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WHY NOT ME? CAREER LESSONS WITH MOMO BERTRAND

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Hello, my friends. Thank you for joining today.

You joined on a really great episode because today I have a remarkable man as my guest. His name is Momo Bertrand, originally from Cameroon, West Africa and now based as the digital media officer at the United Nations in Turin, Italy. You'll hear me talk about him throughout this episode as an amazing guy. And he really is an amazing guy. For some reason, I could not think of another adjective throughout this entire episode. So you're going to hear the word *amazing* a lot.

It's probably because I was just so impressed with him, that I started getting tongue-tied. His story is an inspiration. And I was so happy that he agreed to come on to the podcast and share it with all of you because he really is an example of what's possible when you get your head in the right place. So I'm going to let Momo share his story with you. But it's quite incredible.

He started in Cameroon, where he opened up the first digital agency in Cameroon. He applied for a scholarship at the University of San Diego and got it. He applied to 500 jobs in his chosen field and now is working for the EU and in Italy. After a month of being there, they got hit with the Coronavirus.

I really paused my entire schedule of things that I wanted to do to be able to not only speak about the Coronavirus, and its impact on people's careers and certainly take some time to speak about what's happening right now with the Black Lives Matter movement. But I think it's time to share Momo's story because it really really is an inspiration.

I would say that the key thing that I took away from after speaking with Momo was that he really focused on going after the things he could control. He didn't let rejection or other people's opinions hold him back from going after things that he really wanted in his career. He just stayed focused and made sure that he was only trying to improve and do the things that he could control to move him forward. He didn't let failure stop him. He only focused on learning from everything that he did, tweaking things, and then continuing to move forward. He always was prepared.

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The key thing was he always believed in himself, which is why I'm calling this episode *Why not me?* That was really the theme that I would say and Momo's words really summarized his attitude towards bringing in the career he wanted to life. He always said to himself, *Why not me?* That's where he is today.

Momo actually just published a book of his poetry called *I Choose Love*. It is a beautiful book of poetry, and I will link to it in the show notes as well. I will link to Momo and all his coordinates if you want to look him up in the show notes as well at thecareerreset.com/37. I'm going to stop talking now and I am going to introduce you to the most amazing guy, Momo Bertrand.

Mel Savage: Welcome Momo. How are you today?

Momo Bertrand: I'm doing great. Thanks for having me on your podcast, Mel.

Mel Savage: It's so good to have you. For everyone, I found Momo on LinkedIn. He did this amazing post about just really tenaciously going after his dream job. And it inspired me so much. I reached out to him. He's going to talk a bit about his journey, and it's just so fascinating. You're such an inspiration. Thank you for taking the time to speak to the audience today.

Momo Bertrand: Thanks and hello to all the people who are listening right now.

Mel Savage: Fantastic. Momo, tell us where you are so people get a sense of what's going on with you.

Momo Bertrand: I am currently in Northern Italy, precisely in Torino, which is a medium-sized town just a few hours from Milan. We all know the situation that's happening with Coronavirus. Just to be positive, things are not as we expect, but we are hopeful that the crisis is going to pass them. So that's where I am.

Mel Savage: That's fantastic. You just got there too, you just started your new job, and boom, you're in the middle of this. When we spoke last week, I was so taken by how positive and motivated you were to add value and just to stay focused on what you were doing. Kudos to you for that.

Momo Bertrand: Thanks. I think the only reason we have challenges is to overcome them.

Mel Savage: The reason we have challenges is to overcome them. That's fantastic. That is someone who is at the cause of their life. Let's start with a little bit about you. Tell us a little bit about your history. Where are you from? How did you get to where you are right now?

Momo Bertrand: I'm originally from Cameroon. It's a country in West or Central Africa, depending on who you ask. And it has the best seafood in the world. I grew up there for most of my life. I went to school there, and I began my career there. My mom is still back there and I grew up with my siblings back in Cameroon. When I left college, I started a marketing agency, one of the first in the country because I saw a gap. I worked in that agency for a few years, then I got a scholarship to the United States to California. I started there, and then I worked there for a few months. And then I got this job at the United Nations in Italy. That's my story in like, one military second.

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Mel Savage: Well, there was a lot in there. I don't want to lose focus on it, too. Because the first thing is, you could tell, first of all, that you are someone who goes after what they want because you started a marketing agency in Cameroon, the first of its kind. What motivated you to do that? Where did you see the need and how did you even get started?

