



## Official Transcript

### Season 1, Episode 5

### Michael Dumlao: How Activism, Resistance and Radical Authenticity Informs This Branding Expert On His Craft

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**Michael** [00:00:17] Brand helps you define and redefine culture. It helps you move people in a different way, through color, through words, through imagery, through ideas.

**Megan** [00:00:28] From ADECIBEL Media, I'm Megan Rummler and you're listening to ADECIBELvoices, a podcast that features intimate conversations with Asian American trailblazers who all have one thing in common, unabashedly pursuing their dreams while transforming the fabric of this nation. From food to business to tech to the arts, this is Asian American up close and personal.

**Megan** [00:00:56] Today we're talking branding, what it is, what it means, how to use it and the power it wields for both individuals and companies.

**Megan** [00:01:06] Our guest is Michael Dumlao, Director of Brand for Booz Allen Hamilton, a U.S. management and technology consulting firm that is considered to be one of the largest and most successful contractors for defense and intelligence agencies today.

**Megan** [00:01:21] In this role, Michael leads strategy and activation of the firm's brand ecosystem that included a brand refresh, which has since won leading industry awards for large scale brand transformation.

**Michael** [00:01:35] Michael also chairs Booz Allen's LGBTQ forum and is a certified executive scholar in marketing management from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

**Megan** [00:01:47] Michael Dumlao, welcome to ADECIBELvoices.

**Michael** [00:01:50] Thank you for having me.

**Megan** [00:01:52] Michael, you were born in Manila, Philippines. Then at age 7 you immigrated to Sydney, Australia. And, then as a teenager, you moved to Santa Barbara California where you ultimately finished high school. Tell us about your parents and childhood and what prompted these events.

**Michael** [00:02:10] Yes. So, I was born in the Philippines under the Marcos dictatorship, which is always a fun way to introduce yourself at a party.

**Michael** [00:02:18] And, what is interesting with my family is that I was born to a father that was related to the political regime and a mother who was actively fighting against it, which became a really interesting dynamic in my family and my upbringing because we were living under a family legacy that could have defined us in a certain way. But through my parents, I learned very early on that you can define your direction and what you want to leave behind.

**Michael** [00:02:48] I mean I can still remember stories on TV and in the newspapers about this assassination of Ninoy Aquino. You know, the fact that he was assassinated as he was being escorted from his plane and then the images of his wife, Corazon Aquino, making speeches and rallying her supporters. And, eventually the rise of the people power movement. I mean that was such an indelible moment in my life that left such a mark just to see a people rise up against their oppressor and to do so, mostly peacefully, and with such power and self-agency.

**Megan** [00:03:23] Hearing you tell that to me; I can feel the impression that it made, and you were quite young.

**Michael** [00:03:29] Oh, yes absolutely. I mean I was born into it. I mean, I think I remember there's a photo of me as a baby with a newspaper, with headlines basically about what the Marcos regime was doing about what the Aquino campaign and later the Corazon Aquino campaign, you know, how they were rising against the dictatorship.

**Michael** [00:03:49] To grow up basically in that environment and certainly, you know, growing up in a household that was fighting against it, that was fighting against legacy, that was fighting against you know that kind of oppression. It sort of informs you, you know it informed the rest of my life.

**Megan** [00:04:03] So, in hindsight do you think these seeds, you know the seeds of activism and resistance and you know standing up for what you believe in. Do you think that was sown then?

**Michael** [00:04:16] Oh absolutely. I would say it was also interestingly the first time in my life that I witnessed firsthand the power of people to decide their own fate.

**Michael** [00:04:25] I still remember wearing yellow. Yellow was the color of the people power movement and forming an L with my index finger and my thumb. The L stood for the word Laban, which in Tagalog means fight.

**Michael** [00:04:39] And those actions, the color, the messaging. Believe it or not that was probably the first time I discovered the power of brand. Right? The power of using color and gesture and messaging and words to unite people under an idea.

**Michael** [00:04:55] In reflecting about that moment I realized, was that where I discovered, really, the power of branding?

**Megan** [00:05:01] How interesting.

**Michael** [00:05:03] Isn't that interesting?

**Megan** [00:05:03] So fascinating. It's interesting that you brought up color.

**Megan** [00:05:08] At this very same time that you were being introduced to the power of protest, resistance and activation, there was another force that entered your life and that was the force of creativity.

**Michael** [00:05:21] Absolutely.

**Megan** [00:05:21] To say that your family has baked in creativeness and really leans into creativity, probably is an understatement. Which was, you know, the reverse of my parents who wanted me, and my dad still actually wants me, to be a lawyer.

**Megan** [00:05:36] When did you start your formal creative and musical and arts training?

**Michael** [00:05:41] I would say out the womb.

**Michael** [00:05:43] There's a joke in my family that Filipinos in general, but certainly people in my family, come out the womb with a karaoke mic. And, I kid you not most of us have a karaoke list formed by a certain age. In fact, ask any Filipino and I will put money on it. You probably have a list on your phone right now of your karaoke song.

