however, we'd say, "Hey Kevin, you decide what makes it in and what doesn't."

We would then re-debrief a few days after he got back to us with the next revision, and so I guess a couple of key points... We learned to jam together on the front end, on what you might call the ideation or the creative part. Somebody was in charge of distilling all of that and putting it into a draft. In this case, it was the professional. We did another version of that, although a more focused, rigorous run, based on that first draft. Then, again, one out of the four of us (in this case it was Kevin) decided what went into that draft. We would close that draft after that and just keep going.

We would get together on a 4-6 week cycle, at my place, and that would drive the subsequent follow-up cycles that I just described. Another thing that I would share with you is that both Hollis and Jim, our publisher and our agent, requested to see the book as it was taking shape, as opposed to getting a manuscript at the end. So, when we would get two chapters to a point where we felt like they were getting to a fairly good place, we would fire them over to those guys, and they would give us feedback as we went. I think that also helped.

We were building the book, and creating the book, and refining the prior chapters, sort of, at the same time, but in a fairly rigorous way. I can tell you, when we handed that manuscript in, around Thanksgiving, 2015, we were sad. It was a bummer that it was over. Most people, when they talk about writing a book, or writing a book with co-authors, they want to kill each other and all of that sort of stuff. We kind of wish it kept going. It was a real bummer for us that the manuscript was done and we were finished.

Does that Mean it's Time for Another Book?

Well, we'll see. The whole process, end to end, took two years, from making the decision, making the deal with Harper and all of that, to the point that the book came out. When we handed in the manuscript, our agent said, "Well, congratulations boys! You've done half the work!" That's because at least half the work, and maybe even more, comes after the manuscript is finished, as you probably already know. It's a huge commitment. In our case, by the time it's said and done, [Play Bigger](#), the book, is probably a five-year time commitment.

We spent over half a million dollars because we did a lot of data and science research for our book. That proprietary research took a lot of time and effort, never mind all of the marketing and all of that kind of stuff. We put a lot of time, money, and effort into it. So, who knows? Maybe there will be one, but I can tell you that the process we put together was amazingly collaborative, incredibly fun, and we have something that all four of us are incredibly proud of.

Final Tips

This probably isn't going to be a surprise to anyone, but the biggest point of advice that I have is to, "Just freakin' write." I've now been writing for well over a decade. We all suck in the beginning, whether we are writing, or as children learning to walk, right? You never look at a baby learning to walk and say, "Oh, well you've fallen down for the 4,302nd time. Why don't you just forget that?" We keep trying until we learn to walk, and so, for me, writing in the beginning was really, really hard.

I was lucky to have a guy like Dan Farber helping me, but I just kept pushing myself, and pushing myself, and pushing myself, to the point where I could write an 800-1,200 word blog and have it not suck. So, in the beginning, I'd say, just write. Just write your ass off. You're going to suck. Get feedback from people who love you and want to support you.

It's really frustrating for those of us who have to Google every fourth word because we can't spell, and all of the details like, "Where does the period go," and, "Is it the right 'your'," and "Is it the right 'there'," and all of that stuff that's even challenging for people who aren't dyslexic. For those of us who are, it's like, I literally have to Google every 4-8

words because I misspell so badly that Word can't figure out what I mean. Writing an email can even be hard. **I send video emails now because they're easier.**

I say just work through all of that, and you'll begin to develop your voice. My goal with my writing was, "Could I write like I talk?" If people know me and they read something that I wrote, they tell me that they can almost hear my voice in their ear. So, I consider that an achievement. So, I say, just write. Write every day until you get to a place where you feel your writing is good, and then, if you want to tackle something like a book, I really... I don't know if I'll write another one, but I wouldn't write one by myself. I know that dyslexic people do, and if you do, congratulations. If you want to fight through it, and work through it, by all means. But, in my case, I just looked at it and said, "Well, why wouldn't you go to someone legendary and partner with them?"

As we know, anything that you love doing is better when you do it with someone that you love, respect, and admire. So, for me, working with Kevin, and of course, working with Dave and Al, who are guys that I had been in business with for over five years, at the time, and guys I've known for the better part of 20 years and respect incredibly, the opportunity to do a true collaboration, to have them push me, and hopefully, vice-versa... And, to have a master like Kevin pull it all together, and then to have the thing come out and become a bestseller and be called all of the nice things that it has been called... You know, I get tweets, and emails, and all of that stuff, pretty much daily now, from people all around the world, and sometimes from countries that I've barely even heard of.

The backend of it is that if you write something that can make a difference for people... You know, we didn't do it for money. I don't think anyone ever makes very much money from writing a business book. Certainly, with four authors, and an agent, and a publisher, and all of that... You know, we got a great advance, which was wonderful, but the economics weren't particularly... With a big publisher like Harper and all of that, no one is going to be buying Lamborghinis from the royalties. But, that's not why we did it at all. We did it because we thought that we had some ideas that were powerful and could make a difference.

If you're lucky enough to write a book that gets the level of exposure that we've been amazed to get, those emails, and those tweets, and those LinkedIn hits, and all of that from people that say, "You know what? So and so told me to read your book. I read it, and it changed my life, and it changed my business, etc, etc."

As a kid who grew up the way that I did... You know, math ended for me at Grade 3. Reading was brutal as a kid. So, to be able to fast forward to writing a bestseller, and most importantly, writing a bestseller that we're proud of and has made a difference... I guess what I'm trying to say is that it's really worth it. If you partner with someone who can help you, and you can write a book like that, it's one of the greatest things that you can do in your life.

Another thing that I'll tell you is that it's so far out there of an idea that we had publishers pass on our book because they never heard of four authors writing a business book. You know, Amazon didn't know how to deal with us because they aren't used to listing four people. It just sounds crazy, right? I think a lot of people thought... It's the whole, "How many chefs in the kitchen," thing. They thought, "This is going to be a piece of crap. It just has to be." And, we didn't... We hoped that it wouldn't be a piece of crap, and we came up with a process to make it work.

Also, as a dyslexic writer, whether you are writing alone or with a group... Um, this is going to sound crazy, but it forces you... I'll speak for myself... **It forced me to hang out for very long periods of time in my own brain.** You can probably tell that I'm an extravert. So, I hang out with people, and this sort of made me have to be more introverted, if you will. I got to troll around in my own brain and find all of these nooks and crannies, and I discovered what I really thought about things.

I had these moments, as crazy as it sounds, where I was like, "Wow. I really like the way my brain works," you know, because as a dyslexic, we can focus on the bad parts, like "I don't know my wife's phone number," and, "I don't know where the keys are," and "I don't remember my password." There are a lot of things that are really problematic about being dyslexic, which can be significant.

On the flip side, we have these very interesting brains, and we get things in a way that non-dyslexic people don't. So, I was able to appreciate my own brain, if you will, and my own skills, which is, sort of, the flip side of how one might feel about their dyslexic mind and the advantages of having a different set of skills when it comes to learning. I was kind of like, "I like my brain. I like hanging out and soaking in all of this in a way that I never had before."

Connecting with Christopher

The simplest way to get me is LegendsandLosers.com. My contact info is there as well as information about [Legends & Losers](#), the podcast. *Play Bigger*, the book, is there, and if you want to email me, you can grab the email off the site as well. If you buy the book, and you don't like it, let me know and I'll send you \$50.

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