

Willing & Abel podcast: Finding new heights with impactful entrepreneur Gidon Novick

Season 1 of Willing & Abel is brought to you by <M&C Saatchi Abel>, a proudly South African award-winning creative company founded on the principle of Brutal Simplicity of Thought.

[00:00:00] **Gidon Novick:** The older I get, the more I realize that that is the issue to find the right people and particularly at a leadership level, to find the leadership that can unlock the potential in their people, obviously find the right people to start with, but to unlock this potential. And you talk about South Africa and I just think it sounds cliché, but we have the most incredible people, the diversity, the energy, the resilience, given what we've gone through. These people are just waiting to make magic. They do need the right environment. They need the right context. They need the right support. That's the overriding theme in what I like getting involved in.

[00:00:36] **Mike Abel:** Hi, I'm Mike Abel. I'm a business marketing and communication specialist and the founder of MNC Saatchi Abel. I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist, and an optimist at heart. Welcome to my podcast, Willing and Abel, the home of hopeful conversations that challenge perspectives. It's a continuation of the ideas and conversations I began in my book, Willing and Able, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis. My guest today is good friend Gidon Novick. In the unlikely event that you don't know his name, chances are pretty high that you've flown in one of his planes or earned loyalty points at one of his brands. He's the founder of low cost airline Kulula, and now Lift, former CEO of Discovery Vitality, chairman at SA Harvest, a food rescue and hunger relief organization and founder of Home Sweet Hotels. Now at the helm of his newest venture Circle Senior Living, a boutique brand with senior residences in sought after urban locations. Gidon is certainly an impactful entrepreneur and also a lover of stray dogs. More of that later. Welcome Gidon, so great to have you here today.

[00:01:50] **Gidon Novick:** This is exciting, Mark. It's kind of one of our lunch get togethers on steroids with lots of people hopefully listening.

[00:01:57] **Mike Abel:** Exactly that. Exactly that. But maybe we'll have to restrict the conversation a little bit in terms of what you and I That's disappointing. We'll get down and dirty. Don't worry. Anyway, it's fantastic to have you here.

[00:02:08] **Gidon Novick:** Thanks.

[00:02:09] **Mike Abel:** Gid, you're one of South Africa's great entrepreneurs in my mind, and I think entrepreneurship early in life, foremost, something sparks some kind of a curiosity. If you go back to your childhood, to the beginning of your youthful years, teenage years, did you ever know you were going to be an entrepreneur? What do you think it is in you that has led you to an entrepreneurial journey?

[00:02:34] **Gidon Novick:** Hmm. As a kid, I don't think I really knew what an entrepreneur was. I always liked to experiment with things. I like to create things. I loved, uh, finding out new things about the world. That hasn't changed. No, it's gotten worse. So maybe that was influenced where I got to eventually in my adult life. And I'm the youngest of four. There's quite a big gap between me and my next oldest sibling. How many years is that? Four years. Okay. My three siblings are pretty close together. So it's pretty clear that I was a mistake, which I'm fine with. And in fact, growing up, it gave me a lot of freedom because I think my parents were just, you know, had had enough in terms of raising kids. And I was the little guy that could do whatever he wanted and could ask whatever questions he wanted and could go out and do stuff. So that I think has had an impact. And just being in a family, I think, which is also quite interesting. My father was a business person, a very, you know, strategic, smart man that I learned a huge amount from in business. Specifically, and my mom is a creative, she's trained as a social worker, then did a fine arts degree and kind of moulded the two into a career in art therapy and various social initiatives. So really I'm the, I'm, I am a product of the two of them, you know, interested in business and the hard nuts and bolts and numbers and all that stuff. But then my mom's influence is just on the wild side, you know, creative, lots of ideas, many of them, not practical, can't do them just really always coming up with new stuff that could be done and could make the future a little bit different.

[00:04:27] **Mike Abel:** So I think that what's really interesting as well in, in what you've said over here for people that are going to be raising children, if you're not already, is the importance of curiosity and encouraging that within children and letting them be a bit, not wild, per se, but exploring, you know, you talk about exploration and different ideas and being curious and exploring new ideas. I think that in a world of a lot of cookie-cut behaviours, I think it's really important that people understand the importance of having an inquisitive mind and asking questions. And uh, I didn't actually know that about your mom, I knew all about your dad's entrepreneurial journey, but I guess that is why you are a capitalist with a conscience because I think you really are. And when I say a capitalist, I think in a, in a very good way because I think you embrace responsible capitalism and what a successful business can do in terms of employment, in terms of changing society, in terms of giving people access to products that they wouldn't have otherwise had access to. But I can see from that background how your parents would have shaped that. I have a bit of a hard question I'm going to throw at you because you've taken me straight there with your parents and situations. Do you think that there is a secret to being at the right place at the right time or do you think it just happens to be luck or fate?

[00:05:46] **Gidon Novick:** There's so much luck in life. I mean, we live in a country where that's just so abundantly clear that you can start off in a lucky place or you can start off in a very unlucky place. And it absolutely must be easier to make a go of it if you start off in the lucky place. I'm completely convinced of that. So that's something that I believe, and I think you do too, comes with a lot of responsibility. And I think you and I, and what binds us together as friends is that we carry this with us, the sense of responsibility. We lucky enough to be in a position to be able to influence and affect future outcomes, and we take that seriously and that, you know, at the same time, we know that business is important and commercial models are important and customers are important. And so the commercial world is an

important part because it creates sustainability in our personal environment. So we can, we have resources to do stuff and particularly do stuff outside of the business world. So I think it's that blend of commercial mindset. of making sure that things are working and they're sustainable and profitable and that the incentive structures are in place and that people within an organization, outside of the organization, are incentivized to do things and, and create things and be productive. But at the same time, just realize that coming back, I guess, to your question, that we're on the lucky side and there's a big 80/20, 80 percent on the not so lucky side or the unlucky side. So what does that mean? It means, how do we create opportunity? How do we spend time, effort, resources that are dedicated to the less fortunate? We'll get into politics, but I'll throw it into the fire. Now we have a government that has absolved themselves from the duty of caring for people that need to be taken care of. That's abundantly clear in our country. So any sense of disappointment. That these people have been neglected, and we can talk about SA Harvest and the food side. Any sense of disappointment is misguided because the expectation was wrong. Our government will not take care of people that need to be taken care of. It's not their orientation. Our current government. They are oriented towards their own self-interest and therefore. You know, we can complain about that or we can do something about it and coalesce our resources and our intellect to figure out solutions for the very big problems that we have right here in our own country.