**Megan** [00:06:09] Stacy is losing her stuff here. I wish I could pan the camera. Stacy's just lost it. Okay, what's on list Michael?

**Michael** [00:06:20] One of our classic songs that we do as a duet together is, "Killing Me Softly."

**Megan** [00:06:25] Nice.

**Michael** [00:06:25] I like to think we did it before Lauren Hill and, so yeah, that definitely has been a part of my karaoke playlist for a long time.

**Michael** [00:06:34] From my very earliest days of my childhood, I still remember my mother with her guitar playing songs almost like a human jukebox in all of our family gatherings. My father was an actor and also a singer.

**Michael** [00:06:47] And then together, my mom and dad led worship ministry in our churches throughout my entire life. So, it made sense that eventually they would enroll me in music and piano and voice.

**Michael** [00:06:59] I also at some point apparently demonstrated an aptitude for the visual arts and I think at the ripe old age of 5 or 6, my mother who at the time was working for the Philippine Development Bank, enrolled me in a summer arts program where I started my training in painting and drawing and sculpting and making art with my hands. While at home we learned music, we learned how to play the piano, play the guitar and harmonize.

**Michael** [00:07:28] I mean I learned how to harmonize from a very, very early age. Mostly because I think my mother just wanted to create a family of backup singers.

**Michael** [00:07:39] Yeah, I was the Dreamgirls to her Dreamgirls, sort of thing.

**Megan** [00:07:42] I feel like I need to meet your mother.

**Michael** [00:07:44] Oh yeah, absolutely. No, she's a character.

**Michael** [00:07:48] From an early age, my parents taught us that we could define our own happiness. Which is something that actually I am very, very grateful of.

**Michael** [00:07:55] The fact that my parents did not succumb to, you know, the typical Filipino, Asian Pacific Island template of what success would look like, you know.

**Michael** [00:08:07] Sure, they were pressured by their parents, by their peers, certainly by their siblings to make sure that their three sons would become the triple success, Asian trifecta of doctor, lawyer engineer.

**Michael** [00:08:23] You know, the fact that they had three boys it was like the jackpot.

**Megan** [00:08:27] Totally.

**Michael** [00:08:27] If only can you sire the next generations. But you can do so under the trifecta of success.

**Michael** [00:08:36] And, so you know, growing up the fact that they were actively telling us to pursue the arts and ended up fast forward to having an artist, a musician, a filmmaker as sons and being proud about that, I think is something that I would offer to our listeners that, you know, as Asian parents you can have children in the arts that are successful.

**Megan** [00:09:00] So, you were really given the gift and equipped very early on with a set of tools that were really powerful. You make your own destiny in any way that you want. So, really out of the box out of the womb.

**Michael** [00:09:17] Right.

**Megan** [00:09:18] So then, I'm seeing visually these two worlds of creativity shaded by the color yellow, as well as a world of active resistance starting to meld.

**Michael** [00:09:31] Absolutely.

**Megan** [00:09:32] So then, around the age of 7, you immigrated to Sydney. Tell us what happened.

**Michael** [00:09:39] So my family had actually applied. My parents had applied to be American citizens, to come to America back in the 70s.

**Michael** [00:09:48] They had benefited from you know several other siblings and relatives that had come to America, you know, certainly some generations prior.

**Michael** [00:09:58] But there was a moment where America seemed to stem the tide of immigration from certain parts of the world and an application that would have automatically, you know, allowed them to come to America was suddenly halted and it was actually years later that I found out that was actually because of me.

**Michael** [00:10:16] Because my Mom had applied as a woman, as a single woman and then later has applied as a wife to my dad. And then, I guess during the application process I sort of ruined her plans by appearing in her womb.

**Michael** [00:10:29] And, all of a sudden the consulate had said, "Oh no, since you're a mother now this is a whole different process. So, we've got to change this up a bit and you can't come to America, you know, under this this new pretense."

**Michael** [00:10:44] My mom said, "Yeah, you kind of sort of like ruined our chances of going to America. Like at that moment."

**Michael** [00:10:50] And so, the option was to go to Australia to join my father's sister, who at the time had married and been living with an Australian man in Sydney. And, what they offered was, so you can't go to America, why don't you come to Sydney and try a life here in Australia?

**Michael** [00:11:07] I still remember telling all my friends in the Philippines, "Oh, I'm going to America," and then landing there and then saying, "Oh, this is America."

**Michael** [00:11:15] And then, seeing my white Australian uncle and him correcting me saying, "No, this is Australia."

**Michael** [00:11:21] I think my first question to him was, "What is that? What is this place?"

**Michael** [00:11:25] This weird approximation of America that, you know, I was unfamiliar with became basically an adventure for my entire family because, you know, we had thought to ourselves that we were going to immigrate to America and instead our entire plans had been rerouted.

**Michael** [00:11:39] What was actually originally only supposed to be a few months to a few years, just to get us to become Australian citizens to then apply as Australian citizens to then go to America, ended up becoming seven, eight years living in Sydney and growing up in Australia.

**Michael** [00:11:57] A lot of people don't realize this but Australia became a place of refuge, you know, after World War 2, after the Korean War, after what was happening in the Vietnam War.

