



144. Preparing Our Kids to Become Leaders of the Future with Michael Trezza

Michael Trezza: [00:00:00] If I can have a coach to be part of this company and be learning and growing along with the students as well, that would be such a massive win. And we're doing that and it's so awesome to watch.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:13] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, and your host.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:24] We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:47] So, on today's episode of Learning Unboxed, we are going to be talking about high school students. And we all know how difficult it is to contemplate, think about, and sort of wrestle the world of high school education. And so, I'm super excited today because we're going to be talking about a program called Giant Leaps Learning.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:07] And Giant Leaps Learning provides an online afterschool enrichment program that helps prepare creative and curious high school students for success in life, college, and the workforce and beyond. And there's just going to be so much we're going to get to talk about with this. And joining us to share the story of Giant Leaps Learning is Michael Trezza, who is the Technical CEO and Entrepreneur, with over 20 years of experience doing software and platform development mobile apps. I suspect he's a bit of a renaissance man. So, Michael, welcome to the program.

Michael Trezza: [00:01:41] Thank you. It's so good to be here. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:44] Excellent. Well, we're super excited to have this conversation because, honestly, high school and workforce development and prepping sort of kids is a really, really tough thing. And I suspect we share a lot of synergies just in looking at your work, and our work, just recognizing that the current or trending school system or educational sort of endeavors in the U.S. and other parts of the world are largely obsolete today. They just don't really fit the needs any longer. And it's time for a major overhaul, which I understand Giant Leaps for Learning it feels is all about.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:21] So, let's start at the highest level, Michael, and so tell us, first and foremost, what is Giant Leaps of Learning and why do you feel so strongly that it was needed?

Michael Trezza: [00:02:32] Yeah. Sure. So, you teed it up really well. It's an online enrichment program for high school students, curious, creative high school students who need more from school than they're getting. And the three things that it really touches on are self-awareness, global-awareness, and critical thinking skills. Three components that I think are absolutely important and critical to a kid's success in life and then afterwards. And we can dig into the components of it later.

Michael Trezza: [00:03:01] But why I started it was, so my daughter was born about five years ago, and when I found out that I was going to be a father, I just started thinking about the world differently. I know everybody says having a kid changes them, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:16] It does. Yeah. True.

Michael Trezza: [00:03:17] It really does. It's so cliché. But my my entire perspective on the world and the world that I was living or bringing the child into really, really shifted. And I started to think about things like, I wonder what this little girl is going to see when she's my age. I wonder what the world is going to look like. And I had this thought that I didn't think she was ever going to have to drive a car.

Michael Trezza: [00:03:40] Living in San Diego near Qualcomm, I see autonomous driving vehicles up and down the highway all the time. No driver in this. It's not like a Tesla where it's somebody there. There's no driver in those. And I just wonder if 15 years from now or 14 years from now, wow, the world is going to move very quickly. It is moving very quickly.

Michael Trezza: [00:03:59] And I didn't think that the way we were preparing our kids to sort of pick up the reins and take over leadership roles was in lockstep with where the world was going. That's what drove me on a very high level. That's what drove me to build Giant Leaps.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:19] So, that's a really interesting perspective. And I think so many of us who are parents, and lots of our listeners are, we would agree with you. I mean, suddenly you do, in fact, think about the world very differently and you think very creatively about the world as well. I think it's an interesting synergy between the recognition of, "Hey, you know, when my kids are old enough, they may not need to or want to drive a car."

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:42] And, actually, I feel that very personally. I have an 18 year old who, literally, I finally had to say, "We're going to go get a learner's permit." Zero interest in driving. Same sort of thing, "I live in a city, I don't really need to do that thing." And, yet, you, as a parent, the flipside of it is I feel compelled to give you some skills and to have you be able to think critically. Which, I think is part of the process, actually, that Giant Leaps is sort of tied to, is sort of helping with that individual growth and self-awareness.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:11] So, Michael, help us understand the nuts and bolts of sort of how the program works. There's a one-to-one mentoring piece to it. There's also a curriculum. So, we just really want to try to understand what is it that we're talking about here when we talk about, you know, students signing up and being part of this program?

Michael Trezza: [00:05:28] Yeah. Yeah. There's so much to the program, so I'm only going to be able to give you just the tip of the iceberg on some of these things. But the two major components certainly are the one-on-one coaching and the online curriculum.

