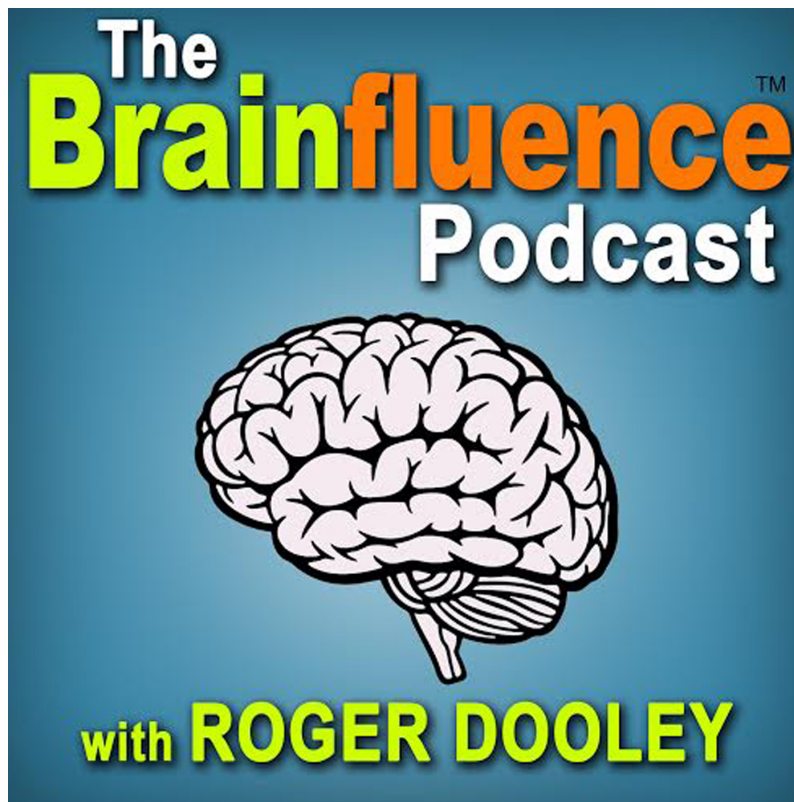


The Science of Success with Albert-Laszlo Barabasi

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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to The Brainfluence Podcast, I'm Roger Dooley. I found today's guest after another author and voracious reader, said that his book was one of the best of the year. I acquired a copy and, after reading it, I have to agree with my friend's assessment. One of the things we emphasize here on the podcast are that advice and tactics should have a base in science or data. There are a million authors who will tell you how to achieve success, but almost all of them base their advice on their own experience or anecdotes from successful people. Success stories are great, I love them, but they're also limited. If you try and follow the same path as Richard Branson say, or Jeff Bezos, you'll almost certainly fail.

Joining me today is Albert-László Barabási. He's a distinguished university professor at Northeastern University, where he directs the Center for Complex Network Research. To stay busy, he also holds appointments in the Department of Medicine at Harvard Medical School and the Central European University in Budapest. His books include, "Linked in Bursts", plus a couple of textbooks on network science, the most recent of which, oddly enough, is titled "Network Science". Part of László's network research led him to start studying the science of success. He's condensed what he's learned about the topic into his book, "The Formula: The

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Universal Laws of Success". Welcome to the show, László.

Albert-Laszlo: It's a pleasure to be talking to you, Roger.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, so László, you direct Northeastern Center for Complex Network Research, I assume there's not a sister group for simple networks, can you explain the kinds of questions you try and answer there?

Albert-Laszlo: Oh, absolutely. The reason I'm fascinated with networks is because our very existence depends on networks. If you think about the networks within our cells that determine our very biological existence, and when they go wrong they determined our diseases, to the network between our brain, that define our consciousness, to the communication networks through which we communicate, to the social network and the business network that allows really for us to have a successful career, all the way to the technological networks that really provide us the resources to be able to do what we're doing. So oldest systems, and we don't think much about them, but we're truly defined by them, and what we're trying to do is to kind of map these networks out, and understand their underlying structure, and eventually understand how these networks affect your ability to achieve something, the particular case being, how these networks help you, or pull you back from being successful.

Roger Dooley: Yeah well, so how you get from these complex networks of really all types, into the science of success?

