

**Embracing Change and Building Resilience: How to
Shape Better Decisions in a Fast-Changing World -
Dustin Burleson: Ep #472**



Full Episode Transcript

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Dr. David Phelps

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Welcome to the Dentist Freedom Blueprint, a podcast about freedom—freedom from expectations of society and the traditional path to success that has been ingrained in us from our early years, I'm joined by mavericks, renegades, and non-conformers to discuss an anti-traditional path to financial freedom, freedom of time, relationships, health, and ultimately freedom of purpose. My name is Dr. David Phelps. Let's get started.

David Phelps: Hi, David here. Well, today I brought back one of my longtime good friends and colleagues in the field of dentistry and orthodontics, and that's Dr. Dustin Burleson. Dustin's been practicing orthodontics for 16 years. He attended the University of Missouri–Kansas City School of Dentistry for both his dental degree and his certificate in orthodontics. He had his MBA from New Charter University and is board-certified by the American Board of Orthodontics. Dr. Burleson uses his specialty training to help patients with cleft palate at St. Luke's and Children's Mercy hospitals. Dr. Burleson is the director of the Leo H. Rheam Foundation for Cleft and Craniofacial Orthodontics

He also supports Smiles Change Lives and is the nation's largest provider of free orthodontic care through his community orthodontic program. In addition to his professional pursuits, Dr. Burleson finds fulfillment in his role as a husband and father of three. Outside of orthodontics, Dustin enjoys cycling, golfing, and sailing.

And just a little personal note, I've known Dustin for well over a decade. We've become good friends and colleagues, and we share a lot of the mutual benefit of serving our industry colleagues in orthodontics and dentistry in the respective things that we do. He's a great mentor, really a deep thinker, and somebody I think you'll really enjoy the conversation that we have today. I'll

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let you be the judge, but Dustin's a great guy, and I'll have him back from time to time to do some deeper dives as we've done today.

Dustin, it is always great to have you back. You are one of my favorite people to read and follow and I love being when I have a chance to be with your mastermind groups and hanging out with you at some other meeting, but also just reading what you write.

And that kind of prompted me to jump in today and just pick up some things that you've delved into recently. You're a very innovative thinker. And one of the things that I think I see, and this happens to me, probably everybody else, we get to a new year, of course, people are setting up resolutions and goals and resetting.

And that's always a good thing. You should do that all the time. But the new year is a time when people do that. And you wrote recently about kind of consequences or the effects of short-term thinking regarding making decisions on really long-term issues or plans. And so people just grabbing something to fix something in the short run, but they're not realizing there's unintended consequences that reveal themselves later.

You want to talk about that a little bit, and how you see that maybe in your life or with people you work with? I mean, hard-working, very good people that we have a chance to work with. Where do you see some of these effects occur?

Dustin Burleson: I'm seeing one of them in this room right now. There's a short-term effect of the electrician came yesterday in this new house we're in Seattle and we said, "Hey, I don't think those lights are installed properly." So I think he took the short-term fix on this light. So I'm going to dim it just a little bit so your viewers don't have this constant flickering in those corners.

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David Phelps: Perfect example right there in front of us. Didn't have to go far for that one.

Dustin Burleson: All kidding aside, we had the same issue with our remodel in Kansas City. Most electricians are taking very short-term fixes for things. I'm going, "Hey, maybe we can have some light bulbs that actually dim in this house. That would be cool." We come in early in the morning and put the lights on like the lowest setting is like fluorescent, like glare, right? I'm like, I long for the days when we had real light bulbs.

You could actually dim the toxic waste when you had to dispose of them. But yeah, I think that article resonated really well with our readers. And a lot of it is from very smart people like Charlie Munger and Warren Buffett, Shane Parrish, people that do mental modeling. And it resonated, I think, because a lot of our members who have found you in Freedom Founders have used this kind of stepwise progression and say, like, "What's success for me a year from now? And how do we then take incremental steps backwards to today?" So if a doctor listening to this says, "I really want to do a real estate deal." All right. If they just sit and wait and rely on society's push to do things in the short term, they're going to take the vacation to the Dominican Republic, they're going to buy the jet ski this summer.

They're not going to do the things that would prepare them to make an investment in real estate. So I always ask them, I say, "What is a huge success look for you? Just next year, what would be huge for you next year?" You say, "Well, I'd probably be like ready to do my first deal with David's group, but I'd be finally ready to invite. I'd have the knowledge. I would have the financial acumen. I would be prepared. My spouse would be on board."