**Megan** [00:12:07] After Saigon fell.

**Michael** [00:12:09] After Saigon fell. You know a lot of the world went to Australia to find refuge because in many cases Australia was the only place that would accept them. You know, so I absolutely do credit Australia as being this incredibly multinational place eventually where I ended up having probably one of the best childhoods in the context of being surrounded by people from so many different walks of life from people who, like me, were escaping.

**Michael** [00:12:36] I was quickly surrounded by people with similar stories, children with similar stories. The fact that they were rebuilding was such a powerful thing and powerful shared experience.

**Megan** [00:12:45] So then, Michael it almost sounds, I mean I don't know if this is a reach to say this, but really for the first seven, eight, maybe even nine years of your life, it was immersed maybe by baptism by fire into really standing up for yourself.

**Michael** [00:13:01] Oh, absolutely.

**Megan** [00:13:02] Not only having the strength to, you know, be brave and to, you know, muddle through the racism, the xenophobia this idea of rebuilding. So not only mustering up the strength to do all that but on top of that having to say this is who I am and to do it in a foreign country.

**Michael** [00:13:22] Absolutely. I was in Australia from the time that I was 7 to until round 13.

**Michael** [00:13:27] And around 10 to 11, was when I realized that I may not be entirely heterosexual.

**Michael** [00:13:35] And, you know the interesting thing is, you know, where my family found comfort and community was in the church, specifically in the Filipino community church, it was a place to find refuge but also some place to build identity and to protect us and also to affirm who we are as Filipinos.

**Michael** [00:13:53] But interestingly within that church setting was also where I started to discover the inherent toxic masculinity and the homophobia that is very frequently experienced by young LGBTQ people in religious settings.

**Megan** [00:14:11] Oh man that's like triple, quadruple loaded.

**Michael** [00:14:14] Right, right. So, I'm sure there are some listeners out there who can, you know, kind of appreciate the fact that, you know, you're already dealing with racism and xenophobia.

**Michael** [00:14:21] And then, you run to a community that you want to embrace and that you hope would embrace you but then there's something else inside your identity that keeps you from fully realizing that safety and security.

**Michael** [00:14:36] Because at the same time that they are affirming your Filipino, Asian Pacific Islander brand identity they're also making fun of the fact that you're relatively effeminate, that you don't really like sports, that you're relatively introverted. But introverted because you're afraid and also on top of that Australian culture in general is incredibly masculine toxic masculine, I would say.

**Michael** [00:15:01] So, I was grappling with a lot of identity issues, you know.

**Michael** [00:15:04] And not only that, I was trying to figure out who I needed to be to fit in. Not just to fit in but to also to survive.

**Michael** [00:15:10] I was trying to be white. I was trying to be straight. I was trying to be the good Christian boy. I was going to marry a Filipino girl and start a family.

**Michael** [00:15:20] I'm the eldest in my family. So, on top of all the pressures. I've also expected to be the eldest that will carry on the family line. Marry a Filipino girl that will have beautiful Filipino babies.

**Megan** [00:15:35] It's so much pressure.

**Michael** [00:15:36] It's a lot of pressure.

**Megan** [00:15:37] It's a lot of pressure. So, you're getting internal familial pressure, external pressure and religious pressure rightly. So, then everybody goes to Sydney at around 13, these middle school years. And, what happens?

**Michael** [00:15:53] And then, I will never forget this. I come home. My mother's home early from work. My dad is on his way home and my brothers and I are standing there in the living room she says, "Sons, sit down. I have some news."

**Michael** [00:16:07] She actually didn't call it great news. You can tell that she had this sort of measured excitement because she knew that what she was about to tell us was going to completely uproot our lives again.

**Michael** [00:16:17] And, what she said was, "We got some news from the American consulate. We've been approved to go to America. We have to pack up. We have less than a month. We're moving to America."

**Michael** [00:16:30] What was interesting is that, that is something that my parents had at that point, by that point waited more than a decade to hear. They finally got the news that the dreams that they once had are now being fulfilled. I mean to talk about disruption, you know, I mean I give them a lot of credit. The fact that they were willing to take that risk and now a risk with three children.

**Megan** [00:16:49] A lot of mixed emotion.

**Michael** [00:16:50] A lot of mixed emotions.

**Michael** [00:16:52] This is sort of the point at the story where I started to think through, you know, is this an opportunity for me to escape and run to something? And, in many ways I would say look my early childhood I was constantly running from something escaping something.

**Michael** [00:17:05] We escaped the Philippines and ran to Australia. At this point I was escaping Australia to run to America I thought to myself, yeah this is what I needed to do for myself. Not that I had a choice. I remembered I think to myself, okay, well maybe than this is God this is the universe. This is an external force giving me an out. You know from all the personal turmoil that I was experiencing.

**Michael** [00:17:27] And so we did. We packed up our entire lives and moved once again across the Pacific across an ocean to a completely new culture called, California. To Santa Barbara, California.