Albert-Laszlo: That's a very good question, and it almost started by accident, and I started from a particular narrow

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perspective which is, we have lots of data now these days about scientists and how they collaborate together, and who they collaborate with, as well as their scientific impact. So about eight years ago, a student of mine and myself, were starting to think, hey, maybe we could actually go ahead and ask the reverse question. Not as much to say how these networks that we're part of look like, but how they determine our success. And so we said, maybe we could figure that out in the context of the science base, which we understand, but as soon as we started working on the problem, we realized that the word, science of success, raises a number of questions that go well beyond science, and it's not only a network problem, well we have to kind of explore lots of other dimensions of the problem. And eventually, the result of this eight year journey, was "The Formula", the book that I published last year.

Roger Dooley: László, do you reckon peers ever give you the side-eye when you talk about the science of success? I've read the book, and I can tell our listeners that it's really serious stuff, but to someone who's not that familiar with it, it sounds kind of new-agey or not scientifically rigorous.

Albert-Laszlo: Well, to all of those I just say, read the book.

Roger Dooley: Right, well that's good advice, and I would echo that. If you had any doubts that there could be a scientific approach to success, then "The Formula" is something that you ought to read. So, since we're talking about successful László, how do you measure success? What is success?

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Albert-Laszlo: Yes, that's a good question. And why should a physicist and a scientist study success? Well, what we realize as soon as we started to look at the subject is that, really, when it comes to success, we have two almost indistinguishable terms in our vocabulary, which is performance and success. And we often use these interchangeably, that if I had performance I will be successful, but for us these two are very different things, and at the outset we differentiate them. Performance is what you do, that is how good deals to put together as a businessman, how well you treat a patient, what paintings you draw and what research papers you write. So it's all about you and your actions.

Success is really what the community sees, acknowledges, of this performance, and eventually how do they reward you for that? In other terms, your performance is about you, but your success is about us, the community around you, and this has a very important implications for a scientist like myself, because what we learn as we look at performance is that in many, many areas, it's very difficult to measure performance, and difficult to distinguish individuals based on performance, because we're looking for one data point that captures that particular person's activity, but because success is a collective measure, that it's about the community's reception of that performance, it becomes measurable because there are multiple data points on it.

So, success can have multiple measures. There's not a single measure of success because it depends on what domain you are in. If you are a scientist, your success couldn't be done a number of citations, that is the impact of the papers that you write. If you are a businessman,

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could be the nature and the size of the companies that you build, could be money. If you are an artist, could be access to the top venues, but could also be the price of your painting, how much they sell for in the market. And in other areas could be purely popularity. How many people are aware of your name? If you're a singer, could be popularity, but could also be how many people are listening at a given a moment to your songs. So there's not a single success measure. It's really, you have to adapt it to the particular profession that you're talking about. What is common, is that it's always collective. It's something that the community rewards you for what you have done.

Roger Dooley: We'll use the example of academia where for a researcher, perhaps the number of citations that they get over the years is a measure of success and that's, right there, that is a community thing, but don't you dig into that a little bit deeper? You would think that a really great research insight would simply rise to the top on its own merits and that would propel that individual to the pinnacle of success, but it's not quite that simple, right?

Albert-Laszlo: Correct. And that's really the interesting part, that you and I probably were told in school that that reasons why we must have performance, that is we must study, we must exercise, we must practice, is because performance is absolutely necessary for success. And really, that's absolutely true, and in this book, this book is not about how you actually become successful without performance, and the performance is given. But the question is often, what happens when performance is not measurable, or the individuals are not distinguishable? Well, before that, let's go back to the performance drives

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success equation. It's certainly true, very true in areas where we have a very accurate measurement of performance, like sports.

The faster you run, the better you are as a runner, and you are better recognized as a runner. And indeed, we actually have done studies in this space and we showed that the performance of an individual who was active in sports, truly determines it's visibility and all other measures of success that is given to that particular individual. But sports is a very unique area. Most of us work in a spaces where performance does not have a chronometer, that is, there's not a single measure or a single one dimensional chronometer that could tell you how good we are at something. So then the question is, what happens if you are a doctor, if you're a business or if you are a painter, were performance is not so clear cut, as it is for a swimmer or a runner?