Michael Trezza: [00:05:43] So, the online curriculum is super interesting. It's different for every student. So, it's hyper-personalized and adaptive to every student. So, the program starts with a student taking a Strengths

Finder Assessment and their parents taking one as well. So, there's a common language in the household around the family's strengths, and we lean into that a lot in the program, which is really, really valuable.

Michael Trezza: [00:06:10] Then, they take an interest assessment, which helps us determine which module they sort of get kind of introduced to first. So, the online curriculum is broken down into modules. And the modules are based on different topics, things like cryptocurrency, artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, sort of near-future and current future technologies that are shifting and changing the world.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:34] Very interesting. And things that kids are interested in just naturally.

Michael Trezza: [00:06:38] Absolutely. And the cool thing about how that component works is, we set it up in a way that it's almost impossible for them to not be interested in. So, if you and I were to have a conversation and I were to say, "Hey, how interested in genetics are you?" I mean, if you are, cool, but you may not be or may not know you are.

Michael Trezza: [00:06:59] But if I were to say something like, "Imagine a world where we could pause or reverse human aging." Now, we're talking about biology, we're talking about science, we're talking about things in a sideways way that can be very, very engaging. And we can have a conversation, a consequential conversation about, What does that world look like? If somebody can live to 150 or 200? What happens to social fabric or family structures or business? And then, we can start to kind of tease out where the student's natural interests lie using these sort of really interesting, engaging conversations and topics.

Michael Trezza: [00:07:39] So, they're learning about where the world may be going. They're figuring out their interests. And along the way, they're having meaningful discussions with their family, which there are prompts in the program to do that, and every week with a coach. And that's the part that I think is the secret sauce in our program, it's the one-on-one weekly coaching with their success coach. And so, they meet with this coach every week. And they're genuinely coached. They're not taught lessons necessarily. They're mentored and they're motivated to kind of push through the challenges that they find in the program. And it's beautiful to [inaudible].

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:18] That's really amazing. And I'm super, super curious about that element, that aspect of it. So, a couple of follow up questions with that. You know, one of them is, since the program is so tailored to the individual - which that's fabulous. And this sort of reminds me a little bit about, you know, executive coaching that happens when folks get far down in the career - I love the idea of doing this at the earliest point instead of waiting until somebody is neck deep in the world of work, right?

Michael Trezza: [00:08:45] It's all [inaudible] in a way.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:47] Yeah. Absolutely. I love that. So, since it is so personalized - which I love - help me understand, so (A) where do these mentors come from? And how do you find enough people? Or how many kids are we talking about at one time? Honestly, how do you manage this? Because it's super cool and I could imagine an entire school district saying, "Let's add this into our high school curriculum." But how could you possibly do that? How's it work?

Michael Trezza: [00:09:19] Well, scaling up quickly is certainly a challenge because there's an HR component. There's a people component. But having done what I've done for the last 20 years, building tech and building tech companies, one of the focuses that my tech business has had over the last ten years has been a business process improvement and then building technology solutions to kind of accelerate those. So, I'm a systems guy. I'm a tech guy. And I understand process really, really tightly.

Michael Trezza: [00:09:52] So, how that all dovetails into Giant Leaps is, we've got a beautiful system for training coaches, for onboarding them, for hiring them, for getting them really rolled into the ethos of the organization.

Michael Trezza: [00:10:11] Finding them is actually a lot easier than I expected. You know, that was one of the first tests we ran when I was building the company. Because so many people told me that hiring people was going to be very difficult. I was like, "Okay. Well, I have to figure that out very quickly." So, I ran a test that we put a job ad up on Indeed, and within two hours we got something, like, 200 or 300 applicants instantly.

Michael Trezza: [00:10:40] And I think the reason for it is because the job that we're offering, the role that we're offering, is entirely flexible time-wise for them. They can do it remotely. And it serves a real mission and purpose. Things that people are looking for. That's such a magic, like a secret kind of sauce, I suppose, right there. You can work from home.

Michael Trezza: [00:11:06] And most teachers got into what they're doing because they want to serve kids, they want to solve problems, they want to help kids. And they realized pretty quickly that the bureaucracy of it gets in the way. It doesn't often support that, unfortunately.

Michael Trezza: [00:11:22] So, to answer your question of who we hire, it's not all teachers at all. A diverse group of people, high performers, athletes, entrepreneurs, people who have extra time and the capability to interact with students and motivate them. So, we pull from a really wide range of groups of people. We have an amazing training program.

