

**EPISODE 1648**

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**FT:** So Money episode 1648, small actions for big impact in your career, with the authors of the forthcoming book, *MicroSkills*.

*“**RL:** There's one step that gets brought and threaded throughout the book, and that's your personal board of directors. We love this one. I'll just say that having a personal board of directors can help you with almost every microskill we talk about. That is – for people that aren't familiar with the concept, it's just your go-to people, the people that you trust and trust you, and there's a safety.”*

[INTRO]

[00:01:00]

**FT:** Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. Let me ask you. Do you want to build your career without burnout? Do you want to get things done efficiently, build your reputation, become maybe a subject matter expert and nurture your network? Well, our guests today have written a book called *MicroSkills: Small Actions, Big Impact*, that can help us all become better at our jobs across all professions with this framework called microskills, which is built on a core easy-to-learn principle that every big goal, complicated task, healthy habit can be broken down into small learnable skills that can be practiced and incorporated real-time.

Authors Adaira Landry and Resa Lewiss were both emergency room doctors. They're also educators and mentors. They've experienced and heard about the challenges with navigating the workplace. Adaira is an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. She co-founded WritingInColor, a nonprofit that teaches the craft of writing. Resa Lewiss is a professor of emergency medicine, a designer, an entrepreneur, and an award-winning educator, mentor, and point-of-care ultrasound specialist. She's also the host of The Visible Voices Podcast.

Their book, *MicroSkills*, is packed with privileged information they say. Regardless of status or rank, we can all embrace this framework. Here's Adaira Landry and Resa Lewiss.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Resa Lewiss and Adaira Landry, welcome to So Money and congratulations on your new book. You both co-authored a great new book called *MicroSkills*, which we're going to get into in the next half hour. But first, welcome and how are you doing?

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**AL:** Thanks so much for having us. I'm doing great. It's not too cold in Boston, so I'm loving that, and I'm enjoying speaking to both of you.

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**FT:** Did you both meet in the emergency room as doctors? What was your first encounter with each other?

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**RL:** Farnoosh, thanks for that question. We often get that question like, "How did this happen?" We have a lot of Venn diagram overlaps, as I like to say. We're both emergency medicine physicians. We're both ultrasound-trained. We're both medical educators. We both like storytelling, specifically the written words.

It started pandemically. We started writing together. Truth be told, this amazing product that is the book is thanks to Adaira. She came to me with the idea of writing a book together after we had a lot of articles together that made us both really feel that we were sharing content to the world to be better at work.

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**FT:** It's interesting. It's an interesting journey from being emergency medical physicians to writing a book that is categorically a business book. I know you're both very creative, too, so the business book, interesting. Maybe not really the departure that one would assume. Tell me a little bit about how that came to be, why you decided to target people who are browsing the business section, as opposed to all the other categories that you could have probably written beautifully on.

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**AL:** That's a great question, and we definitely get that a lot. The truth of the matter is we are employees for a large corporation. We interact with – we call them patients. But effectively, they are in the customer service realm, the customers' clients. We have peers and colleagues who we have to collaborate with and interact with. On the most fundamental level, it's like any other workplace, right? It's like working in a law office or in a big consulting firm. You have to be able to interact with people. You want to also grow your career. You want to take care of yourself. All of those themes that are throughout the book are very universal.

If you look at a lot of the business self-help books, the vast majority of them are written by older white men who are in very, very, very corporate America. Well, most people aren't in that exact same scenario. So we really wanted to bring on fresh perspective, right? It's definitely unique having two women physicians writing in this genre. But we also wanted to show that we can do it and that women can be key opinion leaders, key thought leaders on how to navigate the workplace and write a book that is for everyone. This book is not just for doctors. It's not just for women.

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**FT:** The book, again, is called *MicroSkills: Small Actions, Big Impact*. Your promise the cover of the book is buy it on Friday, be better at your job on Monday. As human beings, we love to be able to distill complexity, right? I mean, that makes sense. We like small action steps, baby steps. Of course, we want the big results at the end. Psychologically, why does a microskills

approach work better than any of the other sea of strategies and frameworks out there when it comes to managing work-life?

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**RL:** You bring up something that listeners may already realize, the breaking down into small steps. We're not the ones that invented this, "Oh, you should break it down into small steps." We start by allying ourselves with the listeners, with the readers, with the audience to say, "Listen, we've been there. We've had these overwhelming projects, these overwhelming tasks, these things that we put off, and even these habits or skills that colleagues seem to just get." We're like, "How did that," or, "That must be innate. You must just naturally be an athlete."