Roger Dooley: I think, in reading your book, *László*, it reminded me of my friend Ryan Holiday, who was a past guest on the show, and he wrote a book called, "Perennial Seller", and it was about what it took to create something, a product or a book that really lasts beyond just sort of an initial period of success, or no success at all. And he talked about restaurants that have been open for decades and products that stayed popular forever, and in particular books, and his thinking wasn't based on network science, but I saw a lot of similarity. He said that the work itself had to be good, just as you do, but that if it was going to get traction it had to be promoted. And he had examples of books that had languished for years but eventually got attention, and others that just languished. And what he calls promotion sounds a lot like your network idea. If your

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network includes writers for the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, your book is more likely to catch on, than if you're working on island somewhere. Would that be pretty accurate?

Albert-Laszlo: It is accurate, but I would actually go a little bit further and look at the word promotion as not something that the individual does on his or her behalf, but the community does to them. And that's exactly what the science of success has uncovered, is that success breeds success. And that's a really well measurable property, that the more success, the more visibility, the more impact you had, then your future impact is proportional with that. And that's really one of the laws in the book, and it is as simple as that, in the sense that really, I discuss in the book very simple experiments that the sociologists have done, to show that success really generates future success. Let me give a particular example.

One of my favorite story in the book, is the work of a sociologist, working the US back then, and what he did is that he selected the most active Wikipedia editors, the 200 most active ones, and then randomly put them into two distinct groups, but totally randomly, the groups were indistinguishable. And then for one of the groups of 100, he gave a prize that you can give it in Wikipedia as being one of the best editors, and for the other hundred he did not give the prize. And then he watched what happened three months later, and three months later the group who has not been rewarded got three more prizes, and it's not surprising because they were very good at what they did. They were the top editors. But the group that he rewarded, got twelve more prizes. So, this is a pure case where there is no difference in the performance, because

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the people were randomly put into the group and they were indistinguishable in terms of performance, yet the rewarded the group actually got more rewards. That is success breeds success.

And this is very important as we think about our life, and our children's as well as for our students life, is because it's much safer for me to give a job or reward, a prize to someone who has been previously rewarded, because in a way I'm not running the risk by doing so. So, kind of this initial rewards are very important to raise individuals above the noise level, and bring to our attention. And so this, coming back to your original question, yes, advertising, marketing is very, very important, but there is a natural mechanism through which things are really raising in popularity and in awareness, and this is what we call "rich gets richer" phenomenon, or in technical terms, we call it "preferential attachment", saying, the more success you had, the more visible you are and therefore the more chance you have to have future success.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I think it even works in reverse. I'm thinking of the author Dan Brown, who had written multiple books about ... at least three books before his huge best seller, "The Da Vinci Code" came out, and the one immediately before that was "Angels and Demons", which many readers would say was actually a better book than "The Da Vinci Code", but it didn't do anything. Or not much, but once "The Da Vinci Code" came out, it became a best seller, and not only does that predict future success, it can even elevate to the success of past work.

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Albert-Laszlo: Oh, and this is actually what we call the "Sleeping Beauty" phenomenon, is that the product that has not been discovered, suddenly is discovered as everybody's really crazed about, and well studied in science. But let's consider the other cases discussed in "The Formula", because of a book that was written by J.K. Rowling under a pseudonym, and why did she write it? She was by then hugely famous for Harry Potter, for the seven volumes of Harry Potter, she was the best selling author of the world history of writing, right? And then she puts out a detective story, under a pseudonym, not disclosing that that's actually her behind that. And lo and behold, it sells 300 copies, right? And it's not because the critics were not good, because whoever read it, the official critics said, this is actually a fabulous book, and it doesn't feel like if, some of the critics said, as if it would be a first time author because it's such a well written book, but yet it could not get traction.

In the moment, she was unmasked by a journalist, that really, that's her book and she acknowledged, overnight it became an international bestseller. So, this actually shows how important it is, this component of success, of paying the right attention to that, and how performance alone does not determine the longterm success. That book that she published months before, was the same book as the one became overnight bestseller, in the same way as your example, "Angels and Demons", where it's the same book and published years earlier, as the one that now the community has embraced as a fabulous book. And one of the chapters discusses a series of experiments that systematically show how there is a bandwagon effect in the community, and who gets on the

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top is not as much determined by the performance, but determined by this collective forces, that early on pick a winner, and that through this "rich get richer" or "preferential attachment" mechanism, ends on the top of the list, even though there are many others who are indistinguishable from that.