Michael Trezza: [00:11:43] And the thing that I love about what we're doing is we want, and I want, the coaches to get as much from the program as the students. I felt why build something that's just a one-way relationship? If I can have a coach be part of this company and be learning and growing along with the students as well, that would be such a massive win. And we're doing that and it's so awesome to watch.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:14] That is really, really amazing. So, I know one of the questions that folks are like, "Okay. This is super cool, but I've got to ask." This one is around safety and security. You're talking about adults who are strangers, even though they've been vetted and all that sort of stuff, interacting one-on-one with students, with minors. So, how does that play out? Because I can imagine that's one of those questions that's being asked, like, "Well, how do we know that's the safe relationship that's being developed?" So, how do you do that?

Michael Trezza: [00:12:43] Yeah. There's a couple of ways. There's a protection of information. So, the only way coaches connect with students is over Zoom and over Slack, which is a monitored and archived solution so that nobody's texting and nobody's calling each other, nobody's e-mailing each other, or at least the coaches aren't emailing the students, anything like that. So, we kind of lock the communication channels then. We have really clear oversight over that.

Michael Trezza: [00:13:10] I guess even before that, we've got a really detailed vetting process, background checks, all sorts of background checks that are in place and multiple steps of meetings. You don't just apply, and then fill out a form, and get a background check, and you get hired. There's a lot of steps involved in making sure that you're the right person, the right fit for the job. So, there's a culture component of it. There's a technical component with background checks.

Michael Trezza: [00:13:40] And then, there's the safety and security component of the communication channels, as well as the Zoom sessions are recorded, and that's maintained for a while and overseen by administrators. So, we do everything possible to make sure that the relationships are safe and that there's nothing that slips through the cracks.

Michael Trezza: [00:14:01] And we give opportunities for students at every step to raise their hand if anything ever happens. If they ever have an inappropriate comment or who knows - I don't even want to think about things like that - but if there's ever something where a student felt like a line was crossed, they're able to raise their hand. And it's anonymous to the coach. But the administrative staff get alerted immediately and we intervene.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:30] Yeah. Absolutely. I had to ask the question because I knew that people were saying, "Well, this is super cool, but -" So, we can just move on from that. So, that's awesome. There's an entire protocol in place to sort of deal and think about that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:41] So then, let's talk about the design and development of the program itself. So, that's another thing that folks would be super curious about. You know, and since it's module-based, that makes it easy for you to adapt it based on individual student's need. But as you're building a designing the modules, what does that look like? Where does the content come from? Or how are you structuring so that the content, the coaching, the modules, they're obviously going to be appropriate, but super, super curious about how they meet educational needs and outcomes.

Michael Trezza: [00:15:12] Yeah. Sure. So, one of the things that I was really clear on early on was that - nothing against Khan Academy - I didn't want to be Khan Academy. I didn't want to be having to constantly be creating content.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:27] Right. Right.

Michael Trezza: [00:15:28] So, one of the things that we are not is, if you come to us and you're interested in cryptocurrency, we're not going to make you an expert in cryptocurrency. That's not what we do. What we do is teach you how to think consequentially about where cryptocurrency is taking the world and how you fit into that world. And give you real skills in that engagement, real critical thinking skills. So, what that looks like is the modules are all based on various topics, any number of topics.

Michael Trezza: [00:16:00] And your question around where does the content come from, we create all the content that is not the topic specific content. So, there's components of the modules where we have to explain a little bit about what cryptocurrency is. So, what we do is we find videos that exist out there that do what we feel is a great job of explaining them. We find articles.

Michael Trezza: [00:16:25] And that's what part of the program is, is teaching kids how to find information, how to discriminate between good and bad information, how to check courses, how to determine the motivations for this information being out there in the first place, which it's very meta on some level.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:44] But it's awesome because that's exactly what we should be teaching. I mean, the reality is - I say this all the time - you know, I hold my cell phone up, I'm like almost everybody has this. It's a computer in your pocket.

Michael Trezza: [00:16:57] It's everything.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:58] Yeah. So, why are we teaching facts when we should be teaching kids how to understand what's good information, what to do with it. I love the fact that you said one of the motivations behind the creation, an article or a website, because that's huge. That's right now.