And I say, "Cool. So let's just back up three months from that. What is that person doing three months before your first deal?" And they sit and go, "Okay, well, yeah, like my spouse would be at that meeting. I'd have enough cash on hand," like, okay, now let's go back three more months, six months

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before that. What's that person doing? And then I say nine months before that big success, what is that person doing? And I say, what are they going to do today? And they suddenly go, "Not buying the second boat." Right? So I think it forces us to think about where our future self is going to be. And that's everything you're going to do is going to be in the future. But we sit and ruminate on like, "Well, I never had the chance. I wasn't born into money. I don't know the right people. I'm in the wrong town," and that's all shit that's in the past.

And we fail to realize everything we're going to do, right? Even the last two minutes you and I spent together is gone. It's all going to be in the future. So that kind of forces them to think long-term. And that's the way you generate happiness. That's the way you generate success for everyone around you is by playing the long game, right? But society, by the way, is telling us the entire opposition to that.

David Phelps: Yeah, get it today, make it happen today, no planning. Our education of what we went through was so built on step by step. You add credits and you went through the courses, and so we're kind of used to that. And I think we tend to be risk-averse, which I think that's not a bad thing when we're dealing with the human body, that's probably good, but in everything else in life, you're right.

If we don't really look ahead and then reverse engineer and have benchmarks, milestones to know where we are in that pathway, once we define success, as you said, wherever that is, nine months out of the year out, wherever that is, and then reverse engineer that, we don't have those milestones to measure.

We get lost and we're always getting ready. Well, I'm getting ready. As you said, well, I'll study some more and never making the steps. So when you reverse engineer and actually identify what success looks like on the way,

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then nine months later, whatever that time point is, gosh, you're there, or close to it, and it makes a world of difference.

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, I was watching an old, like, it had to be VHS tape, obviously, re-digitized and brought to life, Gary Halbert from one of his seminars down in Key West, and it just smacked me in the head. He said, “If you're always meditating, if you're always planning, if you're always thinking and constantly kind of preparing for this thing you're going to do, you're really doing nothing.”

That's like a lot of what all of us do is like we're going to buy a new laser for the practice, and so we stack up all the journals and we think about it and we talk to a friend and then we finally buy it and then we're onto the next thing. So I think like anything, and it's very much from Dan Kennedy, one of our mentors and friends. It's very much from Warren Buffett who says like, “Just look around at what everyone else is doing, and that's a pretty safe bet. You could do the opposite and be successful.”

Short-term planning, look at our government for crying out loud. How much is our debt, but it might as well be fake. It's like monopoly money, right? And they're finally going, “Hey, the interest on that is suddenly real,” that there'd be significant consequences to that the minute the dollar starts to have issues, it might not stay as the world's premier currency. What do we do there? So that's all a consequence of short-term thinking. How long did they kick the can down the road for? The government opened like 45 days for some people. They can't even do a one-year budget.

David Phelps: Well, with politics, I mean, we could come up with example after example. That's the world they live in. It's never long-term consequences for them because they're in office and they create the havoc and then they're out and like somebody else's problems.

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So we're out, they never stick around and see what happens. So that kind of leads into another provocation you put out, which was about certainty. And I think Mark Twain said it well, he says, "It's not what you don't know that gets you into trouble, but it's what you know for sure that just ain't so," is where the real problem is.

And so how much of the time do we live our life kind of in ignorance? We may follow something or somebody, we may think that's the way to go because everybody else does it, it's the herd mentality, it's the group thing, so I'll just jump on and do it. Have you really questioned the essence of what it is you believe is to be true?

Right? And so digging that a little bit, what areas do you see, again, with people who are proven to work with, but where does the—certainly, I know what I'm doing. I've got this. When does that come back to haunt them? If they don't really have a way to dissect and see what they're looking at really has truth and foundation to it.

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, I mean it's such a profound quote by Mark Twain and Richard Feynman says the same thing in a different vein. He says, "First don't be fooled, and then realize you're the easiest person to fool." We fool ourselves. I was in a seminar once and we're looking at all these beautiful cases with this really cool bracket system and it's new and it's exciting and most of the people sitting around me have been practicing for 30 or 40 years, and by lunchtime, they've said, "I already know how to do this better than I can. This new thing's not going to help me."

And so that really falls in the category of willful ignorance, which is, I'm not even going to attempt to learn if this could be better for my patients. And we get stuck in that rut. And it's really easy in private practice to do that because we are in a silo often. We don't have partners and when we go to CE meetings it's, "How many chairs do you have and how big is your practice and how many millions did you do?" And no one's saying like, "Hey, show

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me some cases where things didn't go well, and then how could we be better at this?"