**Megan** [00:17:41] Do you remember what your first impression of California was?

**Michael** [00:17:44] 90201. Absolutely.

**Megan** [00:17:46] In fact, actually before this I will say that we did do a quick visit about two or three years prior. And, I was really excited because I knew that I would get to see Beverly Hills 90210 at least one season ahead. Because this is like back in the days when things were not simulcast, you know.

**Michael** [00:18:04] So, I distinctly remember going to California being with my cousins watching 90210, several episodes ahead, even a season ahead. And then, coming back to Sydney with my friends and suddenly being this sage, this oracle.

**Michael** [00:18:18] I knew what happened to Brenda and Brendon before they did, you know. So, in my mind I also would think to myself, oh my God I'm going to the land of 90210, I'm going to the land of all those rich white people and I get to live with them.

**Michael** [00:18:32] In Australia we were living with my father's family. In California, we were now living with my mother's family. So that was also a bit of an adjustment a different dynamic there.

**Michael** [00:18:40] But I will say what Santa Barbara gave me was an opportunity to start to really explore who I was. Because the interesting thing about California in the 90s was this was the time of Ellen. This was the time of conversations about LGBTQ youth and in many ways I think it forced me to start to grapple with my identity and I would always credit, you know, Santa Barbara, California as being the place where those ideas and those thoughts would come to fruition.

**Michael** [00:19:10] So, I came out when I was 16 years old. And as with many coming out stories it was because of a boy.

**Megan** [00:19:19] Always starts with a boy.

**Michael** [00:19:19] Always starts with the boy. He was true to who he was. He actually had come out a year prior. And, funny thing is, I was afraid of him in many ways because he was living his truth.

**Michael** [00:19:31] What I always sort of marveled at was that he was such a better performer than me. You can always tell when somebody especially performer is confident. I think a lot of that stems from knowing who you are as a performer.

**Michael** [00:19:44] I was afraid of that and jealous of that because I knew that if I wanted to become a better actor, a better performer, a better singer, a better musician, a better artist that I needed to really uncover truths about myself that I was fundamentally afraid of uncovering.

**Megan** [00:19:59] So, how did you know that at that age? That takes some digging, it takes insight, it takes reflection and just a pinch of wisdom.

**Michael** [00:20:08] Well, I think part of it stems all the way back to the Philippines, right? All the way back from me reflecting on how I watched an entire people assert themselves.

**Michael** [00:20:17] You know, I guess this oppressive force it went all the way back to Sydney. Like grappling with racism and xenophobia at a young age and learning how to resist those forces of oppression. Whether they be racism, xenophobia and now homophobia and misogyny and toxic masculinity and these incredibly myopic ideas of gender and expression.

**Michael** [00:20:40] I needed to figure out that for myself and I think what I needed was a push and that push was a boy. And that boy challenged me. You know, he said, "You're better when you know who you are."



**Michael** [00:20:51] I did what anyone would do when somebody, you know, dares you to do something. Dares you to be more than who you're presenting. Dares you to uncover a truth.

**Michael** [00:21:01] It was a really simple moment, really. He dared me to kiss him. And, it was that moment where it was like if he was a movie, like the movie suddenly like went straight into my forehead and it flashed all these images of resistance, of activation of, you know, people rising to meet their truth.

**Michael** [00:21:19] So, why couldn't I rise to meet my truth as well? And so, in a flash moment I thought to myself, okay, this is a moment. This is that moment where I decide if I am going to live as I am. And I decide at that moment that I was going to kiss him. And that was what 15, 16?

**Michael** [00:21:33] And, that's when I start to realize, you know, this is something that I deserve. I deserve this happiness. I deserve to have that teenage love story that everyone else around me was having. And so, with that kiss it changed my life.

**Megan** [00:21:51] Fast forward, you have this sort of moment that is empowering. You go off to...

**Michael** [00:21:59] Well actually before that I had to tell my parents.

**Megan** [00:22:02] So, let's step back.

**Michael** [00:22:03] So, let's step back.

**Michael** [00:22:04] Oh my God. I didn't really expect to be telling my coming out story but here it is. I'm going to tell you my coming out story to my parents.

**Megan** [00:22:08] I know, we took a little detour here.

**Michael** [00:22:10] Okay, so I'm going to do this.

**Megan** [00:22:12] It's gonna be impromptu here.

**Michael** [00:22:13] So, I was doing what any good teenager does. I basically borrowed the car, completely lying about where I was going. I said I was gonna go to a study group and I was going to do homework with some friends. No, I went to a party. I came back much later than expected.

**Michael** [00:22:28] And, my mom was like, "You weren't answering your pager."

**Michael** [00:22:31] Yes, I had a pager.

**Michael** [00:22:34] "You were supposed to be back hours ago. You're coming home late. I feel like I don't recognize you anymore. Who are you? Are you doing drugs?"

**Michael** [00:22:41] I just love like that logic.

**Megan** [00:22:45] That's a classic, classic parent thing. It devolves.

**Michael** [00:22:50] It devolves and suddenly I am hardened criminal. Yes, I'm suddenly a hardened criminal on my way to Rikers Island or something. It's like, okay mom, calm down. And, in that minute to respond to her, I just said, "Well, maybe you don't know who I am. Mom, you don't know."