Roger Dooley: So, László, since we see that even rather skilled writers can't really get traction without their brand name, what would you suggest for an individual? Not just an author perhaps, but somebody who is creating something new, and first obviously, it's important to get the quality right, the performance right, whatever you want to call it, whatever you're creating has to be good by objective measures, because otherwise it's simply, even if it had a lot of exposure, it's not going to get traction. But how would you address the other side of that equation, how do you try and achieve that network effect?

Albert-Laszlo: Oh, I discuss a lot in "The Formula" in different spaces. Actually, in chapter three, I have a long discussion about the artists who really succeed in the space where performance is totally unmeasurable, and then I have ... in the book we have two more laws that explicitly talk about that. So let me amend the "rich get richer" phenomena, to say how really the law that is described here, looks like. And what it says actually is that, future success equals previous success, times fitness. And now, that fitness is really what is the performance of the product. How well the book has been written, how well you are actually as a doctor of healing people, and so on.

And what we find is that, yes, success does breed success, but the fitness parameter accelerates that

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process. And typically those who are succeeding from an unknown book or from an unknown product and become really well known, are those who are coming along with the fitness parameter that is higher than the competitors. And in some cases, this fitness parameter is even a measurable, like on the Wikis or websites, we're able to measure what is the fitness of the website, which kind of determines eventually in the long term, how many links the website will acquire over time. And this fitness component is the one, where I'm telling you that this book is really not about bringing success to a product that doesn't have the performance or the fitness, but it's really kind of asking the question, if you do have, how does success emerge in that case?

The second law that I think it's very relevant is the fifth law of the book, which effectively says, with persistence success can come at any time. And this is really based on our research of the scientific space first, but then, asking the question, when does success come in a person's career? And in this particular case, we were really addressing an issue that is widespread, both in the business space as well as in the scientific space, is that the belief that creativity lies with individual people, that the young people are creative, and mid-age we lose our ability to be creative. And what we had shown, and that's what I discuss in detail in "the Formula", that this belief is actually a wrong interpretation of the data.

Yes, it is true that major breakthroughs are typically connected to young individual's name, but that's not because the older folks are not creative, but because the young people are trying more often. That is that the productivity in youth is higher, and with age productivity

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drops down. People are simply not trying to build new companies, not trying to write new research papers, not trying to paint new paintings, and when we correct for the core productivity, it turns out that innovation has no age. In other terms, as long as we keep trying and putting projects on the table, your chances of breaking through at 80, is exactly the same as breaking through in your twenties. And I even discuss the beautiful case of John Flynn, who was a chemist at the Yale University, who was forcefully retired from Yale at the age of 65.

They closed his lab down, and after he was forcefully retired, he wrote that research paper that 15 years later led to his Nobel prize in Chemistry. And we don't have to actually stick to academia. If you go to the industry space, and particularly if you look at the big successful companies that Silicone Valley has produced, where clearly youth seems to have an advantage, when you look at the data it turns out that among the funders of the Unicorns, you have actually all the age ranges, from 25 to 65. So, creativity has no age. Productivity does, and for those who can keep keep up the enthusiasm and the willingness to try, success can come at anytime.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, that's really a great message I think, and I'm sure one that will be appreciated by those folks in our audience, and me, who are beyond their sort of midpoint stage, and it really has been conventional wisdom. Like, if you're looking when Nobel prize are awarded, I mean typically, it's for work was done when scientists were quite young, and I can see where you would draw the conclusion that well, okay, only young people have real great insights and creative ideas, but now we've got the

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data. So, I think I, and many other folks, thank you for that László.

Albert-Laszlo: And Roger, just want to reflect on something you said. You said, you are beyond the peak point. There is no peak point, in creativity. Only in terms of-

Roger Dooley: Midpoint, not peak point.

Albert-Laszlo: Yes, or midpoint. Right. Only willingness to try. That's what matters.

Roger Dooley: Right, yeah. I better not be past my peak point. I've got a book coming out shortly and I'm anticipating that will be a peak, hopefully not the final peak, but I'm looking forward to that. So, you know László, I had a wine blog for years and one of the things that I was always amazed by in that industry, was the variability of expert opinions. It seems like most experts kind of avoid blind taste tests because it exposes how subjective their opinions are, or they might give a \$5 wine a gold star, and rate what everybody, all the "experts" are rating a very excellent wine, a superb wine, a lower rating. Or even how slapping an expensive label on a cheap bottle of wine, not only makes people say it tastes better, but it actually fools their brains and fMRI scans show that their brains light up more when they think it's an expensive wine. So, you talked about wine a little bit in "The Formula", what were your findings about wine?