So there's fooling ourselves, and then there's willful ignorance where if we don't push ourselves to kill some of our best-loved ideas, we just wake up one day and just because we've been doing it for 30 years the same way over and over, call that experience, right? And like, doing the same thing for 30 years is not experience, it's ignorance, right?

I don't know who said it, I think it's like a movie line or somewhere, but a lot of movies have great screenwriters. It said, "If people don't change, they just get more like themselves." But if you look at really effective people who do understand these principles, and Charlie Munger again comes to mind, they find some of their best-loved ideas and they try to kill them.

He said, "I always go into a conversation with someone trying to know their position better than they do." Right? Even though I don't, even though I don't agree with it. And that'll help you in negotiation. That'll help you in hiring. That'll help you in everything in life if you can see what that person sees.

So I think that it really plays into being a little bit more self-aware and trying not to fool ourselves that this is the way we've always done it around here. I've already put a bunch of money into this so this is how we're going to continue to do it. And meanwhile, you put on blinders and don't realize there's always a better way to do it, right? It's a big mantra in Silicon Valley. Not everything in Silicon Valley has gone on as great, but there are some pretty cool things that have come out of Silicon Valley, right?

David Phelps: It's a numbers game. You've got to try a lot of different things, and only certain things will stick. But if you're not willing to take the risk to try some things, then nothing ever good comes out of it. I mean, people typically don't like change. People do get those reps, the routine, and I think that's a boring life. But people are like, "Well, that's safe, though. It's safe. I don't

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change the way I go to work every day. It's because I don't have to think about it.”

Well, that's kind of brain-dead. It's like why wouldn't you just change course and maybe something else. We've got—if the innovation to me, it's like being in a different place and being stimulated by different stimuli. Well, how's that going to happen if you do the same thing and put yourself in the same environment every day without something to change the dynamics of what you're doing?

And again, people don't like change, but change or sometimes even change that we're not even looking to change but forces to change it, and we think, “Well, this is painful.” But the pain is what creates the opportunity on the other side that you never were going to look at in the first place, right? And it's really opposite of what we tend to want in our human behavior.

Dustin Burleson: Oh yeah. But it's counterintuitive to nature, right? All growth comes through struggle, right? From the moment you were born to the minute you learn how to walk and talk and read and do—dental school wasn't easy and it shouldn't be easy. Doing surgery should not be easy, right? It's Napoleon Hill back from the Laws of Success, “The tallest tree in the forest isn't the tallest because it's shaded from the sun and protected from the wind and never has to bend and hide storms, it's actually the tallest because it's resisted all those things. It has learned to withstand the scorching sun. It has learned how to grow amidst adversity.”

And this goes way back to Stoic philosophy. If you read Ryan Holiday's book, *The Obstacle is the Way*, or you go and read the great Steven Pressfield, it's all about like, where is the resistance in your life? Where's the obstacle? And the average person wants to go around it, hide from it. The most effective go right at it.

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They go straight towards the ops. They embrace the resistance and it sucks, right? I'm not here to be like, "Hey," or I got to sit around the campfire and sing Kumbaya and like, "Oh yeah, we're all going to do the hard thing." Like it sucks to do the hard thing, but the reward it's exponential. It's super linear, right? It's more than one plus one equals two.

David Phelps: One thing that everybody had to go through just a few years ago and the backside of that are still being played out today depending upon how you dealt with it, but it was COVID, pandemic. Every business owner in this country had to deal with it. And again, decisions that were made, good, bad, or ugly, but how much was learned about that?

How much changed in the dynamics of the operations of our colleagues, dental practice, ortho practices that actually became innovative because of what we had to do to adjust to that? So again, these things that happen in life where they're painful, but on the other side, you figure things out.

And I think, everybody learned some things just even during that period of time that made them better people, strengthened them, and made their practices on the backside more resilient to things that may happen again.

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, there's certainly a silver lining to that. I mean, it stuck. So we had to go through that as a global society, but you know, and some people didn't learn anything, right?

Let's still see people show up to work sick. I'm going, what are you doing? Go home or at least don't come cough all over us. But I mean, think about like, so we had Bernie Madoff, do we learn? No. We've got Sam, the Bitcoin kid, right? Just totally made-up number. Did we learn? It's easy again to trick ourselves, but yeah, I think hopefully we built a more resilient workforce that today, I think, younger generations have just said, "I'm not giving you a hundred percent." Like you and I, and our parents did, we put a hundred percent of our heart and soul into our business and enterprise. And a lot of

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younger generations are saying, "I'll give you 85%." Right? "I'm not going to learn off the job. I don't really want to do anything past five o'clock. Kind of want to work from home a little bit."