**Michael** [00:23:06] And, she's like, "Well, I thought you would have better influences in your life. And, you have this new friend and he's such a good influence on you. What happened?"

**Michael** [00:23:13] And, I said well, "He's not my friend, mom. He's my boyfriend and I'm gay."

**Megan** [00:23:19] What? You stepped right into it? You didn't even give her, like, a warm-up.

**Michael** [00:23:23] No. You know what she said? Well, I'm still mad you borrowed the car.

**Megan** [00:23:28] What does that mean? Did she...

**Michael** [00:23:31] No. She was like, well I'm still pissed off that you brought the car back home late. And, then she like sort of like record scratch. Wait, what did you say?

**Megan** [00:23:39] Record scratch. I was just about to say did she jumped over it. She didn't even like it didn't even register.

**Michael** [00:23:49] No. All she was thinking about was the fact that I brought home the car late. So, then she backtracked.

**Michael** [00:23:53] Eventually, she backtracked and she was like, wait what?

**Michael** [00:23:56] And, I said, "No mom, I'm gay. And that boy is my boyfriend and we are together as boyfriends."

**Michael** [00:24:05] And there was this moment where she had to step back and we had a whole conversation thereafter about how is it a phase. You know, we all have feelings. Well, what about the church. What about the family?

**Megan** [00:24:23] So she was grappling with.

**Michael** [00:24:24] Oh yeah, absolutely, she is grappling with it.

**Michael** [00:24:27] And, like many coming out stories that ended in tears. And, at the end of it I said, "Please don't tell Dad. You know, can this just be you and me. Let's talk it through. Let's don't tell Dad."

**Michael** [00:24:37] She says, "Fine, I won't tell your father."

**Michael** [00:24:39] I go to bed and I'll never forget this. I wake up in my father's arms rocking me back and forth and saying, "I still love you no matter what happens from here on out. Just know that you are still loved because."

**Michael** [00:24:53] I feel like at that moment he knew immediately the hardships that I would go through not just as a gay man but as a gay immigrant of color. Right?

**Michael** [00:25:02] He knew that my life moving forward was never gonna be the same. And, specifically, that it was going to be difficult.

**Michael** [00:25:11] If my family ever listens to this, I mean you have really no choice and you are going to listen to this, I'm just going to tell you thank you so much for opening your hearts, for opening your minds and for accepting me.

**Michael** [00:25:21] And having had the difficulty given the upbringing that we had to prove to the world that you are not your upbringing necessarily, right?

**Michael** [00:25:30] That you don't have to only be what your culture and generations of expectations expect you to be. That you can change and that you can learn to love and accept people in very, very powerful new ways that ultimately, I think makes for a stronger family.

**Michael** [00:25:51] I would then enroll in UC Santa Barbara and then through an opportunity to do a year abroad I decided to go back home.

**Michael** [00:25:58] Remember when I kept saying that I was escaping things?

**Megan** [00:26:00] Yes.

**Michael** [00:26:01] This was the time when I thought, you know, what rather than escape, why don't I run to?

**Michael** [00:26:06] And this is when I realized that Sydney may be a place for me to run towards rather than escape. And, going back to Sydney to reacquaint myself with my family there to reacquaint myself with a culture that had in many ways caused me quite a lot of pain and turmoil in my childhood. I wanted to reclaim that. I wanted to reclaim that city and that place in that culture.

**Michael** [00:26:30] I would spend a year in Sydney University, honing my craft as a photographer and videographer and filmmaker in Sydney College of Arts. I would also enroll in two programs which actually I would say were very, very formative for me.

**Michael** [00:26:42] One was the Sydney University Drama Society and the other one was the Queer Student Union and both the Queer Student Union and the Sydney University Drama Society both really honed this idea that I could really use the arts to inform my activism.

**Michael** [00:26:58] And it helped me understand how as an actor, performer, musician and artist, I could use that to effect change to find a voice. And I used all those experiences to really understand what it meant to create change to articulate a message and to do so in a really powerful creative way.

**Michael** [00:27:16] I would then take that, come back to UC Santa Barbara and graduate from UC Santa Barbara. And, in that moment I was then forced to think about what I was going to do next. And that's probably where the next major crossroads in my life came and that was when I was offered two opportunities.

**Michael** [00:27:34] One was to go into entertainment in L.A. The other one was to pursue my activism and end up working for the Democratic National Committee, specifically the Al Gore presidential election. And, actually many of the other democratic elections in the year 2000.

**Michael** [00:27:51] And instead, move completely across country. Now I was making a choice to move myself from California to the East Coast to New York City to New Jersey and eventually to DC. And I'm always really grateful actually to my parents because I got in to my little 1997 Nissan Sentra and at that moment said, you know, I can either drive south to L.A. and live the rest of my life there or I can drive by myself cross-country to New Jersey and New York and see what happens.