Albert-Laszlo: Sure. Wine is a beautiful story to ask to what degree experts are really good at measuring performance. and indeed, I'm quoting here a wonderful experiment that was done at this California state fair, by a wine maker who's a

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former oceanographer, that is a scientist who got totally unhappy about the fact that some of his wines that he did not actually appreciate so much, would get gold prizes, while other wines actually would be totally ignored by the wine community, despite that he was convinced that it's his very best. So he himself became a judge at the most prominent venue for wine judging in the US, which is a California state fair, and his opinion didn't give proof, so eventually he convinced the state fair to do an experiment, where the same panels that are judging the American wines, were now asked to actually continue judging the wines as they did before, but unknown to them, the same wine was actually shown to them three times, in a random orders.

And really, he wanted to see to what degree the judges are consistent of giving the same grade to the same wine. And the results was totally disappointing. That is, there was one thing that the judges agree, they typically agreed on bad wines, but when he came to good wines, the same wine could get a gold prize, or just be totally ignored. And, there seemed to be however a few individuals, that were consistent with their grading, and they would always give gold prize to the same wine, not knowing that they're being shown it again. So he hoped they would pick these individuals as kind of the gold standards, but it turned out that that only lasted for a year, and the next year the same individuals were just as random as everyone else. And so, of course, this is disappointing for us when it comes to wine, but it's saying a much deeper issue, which is the fact that when we are confronted with individuals with top performance, or wines that are old good, we're really unable to tell them apart.

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And this is not only in wine. In "The Formula" I discuss also how classical music is being judged, and I showed that when it comes to the finals, the judges are unable to really see who is the best violinist or singer or pianist, and they start using other mechanisms, like recency, that the later you play, the bigger grades you have. Gender, women get lower grades than men, and so on and so forth. And this is not only in the kind of music space, for example, if you would like to be a judge in Spain, and you take your exam on Monday, you have a 40% chance of becoming a judge, on Friday you have a 70% of passing the exam. And so, what we see over and over, is that when even the top experts are faced with individuals who all offer a good performance, they are unable to distinguish them from each other, and therefore they start using typically discriminate or other mechanisms to decide, who is the best.

And for that reason I always tell for example my students, when they come back to me happily and say, I got a job interview. And I tell them, good. That means that your performance is sufficient for you to get the job. Now, if you want success and nailed that interview, find out when they're going to actually do ... when the decision time will come, and try to get an interview date as close as possible to the decision time. Because the later you go, the higher the chance that you will get the job. You and I have actually lived in South Bend. I was a faculty at Notre Dame. When I got that job, I was the very last person to be interviewed out of about 10 candidates.

Roger Dooley: Well, it could have just been that you were the best too, László. I mean that is possible, despite your research.

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Albert-Laszlo: That is true. That is true, and let me just tell you a beautiful story that one of the editors wanted to publish, "The Formula" told me. He said, the reason why he wants this book, is because from this book he finally understood something that he was puzzled for a decade now. He said, every year he interviews about five to 10 potential interns for the publishing house, and always, the last person is the best for the job.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I guess didn't think about it. I have interviewed folks over the years with my various businesses, and I never was consciously aware of that last candidate or fairly recent candidate bias, in case the last one was a real clunker, because not everybody sort of met even the basic standard, but I do recall that a candidate that I had given a high grade to, perhaps even a couple of weeks earlier because the interviews were spaced out for some reason, that higher rating in my notes on that weren't quite as potent as the person who I had just spoken with, who had maybe similar characteristics. So that's very interesting.

Albert-Laszlo: Yes. We all have to be aware deeply of this recency bias, whether it comes to our children or our students as we are advising them, as well as when it comes to our own hiring, like how do we make the decisions, and not really fall into the trap of the recency bias, and hire the last person just because I remembered them the most.

Roger Dooley: Right, and of course in-person interviewing is subject to so many different kinds of biases, much like the piano judging we were talking about. I mean, people are judged by clothing, their appearance, their gender, how they speak, just absolutely every aspect, none of which may

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be relevant. If you're hiring a coder, programmer, you really don't need somebody who is necessarily highly expressive and friendly and whatnot. You want somebody who can sit and write great code for eight hours a day and but the same time, there's a lot of data showing that people are influenced, the interviewers are influenced, by characteristics that aren't really relevant. How well did they do in the interview? Where they personable, were they friendly, which might be important if you're hiring a salesperson, but not so important for other kinds of jobs.