Momo Bertrand: My mom had a print shop in the basement. During the holidays, I would go downstairs and I would actually work on creating books and everything. I've always had this passion for creating stuff, and most importantly, for creating stories and stuff like that. I didn't study marketing at school, I started management. But when I graduated, I realized that it was really a gap in society.

Most people invested a lot in flyers and things that people didn't really look at. I was like, wait, there's Facebook. Everybody's on Facebook. Why don't we use this for marketing? It was like, no, Facebook is just for fun. I was like, okay, I'm going to prove you wrong. So I decided to start to start the agency. I just had my laptop and internet connection, and I was in my mom's room. She was like, *"Why are you not going out? You're just on your laptop all day."* And I'm like, *"Mom, I'm building a company."* Steve just started in his garage. I did that.

We went from just me to a team of four employees, full staff, and working with Fortune 500 companies. But it was really tough. It took like, two and a half years, I think. It was an interesting experience. And when I look back, I'm really grateful for that. Because, yes, there's a struggle and everything but a lot of the principles and the techniques that I'm using in communication and marketing right now, I learned them when I had to do things using rudimentary tools, so I think that's really important.

Mel Savage: Yes, that's so often especially in business and even in your careers, I find too, that a lot of people outsource things. Even as an entrepreneur, people say to outsource your website to someone but I want to do my website myself because I wanted to understand what was happening. Before I give it to someone else, I want to understand and learn those rudimentary tools and what was possible because that helps feed your thinking when you know what's possible. It gives you an idea.

Momo Bertrand: I totally agree. I think the latest research in terms of skill is, that you shouldn't just be good at one thing but you should have a plethora of skills. It doesn't mean that you need to be able to build the best website in the world but once you know how things work, then you can be able to do things yourself, or next time you're working on a bigger project, you know how to set up, lead people, or something. I totally agree. I agree with you on that.

Mel Savage: While you have this agency that you're building and you're growing and you have the staff you decide that you're going to apply for this scholarship. I know that you applied a couple of times. So let's talk a little bit about that.

Momo Bertrand: I was always looking for global opportunities because I was from Cameroon. I love Cameroon, I love Africa. But I think the world is a big place and it's just good to explore and look a little bit beyond like where we are right now. So I was like, okay, I'm going to be exploring things. And I found this School of Peace in California, at the University of San Diego. I was like, oh, this looks cool because sort of the mantra of this school was, on one hand, you can be able to do innovative stuff; but on the other hand, you could be able to solve global problems. That's how my mentality is.

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I've always loved social issues, but also, the business and marketing side and everything. I found that and I applied. The first time, I didn't get him. I was so sad. I was like, why didn't they get me? I invested so much time in writing the application, getting recommendations, and paying the application fee, which is a lot of money, for me, at least, from Cameroon. My mom was like, oh, it's all right. It's going to be fine. The following year, I almost did not apply. It was like, three or four weeks left. I said, okay, why not? Just apply again.

I just sent and closed the application. I didn't look at it. I wasn't even looking at my email regularly. But then, one day, I got the notification that I had been given a full scholarship so it was an opportunity for me. Yes, I had the firm that I was running. But I was like, I don't know, you just have this voice that tells you this is something you should pursue. What I did was, I just helped all my team members. Someone had to go to school so I helped them get into masters. Others wanted to continue working so they went to work for our clients. Once I settled that issue, I traveled to the United States.

Mel Savage: That's amazing. First of all, just going for it. Go for a scholarship in another country, so many people would not push themselves to do that. To not get it, and then get past that and go, *I'm just going to do it again*. That takes so much courage and the ability to really get past failure. You said something to me last time about, *Why not me?* That helped you get past the fact that you know what, why not? Why not try for what I want? Can you explain what your thought processes are around this whole *Why not me?*

Momo Bertrand: It's a very common statement. I think it's not just my mom or Cameroon. It's very common among African parents. They're like, *"If your friend was able to get a scholarship, he doesn't have five heads, or seven legs, or two hearts; he has exactly the same physiology as you and you should be able to do it."* When I used to go online, I would see on LinkedIn, someone posting, *Hey, I got a scholarship to the United States. Hey, I just got this beautiful job.* I was like, *Why not me?*

There's no reason that explains why I shouldn't be able to do this thing. I would understand if it's like, maybe Michael Jordan, being able to have these physical properties. It's just about applying for a job or applying for a scholarship. Why not? Why should I not be able to get it, especially if I have the basic prerequisites? It's like, okay, I've worked hard in school, and I am motivated. I have ambition, why not? Why not me?