**Michael** [00:28:22] And that's what I did. I drove cross-country and have been on the East Coast ever since.

**Megan** [00:28:28] We'll be right back after this word from our sponsors.

**Stacy** [00:28:32] This podcast is brought to you by our sponsors, 8 Media Group, a Washington, D.C. area video production company whose mission is to create, collaborate and resonate. Find them at [8mediagroup.com](http://8mediagroup.com).

**Megan** [00:28:44] If you're just joining us, we've been talking with industry branding veteran, Michael Dumlao, who is currently serving as Booz Allen Hamilton's Director of Brand.

**Megan** [00:28:54] Booz Allen is a Fortune 500 global technology firm that specializes in management and information technology consulting for the federal government.

**Megan** [00:29:04] Michael has held this post since 2015 and has since led the company's brand pivot which includes landing industry awards like the PRSA Silver Anvil and Gartner for Large Scale Brand Transformations.

**Michael** [00:29:18] Michael there are so many definitions of what brand means from selling ideas to encapsulating values to even representing relationships between consumers and companies. In your opinion in the most simple terms what does brand mean?

**Michael** [00:29:38] Brand is a promise. It's a promise that you make as a person. It's a promise that an organization makes to deliver something. Whether that's a product, a level of service, an idea to someone in a specific place and time. And, I think that's where brand really becomes powerful is that level of specificity, right?

**Michael** [00:30:01] Defining what it is that you promise to deliver consistently and then promising to do that to a specific audience and then understanding how best to do that in the context of how that audience wants to receive that brand.

**Michael** [00:30:15] Brand is also a shortcut.

**Michael** [00:30:17] When you go to the grocery store because of your lived experiences, what you're taught, what you see, what you reach for, whether you know it or not it's informed by your either intellectual or emotional connection to a brand.

**Michael** [00:30:33] It can be as simple as packaging or can be as complex as your appreciation for a level of quality or price, right? Or, just something you know inherently because it's what your mother taught you or it's what a teacher taught you, right? It's emotional but it's also very scientific.

**Michael** [00:30:51] Something that I've always been fascinated about with brand, is that it is really both an art and a science.

**Michael** [00:30:56] Where brand breaks is when the promise breaks, right?

**Michael** [00:31:00] When you pick up something expecting something and that expectation is broken in some way. Which is why recovering your reputation, recovering your brand is so difficult because nobody likes to have their trust broken.

**Michael** [00:31:15] Which is why I think there's such a huge investment in brand in corporations and increasingly personally amongst people because you want to make sure that you're trustworthy.

**Megan** [00:31:27] You know you brought up the word corporations. So, then what does it mean right now for corporations and for individuals. What does brand mean?

**Michael** [00:31:37] I feel like in many ways our price of entry for living in a hyper-connected world, where all of our actions are archived and our privacy and secrecy is really up to debate these days, it seems that there's a greater pressure to be authentic for both individuals and corporations.

**Michael** [00:31:54] By living your truth, you're doing so not just for yourself but to create a space for others to do so. And I feel that's particularly true of branding as well.

**Michael** [00:32:03] It's really hard, I think, for anyone especially a corporation to hide, right, behind something false. Because we are all empowered as consumers, as clients to do research, right, to call things into question.

**Michael** [00:32:20] Particularly, you know, before the age of social media it was all about controlling the message.

**Michael** [00:32:26] But I can tell you that in my career especially with the increasing use of social media and the advent of big data and frankly the increasing absence of privacy and secrecy when it comes to this world.

**Michael** [00:32:41] It becomes that much more important to just be transparent and to be authentic and to really stand for something.

**Michael** [00:32:47] And actually if anything that's another thing that is going to be increasingly important to many corporate brands is to stand for something, to have an opinion on something beyond what it is that you sell and what you offer.

**Michael** [00:33:00] You know for the longest time all us marketers wanted to do was to control the message, to control perception. But you really can't do that in an environment where everyone is their own personal broadcaster.

**Michael** [00:33:12] Everyone is able to form an opinion and help inform others opinions about something.

**Michael** [00:33:18] One of the key rules of branding is that brand is not what you say you are. Brand is what they say you are. Right? It's people's perceptions and their trust, right? And, who you are that really makes your brand.

**Michael** [00:33:31] Now, can you shape it? Sure, you know. Can you influence it? Absolutely. You know, can you help drive the conversation? Great. Yes.

**Michael** [00:33:40] Can you control it? Absolutely not. You know and I think that's something that keeps brands accountable because it means that if you're gonna say something, you've got to make sure that you can back it up. Right?

**Michael** [00:33:51] If you're going to stand for something and increasingly brands are asked to stand for something to have an opinion on something beyond just an opinion on the quality of their industry or the quality of their product.

**Michael** [00:34:01] But now it's like how does that product or that industry affect the livelihoods of its workers? How does it impact the lives of its communities? Right? How does it make the world a better place or doesn't?

**Michael** [00:34:14] Those questions are starting to be asked of corporate brands because people realize that brands in many ways, it governs our lives in ways that I think people are much more smart and much more aware of how that happens and how that's engineered.