And so we've got to figure out how to reconcile that with what workers want instead of just complaining about it, but that's going to stick the, "I'm not working for little money and a crappy environment if you're not going to take care of me." I think people are wising up to that and hopefully, it'll be better.

I mean we can't cut our way to greatness. We just need to find organizations that deliver more value so we have the margin to invest in great people. I still have great experiences at the Four Seasons. I still have really nice experiences at a lot of the retail shops I go into, but the average hotel, we drove the dogs out here 'cause we want to ship them out here so we drove 27 hours and we stayed in a Little Springfield in suites along the highway. And I can tell you, they're objectively awful. There's one person working the whole place, the free breakfast in the morning comes out of a box, it's just garbage.

And so, that's where we are when businesses have not paid attention to their margin. But then you check in into Four Seasons you're like, "This is how customer service is supposed to be." You go to Disney, right? Or even Costco. There are great businesses doing it the right way. And I think they've learned those lessons from the pandemic. And hopefully, they stick, but probably 50-50 on our memory. And we're getting some of the good stuff we put into place.

David Phelps: Well, it goes back to the tallest tree in the forest. Things like pandemics, unfortunately, or recessions, they weed out those that are weak and don't make change. And so it's just part of, again, part of the natural forces of nature. In this case, in the market economy. One more thing I want to touch on, and this is very recent, I think everybody heard about it, but you

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mentioned it in your writings, was the Alaska Airlines, the panel just kind of blew out. And fortunately, plane landed and no one got sucked out.

I think a shirt was lost and I don't know what, but it was the after-effect of what Alaska Airlines unfortunately did not have in place to deal with. In this case, something that nobody expected, of course, no one expects these things. This is a plane in the air. Run through what you saw on the backdrop of that and where, in this case, contingency plans, which everybody needs to have, were not there, and the damage that it's probably done to Alaska Airlines in this case.

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, I was actually on an Alaska Airlines flight coming back from Seattle that same night on a 737 9 MAX. And I got an email that said, "737 9 MAX—" I've gotten these emails before from Delta, where I thought, oh, they're going to ask me how my experience was on this style of plane. And that was not the email I got.

It was from the Seattle Times about this news article and this horrible incident where the plug for one of these planes popped open at 20,000 feet and they had to make an emergency landing. And apparently had that happened at higher altitude, the results would have been catastrophic. So, I mean, there's a larger discussion to have about what's going on at firms like Boeing and what has been historic at firms like General Motors and Ford about quality assurance.

But I just, on the surface, dug into contingency plans because I had to reschedule my flight. Well, they're still canceling about 120 flights a day because Alaska placed the largest order for those planes. I think they bought 45 of them in the last year, and so a big part of their network flies on these planes that have been grounded by the FAA, and on the way to mass, I think I was like, I'll just call and see if I can like get a reschedule, at least get it canceled.

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I'll schedule on Delta. I'll get the flight canceled. And I'm old school, so I like to talk to a human, call me crazy. So I called the number and it said the current wait time is eight hours and 28 minutes. So I thought, well, I'm not going to talk to them today. And I just did some rough math based on SCC filings, and I think maybe they fly 1,300 flights a day or something, a couple hundred people, maybe two, three hundred per flight.

If everyone had to recancel, they would have to rebook about a quarter of a million flyers, and I know their call center is just not equipped to handle that. So then the question becomes, what sort of planning do they have in place to offset unforeseen circumstances, and that's how that always worked. If we could foresee that the door was going to blow off, we could have called Spirit Airlines and they could have put some of that duct tape around there on the outside, right? So if we could foresee unforeseen consequences, you and I wouldn't be having this conversation. You would own all the real estate in the world and I'd be playing every Powerball number every day and I'd be on an island in the Caribbean. But because we can't, it forces us to plan today and this ties into long-term thinking.

So what would trigger a contingency plan? Power goes out, the water supply is cut to your business, the city issues eminent domain over one of your parking lots. We actually had a neighboring business say that we were building on their property line, which delayed our construction. What happens when things show up that you didn't plan for and how do you respond to achieve your objective?

If the objective is happy customers who fly Alaska Airlines next month, next week, then we have to have a contingency plan in place where we can ramp up support. You've got 120 flights a day. That's 240 flight attendants, minimum, are they cross-trained in how to do customer support? Because they're not flying on planes today. All right? I mean, that's an extreme example. I don't want the flight attendant sending me hate mail saying that I'm giving a poor word.