Through reading, through experience, and quite honestly through our medical training, we realized, no, you can actually break things down. By breaking them down and doing little digestible, concrete, fundamental building blocks, those blocks can help you achieve what seems so big and unattainable. Also, you can translate some of those little blocks, little skills into other projects, tasks, skills, habits.

One of the ways we think our book is different than all those out there in the business self-help category is many say, "Well, go out and get a financial adviser or just start saving for retirement." But they don't tell you how. If you don't come from a place of knowing how, being resourceful, being given resources, having access to resources, that's just overwhelming. You shut the book. You don't even buy the book because you don't think the book is for you. It doesn't speak to you.

Number one, we walk people through the how. Also, we try to assume to the best of our abilities that there is no assumption of access. There's no assumption of resources. We state out front in our introduction we get that not everybody starts at the same place.

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**AL:** One of the other things about doing it as a microskill versus large, big ambitions or goals is that when you break things down, you can actually really expose your knowledge gaps and the

areas that you need to focus on. Resa and I are educators. We have taught students, residents, fellows, all the hierarchy of medicine. When we're teaching someone a particular skill, you do it step by step. By doing that, you're able to really say, "Oh, okay. So the problem is that you don't really know how to insert the needle correctly into the patient's skin. So let's focus on that skill."

That's translatable to the larger aspect of the workplace. If we're talking about communicating, and if you're trying to teach someone how to be a better public speaker, and you talk about eye contact, hand gestures, slides, posture of your body, interacting with the audience, all of those small little things. You could say, "Okay, this is why you feel uncomfortable. You don't like to make eye contact with your audience. So let's talk a little about how you can do that." A lot of it is just exposing those knowledge gaps.

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**FT:** Yes. One of the first challenges or complexities that you want to simplify and provide those microskills and steps for the reader is the burnout issue, how to build your career without breaking yourself. Again, going back to perhaps the target audience here of women professionals, which we know during the pandemic, at least. I mean, I can speak personally. It was a very challenging time because as someone who has a business and also two children, I mean, the topic of burnout I feel like we can't – there aren't enough episodes on this show that we could have done.

We have done many episodes on financial burnout, career burnout, household burnout, burnout burnout. How do we – can you share some of your applications, your microskills for managing that piece of it? Because I feel it's so foundational. If you don't address this first, the rest of it doesn't matter. Good luck making eye contact or communicating. It's like I just – the mental health component of this, I think, needs to be addressed first.

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**RL:** As emergency physicians, people are like, "Oh, yes, yes. You know burnout." There was a recent Medscape survey that looked and spoke to physicians from different specialties. Emergency medicine topped the charts in terms of rates of burnout and depression. Again, the

book is not actually for physicians. It's not even specifically for women, although we like that you highlighted it does speak to people that have in any way been marginalized in the workplace. Often that is women, not only women.

Healthcare is very similar to many industries, and that's actually why we think this book goes across and does speak to people in all fields. The workplace does not value self-care, and it does not teach you how to take care of yourself. It doesn't model, and it doesn't necessarily reward. Our chapter one is microskills for self-care specifically to try to empower and teach and show how to the audience, the listeners, the readers. What they can do to sort of build in certain skills to bring them along from entering the workplace to navigating and staying in early, mid, and even late career.

One example we talk about relates to you and your work, and that's finances and actually taking care of your financial health. We actually break down for the reader how to do that.

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**FT:** You say addressing your finances is sometimes at the root of what can protect your well-being and your – it must be a component of self-care, which is not something we often associate financial care with. We don't think of financial health as self-care.

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**AL:** Well, I think also what happens. In our specialty, as Resa mentioned, there is a lot of burnout. Because there's a lot of burnout, there's a lot of discussion about attrition or wanting to leave. Many people can't leave because of their financial obligations, whether it be their mortgage, student loans, or who's paying for health insurance, right? Who's covering the family? Whatever it is, they feel locked into their job because of the salary and benefits.

When we organized this book, we put self-care at the front. To your point earlier, you have to be in a good spot before you're thinking about eye contact with someone else. That's exactly how we modeled the book. We framed the book as take care of yourself so that you can take care of

the team, and then you can take care of the work. That's a really important fundamental sort of pyramid within the book that we sort of carry throughout.

As far as examples of self-care and a real life example for me was on meetings and how I was just overwhelming myself with meetings, especially meetings during the evening time. I also have three children. At a time where I had two kids and that was during the height of the pandemic, I still had a ton of meetings on my calendar. I remember getting one particular meeting request that was literally at six or seven o'clock, peak dinner, bedtime window. I was trying to set up for this panel.