**Michael** [00:34:28] And so, in many ways there's a greater respect and expectation for transparency and authenticity.

**Megan** [00:34:35] Speaking of transparency and authenticity, you know, you mentioned the pervasive use of social media and you know technology that is really kind of peeling back the curtain on our lives.

**Megan** [00:34:49] So then, how does one tell the difference or is there a difference between personal branding and corporate branding?

**Michael** [00:34:57] I'm of the belief that there is no difference. That I have come to believe that the basic principles and best practices of corporate branding of any kind of branding enterprise applies whether or not you're doing it to affect the brand of a corporation, an organization or yourself.

**Michael** [00:35:17] I have a principle of analyze, articulate and activate. I call it the three A's of branding.

**Michael** [00:35:22] And I feel like it definitely applies. You know, the ideas around positioning and targeting, knowing who your audience is. Tailoring a consistent message to your audience on the channels, at the right time. You know understanding what their wants, needs, desires, motivations are and whether or not you're talking about your own brand or that of a Fortune 500. All of those principles still apply.

**Michael** [00:35:42] I think it's also about intention and about purpose and being open, you know, to curating who you are both as a company and as a brand.

**Michael** [00:35:52] In fact, lately I've been thinking that if I to have my own Netflix show that I would be, you know, Marie Kondo meets Queer Eye. That like Marie Kondo I would you know help either an individual or corporation understand what is distracting you from being your true authentic being.

**Megan** [00:36:12] What doesn't give you joy.

**Michael** [00:36:13] What doesn't give you joy. What doesn't give you truth, right? And that you thank it and then you donate it to Goodwill and then everything else you keep. I help you structure and fold up you know into a way that is easily discoverable and then the Queer Eye part is that I basically make you over.

**Michael** [00:36:33] And, I feel like that many, many brand directors and brand managers have that role right.

**Michael** [00:36:37] We have the Marie Kondo role of clarifying and curating and then we have the Queer Eye role of helping you be the best part of yourself.

**Megan** [00:36:45] Are there any other core, kind of, grounding emotional connections?

**Michael** [00:36:51] Absolutely. I think it's about empathy and inclusion. I think at the very core of good branding it's having this empathy for your users. Of identifying who they are. Knowing who they are.

**Megan** [00:37:04] Which is tough that's a tough task.

**Michael** [00:37:06] Right.

**Michael** [00:37:06] Another key part of branding is positioning and targeting, right? There is a very, key decision that one must make when you are deciding your brand in that you have to decide who you are not good for, what you are not, right?

**Michael** [00:37:23] The understanding of the not is as important as understanding the what is. You cannot be everything to everyone.

**Michael** [00:37:35] You have to be perfect for someone right. And I think part of that is this really disciplined approach to understanding the fact that you can't be everywhere at once. You can't talk to necessarily everyone at once that you really have to focus, you know, who you are as a brand. You have to focus your message.

**Michael** [00:37:53] You know, for Booz Allen and for many brands, one of the major areas of self-definition is whether or not you are a house of brands or a branded house.

**Michael** [00:38:00] And let me explain that. A house of brands are those entities where you sell different kinds of experiences, different kind of products to different kinds of people. You have different value propositions; you have different marketing strategies, but you all live under one company.

**Michael** [00:38:17] Versus a branded house where you have a consistency in your messaging.

**Michael** [00:38:22] It's like Apple, right? All the packaging, all the messaging, all the brand identity with an Apple is very consistent versus you know a company that owns both say, you know, Cheetos and a soda drink for example.

**Michael** [00:38:36] You know, those may exist in one house of brands with very, very different ways of selling that idea and that product to different kinds of people. You know, versus something like an Apple where it is really all about one consistent idea that you are helping people adopt and form an emotional bond with.

**Michael** [00:38:57] That is certainly true of Booz Allen. We were asking ourselves are we going to be a house of brands where we were selling different kinds of capabilities in different ways to different kinds of people.

**Michael** [00:39:07] Or and this is what we ultimately decided was that we were going to be a singular branded house you know with a singular expression, articulating a unified idea and a unified message.

**Michael** [00:39:20] Brand helps you define and redefine culture.

**Michael** [00:39:24] It helps you move people in a different way through color, through words, through imagery, through ideas. And, I feel like that's where also where personal and corporate branding also starts to converge.

**Michael** [00:39:39] You know this idea that by carrying through this idea of excellence and inclusion you can really make the world a better place.

**Megan** [00:39:47] I want to congratulate you on your recent industry award. Can you explain to our listeners, you know you've won some really large industry branding awards. What does winning these means to you?

**Michael** [00:40:01] Well, first of all, it wasn't me alone right? I think one thing that's also very key to branding and a really really good brand enterprise is that it involves a lot of different perspectives, a lot of different people. That there is an entire team that builds and sustains, thrives and pushes a brand.

**Michael** [00:40:19] You know another key thing about branding is that it has to be resourced.

**Michael** [00:40:23] It cannot just rely on one person alone? That a brand for it to live on beyond the launch it has to understand data. Understand how data can be continuously measured. It has to understand how it can evolve you know based off of all those metrics.