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But in your dental practice, what happens when a dental assistant calls out sick? Do you have a PRN pool of assistants you can call who make a really nice hourly wage, who'd be happy to come in and fill in that shift for half day?

What happens when the internet goes down? We're all in the cloud. You're like, "Hey, I hope you're patient. Now you look like you have braces. Come on in." But you don't know their name. You don't know their chart because the internet's down. Do you have a redundant system where Wi-Fi repeaters kick on? So I think there's an opportunity in this because most of the competition doesn't take it seriously.

So if the internet's down or the water is turned off or there's a snow day, most dentists in town just kind of take a day off. That's an opportunity for you to serve the patient better if that's your objective, which I think it should be. So, yeah, Alaska was just a neat example. Eight-and-a-half-hour wait.

I mean, come on, unless you're retired and bored for the day, what are you doing for eight and a half hours waiting on a phone? There was no option for us to call you back, right? That would be something they could implement. Delta has that. Like it's an insane amount of wait time. Pick a time. We'll call you back.

This is why I wrote about it. Ashley's like, "You just write about stuff that pisses you off." I mean, yeah, I did. So I get home after church and I go to their website and I do the chatbot and it says, "Due to high volume, chatbot is closed," just kicks you out, right? It's a great way to treat customers is to just kick them in the shins when they walk through the doors.

David Phelps: Okay. And going back to Charlie Munger, he uses what he calls the inversion theory, right? And he thinks instead of how can we be successful? Which everybody thinks that, well, we want to be successful customer service support, we want people to be happy. He says, "How can we screw that up? What are all the things that would happen that would not

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be successful in this?” And then reverse engineers again back to it saying, “Okay, well then how do we prevent that?” I think another phrase called red teaming, so it's the military uses red teaming, and that's where they really just shoot holes in everything.

They have another team, that's the red team, and the blue team's one that's trying to prevent the issues. The red team is just shoots holes, just what you said, airlines—what are all the things that go wrong? And they just shoot the holes in it until they come up with enough contingency plans that they think we've covered as much as we can. And hopefully, we've got some things in place. So when something does happen, we've got a game plan here and we don't just fall apart at the last minute and try to figure stuff out on the fly, which is what happens when you don't have a plan.

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, and then reinforce the blind side, and it's, I'm gonna fail to remember the engineer or the private first class or officer in the second world war that noticed fighter jets coming back, their airplanes are coming back with holes in them, and the immediate response was, “We need to reinforce those areas.”

And he said, “Wait a minute.” He said, ‘A lot of planes didn't come back. We need to reinforce the areas that haven't been hit because the ones that didn't come back, they were hit in places that caused them to crash.’ We often don't think about that.

Please, if you're listening to this, go get Charlie Munger's Poor Charlie's Almanack. And then a great book that summarizes a lot of those lessons by a financial, I think he does a venture capital firm somewhere in Europe, but the book is called Seeking Wisdom: From Darwin to Munger. It's so good. And yeah, I can't tell you how many times you get to win or succeed or achieve the objective just because you didn't suck, right? And no one wants to admit that. Sometimes it's a lot.

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But I had a great interview with Kobe Bryant, the late great basketball player. And they said, “Do you play to win or do you play not to lose?” That’s a big theory in sports, right? We play to win. I mean, we go for it on fourth down, right? We don’t play conservatives.

Some coaches say, “No, we play not to lose. We really beef up the defense and we just hope that we can score a little bit and really hold the other team,” and Kobe, such a great answer. He said, “Neither.” He said, “I play to learn, so I’m always playing to learn something new. Even if I win or I lose, I show up the next day and see what I learned was.” I mean, it’s just amazing to see the guy, I mean, broke his arm. He’s out there taking free throws with his left hand. He’s got a cast on his right wrist. It’s just such a great way to approach life. And I think, obviously, Munger who passed away recently just probably lived it the best it could be lived, right? Which was to deserve all the things he was fortunate to have, to not be envious of anyone else for what they had, and just constantly play to learn.

David Phelps: A great role model. And yeah, 99 years old. Amazing, man. Well, Dustin, I always love the conversations with you. Thanks so much for coming on this morning to do this. I wish you the best for the rest of your day and particularly this year. And we’ll circle back again and do it again sometime and pick some other topics that were fun to talk about.

Dustin Burleson: David, thank you. And thanks for all you do for all of our friends at Burleson Seminars and members. We get great mail and feedback, and it’s such an honor to watch them grow through you and to see them truly change their lives. It’s awesome to see. And keep doing what you’re doing. We appreciate it.

David Phelps: My pleasure. My best to you.

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