[00:08:22] **Mike Abel:** Well, it's very interesting you say that because I find also in business, you are a bit of a unique animal and I would include myself in that club where we do have a strong social conscience and responsibility and a drive to create a more inclusive culture and a more shared economy. But I do find that generally in business, it's often viewed as a strategy as opposed to a calling. And I think for you and me, it's a calling. It's a matter of conscience, not choice. Why do you think there is such a low level of, I guess, lived corporate responsibility in the world? I don't think it's unique to South Africa. I think if you look at America, it's very capitalistic. But here, I think that companies could be doing so much more to change the social fabric in our country. I mean, do you have a point of view on that?

[00:09:14] **Gidon Novick:** The main one being that it has to be time horizon that these companies are thinking short term. They're thinking short term, contracts, short term. You know, if I say this, if I do that, my business may impact it. My shareholders may complain. My board may complain. If they were thinking long term, they would absolutely be doing much more. Because the trajectory that we're on is absolutely going to affect their businesses and it's not going to be good. So that's the dichotomy is that, and I think it's a problem in corporates generally and in government is that is the short termism. You've got a short window of interest. If you're running a company, well, you're going to be not running it forever. Probably you probably, I don't know, the average 10 years, what, six, seven years of running a company.

[00:10:00] **Mike Abel:** Globally CEOs are about two and a half years at the moment.

[00:10:03] **Gidon Novick:** There you go. So it's unfortunately a big misalignment in terms of time horizon. When we think of our kids, which you and I do, when we think

of our love for this country, when we think my kids are. I'd say split in a way. Some absolutely see a future for themselves here and want to be here and will be here. And some say, well, you know what? I'm going to see what it's like in other parts of the world. And I encourage both of them.

[00:10:29] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think that kids today, it depends if it's a push or a pull factor. So I think that if kids feel that they need to go overseas because there's a better future for them somewhere else than here, I think that's problematic. I think if kids go overseas because they want to explore the world and have different inputs and diversity and, you know, adventures, then that's a wonderful thing. And I think that we want to create a country, you and I, where if people do, kids do have a wanderlust and do want to go overseas or people choose to go and live in another country, it's because they embrace a journey as opposed to feeling that a better future lies for them outside of this country, because I mean, the truth of it is that South Africa has got everything to make it a magnificent and successful country. We've got great people. I think our South African people are amazing. Just good values. We've got unbelievable agriculture, technology, banking, telecommunications, the creative industry, the hospitality industry, that you're in airlines. There's not a single reason why South Africa can't boom, other than the impediments that government might actually put in place. Because the country itself and its people, we should be the best country I think in the world to live. Couldn't agree with you more. And I think that that's what you've harnessed. I mean, when I look at your, the fact that you're in the hotel business. It's a long term investment business. The fact that you're in an airline, long term, the fact that you're doing these different things, that you're giving dignity and a wonderful retirement to older people, all of those are long term projects. Can you share with us, Gid, what is different about your business models that you create versus what you see out there or what you've done in the past? Because I certainly see a high level of innovation in what you do.

[00:12:17] **Gidon Novick:** Yeah, I always see creative potential in a business. In other words, looking at the way things are being done in a sector, in an industry, and just challenging those ways and figuring out how innovation and creativity could change that. But at the core of it, Mike, is the people side. And you'll see the theme in all the businesses or organizations that I'm lucky enough to be involved in. It really comes down to. To the people side of the business. And these are people-intensive businesses and an airline experience is really mostly a function of the engagement and the interaction you have with the people, with the crew, with the ground staff, with the people in the organization and a hotel, even more. So my kind of core belief and understanding with people is that people are unbelievably underappreciated and as a result of that, they are so often and more often than they're not so far from reaching their potential as human beings because they're not recognized. As individuals with immense potential. And my starting point with every single person I meet or engage with is an individual with immense potential. And most times, from my experience, that potential has been blocked and has been somehow cut short by, stifled, that's the word. From their own experiences in life and from the leadership that they've engaged with in life and often in businesses who have viewed them and view them as a resource and as a person that is fulfilling a function, a repetitive function. And that is their job. That is their role. And I've seen something different. I've seen people, not everybody. Some people are limited and they, this is not the

appropriate thing for them to be doing. So they end up moving on, but I've just seen immense potential in people that just needs to be. So it's this massive resource, this massive potential that in the right circumstances and in the right environment can be magical.

And that's the theme in whatever I do. And the older I get, the more I realize that that is the issue. To find the right people and particularly the leadership. To find the leadership that can unlock the potential in their people. Obviously find the right people to start with, but to unlock this potential. And you talk about South Africa and I just think it sounds cliché, but we have the most incredible people, the diversity, the energy, the resilience, given what we've gone through. These people are just waiting to make magic. They do need the right environment. They need the right context. They need the right support. That's the overriding theme in what I like getting involved in.