Mel Savage: I love it. Like, to me, it's so inspirational, because a lot of people would say it in a different way. They might use it in a different tone. They might say, *why not me* and get whiny. Versus like, *why not me? I can do this*. So often, it's not the smartest people who are the most successful, it's the most determined. The ones who are able to get past the failures and keep trying and keep learning. Those are the ones that really reach their dreams or achieve amazing things in the world. Kudos to you again. I just find you such an inspiration.

So you're in the US, you're in California, and you're doing your thing. I know the program you said was a combination of creative, innovative thinking with global impact, and that really had a huge effect on you. You decided at that point that's what you wanted to do with your career. Is that right?

Momo Bertrand: Definitely. I think I've always had that in mind. Just today, I was looking at old files and some old documents that I had published, some visioning that I had done. Even though it wasn't stated clearly, I could connect the dots looking backward and say that, okay, there's always this element of being able to use innovative

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tools, but also, changing the world for the better, especially on the social side. I think when I went for the Masters, it concretized itself.

The first class that I took, I think was UN Sustainable Development Goals and how it's the urgency of now, and how each of us can do something to sort of make the world a better place. I know it sounds cliche, but I found it pretty cool. Then the second class I had was entrepreneurship. So instead of seeing they're bland, I was like, oh, this is really cool. They're not necessarily opposed to one another. I was like, yeah, I want to do this. I want to work in a role where I can make a global impact, but still be able to use my resourcefulness, creativity, and innovative skills.

Mel Savage: That's really fascinating to be able to put those two things together, too. I agree that having a change-the-world mentality, even for me, that's really what drives me. I want to change the world, one person at a time. I don't want people suffering at their desks, in their careers, because life is too short for that. And that's creating less stress in the world. Helping people take control of their careers is my way of creating a better world.

I think you're doing a beautiful job, honestly.

Mel Savage: Thank you very much. I love you even more now. So you graduate and you got a job in marketing in California. But this is the part that really, I was like, wow, this guy is something special. You decided you were going to get a job, a global impact job, and you sent out like 500 resumes, or something like that. Tell me all about that.

Momo Bertrand: I started quite early on, just before graduating. I was like, okay, now I need to work in a global role. So I was like, okay, it should be something like United Nations, or Save the Children, or maybe like, the nonprofit arm of Google, maybe NASA's communication aspect, talking about the future of science for women, but something that would span the whole world. You can imagine, the competition in those kinds of roles was really tough.

Mel Savage: Those are massive organizations. Good for you. You don't go half-baked.

Momo Bertrand: I was working in a startup. Once I graduated, I started working in a startup. So it's not like I wasn't doing anything. Yes, you can start small, but the vision is still there. I really wanted to have a global impact so I started applying. At some point, I wouldn't even look at the *thank you for applying*. I wouldn't even read the details or something. It's almost like I had become numb. I didn't care about the rejections anymore.

I would just wake up, and say, *Okay, Momo, today, we have 10 applications to send. Are you ready? Yes.* I just go in and then I send applications, because, at some point, some days I'm like, *Okay, Momo, let's focus on quality.* So I take time to write the cover letters and everything. And then I'll send and then I'll receive rejections. It makes them like, *Wait, you took your time, it didn't work.* So I just send out as many resumes as possible.

I did LinkedIn, I did Indeed, and every possible job platform. I split the job platforms, and the job ads on each website. I did everything you can imagine. I won't use the word *harass,* but it was close to harassing people on LinkedIn. I was like, *Hey, I'm this person. I've been doing something. I was thinking about it today.* It was quite funny.

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I think I was applying at Intel. They had a CSR thing or something. So I did a whole analysis of their competitors and everything and I sent it to them. I was like, *Hey, I'm really interested in your thing. I've sent you an analysis of your market or something. So you should hire me or something.* But of course, they didn't respond. I saw that they had read it because I saw that someone had clicked on a thing.

There's this guy, his name is Les Brown, and he has this thing that he says you need to be hungry. I was watching him every day, and I was like, *Okay, I'm hungry. I need to get this job.*

Mel Savage: You know what else is really great about based on how I coach people as well is, that you didn't measure your success by what you didn't control. Whether or not you got the job wasn't 100% in your control. Other people had to weigh in on that. The only thing that you could control was getting up every morning and sending out your 10 resumes or chasing people or asking for an interview. That you could control, and you focus your mindset and your success around that. If people want to be with you, great. Then you would take the next step of the thing that you could control, but you just focus on the things that you can control and stay hungry as you said, which is brilliant, a brilliant way to approach it.

Momo Bertrand: Thank you.