Michael Trezza: [00:17:16] That's gold. Absolutely. That's what I feel brought us to the position that the world is in a lot of places by seeing news or by seeing information and just accepting it as fact because it's on Facebook or, I don't know, whatever news channel they're getting it from. And that's deadly to society. I'm not saying one outlet is better than the others, but take the time to read past the headline. You know, read the content and determine for yourself and have some tools, how do you determine if this content is good, bad, or nonsense.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:57] And that's part of those sessions, you're helping them figure out how to ask the questions and make the determination. This is good, this is bad, this is flawed, this is motivation. It might be great research, but it leans one direction or another, whatever that happens to be, because of a whole set of circumstances. You know, understanding the research comes from this part of the world, that it's going to have this sort of this leaning or impact or understanding tied to it. Interesting.

Michael Trezza: [00:18:23] Exactly. The coaches are there to have the students sort of dig deep.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:28] I love that.

Michael Trezza: [00:18:28] Because, of course, some students are going to mail in their answers a little bit or say this seems credible. Why? What about it exactly feels credible? I mean, what are they thinking about?. So, that's what that relationship is there for, to sort of pull the student out of their comfort zone and really think a little bit harder about their answers. Did that answer the -

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:56] Yeah. Well, I love this because I love the fact that it's all about, you know, recognizing that we need to equip these kids to go out into the world. I mean, at the end of the day, I don't know about you, but me, personally, I feel like we have a moral and ethical obligation to ensure that these kiddos, when they leave the nest, however you want to define that, whatever everybody's circumstances are, are independent in the world, that they are equipped to make the world a better place.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:30] Because we're a mess right now on so many levels. And so, it's just like we desperately need these kiddos to solve the world's problems. And they can. They're wicked smart. They're creative. They're innovative. They've got such a diversity of thinking and understanding. And, yet, we don't always equip them with the confidence and the skills to go out and say I can.

Michael Trezza: [00:19:55] That's 100 percent. And I love that, that word confidence is really important to me. And that's one of the things that I see the students who go through the program developing, whether they didn't have it before. And I think it has to do with a couple of things. That coaching relationship is amazing, so they're being seen and they're being heard every week by an adult who's validating their ideas, asking more questions about their ideas because they're interesting and fascinating. The ideas kids come up with are amazing. And so, there's that component.

Michael Trezza: [00:20:30] And then, them seeing themselves in a different light and them realizing the future is interesting and they're going to play an amazing part in that future. They get a context that they don't get in school often. They're taught facts. They're taught how to memorize. They're taught how to take tests. And they may have a science class where they talk about robots or who knows what. But it often doesn't come with the

context of how do you fit into this world. So, they come away from the program with a different sense of who they are and how they fit into things.

Michael Trezza: [00:21:09] And there's one other thing that I wanted to mention about the program, there's so many components of it that are kind of baked in, but one of the other things is every week they're given a prompt that they have to go home and take to their parents or to friends and family or a mentor or something like that. And usually it turns into, like, a conversation with a parent, which is awesome.

Michael Trezza: [00:21:32] So, they bring these questions home, these are really engaging questions, and it provides an avenue of stress-free dialogue. That I think is pretty hard to come by in, like, a teen-parent relationship these days where a lot of the conversation is around school, and grades, and logistics, and things like that, or relationship drama.

Michael Trezza: [00:21:56] But one of the things that we've seen is these kids come to their parents with these questions, and they're open-ended and blue sky and really interesting, and they have dialogue, and the relationships are sort of strengthened in a way that is so beautiful to watch.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:14] Give us an example of one of these questions.

Michael Trezza: [00:22:17] So, a lot of them are based on the module topics, but something like, you know, imagine a world where we could communicate by thought alone. That's, like, one of the problem topics. That's what we're working on right now solving. So, a student may come home to their parent and say, "What do you think about this world? What do you think that world is going to look like? Or what do you think the challenges and the problems in that world are going to be?" And they end up having just an open-ended discussion that has no baggage attached to it. It's just [inaudible].

Michael Trezza: [00:22:52] Or some of the other questions are more personal, like who was your best mentor in your life? Or what's the best advice that you've ever gotten from somebody in your life? Some questions that kind of have the parent reflect on their own. They're all different. They're all very different and designed to get at different kind of aspects of the relationship and personalities.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:18] Yeah. That's really awesome. I love that, that there's this carryover component that says you can take what you've learned and you've experienced and you can sort of test the waters of your skills in that sort of safe environment. Because, essentially, that's what you're doing. If I'm going to take this prompt question back home or into some safe environment where I am, I get the opportunity to sort of explore how others, not just respond to the question, but how they respond and grow with me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:46] And that's a really, really powerful thing that translates long term, I think, into the world of work and to whatever career future you have in terms of the ability to have meaningful relationships at a variety of different spaces and places. Which, I think ultimately gets to what it takes to be an exceptional leader down the road. And so, is that one of those sort of goals within the program, this sort of notion of exceptional leadership?