By the way, the panel was on work-life balance for women, just as a reminder. I'm sitting there, setting up for the panel, and my kids are literally trying to get into my room. They're like, "Mommy, Mommy." I'm sitting there answering these questions about work-life balance. On the other side of the door, my kids are banging on the door, trying to get into the room. That was a real-life wake-up call that I'm not caring for myself at all, and this is not sustainable. That was really the moment for myself where I said self-care starts with creating boundaries on when I have meetings.

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**FT:** Right. Yes. This is all happening in the context of, as you mentioned, the workforce, which is not sympathetic to personal care. I get it. As workers, we have to be at the forefront of our own self-care. But how do we do that in that context where you could get backlash? You could experience backlash from that. I'm all for developing boundaries and saying, no, I'm not going to make this meeting happen. But there may be a cost there, right? A political cost, a financial cost.

I'm sure you address this in your book. What's your advice for someone who's like, "Yes, I want to do this. I want to prioritize myself in the workplace, and I also want to protect my job." Again, it's culture clash. As individuals, we want to protect this culture of protecting ourselves and our well-being at work. The bottom line is the bottom line. It's profit. So how do we kind of balance that and protect ourselves?

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**RL:** It's a great question, and you are speaking to two people who are on the same page with you. We actually have a chapter, microskills for learning your workplace culture. You're exactly right. When a certain person or certain people or certain groups of people have decided the tenets of the culture and the tone of the culture, it's really hard to change culture. One of our thoughts is that you personally, individually cannot change the culture. However, you can do things to take care of yourself while navigating the culture and slowly helping to skill-by-skill change the culture. We talked about the self.

Then the next one we talk about the team. One example that we talk about is calling in sick when you're sick. Doctors do not call in sick when they're sick. COVID changed everything because we were mandated that if you are infected with COVID, you had to stay home, CDC guidelines, hospital policy, et cetera, et cetera. Sometimes, when you join a team and you have the ability to model behaviors, model support for your teammates, those are some of the ways that you can start establishing change.

We talk about – now, this is, again, chapter one, self-care, but jumping ahead to workplace culture. Say it's not the culture to call out sick, which again, that's the healthcare medicine culture. We think that it can start with you, meaning you're sick. You or your teammate is sick. You can encourage them and support them. Say, “Listen, you don't feel well,” or, “Your child is sick. Why don't you not come to work? I will cover you.” Then you flip it. Then when you're sick, you say, “Listen, I'm not feeling well. I'm sick. I'm not going to come in,” and sort of that sort of modeling. I'm going to start this again, if I can.

Learning a workplace culture and sort of changing that culture are two different things. Once you learn your workplace culture, you can bring in some of those microskills for self-care to help you navigate that culture. When it comes to culture change, you are spot-on. It is hard. It is difficult to not do what's been done before you or that – so that whole we do this because this is the way we've always done it. But we all know that that's not sustainable, and we know there's something called the great resignation happening in healthcare.

Again, I'll just use healthcare as the example that if something doesn't change, then we're not going to have healthcare workers. We're not going to have people taking care of patients. What



we see is there's broad, big institutional changes that need to occur. Then there's the small changes that we can do as individuals. One example I'll give is if you're sick that you call in sick. If your teammate is sick, you tell them it's okay to call in sick, and we as the team will make sure the work gets done.

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**AL:** Just to add to that, there are some small changes that have huge impact in regards to the culture that we mention in this book. I honestly think the first one, this is coming again from the perspective of being a parent, is when we schedule emails to be sent out and when we have meetings. I really think something that is implementable literally the moment you read this book is thinking about when you're reaching out to someone. What are they doing? Are they on vacation? Are they on maternity leave? Are they – it's just a holiday, and they deserve to take that holiday off. Who knows what they're doing, but they deserve the day off in that time and space. But just being mindful of the culture of connecting with each other outside of business hours.

Yes, there are workplaces and teams that communicate 24/7. My husband is a part of a startup. They communicate 24/7, and they want to communicate with each other 24/7. I'm not like that, and so that would be a terrible culture for me. But I think thinking about when you're reaching out to someone and sort of invading their time off is important.

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**FT:** I want to discuss in a minute another aspect of your book which is how to become a subject matter expert using microskills. But sticking with this, we've touched on this now a couple times, and I want to dive a little bit deeper on it, which is the pandemic. If you had written this book, BC, before COVID, versus AC, after COVID, how would it be different? In other words, what has COVID taught us?