Mel Savage: Because we often get caught up with *I sent out these 10 resumes and nobody responded. I'm such a 'failure.'* You sent out 10 resumes, that's not a failure. What are you measuring success? How are you measuring your success? If you're measuring your success around things that you can't control, then it's going to be really hard to control your own success because you're putting it in other people's hands. I don't know if you knew that you were doing that, but it's an amazing way to handle it.

You're an amazing guy. I keep saying amazing. I need another word, clearly. But it wasn't just you, right? You have an amazing support network, too. So tell me a little bit about the people around you that kept you motivated and kept you focused on moving forward.

Momo Bertrand: I think my biggest hero will be my mom. My dad passed away when I was really young so she raised me alone. I remember when we were young, she was so tough. I used to cry and stuff. But then when I grew up, she had so much pressure and everything. And with time, I learned to appreciate that and to be grateful for that. Once I became a teenager and everything, she really took my perspective.

When I was going through this thing and applying for jobs, I'd tell her, *"Okay, Mom. I'm applying for these…"* She's like, "*Yeah, just do it. Just do it. You never know. You just need to be patient. And if it's for you, it's for you."* And I'll be like, *"I've applied to like 10 jobs today. Nobody has even responded."* She's like, It's all right. *"Just take it easy, okay? You need to be patient. Good things take time."* And she had all these cliche things that people say. But I think when it comes from your mom, you're like, *"Okay, my mom. It's true."*

So it really helps, and also my siblings. One of my siblings was able to get a job in a Fortune 500 company as an engineer, and I was like, if we grew up in the same house and he can do it, of course, I can do it. Why not me? He also gave me tips and suggestions. All my siblings, the way they helped me, they were like, these are some books I should read and stuff like that. So it really helps to know that even if I didn't get it immediately, I would always have people at home to lean on. And that was very helpful.

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Mel Savage: You weren't thinking small either, which I love. You're applying to NASA, the UN, and Google. You're going for it. I love that about your story as well. Finally, of all places, the UN responds to you.

Momo Bertrand: The way it happened is, first, what is interesting is the job that eventually responded was one in which I had not necessarily over-optimized my resume. I had not over-optimized my cover letter. I had done something good but it wasn't the best thing I had done among those 500. It was weird. I was just sitting in the office and I went on LinkedIn during the break, and I noticed that somebody at the UN had looked at my profile. I was like, wait, this is interesting.

Then a few hours later, I got the email that, *Hey, you've been selected for the interview.* I was like, oh my god, I just stepped out and I screamed. I told myself, okay, Momo, you have one chance. You need to make sure it works. I was really happy. Even if it just ended there, I was happy that at least, I had even gotten an interview because most of the jobs that I applied for, I didn't even get a response. The first step was a test. But still, it's going to the first stage. I was really happy.

Mel Savage: Even though you said your resume wasn't anything special. You worked on it, but it wasn't like you overdid it or anything, then you went to and prepared for the interview process, which you took very seriously.

Momo Bertrand: Yes. I told myself that I was going to prepare like it was a Ph.D. defense or something like a thesis. Looking back, the only things that have prepared me as hard as this interview, were probably my high school exams, where we had 11 subjects or five subjects to do and it was really tough. But then, I don't think I've prepared harder for almost any other thing in my life. I downloaded books and watched videos.

I had a Google Doc, where I wrote all the possible questions that I could be asked. That Doc was 20 to 30 pages, with every possible question that could be asked to someone who wants to go work in communication. Not only in the social sector, but I had the weirdest questions. The things I did were almost like a cycle. It was not exactly to the point of perfection, but I wanted to know every possible thing.

I went to the website because it's a specialized United Nations agency, which is the training center of the international organization. I went to the website and downloaded the Constitutional status. Basically, the founding documents of the organization, the mission, and the vision. I read everything that I could find for the interview. Because I told myself, you have this one chance. You have just one shot. You really, really have to take it. So I studied really, really hard.

Mel Savage: Whether or not someone has the 30 pages of questions or not, the idea is you want to really understand the organization that you're applying to, and you want to prep for questions, and you want to know how to talk about yourself. One of the things that you mentioned the other day when we were talking that really impressed me was you knew your story.

Momo Bertrand: Definitely. The '*tell me about yourself*' was something that I worked on a lot because that's the first question. It sets the pace. I took my mirror from the living room. I took it back to one angle, and I looked good. And I would speak to myself like, *Momo, tell me about yourself.* And my roommate was like, *"What's happening to this guy? Is he smoking something?"* I was like, *"Dude, you can't understand."* I think it's really

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important. What's interesting is they actually give you feedback at some stage of the interview. They're like, *Yes, we think that you're passionate about your story.* So the ability to tell my story, I think, was really important.

