**Motivational Mondays interview:**

**Kozhi Makai – *Airing* 02.22.2021 (Part 1)**

**Music intro** [00:00:00-00:00:01]

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:02] Welcome ladies and gentlemen to Motivational Mondays.

I’m your host Max Irzhak, and joining us today is Kozhi Makai, the founder of Kozhi Makai Worldwide, a consulting agency that uses behavioral science to help people thrive at work,

by turning potential... into performance.

His clients say he helps them rediscover their purpose. Here at the NSLS, our members want him back time and time again. His passion for humanity shines through in everything he does.

I’m proud to welcome the one and only *Dr.* Kozhi. Makai.

**Kozhi Makai** [00:00:32] Thanks, Max. Thank you so much for having me.

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:35] One of the things that really resonated with me is your approach to work.

Life is too short to simply survive our jobs, especially when we spend 66% of our lives in the office. You envision a world where instead of dragging ourselves out of bed each day, people actually *love* going to work.

What are some actionable steps people can take today to not just *survive*, but to actually *thrive* in the workplace?

**Kozhi Makai** [00:00:59] Number one, is taking a strengths-based perspective. I want people to be unafraid and unapologetic about their strengths; it’s very important to me. Too many of us hide our strengths because they will either make other people uncomfortable, or they require a little bit more work from us in order for them to really be highlighted. I want people to be unapologetic about their strengths. My number one strength is “learner”—if we use strength-finder. I love learning. But my learning isn't just from books; i love learning in any context. Which is what makes it easy for me to engage with people because i'm always asking questions. I want to learn about what’s important to people, what moves them, what drives them. And then i want to ask myself questions too: why are you behaving this way, why is this so important to you, why is this not important. I never want to lose that. And it’s that curiosity that allows me to wake up every day completely excited about my work. That in one way or another, today my strength is going to be used.

Gallup has found that when people are able to show up at work, and work through their strengths, their level of engagement is extremely high. And when people’s level of engagement is extremely high, they tend to be thriving in their work, and they look *forward* to their work, they look forward to coming to work. Very very important. So for me, it’s really number one starting with your strengths—you have to learn how to figure out what your strengths are.

So you have to go through a discovery phase. I'll give you a 3-point process. Number one: discover your strengths. Whether it’s through assessments, having conversations with people… discover what your strengths are. After you discover them, second thing is sharpen those strengths. Once you’ve sharpened those strengths, go to the third part which is leveraging your strengths. And then you go through that process over and over where you discover, you sharpen, and then you leverage your strengths.

Once that happens, you know there’s a place for your strengths, there's a place for your edge, there’s a place for you to bring value—because that’s the key. Today’s world and tomorrow's world is going to be about value. People care a great deal about the value that you bring, and people will pay you well if you bring value. People will honor you if you bring value. Even in our personal circles, people that dont bring value, we don't want to spend time with them. Value doesn't mean they make money, they do all these things—it’s that they come into our circle, and when they come into our circle, our circle is better.

And so to me that’s an important part that people shouldnt just survive work, clock-in/clock-out, deal with client, deal with a boss—i want them to go in and have a sense of control. And you have that sense of control when you know exactly who you are and what value you bring. And for some of the folks listening, they might decide this particular company isn't recognizing my value. I need to go somewhere where I can get my value recognized, and used completely. And that’s okay. I always told my clients when i go into organizations “my job is to get people either to fire themselves or to get fired.” Because for some people, they’re not in the right organization, they need to move on.

**Max Irzhak** [00:04:17] You mentioned engaged employees. When you have engaged employees, employees aren't just happier, they’re actually more productive, sales are higher, word of mouth is stronger.

How can leaders foster the strengths of their employees to have them be more engaged at work?

**Kozhi Makai** [00:04:35] It’s going to be a paradox. On one level, stay out of their way. Some leaders, it’s really heartbreaking because a lot of leaders, I know they mean well, but what they do by micromanaging (either by micromanaging or doing their team’s work is telling their team they dont trust them). There’s no easier way to tell somebody you don't trust them than by doing the work for them, or by watching every move that they make. So if leaders are going to foster a culture of innovation, a culture of engagement—give your team every tool possible for them to do their job—both physical tools, emotional tools, psychological tools, and so on.

One of my teammates yesterday was dragging, not doing so well, didn't sleep well the previous day. I said “hey, four-oclock once this meeting is done, you are done, because you need to rest. I need you strong again tomorrow.” But i don't micromanage, it’s never been my strength. Micromanaging is not my strength. I have people in my world that i trust. And i trust them to do their job. I give them multiple opportunities to do their job. If they don't do their job well, I guide them, and advise them. And that's one thing most leaders don't recognize is that their number one role is Coach. They don't get to get into the game and play. They don't. The best coaches in the world, they never got into the game and played. What they did was give the best plays, and then they gave the best tools to each of the players so that they could go out there and win the game—and that’s what leaders need to do, help your team win by giving them every tool that they need calling out the plays, not trying to get into the game.

**Max Irzhak** [00:06:18] As a behavioral scientist, you know that work and stress go hand-in-hand.

With most of us now working from home, it’s no longer 9-5 — and we’ve shifted to this always-on mentality. How can people manage their stress in this new world when the line between life and work is more blurry than ever before?