There were things that we did during the COVID era that were very knee-jerk. But I think some things have endured because we've learned that this was actually a better way of doing things; for example, calling in sick when you're actually sick. What are some other nuggets of wisdom

or models in the workplace that you think have been positive since COVID, have been informed by the COVID experience and how the microskills almost play into that because of this new framework, this new dynamic?

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**AL:** I definitely think probably that that chapter on communication is very different now than BC, before COVID. I think just us right now having this conversation virtually perhaps. I assume podcasts were happening this way before. But generally, meetings now by default are going to be virtual, especially if you're in the remote environment. I think that adds a lot of complexity to interpreting someone's emotions, their perspective, understanding how they communicate, right? Not all of us are comfortable in front of the screen. It doesn't mean that we're upset or quiet or angry. It could just mean that this isn't really our natural way of communicating. We prefer in-person, across-the-table communication.

I think definitely COVID has changed the way teams interact with each other. There's a lot more reliance on software like Slack or Teams. Or even we talk about asynchronous communication, a lot of audio messaging that you can use now on software apps where you're not necessarily having to call someone, but you don't necessarily want to type something. You can just send a voice message instead. I think the communication aspect is the most different in how we work. I think that brings a lot of challenge, especially for people who work remotely, and they struggle with connecting.

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**RL:** I think another thing that we have a whole chapter on finding your next opportunity. I think extreme situations such as the COVID pandemic made people consider what they were doing, with whom they were doing it, and how they were doing it. I think it actually pushed many people to consider their next opportunity. We actually walk the reader, audience, listener, whatever you want to say how to do that and how to really take inventory of where you are, what you've done, your skills, and how those can translate. Also not to just sort of knee-jerk reaction like, "I need to change," but to think about it over time.

There are many things that come across our email inbox or come across in terms of conversation with inspiring people that, 'Wow, that's a great idea. Oh, that sounds like an amazing training program. Oh, maybe I want to get that degree and keeping a list.' List those down that you can always refer to and update and think about because maybe the time to do that advanced degree is not today. But maybe in a year, you're going to be in a really good place for it.

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**FT:** Right. Well, as a subject matter expert, as are you both, I'd like to talk about this. You dedicate pages in the book to microskills related to becoming a subject matter expert. First, what do you mean by that? How can we start to plant those seeds? I think you've already kind of touched on one thing, which is like maybe you do go back and get further education. Maybe not today but at some point and putting that on your potential to-do list, which is not a small thing. But it's inspiring at least to put it, to write it down. But tell us a little about that section of the book and why you felt that was important to include.

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**AL:** Subject matter expertise can also be sort of reframed as being a key opinion leader or a thought leader, someone who is just very knowledgeable on a particular topic. This topic can be as general as AI, or it can be something super particular like AI in preteens, right? You can think about a narrow or wide focus, but it's something that you are just very comfortable speaking about, and people respect your knowledge.

This was born out of just Resa and I's personal experience being in medicine and how we both worked and trained at a very academic institution. We had a lot of people around us who were tapped on and called upon to speak at national or international conferences. They were consultants in industry. They were writing books and articles on that same topic. For me, personally, I saw that and I thought I have absolutely no clue how to get there. There's no path. There's no one sharing how I become a thought leader. That's not to say that they're not – these people who I work with are bad people. They're busy. They don't have time to sit down next to

me and say, "This is step A, step B, step C." But without that knowledge, it's just a much harder challenge.

Personally, the reason why I love this chapter is because this is the one that I struggled with the most when I was early in my career, and I feel like I was sacrificing a lot by being here in Boston. My family is all the way in California. I have two or three kids at home, just depending on the time of the year. I'm here at work, and I don't feel like I'm progressing. It's like what is the bigger purpose of me being here if I'm the same person year four as I was year one. That really was the drive to try to learn how to become an expert in something.

For me, it was being an expert in career development and mentorship and helping other people navigate their own ambitions. There was a whole process to gaining that, right? It's like building a network, which we talk about in this book, by the way. It's like how do you brainstorm ideas? How do you build a network of people who you can test those ideas on? How do you become a speaker, a writer, a collaborator? It's a whole process that if laid out for you becomes much more clear.

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**FT:** I'm hearing through your answers, too, that while the promise of microskills is read this book today and be better at your job on Monday, there is an element of patience that is required. There are steps, and it's not like one step is going to be the silver bullet. It's like you have to build on all of these microskills and steps to get to maybe that other side, to that end of the tunnel, or whatever you want to call it. Maybe share a little insight into that and why that – maybe I'm just misinterpreting, but I feel like this does require some delaying of gratification or some patience at the end of the day.