[00:14:58] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think it's two-sided, and I love what you say, and I've seen you practice that love. There is that saying that, you know, God helps those that help themselves as well. And I think at some point in time, you know, a country and a people need to take the initiative themselves to believe in better, to fight for better. In terms of potential, you remind me when I took over running Ogilvy at a very young age, I think I was about 32 or something, running the Cape Town group. I had exactly that experience where I had all of these people that I thought were massively talented, but that didn't believe in their own potential. So I actually put up a huge post on one of the walls in the agency which said, the past is no measure of your potential, in any moment you can unlock your future. And I think that that's what people don't realize. And that I think that There's a great opportunity to be catalysts for that realization, to say, actually, this isn't a script that I'm reading from, a pre written script that I'm reading from, that I can change course in this journey at any point in time. And when I stay at your hotel, as you know, I'm a regular at Home Sweet Hotel in Bristol. That's not a paid advertising slot for the listeners, but your people pick up from you, the care and interest in the individual. And I found that very interesting, you know, that you're not just a number checking in, but it's like, hi, Mike, great to have you back again. And then they know that I love your stray dog. And we're going to talk about Hazel cause we must, cause Gid has got a stray dog adopted at his hotel in Johannesburg at his other hotels, which I think is really counterintuitive. Why would you want an old stray dog walking around? And yet I think that binds you to the brand and it makes you feel that there's something special, there's humanity, there's a heart in that. While we're talking about Hazel, what made you bring dogs into our hotel? And I know you are dog crazy, but what made you think that that would give soul to the hotels and give a new lease on life to an unloved furry friend?

[00:17:02] **Gidon Novick:** Yeah, well, to say I'm besotted with dogs is an understatement. They're like a huge, huge part of my life. We have seven adopted dogs at home and we're about to get an eighth. We've been looking for a Labrador, adoptee Labrador, and we've, I think we may have found one. So we'll soon be at eight. They are just the most incredible creatures. They bond with humans in an amazing way and they create a feeling in a place. Now, not everybody loves dogs. I

appreciate that. And, you know, as far as home suites, the brand concept was really to really make you feel at home. And so there was a brand element of let's find a. A beautiful, appropriate, adopted dog, Hazel, in the case of our Johannesburg Hotel. And it's been brilliant. She wanders around. She is getting very old, which worries me. She's 14. She's 14. Exactly. Yeah. And it's just, it just creates an amazing energy. I just want to add a bit about the care that we give to people. You know, that is an absolute requirement. It's part of the culture. If someone is not giving care, they will not fit in and they won't stay in the system. The short algorithm for me is that there's such a reward that comes out of connecting with people. It's just a fundamental human need we have is to connect and engage with other people and to care for other people. And it's incredibly selfishly rewarding to do that. So if there's one thing that we're doing, let's just put the financial rewards, whether it's a salary or a profit or whatever aside, every day that we operate, we are generating our own reward because we are giving and we are caring. And so there's in my, I guess, altruistic world, we're creating value in the world just by being kind and by delivering good service and focusing in on that. And I think if I can just extrapolate that a little bit, I think it's such a missing piece. Every, you know, in the world, generally the idea of care and respect and compassion and kindness, it's just, it's just missing in the world. And it's a hugest business opportunity for me across sectors, you know, it doesn't have to be a service business per se. I mean, most businesses are service business in, in some way. And it's just lost the fact that people want to be cared for. They want to be communicated with openly, honestly, regularly, if something goes wrong, they wanna know about it upfront. They don't wanna be told later that there's a problem. Yeah, they wanna feel like an individual, you know, whether it's your business or you personally, you wanna feel that your service provider knows you and understands you as a unique individual. So I think there's just massive opportunity in that space to do good things.

[00:19:46] **Mike Abel:** I agree with you. I think that a, the key pillar to what you're saying, however, is authenticity, and I think that you, because of who you are, and the type of people that you're hiring, create a sustainable feeling of warmth and care because you're hiring people who authentically are those types of people. Because often when you go to a hotel or you have a service experience, whether it's with an airline or any kind of a business, uh, fast food outlet, whatever it must be, you get the feeling that the smile isn't a real smile. That's the minute you turn away, the smile disappears. And I think that what you want to do today in business is to have people that smile from the heart, not from the head because they vested. They want to make the world a better place. And I think that kindness has become in many ways a killer app in business. You know, my mother was, she was an academic, but she was a successful real estate company owner because she knew that academia or the ivory tower didn't pay the bills. And when people used to ask her what differentiated her business from other businesses, her answer was honesty, which was, I mean, she, she always found it very amusing, but it was truthful because it was, as you say, communicating with complete honesty and authenticity. And if there is a bit of damp to point out the damp, and if there is, you know, bad tenant to point out that there's a bad tenant and not to walk away from the hard conversations. But I think within honesty, there's emotional honesty, I don't think it's just about transactional honesty. And I don't think that there's a lot of emotional honesty in business. And I think that if you want to have an authentic organization, then you need to hire people like you

have that. Live that within themselves because I don't think you can teach it to be honest. Maybe you can inspire it in people.

[00:21:36] **Gidon Novick:** Yeah, I think in the right environment acknowledging that everybody's different. Yeah, and that the smile will be presented in a different way depending on the individual, and just giving you permission to say well present yourself in the way that feels like you.

[00:21:51] **Book Ad:** Mike Abel's book willing and able lessons from a decade in crisis captures the stories of clients and partners and the winds losses and learnings through his eyes in a career spanning three decades. Whether you're looking for courage or inspiration, to learn what it takes to disrupt industries, or discover how to transform your company meaningfully and truly empower your people, you'll find it between these pages. You can listen to the audiobook on Audible, download it on your Kindle, order it online, or find it at your favourite bookstore.

[00:22:25] **Gidon Novick:** I've got this friend who we have debates quite often and he's quite a cynical guy and his view is that, like we're all actors, the whole, what's that saying? You'll know the whole world's a stage. The whole world's a stage. Yeah. I think that's Shakespeare. Yeah. And he's got that view and it makes me think, well, then basically everybody's just playing this game and yeah, is playing a part on the stage and I thought that a little bit internally to the point of saying, well, we, we, all these beautiful individuals that have so much authenticity to offer the world. So the best we can do is to firstly demonstrate it ourselves as much as we can and not fall into the trap of trying to present something else to the world and encouraging people and allowing and giving them permission to absolutely be themselves in an organization, in a business environment, and that's magical.