**Kozhi Makai** [00:06:38] I think there’s 2 things that i want to share with you about that. First of all, we all have to have an understanding of what we mean when we use the word “stress”. There are 2 types of stress. One is called eustress, and the other is called distress. Most people when they're talking about a difficulty handling what’s happening in their world, they’re talking about distress. Eustress is the natural stress that we experience. For instance as we’re walking, there’s a certain amount of poundage in our knees, on our hips, on our ankles that is okay for us to have. Distress is basically giving somebody 200 pounds to walk with all day in addition to their own weight. It’s giving them 500 pounds when perhaps they can't even carry that 500 pounds—that’s distress. So most people are really struggling because the demands on their lives are much higher than normal. When you think about stress, that’s really what it comes down to. For most people, the stress and the anxiety pieces, they tend to run parallel because anxiety and stress tend to increase when people feel as if they cannot meet expectations.

And when it comes to that work/home divide, at Kozhi Makai Worldwide, we have a concept called “pro-personal”. That means in our process, whether it’s developing people, or coaching people, or guiding people, we look at it pro-personally. Meaning if you’re growing professionally, it should impact you positively in your personal life. And if you’re growing personally, it should impact you positively in your professional life. So for us, there really isn't a line between those two. But *because* of that, the discipline has to be there that allows us to spend the time necessary creating a healthy divide that when it's time to spend time with the people we care about, we spend time with them only. That means our minds, our spirits, our souls, our physical being is right there with them so that when we’re *at* work we can completely engage with work and not be focused on those other pieces. Is it easy? Not so much, especially when two spouses are working from home, and the kids are going to school at home as well. Trying to coordinate things, and make sure that this person is quiet while you’re doing this. I mean, heck, i just had that conversation with my wife, i'm like “hey i'm going to be recording soon, so you can't go around playing drums.” You have to have those conversations, right, and so it makes it a little bit more difficult, but i think starting with that understanding that there’s a certain amount of stress is normal and healthy. We have to know when we’ve crossed past that normal and healthy for us—because for me it’s different compared to you, and for others as well.

**Max Irzhak** [00:09:19] For your next book, you’re working on a fascinating topic focused on *continuous* learning, and stepping away from the know-it-all attitudes that are so prevalent these days.

Can you tell us about this new concept of continuously sharpening your edge?

**Kozhi Makai** [00:09:34] When I think of an axe, you know, axe’s are wonderful. Not everybody uses them much anymore, unless you’re living on a farm or you’re a firefighter. But the one thing i like about an axe is it’s a wonderful tool you can use in different ways. My late father told me this Chokwe quote. My late father was from North-Western province in Zambia, we were Chokwe’s. And he said “sokola njimbu, muhinyi mukawana”. Njimbu is an axe, the axe-head, the metal part. Muhinyi is the bar, whether it’s the plastic bar or the wooden bar that connects to the axe. And what he was saying in essence is “take your axe head with you, you can always find the handle that you need”. Most of us are pretty good at doing that, but we forget that that axe head needs to stay sharp.

Now when i define the word “edge” in the book, i define it as the things that you do well, your natural skills, your natural gifts. The things that look easy to other people because it just comes naturally to you. Most of us because of use, we lose our edge. If i were to put an axe outside right now and not use it for the next 6 months, it’s going to be dull. And that same axe if i were to use it for 6 months, it’s going to get dull. Our gifts, our talents, because they’re either being used, *or* not being used—they get dull. It's important for us to sharpen them. As a speaker, as a writer, as a thinker, as a researcher, I am *constantly* working on improving my craft. That is me sharpening my edge. Because if i don't improve my craft, i have to work harder for the same level of work because my axe isn't as sharp. So that metaphor is really helpful for me which is basically where the title of the book came from, that if i'm going to cut down a tree—whatever that tree looks like in my life whether it’s a spiritual tree, a business tree, a Navy tree, an emotional tree, a relational tree—whatever that might be. If my skills are sharp, if my axe has an edge that is sharp, I might not need 300 strokes to bring that tree down. It might only need a 100. Why would i want to expend 300 strokes of that axe when i can only spend a 100 because the axe is actually sharp. So it’s important for us to keep that edge constantly sharp. And the best way to do that is to constantly be learning, constantly be open to the fact that we actually don't know it all, and that it’s okay that we don't know it all. There’s more to learn.

**Max Irzhak** [00:12:10] Dr. Kozhi Sidney Makai, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for helping us all succeed in our lives, thrive at our jobs, and become stronger leaders. I know all of my fellow NSLS members will be thrilled to hear more of your insights.

**Kozhi Makai** [00:12:25] Thank you so much for having me, Max, I appreciate it.

**Max Irzhak** [00:12:28] Absolutely. And I encourage everyone to connect with Kozhi on LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube, and to buy Kozhi’s new book “Disrupted. Just follow the links in the description below.

Thank you everyone for joining us today :)

We’ll see you next week on Motivational Mondays!

**Music intro** [00:12:43-00:12:48]