**Michael** [00:40:43] And so, these awards if anything it recognizes what happens when you properly resource a brand. When you bring the right team and the right mindsets when you follow best practices. You know credit is due where it needs to be due and that is the leadership that brought an entire team together of which I was part.



**Michael** [00:41:06] To really, really think through all the different aspects of what branding requires from metrics and research to employee engagement to digital strategy to creative to content and design.

**Michael** [00:41:19] A lot of people have an assumption that all branding is logos, color and typography. Right? And, that's a very important part of it. You know that's what we touch, what we see and there's a very sensorial part of brand.

**Michael** [00:41:33] You know the best brands out there absolutely hit all five senses.

**Michael** [00:41:37] To get to that kind of powerful brand that really hits all five senses, you have to bring research you have to bring strategy. You have to bring a context and a true understanding of the audience in the context in which they will receive and adopt and experience your brand. And that requires a whole lot of people at the table.

**Michael** [00:42:04] Michael when you think about your career and you reflect upon the nuances of brand as it exists today, what do you think the future of branding is for both, if you wouldn't mind talking about for both individuals and for corporations?

**Michael** [00:42:22] Absolutely.

**Michael** [00:42:23] One thing I've started thinking about is this idea of audacious authenticity. You know what it means to really live your truth to be truly free to be who you are and what that means not just for yourself but also for brand, right?

**Michael** [00:42:34] To be truly completely honest and authentic in your messaging and your approach in the audiences that you reach. Right?

**Michael** [00:42:43] I think what's also going to be very, very true to the future branding is the idea of radical diversity of sorts, tied to that audacious authenticity. To know that you know you cannot be exclusive. You really have to be inclusive in your brand moving forward.

**Michael** [00:42:57] You have to challenge binaries. You have to challenge the black and whites. You have to accept the fact that there are going to be grays, new frontiers, new identities. And, I think that's also part of the inclusionary nature of what branding has to be moving forward. And, the idea that you have to be very fluid. I think you have to assume that much like identity is today that brand has to be fluid. That brand has to be agile. It has to be responsive.

**Megan** [00:43:27] So ultimately, what is the power of branding today in our society in our culture? What's at stake?

**Michael** [00:43:35] Branding for a lot of folks is a shortcut. You know it's it can be seen as a cultural hieroglyph of sorts.

**Michael** [00:43:42] You know when you see a logo, when you see a message, when you see a person, right? Your brain automatically thinks through all the different sorts of associations you know that you make with that image, with that sound. And, that's all based off of that lived experience that you have with that brand.

**Michael** [00:44:03] I think, that is something that will continue. But I think what people also have to realize is that people know that and I think increasingly as future generations become more fluent in how brand is engineered, it requires us who manage brands to be even more empathetic to their needs, to their behaviors, to their preferences, to their incentives, to their motivations.

**Michael** [00:44:28] For us to be able to continue to provide value to not only our clients but to the basically the lives of our fellow human beings, we have to be open to change. Right? While being very intentional and purposeful in helping to create that change.

**Megan** [00:44:45] Michael Dumlao, it has been such a pleasure having you here in the studio. Thank you for being with us.

**Michael** [00:44:51] Thank you for having me. This has been absolutely cathartic.

**Megan** [00:44:56] Michael Dumlao serves as the Director of Brand for Booz Allen Hamilton, a global leader in engineering, cyber, data science and management consulting where he leads brand research and strategy. Michael is also a published author and sought-after speaker on personal branding, inclusive marketing, brand activation and digital strategy and serves as a faculty member of the Institute for Federal Leadership where he teaches strategic communications for leaders in the federal government.

**Megan** [00:45:29] Here's a special note to our listeners to make sure to check out our website at [adecibel.com](http://adecibel.com) that's A-D-E-C-I-B-E-L dot com. There you'll find extended interview excerpts that you won't want to miss, behind the scenes photos and some pretty hysterical outtakes.

**Megan** [00:45:49] ADECIBELvoices is hosted by me Megan Rummler and co-produced and edited by myself and Stacy Yu. All music is sourced royalty-free.

**Megan** [00:46:00] Join us next week as we speak with Leena Jayaswal, a documentary filmmaker and award-winning photographer. Leena's films have been broadcast throughout the country on over 100 PBS affiliates and her work features deep expertise and interest in issues that intersect race, representation and identity.

**Megan** [00:46:21] Leena is currently co-directing and co-producing a feature-length documentary titled "Mixed," a film that explores both the meaning and experiences of being mixed-race in America, 50 years after the historic 1967 Loving versus Virginia Supreme Court decision that made interracial marriages legal in the United States. Be sure to tune in.

**Stacy** [00:46:45] Hey, It's Stacy here. Since we're brand new podcast we need your help. Send us your feedback. We want this podcast to be listener centered and would love to hear from you. What do you like? Not like? Or wish you could hear more of? Is there an Asian American trailblazer whom you want us to interview? Tell us what you think. Call or text us at 202-599-3318.

**Stacy** [00:47:10] Leave your full name contact info, age and where you're from. Messages are recorded. So, who knows? Maybe you'll hear yourself on our show. Thanks for listening and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.