[00:23:17] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, when you say all the world's a stage and I agree with you, but I do think that increasingly one has to fight against the notion of all the world being a stage because I think that's exactly what social media is doing to the world. So, when you look at an insane Facebook, Instagram, TikTok-driven world, we actually forcing people into becoming actors in their own lives, as opposed to living real and authentic lives. You know, you go to the Waterfront and you see people that can't afford to shop in those fancy Italian and French stores, taking selfies of themselves outside the store and posting it and thinking like, why are you worrying about that kind of shit when you could be sitting outside having a cup of coffee, looking at the mountain and the boats for free, having a good conversation with your child or a friend or whatever it might be, and I think that the world is being lulled more and more into this facile world of bling and inauthenticity. And I think that leaders like ourselves have a responsibility to point out the bullshit, to point out that the emperor has no clothes, that there is no joy to be found actually in the material. There isn't. You know, it's comforting, yes, but is a beautiful house going to make you happy? No. You know, some of the most miserable people I know have got tons of money and some of the happiest people I know have got very little because they immersed in their lives and the people that matter as opposed to the bullshit. So I know it's a bit of a rant because I'm concerned about where the world is at on social media. But I do think that the best that we can do is to impart to people that, it's who

they are. It's their freak flag, I guess, that makes them special. It's not the overt signs of success.

[00:25:02] **Gidon Novick:** Yeah. And if I can maybe just take that in the direction of issues that are troubling us today with regards, political issues, geopolitical issues that have become so polarizing. It's worrying me immensely how this media world is almost forcing people. To be on one side or the other and yet talking about individuals who are unique individuals with kindness and compassion and maybe even an understanding of nuance, that's all being lost in this polarized world that people feel they're being forced into. And I find a lot of my time and effort is being spent trying to extract people and extract conversation from this polarized world. Which side are you on? Are you on that side or this side to, how do you feel about these issues? What is your understanding of these issues? Which is often lacking because of the laziness, I will say, that we've gotten into in terms of, it's much easier just to pick a side as opposed to say, well, this is how I feel about something and I want to understand more. I want to understand the layers in this issue. So, anyway, just a frustration.

[00:26:14] **Mike Abel:** No, I think it's a great, I think we should chat about it a bit. I mean, in about 2018, I think I wrote an article, I think for the Daily Maverick at the time, which was something about the Tower of Babel. And how we are all being taught to think things that pull us apart as opposed to draw us together. So maybe unlike the biblical tale, where it was maybe different languages or different ethnicities, today it's identity politics. And I think that's one of the great tragedies of the world. If you're going to judge somebody based on their race, religion, their gender, their sexual orientation, there's something very wrong with you. You know, any religion that preaches that you should dislike somebody because of their religion well, what the hell is that? Part of that is keeping an open mind and being welcoming, diverse and different opinions. And I think that where you're going with this, what I love is that how do we get people to, there's that great saying that when you have two people in a room that agree on everything, you only need one of them. How do we get people to start embracing different opinions in terms of strength of ideas, building on ideas? Because diversity of thought is the very thing that brings fresh opportunity to a table. Otherwise, you're just going to continue doing the same thing.

[00:27:28] **Gidon Novick:** Completely. Those conversations, you know, it's an ability, you talk about curiosity. Well, it's such a powerful concept to be curious. Now, to be curious means that your starting point is that you don't know everything. You know a little bit. Yes. So you want to know more.

[00:27:44] **Mike Abel:** I think Aristotle said a sign of intelligence is knowing that you don't know everything.

[00:27:49] **Gidon Novick:** Yeah. So if that's the starting point, you know, just in terms of the way the world split up in my very simplistic mind, I see like this massive rump in the middle, you know, this is people that just want to get on with life. They want to advance life for themselves, for their kids. They want the future to be better than the past and the present, but they don't want to dismantle society. They don't want to

disrupt society with violence and hatred and all the things that we see. And that's the bulk in the middle. Now, all the attention is being driven by the extremists on both sides, and the evil leadership that is pervasive in the world. They understand this so well. They understand this ability to influence and to manipulate. And that's where we are in the world. So, you know, if these centrist voices that really appreciate the individual and the potential of individuals to collectively do amazing things and move the world forward. Those are the people that need to be empowered. Those are the people that need a voice in our small way. That's what we trying to enable.

[00:28:58] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think those are also the people that need to kind of imbue their organizations with those kinds of cultures. And I guess one of the tragedies today is that you can't kind of bring that into the workplace. You know, there isn't the room or the space for honest conversations about open opinions. You know, it's quite commercially orientated. And I think that if one, you know, wanders off that kind of very tight, paved track of a commercial orientation towards more of a social orientation, shareholders and different stakeholders start thinking, ooh, where are you going with that kind of a thing? But I think that those kinds of authentic conversations are exactly what is needed in the world today to bring people back to the the middle, and by the middle, I think what I'm talking about is the silent majority because most people are good people, but they're silent. And so it's actually the bad voices that get the soapbox, you know, that we all have in our hands these days in the form of a mobile phone to say whatever we want. And yet the messy middle, the people that will make the world better are quiet. And I think a big part of saving the world, if you like, is for the centre to find its voice, to speak up. Ged, one of the things that you and I have in common is that we both look for chinks of light behind even the biggest obstacles. I think that, who's the Leonard Cohen? I think you know, it's through the cracks that the lights come through. So, you've said that sometimes the more chaotic things are, the more opportunity there is. Is that partly why you're still doing so much business in South Africa? Is it like where there's chaos, there's money to be made or where there's chaos, there's an opportunity to fix or a bit of both?

[00:30:42] **Gidon Novick:** Yeah, I mean, if there's one thing that terrifies me, it's boredom and the mundane. And I run a mile when I get involved in anything that becomes, you know, repetitive or

[00:30:54] **Mike Abel:** Which is very unusual for a chartered accountant.