Albert-Laszlo: Yes, absolutely. So this is why I really ... was for me, was so exciting to write "The Formula", because there were so many insights coming out from a scientific approach to the very fuzzy subject of success, that I felt that this needs to be shared to a wider audience, rather than be trapped in the scientific literature, as it was until now.

Roger Dooley: You know, another topic that you talk about is lower teams, and I think that's really interesting because probably every one of the people listening to this has to participate in teams from time to time, and you had some, again, sort of counterintuitive, really surprising findings there. Why don't you talk about that a little bit?

Albert-Laszlo: Sure. No matter what we do these days actually, we increasingly have to rely on teams to achieve it. In science in particular, there's lots of data to show that not only team based work became the norm, but the biggest discoveries since 1990 were really associated with teams rather than individuals. So when it comes to teams, two questions are very important. The first one is that, how you put together a team, that really will achieve what is put together for, that it will be successful. And the second

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equally important question is, how do you make sure that you, part of the team, will actually get the credit you deserve for the team success?

And both of these areas are discussed in separate chapters in "The Formula". Let me actually spend a few minutes on the second one, because it's often taken for granted that if the team will succeed, so will we, as part of the team. But what the data shows is that, typically when it comes to credit for the work, it typically goes to one or two individuals from the team, and often the person who gets the credit, has little relationship to who came up with the idea, who got the funding for it, who did most of the work on the particular problem, and whose role was to just make sure that there is warm coffee for everyone else so the work is accomplished.

And the reason for that is because, kind of assigning credit for the team is not based on the performance, but is based on the perception of how the community feels that whose team was that. And so, we put this one under the data microscope to figure out, how do people decide about work credit goes, and at the end the mechanism is relatively simple, and it's very predictable and quantifiable, that is typically the credit goes to the individual, independent of how much he or she did on that particular team, whose line of work much closely fits with what the team has accomplished. So let me give an example. So, if you and I for example, put together a business deal, since you are a much better known in the business world, that's really your company and not mine. I am an unknown in that space.

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However, if you and I write a research paper, on networks, that's really my paper because no one really knows you in that context, and people will credit me, and they will credit me rightly for that discovery, even if it was your idea and you worked it out, they would credit me because I have many other works in that space, and my previous work will be close sighted with that particular discovery. And this idea, that simply credit goes, by the community's credit goes to the one who has the most consistent track record in that space, we're able to quantify, and we can look at any research paper with 120 authors, and the algorithm can tell us very precisely how much credit every single author will get for that particular line of work. And for example, we did that for all the Nobel prize winning papers, and we always get it right who will win the Nobel prize, no matter how many authors are on that paper. And a few cases where we miss it, there's always a juicy story behind that.

Roger Dooley: Yeah well, you know, I think there's a practical takeaway there, and that is, of course we can't always choose the teams that we're on, sometimes they're assigned by others. To the extent that we can choose teams, it would seem to be a good idea to choose teams, assuming credit is of some interest to us and advancing our careers and such, to choose a team where the ultimate product is closely identified with whatever we're good at, or whatever we're known for, as opposed to being a supporting role on a different team that's really in some other domain. We might have valuable contributions, but even if we do, we're probably not going to get credit for those contributions, because it's not really our space.

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Albert-Laszlo: Correct. I would even further that we may be total responsible for the main achievement of the team, and if it doesn't fit within our career track, then we will get virtually zero credit for that.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well, that's probably a good place to wrap up László. Let me remind our listeners that we're speaking today with Albert-László Barabási, author of "The Formula: The Universal Laws of Success." László, where can people find you and your ideas online?

Albert-Laszlo: Well Roger, I'm easy to find, but the book has a website called theformula.barabasi.com, and just Google my name if you can spell it, and you will find lots of information about me, and listen Roger, it was a real pleasure to talk to you about-

Roger Dooley: Well, likewise, and László we'll link to those places, and to any other resources we talked about, on the show notes page at, rogerdooley.com/podcast, and we'll have a transcript for reading or downloading there too. László, thanks for being on the show, it's been great.

Albert-Laszlo: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of The Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at <http://www.RogerDooley.com>.