Michael Trezza: [00:24:19] Yeah. Our sort of tagline is, Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today. That's what I like to think of. I like to think of what this is, is 21st century leadership school.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:29] Yeah, I like that.

Michael Trezza: [00:24:30] You know, the early impetus for this whole thing, like I said, was my daughter, that shift that it made in me. But I joined an organization, it was called Gen Next at the time, it's called Alder right now, and it exposed me to some really fascinating speakers and people and a network of people that asked really amazing questions about where the world was going. And I started to think about these technologies that were changing the world and we're right on the cusp of them.

Michael Trezza: [00:25:04] I mean, like this idea that the iPhone has only been around since 2007. And it went from 2006 when nobody had one to now where 90 percent of the world has one. That's a massive shift. And what's being developed right now that is going to change the world in an even more significant way. And all these things, like autonomous driving, digitalization of currency, I mean all of these things that are really shifting the world.

Michael Trezza: [00:25:34] So, all that to say, I didn't believe that we were preparing students to be leaders to take the responsibility that comes with these massive shifts. Does that all kind of tie together?

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:49] Yeah. Absolutely. And I think that's a really, really important and intriguing thing for people to hear at the end of the day. And I think that's fascinating. You're one of the first guests that I've had that's really articulated it, so I want to thank you, for starters, for that. Because I think it's critically important that this notion, we talk about the rate and pace of change of technology and what's going on in the world, we talk about that all the time in education, but what we don't talk about that you just did is that with that comes a unique and new level of responsibility.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:21] And as we're thinking about the last of our Gen Z-ers are graduating from high school in the next five years, and the Alpha Gen - I think I heard somebody the other day called them Generation Artemis - that are all our little kids in preschool, elementary, and middle school that are coming up behind them, and their responsibility in the world - that was an amazing point - it's epic. And what are we doing to keep it from being overwhelming for them?

Michael Trezza: [00:26:54] Completely. Completely. The technologies that we're building are so powerful. They're godlike in a lot of ways. That responsibility is different than it was when we were developing steam engines. I mean, that changed the face of business and confidence in the world. But it wasn't having people live to 1,000 years old. You know what I mean?

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:23] I do. It's just such a powerful statement. Wow, Michael. Because, seriously, I think that if folks could step back and say, "If that is in fact the world we're sending kids into, that could be the mechanism, the driver, that finally gets global education system to say enough. It's time for something new."

Michael Trezza: [00:27:48] It'd be amazing. And that's a really big, lofty, aspirational sort of goal and mission. But what I really wanted to do with this program was bring it back to today. Okay. Well, that's big. That's not a lot of things parents can solve for is fixing the world. But how can they ensure that their kids are going to be successful? And let's define what success means. I mean, let's have parents define what that means.

Michael Trezza: [00:28:18] But how can they be successful? And what parents are interested in for them? Right now, it's school. Getting into college, perhaps. Having a kid be fulfilled and really find their passion, have them the spark show up in their eyes. And then, be self-sustainable - or what's the word? - be able to support themselves after school. They want them to, like, fly and leave the nest and be happy.

Michael Trezza: [00:28:45] We give them those skills that translate through all of those things, critical thinking skills, how to make good decisions, and look at information, how to know who you are. And good decisions

come from that. And confidence comes from that. And strength comes from that. It fights anxiety and depression, which is rampant right now. It can change the trajectory of a person's life dramatically at a young age. And exposes them to career options that they didn't even realize exist as jobs are going to be created in the next 10 or 20 years that we haven't even thought of yet.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:25] Oh, absolutely. It's true. We live that exact, you know, existence every day at PAST. And so, Michael, I want to thank you so very much for making time out of your day. And more importantly, thank you for the work that you're doing because it is absolutely, desperately needed. It's amazing the program that you have. I can't wait for people to reach out and learn more about it, and I hope give it a try, because I think that Giant Leaps Learning is on to something really amazing. So, thank you for that.

Michael Trezza: [00:30:00] I appreciate that. And thank you for the opportunity to be here. It was fabulous speaking with you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:05] Excellent. Thank you so much.

Michael Trezza: [00:30:07] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:10] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guest, and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.