[00:30:57] **Gidon Novick:** It probably is. So that world of uncertainty, I mean, when you talk about certainty, like certainty is a, it's an apparition. It's not real. There's no such thing. What is certainty? You know, certainty is something that we convince ourselves is there because maybe we feel better that, you know, somehow the future is going to but it never does. And so appreciating uncertainty, appreciating the fact that things are going to turn out differently to what we think and hope and embracing that and finding opportunity within that is a way that I get through life, I guess, because it makes the future interesting and exciting, even when things are difficult, because in the framework of change, there's going to be opportunity. There's going to be new ideas that can be generated. I love that world. I just find it very interesting

and stimulating to not just wait for things to unfold and hope for the best, but just to position and be open to the change that may inevitably unfold.

[00:32:06] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think that you're giving our listeners a profoundly important wisdom here. And that is that change is indeed the only constant. The only thing you can really rely on in the world is that it will change. So when people seek continuity and prediction, they are actually trying to hope for something that doesn't happen. There are two sayings that come to mind and you know that are. These damn sayings just come to my, come to me all the time. One is that man plans and God laughs. And I think that's absolutely true. And I think the other one was John Lennon, who said, life is what happens while you're busy making plans. And look what happened to him. So I think you do have to carpe diem. You said in an interview once, and I think you've touched on it, but maybe you want to share a little bit more. That you want to work with people that you like and whom share your values, that when you see their name on your phone, and I love this, you want to press the green button, not the red one. Is this a privilege that comes with having years of experience and enough resources, I guess? Or do you think that young entrepreneurs starting out should also follow their gut in a similar way?

[00:33:15] **Gidon Novick:** It's such a great question because if I think back, I've definitely compromised that rule, you know, with. You know, I don't know, trying to please a boss or trying to get into, yeah, exactly, or trying to get into business with somebody, you know, where there looks like there's a good opportunity, but actually I don't identify with that person. So it is something maybe to think of earlier in life because, you know, inevitably in any organizational business, there's problems. It's just like I see business and I, I don't know if it's just mine, but it seems to be a common thing. It's just a never-ending set of problems. That's what it is. Yeah. It's problem solving every day. Yeah. Good problems, bad problems. We're growing. We need more resources. We're not growing fast enough. We need a new strategy. It's just like always a problem. Sure. So one has to absolutely love the effort of problem solving in a group, in a group of people. So in Lift, for example, it's quite interesting. If I think back, Lift has been going now for three years. I absolutely love. The team of people, I love the guys running lift, John, Justin, the whole team, I love the time I spend with him. And within the three years, it's been very volatile. We've been through periods where we literally didn't know if we were going to survive. And they've been through periods where we thought we were going to take over the world of aviation all within this space of three years. Most meaningful times, if I look back, have been the times where we've been worried about survival and we've been figuring out how we're going to get through this next issue that, that we face. The very first day we started there were competitors trying to shut us down and there were banks that were Not prepared to take our payments and there were survival issues right from the start. And the funnest, most meaningful times were when we weren't doing that well. And I think that says everything because that says that you're going into business or you're joining an organization. You're going to have a probability of success, no matter, and particularly if you are in the entrepreneurial world. There is no guarantee of success, whatever you do, no matter how good the business plan looks, there's no guarantee. So what can you guarantee? You can guarantee that you're getting into this thing with people that you want to be doing this with, and then you're going to have fun. There is going to be stress and you're

going to learn and you're going to have an experience that is going to result in something else in your life, either that thing being miraculously successful or something else. So if that's a controllable variable, I would say, yes, find people that you want to work with.

[00:35:48] **Mike Abel:** I think that that's a very, very useful insight. And I think that at the same time. You also do want to have fresh inputs along the way because then you can also become an echo chamber longer term. We've all probably watched the movie, I don't know if you watched it, BlackBerry, on the founders of BlackBerry and I was also thinking the same of Nokia. How do you go into an industry and in both of those, you know, examples, I think with friends and you build something that is so spectacularly successful that you dominate a category, but you so deep in the weeds that you don't have the ability to see innovation, to shift, to change, to say, Oh, well maybe jobs does have something useful here with this, uh, touch phone versus buttons or whatever it might be. So I think that to embark on a journey with people that you know, like and trust and enjoy having around is what someone should strive for.

[00:36:45] **Gidon Novick:** What I like in people is not to agree on stuff. I love debating stuff and I'm not debating for the sake of debating. If you all agree and it's a simple decision, just get on with it and do it. I love Jeff Bezos in one of his podcast interviews, he says when he has a meeting with a group of people, with a group of colleagues, he always speaks last. He says that's a rule in Amazon. The most senior person in the room speaks last. I think that's a, that's a genius insight. Because what that's saying is that there's voices that need to be heard. There's a debate that needs to be had. Now what he makes clear as well is that guys, the end of the day, I'm going to make the decision in this meeting. So they know this is not a democracy, but the voices will be heard. People will have a chance. They will debate issues. I mean, I love friends that I can debate with. I don't love friends that's just like this, agree on everything in the world. I love having these debates, but there's a deep sense of respect. I want to hear what you're saying. I want to understand what you're saying. There's a love in terms of, I don't agree with you, but I still love you as a person, because, just because you've had a different experience to me and you, and your brain processes things differently to me, doesn't mean to say that I don't like you. You know, may well love this person, but part of that is really the diversity of view and life experience.

[00:38:03] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think what I've always found very powerful about you, and you're one of very few people that actually do this, is you reflect on a conversation. So very often, you know, and I'd say maybe one in 20 of my friends does this. So remember when you said X, Y, and Z, you know, I've been thinking about that, you know, that's typical, get on, you know. And maybe I think it's a little bit different. There's something very powerful in not simply moving on from conversation to conversation and reflecting on things. And that's why I think that you are such a successful entrepreneur, if I could say that is because, when you think about something and you consider it, you are refining it all the time. You're changing your mind about certain things. And I think that people don't often change their mind about something. They get in their heads and they think, okay, well, we've taken a

decision. But I think that there's something very powerful in liberating yourself to change your mind.

[00:38:57] **Gidon Novick:** Completely. Situations change. You get new information, you speak to somebody who gives you a different perspective. Why would you not want to change your mind or why would you not want to give yourself the permission to change your mind? I had an interesting Or to be proven wrong. Or to be proven wrong.