Mel Savage: Your story can be anything you want it to be. But how do you like your story to be in a way that is not only passionate but relevant to the job you're applying for and practicing it? You're right, it's the very first question. So if you nail that, everything else becomes a bit easier. You can relax a little bit.

Momo Bertrand: Definitely. If you see them nodding in the first question, it automatically makes you say, okay, I'm probably making a good impression. And your hopes go high. Like you said, being able to show you're passionate, that you have the experience, but most importantly, that you can add something to the company, and that you've done your homework, made me stressed.

Mel Savage: Yes. How you prep for the interview demonstrates how you're going to show up once you get the job. You doing all that work was a fantastic demonstration of what it would be like to have Momo working for the UN. That's a piece of advice that I give everyone that I work with, as well. Just pretend how would you show up for the job. Show up that way for the interview.

Momo Bertrand: I think it makes a lot of sense thinking about it. If you can't prep for an interview, how would you be able to prep for the job? I'm just talking about the manager's perspective or the hiring manager. It makes sense.

Mel Savage: So now you have the job. And we talked a little bit about this. How is it?

Momo Bertrand: It's beautiful. I was looking for a better adjective. But it's awesome. It's amazing. I went to my break today, I was like, wait, I actually work in the United Nations. It's surreal. We have this amazing mission and we all know what the United Nations stands for. It's inspiring, and it's humbling to be able to contribute to that mission. But even in my specific role, I work in the International Training Center of the ILO, and being able to not just do communications and digital media, but duties to be able to advance the decent work to support the Sustainable Development Goals, that's amazing.

I have two bosses and they are really cool. One is Belgian, and one is Italian. It's a mix of cultures and it's so cool. They really uplift you and they push you to be better. And most importantly, they believe in you. If I can prove that we can go this way, they actually listen. They don't care that I'm younger. They don't care that I'm from another part of the world or something. So it's really been an amazing experience so far.

Mel Savage: I'm so glad. It's all about what's in your head, good for you. Good for you for making it an amazing experience, especially when you finally get there, and then a few weeks later, you're dealing with all of this. At the end of the day, though, I know you're in the digital part, your job is around digital marketing and digital solutions. What is it again?

Momo Bertrand: It's a little bit complicated, but to make it very plain, I work within the Learning Innovation Program, which is basically, it's really an innovation program within the ILO. My specific role is digital media. You think about communications, think about web design, think about any innovative media-related stuff that an institution like the International Center for the ILO could do.

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Mel Savage: Wow, that's amazing. And it's exactly what you were hoping for. You've had a digital marketing agency, it's creative, and it has a global impact. You knew what you wanted, and you went after it 100%.

Momo Bertrand: Yes, it's really like a dream come true, honestly.

Mel Savage: Well, you made it come true. Let's say there's someone listening to this right now thinking, *Holy smokes, I'm sitting at my desk. I'm not happy with my career. I'm not sure what to do about it. I don't know what my next move would be.* What advice would you give them?

Momo Bertrand: I'd say, *Why not you?* But honestly, I'd say, I don't know if this is relevant here. One of my professors who taught me a lot of things about management and a lot of things about life, passed away two days ago, unfortunately, in an accident. I went back, and I was looking at our last exchange, and the last message that we shared was something in the lineup of, *just go for it*. It was also the last thing that he said on his Facebook profile.

So for me, we live in uncertain times, not to say that that should be a motivator, but just go for it. What do you have to lose? The pain of staying where you are is much bigger than any pain that you would experience by failing and walking towards where you want to go. So why not you? Why can't you have that dream job? That's what I would say. It's possible. You can do it. I know it sounds cliche or something, but life is too brief not to live and do what you really want to do.

Just from a more positive aspect, I think that each person comes to the planet to do something, to make a difference, and everybody has it within them. But then it's all about deciding to take the leap. And to take the leap, you should ask yourself, *why not me?* I can do this.

Mel Savage: Yes. Bet on yourself. Believe in yourself. You can do this. And I love what you said, too, that the pain of being unhappy or sitting at your desk or not doing what you want to do is so much harder than failing, but going after what you want. I love that. Thank you so much for joining me today. Thank you, you're such an inspiration. I wish you all the best in your career moving forward. I know that you are going to achieve amazing things.

Momo Bertrand: Thank you so much, Mel. It's really a pleasure talking to you. You're sort of the first non-woke person that I'm talking to today. So it's a pleasure to have this conversation. And thanks to everybody who is listening, keep listening, and I wish you the best in your careers and lives.

mel savage
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