[00:39:14] **Mike Abel:** I'm very comfortable with being wrong.

[00:39:15] **Gidon Novick:** Me too. Me too. And it happens a lot. But, uh, my son now, he's, he's 21 and he's entrepreneurial and interested in business and all sorts of things. And he challenges me, he's got nothing to lose, you know, it just challenges me. We have very vocal debates and he often sheds some light on my thinking, because the most important thing is to give people permission to challenge. A big, big red light is when you're in an organization and you think you're in charge, but actually people aren't sharing information with you. They're telling you what they think you want to hear. That's a horrible place to be. And it must be incredibly boring as well to have everybody agreeing with you. So it's beautifully enriching to get those views. I want to just tell you about one meeting I had with some shareholders, which wasn't a fun meeting. And basically what happened in the meeting is, I presented a whole lot of options for the strategy of the business, which is the way my brain works. It's just, I can't help it. Like we could do this, but we could also do that. And we may actually end up doing this three, four options.

[00:40:22] **Mike Abel:** And that's not a factor of indecision. It's a factor of strategy. Which way are we going to choose to go?

[00:40:29] **Gidon Novick:** Exactly, you know, I can't say that option A is definitely going to work. There's external variables that may make option A not work. And one shareholder said, you're all over the place. Why don't you just choose one strategy and go with it? And I tell you, it was at that point that I said, actually, I have such a disconnect. In terms of that view, because firstly, my brain can't do that. So you, you've got the wrong person. If you think that I can just do one thing, which may or may not work and expend all my energy on one thing, which I've still got to explore further. So it's just, it's, it's a way of thinking, I'm not saying it's appropriate for all scenarios and maybe it is the entrepreneurial mind, which is also not appropriate for all things. Some things, when they get to a point. Maybe, and they need to become repetitive, and they just need to scale up on an existing algorithm, maybe that's what that situation needs in terms of leadership, in terms of psychology. But it's not the world that I operate in, and I choose to operate in the world of uncertainty. And possibility.

[00:41:39] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. I think a lot of people are insecure, uh, I would imagine whoever said that to you is probably quite an insecure human being, and is reliant on certainty in order to feel safe in the world, because if you embrace possibility, you

wouldn't come up with that conclusion that you all over the place, you'd say those are lots of really interesting options, let's explore them, you know. I love that when people bring questions to the table rather than answers, because you always get to a better place.

[00:42:14] **Street Store:** The street store turns 10 this year. The world's first rent-free premises. Free, free pop-up store provides a dignified shopping experience to those in need, allowing them to choose from a selection of pre-loved clothing and shoes. Over a thousand stores have been hosted around the world in the past decade, and now we're calling on you to host your own. Visit the streetstore.org to sign up and find out how.

[00:42:42] **Mike Abel:** The story goes that when you turned 50, your goal was to spend 50 percent of your time building a scalable and sustainable non-profit organization in South Africa. So that would probably have been, again, your mind wandering off like that man criticised you and that South Africa thanks you for, actually. Tell me more about what brought you to that decision about turning 50 and shifting gear or changing perspective about how you were going to invest your time versus spend your time.

[00:43:12] **Gidon Novick:** Well, firstly, I haven't stuck to that because I still spend too much time, I think, on business-related things. Business is amazing. I think it creates wonderful opportunities and innovations. I think it, it moves the world forward. So I think the role of business generally is, is brilliant in the world and I support it and like being involved in it. But there's a flip side, particularly in this country because of what we spoke about the responsibility of government not being fulfilled. So in our constitution, which everyone may not be aware of, there's many rights that are entrenched that South Africans all have absolute access to in terms of their rights in our constitution. One of them is the right to food, which is in the constitution. Now, what does that mean? Nobody really knows, but the constitution of the government gives every single individual in South Africa, the right to food, to proper nutrition. The reality on the ground is that more than 10 million South Africans have inadequate nutrition. Now, it's just impossible, I think, for an affluent or middle class person to even think about that because it's just, we just don't think about it. We just don't know. And Alan Brody, who runs SA Harvest, the organisation I chair, I once went to an event and he was speaking at the event and he said, he framed it as a catastrophe. When I first thought, heard it, I thought, wow, that's, is that a little bit of exaggeration? But the absolute opposite. It was the perfect description of the situation that we have in this country with 10 million plus people, inadequate nutrition. Now the flip side of that, and this relates to how you framed South Africa as a country with just about everything in place. From a food point of view, we have more than enough food. We're agriculturally rich. We've got incredible food producers. There's enough food for everybody. When you do the maths on food that's being produced and food that's available, there's enough nutritious food for everybody, but the system has been built to cater for the affluent and the middle class. Which is relatively small in South Africa. I love this problem. I love the challenge of trying to crack this because it's a solvable problem. Now whether I'll solve it or we'll solve it and whether it will happen in my life, I don't know. But I know

that it's very worthwhile. It's a very worthwhile endeavour trying to solve this problem. And what SA Harvest does, just in a very quick nutshell, is it accesses this food, this excess food. You know, it could be a farmer that has 10 million naartjies, they have to go somewhere within a week. Otherwise they're going to go, they're going to go fraught. SA Harvest has the logistical system and capability to get those into the hands of organizations, not individuals, organizations that, that are charitable organizations, creches, aged care facilities, schools, et cetera, soup kitchens that make meals for people in some way. So I think it's profound in its mission. It's doing incredibly well. Delivering the equivalent of about a one and a half million meals a month. Unbelievable. But really something that's got a scale enormously to even touch size, given the scale of the problem in South Africa. So they're very motivating for me. I personally love food. I hate waste. I just cannot get my head around waste and excess. And so that's a mission I would love to spend more time on. And I'm 54, so, I'm a few years behind in terms of my time allocation, but I am spending more time on it and will increase that allocation over time.

[00:46:48] **Mike Abel:** And Gidon, if people are listening right now to, let's say Harvest and what you're doing in those meals, how could they get involved? How could they make a difference?

[00:46:56] **Gidon Novick:** We always looking for people to, volunteers, we're looking for money because it's got to be funded. Yeah. The cost per meal works out at just about a rand a meal, if you can believe that. A rand, 330 grams of Nutritious food for one rand, well, because...

[00:47:15] **Mike Abel:** And for our overseas listeners, I mean, that's like five pence is a rand. You know, under four pence. Yeah. 4p and, uh, in dollars, probably about six US cents is one rand.

[00:47:28] **Gidon Novick:** Crazy. So, and by the way, this is a global, it's not a uniquely South African problem. Yeah. But I'm first and foremost worried about South Africa. Yeah. Because that's, that's where we live and that's where I think we've got a big responsibility.

[00:47:43] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, it's an unbelievable thing and very close to my heart coming at it from the other angle in terms of clothing and my street store movement, which, you know, I also think, you know, people should have the right to being dressed in clothing that is appropriate for the season, is cool in summer, is warm in winter, allows them to walk around and live their lives in dignity. So I think that maybe we do some kind of a, a collab or a JV or something between SA Harvest and the street store. Cause I see a marrying of minds there. Amen. Good. Good. Gid, you're a very curious person. What is your favourite thing to be learning about at the moment? Is it so much change in the world happening with artificial intelligence and you know, all of these different things, where's your mind straying to?

[00:48:31] **Gidon Novick:** Yeah. AI is fascinating. I think if you're not interested in AI, you should get, become interested in it at some level. Yeah. Because it is going to

impact your life. Yeah. In some way. It really is. It really is. Yeah. Exactly. So AI for sure. Yeah. I think geopolitics interests me immensely. Purely because of something we were talking about earlier in that it's just so easy to get the headline and the social media story or post on what's going on, but there's so many layers and there's so much history and there's so many incentives at play in terms of what's unfolding in the world. And I've become obsessed with understanding and I'm still at two out of ten in terms of my level of understanding, but I'm very determined to deepen my understanding because I think ultimately the risk of not understanding and the risk of people just going into these polarized camps of I'm a Russia supporter, I'm a Ukraine supporter, I'm an Israel supporter, I'm a Palestine supporter, I just think the risks of, of that world, that binary world, are immense. And at a personal level, I happen to be fascinated by it, but I really feel compelled to really understand what's going on and, and, and have better-informed conversations with people about it.

[00:49:46] **Mike Abel:** Well, I mean, it's very interesting because when you look at South Africa today and you look at our constitution and us being a constitutional democracy, it seems like a lot of our alignment today is with countries that don't celebrate democracy or freedom of speech and rights. And so I think that we are actually at quite an inflection point, because I don't think that that's where the people of the country are at. You know, I think that there's a difference between the government and the people. And I think that say there's one race, the human race, as they say, and you put humanity first, you're going to gravitate towards things that bring dignity and freedoms and opportunity to people, as opposed to geopolitical strategies that protect the status quo and your control of a country or your control of a business. You know, I think that you need the world to become more open, not closed. And I think that. The world right now, as we sit towards the very end of January 2024, is becoming a little bit more closed. And I think that people need to fight back to find their voices.

[00:50:49] **Gidon Novick:** And, and I just want to add one thing. I think like a question to ask, talking about curiosity, when one observes things. When one observes a government doing something or taking a step or, you know, doing something on the global stage is, what is driving them? What is motivating them to do what they're doing? And I think to ask that critical question and not just to assume, are they doing it because they're morally compelled or, you know, just to ask that question with skepticism. What is motivating this group of people, these actors to behave in the way that they're behaving? And to try and understand that better is important.

[00:51:25] **Mike Abel:** Very important. Very important. I think the listeners today would be very angry with me if I didn't ask you a very particular question. And we spoke a little bit about luck and we spoke a little bit earlier about upbringing and exposure. If you had to say as an entrepreneur, aside from luck, what is the one thing that you think has made you successful and you are successful, what would that thing be?

[00:51:50] **Gidon Novick:** Sure. Firstly, you know, the successful part. I don't know what successful means.

[00:51:55] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think you're a successful dad. I think you're a successful friend. I think you're a successful husband. I think you're a successful businessman. I think you're a successful person in community. in the country. So multi-layered.

[00:52:07] **Gidon Novick:** I appreciate that. I don't always feel that because I always feel inside that I've got to do more stuff. I've got to do more and I've got to, I don't. Maybe that's it. Maybe, maybe it is. And maybe that's the curse and the luck personality-wise is a sense of being permanently unsettled. The sense of stuff going on around me, opportunities, threats, confusion, and wanting to really engage with it and confront it and process it, and out of that comes inevitably some opportunity. I struggle to just accept the status quo, which is hard. It's hard to be permanently unsettled, if I can call it that. And I try things. I do yoga, I swim in the ocean and I take my seven dogs for a walk, which helps because it gets me into a space which, because I don't think it's necessarily healthy to be always looking for the next threat and looking for the next opportunity. And that is mostly the world that I live in. And one other thing is the ability to take risk and people give credit to me and others for being entrepreneurs. I think one of the privileges was that I could take risk. I could take a risk, financial risk.

[00:53:24] **Mike Abel:** That's so important. And it's a privilege of having a space to take a risk.

[00:53:28] **Gidon Novick:** Completely. And if I was dirt poor, and I was offered a safe job, and I had to work in a company, commit to a company for 20 years, and get a salary, I would have taken it. And I wouldn't be an entrepreneur because I wouldn't have been able to take the risk. So I think entrepreneurs often take credit for taking risk, but they were in a position that they could many times. I'm saying that, you know, there are the rags to riches stories of people that risked everything and their family and their livelihood. And I'm not one of those.

[00:54:03] **Mike Abel:** Well, it's interesting you say that because one of the great entrepreneurs of South Africa that I interviewed a few weeks ago for the podcast and for our listeners, if you haven't heard that one, I suggest you go and listen to get Gid's point around this. But that was Nick Dreyer, the founder of Filtscom. And he said to me, I was in a position to take the risk because I had absolutely nothing left to lose. And I think that's also very powerful, you know, when you've got your back against a wall, you know, why not? And I think a lot of South Africans are in that space, you know, where they don't have the privilege of having a plan B, but if they don't do plan A, then what alternative is there?

[00:54:41] **Gidon Novick:** I just want to say one thing on that, Mike, which fascinates me on behavioral psychology, and I'm not, by no means an expert, but one of the elements which fascinates me and I think about a lot is the idea of loss aversion. The science is that people fear a loss much, much more than they value a similar gain. The fear of losing 10 rand versus the potential feeling of gaining 10 rand, the fear feeling is pervasive and will drive your behaviour. And that's what drives us. But it's irrational because there's a flip side. And I think we need to keep challenging our

sense of loss aversion and our tendency in life to just steer away from. But in doing that, we're giving up tremendous upside.

[00:55:25] **Mike Abel:** Well, it's funny you say that because you remind me of my great friend, Kim Reid, who's the founders, you know, of Takealot.com. And a number of years ago he asked me, he said, how did the pitch go? And I said, no, we lost the pitch. He said, no, you didn't lose it because you never had it. You can only lose something that you've had. And I thought that was such an interesting way. Great insight. Exactly. We never won it. We never gained it, but we certainly didn't lose it. And I think just to your point, yea, I did once hear that a gram of loss weighs 10 times more than a gram of gain. You're talking about your setting of being a problem solver, and I guess if by definition you are a problem solver, then you naturally always will need a problem. And David Ogilvy, the great advertising man, had a concept which I always rejected. Only as I'm getting older do I see the wisdom in it. And I think you speak to it very profoundly in your setting and your condition, which is something called divine discontent. Being happy with being unsettled about something. Always striving for something better. Because if you suffer from divine discontent, it means that you are always going to be pushing for something more.

[00:56:32] **Gidon Novick:** I love that. I need to, uh learn more about that, because I think that's what I, I seek. I seek, I seek contentness in my discontent. Yeah.

[00:56:43] **Mike Abel:** I had a grandfather who was a very brilliant man, probably the most influential person in my life, and he had a propensity for moroseness. Only when I was older did I realize that my grandfather was only happy when he was unhappy.

[00:56:57] **Gidon Novick:** I don't want to be like him.

[00:56:58] **Mike Abel:** No, no, no, no. Anyway, not taking anything away from him. We're in the homestretch of our chat today, which has been unbelievably inspiring. What important thing have you changed your mind about in the world? Is there something that you could look back and say, I used to think this, but now I think that, or I fundamentally shifted my opinion on anything?

[00:57:21] **Gidon Novick:** Sure. So many things, Mike, because it literally happens a lot. One thing which maybe I can share a little bit with regards my kids, and maybe raising kids is like one of these things that you just have no idea, no matter what people tell you and advise you before, like you get into it and then it's just like you're starting from scratch with no knowledge. And my kids now are getting, are teenagers in their early twenties. What I would have imagined or maybe my mindset when they were growing up was that I'm going to help them to become a certain thing. Yes. I'm going to push them in a certain direction. Yes. And what I've completely changed my mind about as far as kids go is that they are their own unique beings with their own unique aspirations, with their own unique circumstances, with their own unique personalities. And the best that I can do is just help them explore and find out what it is that suits them and matches their aspiration in life. And it's completely changed

my perspective as a parent. Yeah. And it's actually In a way, a lot easier because it's, I've taken that burden and I think we collectively, myself and Lindy, have taken that burden off ourselves to determine the future of our kids.

They will determine their future. We are lucky enough to be able to give them some opportunities to explore and maybe have a greater spectrum of opportunity. And that's been a profound change in mindset for me. And as each day goes by and I learn even more that these are unique beings. Yeah. And they need to figure out life for themselves with our support. It's been a great change in mindset.

[00:59:00] **Mike Abel:** Mm. I agree with you completely and my view from when my kids were quite young was that I need to play to their strengths, not try and correct their weaknesses as I perceived them. A number of years ago, I saw a brilliant quote, which was about giving your children two things, roots and wings.

[00:59:18] **Mike Abel:** And I love that, you know, roots being To know that your parents love you and back you and trust you and whatever, and then wings for you to fly and do your own thing, you know, not to follow in their footsteps necessarily. And it says something that you choose to do, but not to put that expectation on them or, you know, it's kind of a societal view, because I think for me, my measure of whether I'm a good dad or a bad dad is, am I conduit to making my children feel loved, accepted, and happy? That's all not. Are they doing me proud? Yeah. Gid, It's been amazing having you in the studio with us today. Thank you for sharing your energy and your experience with me and our listeners. I can't wait to see what you're going to do next. You're 54. You turning 55, maybe 55 is the 50 percent I don't know, but I have no doubt that it's going to be game-changing. And chatting to you, you know, for me, it's so important how we need to unlock the human in, inside all of us, you know, at the end of the day, tapping into what people want and people need and who they are, all those things you've spoken about, and that leads to business success. You know, I think often people think it's the hard stuff, but I often say, uh, soft sell is the hardest sell of all. And I think you've brought that to life in a beautiful way and being a force for positive change in society. Lots for you to think about if you're listening to this and lots for me to think about.

[01:00:49] **Gidon Novick:** Thanks. That's such fun. I wish it were longer. Thanks for the chat.

[01:01:03] **Mike Abel:** Thanks so much for listening today. If you enjoyed this podcast, why not leave us a five-star review. Tune into Willing and Abel next time for more conversations that challenge perspectives.

[01:01:15] **Credits:** This podcast is produced by 2Stories. Written by Linda Scarborough, produced by Carol Williams, with audio editing, engineering and sound design by Kozi Mzimela, with production assistance from M&C Saatchi Group South Africa's team, Maciek Dubla and Nadia Siegel. Special thanks to Sonic Nursery and Edible Audio for the recording of these episodes.