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**RL:** I really like that share and you sharing what you're hearing. It's both end. I think truly the reader can flip to a certain page in the book. We designed it that way. It doesn't have to be a cover-to-cover read. People can go and use it as a guide to learn about specific aspects. However, these are small little building blocks. So that's not like one item is going to all of a

sudden get you to the finish line. There is a slow build. Also, there's one step that gets brought and threaded throughout the book. That's your personal board of directors. We love this one. I'll just say that having a personal board of directors can help you with almost every microskill we talk about. For people that aren't familiar with the concept, it's just your go-to people, the people that you trust and trust you, and there's a safety.

Now, these aren't necessarily your confidants about all the personal aspects of your life. This is, again, we're talking about the workplace and your professional journey. Now, there's a lot of overlap often with personal and professional. But your go-to people for questions, your go-to people to brainstorm, your go-to people that you trust to say, "Can you give me feedback on?"

Also, as emergency doctors, we keep bringing up these stories because strewn throughout the book, part of the design of the book is that we share stories as illustration for the microskills that are generalizable for everybody. We have all had bad cases, bad outcomes. You have these people that you call. You call just – you don't want them to solve it. You just want to be able to talk, get it off your chest. They can listen and just hold space for you. Or they can give you feedback and like, "I've been there, and here's what I've done," or, "Here's what happens," or, "It's going to be okay."

Your personal board of directors is one of the microskills for the greater build to great, to big microskills that carries people throughout. That is a slow build, for sure. Because that table's open, people come and go from the table. But we always have open chairs.

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**FT:** Just to double-click on that a little bit because I think sometimes we go and we pick the wrong people. We pick the people that we love because, well, maybe it's a family member. Maybe it's a best friend. But when it comes to work and your career and these other external issues, who are these ideal folks, and how do you go about inviting them into your circle? Are we talking about mentorship here? Is it people at work? Is it – I would love to hear some tips on that. I think that's a hard one.

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**AL:** Yes. I think the reason why it's hard for many people is, A, lots of folks are intimidated to reach out. Also, it requires time and energy, right? Bandwidth to think about bringing more people into your life because when you do that, that means more meetings, more conversation, more time that you're putting into another relationship. This sort of goes back to like if you're not in a good place individually, then you might not want to start building a team around you because you don't have the time to do that.

In our book, we mention that this does not have to be a formal process where you say, "Dear, Resa. Would you like to be part of my personal board of directors?" You can lower that threshold and just make it a simple 20-minute conversation where you're just getting to know the person, right? You're getting to know their energy, their knowledge. You're seeing if there's an emotional click. Testing out the waters and see like, "Overall, do I trust this person? Is this someone who I can turn to if I need them?" That doesn't have to happen every single day. You're not having these meetings all the time. You can space it out and sort of titrate to your own personal schedule, your own personal needs.

I will say that, to your question about the mentorship part, a single person for me can be a mentor where they're giving me life advice, and we're sharing a lot of personal experiences. But they can also very quickly in the same conversation turn into a coach, where they're teaching me a very concrete skill set and providing me a lot of hard insight that is very tangible and actionable. Sometimes, they're a sponsor, and they can mention me when it's time for me to get recognized for my work that I'm doing.

That same person can have multiple different roles, but that same person could also just be one thing. It could be that one person you go to for parenting advice or personal finance advice. You wouldn't go to them for something else. You would only go to them if you're having issues with just money management because that's what they're really, really good at. They can in that conversation teach you about mentorship. I mean, teach you about money management through mentorship, through coaching, through advising.

I will say as far as building, the mechanics of building your network, that also is not going to happen overnight. One tip that has helped me a lot was joining social media. I'm on social

media a lot. I don't post as much as I DM. I like DM all the time. That's how I meet people and ask for meetings. Every once in a while, not always, I'll meet with someone, and I'll ask them if they have anyone who they think I should also meet with. That becomes what I call the snowball effect of gathering those people and collecting those names. I should mention this. You're helping as much as you're asking for help. You should also be thinking about ways to help these people in return, so it feels mutually beneficial.

It is a lot of work. It's a whole new collection of people in your life that needs to be nurtured and needs to feel cared for. So if you just don't have the bandwidth and I think forgive yourself and say I can't network today or tomorrow. But maybe in a week or so, I can start thinking about reaching out to, even if it's just one person, 20-minute call, asking them a very particular question.

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**FT:** Yes. It's that one question at the end like, "Who else do you recommend I can connect with?" Also, how can I help you, to your point, to kind of keep it feeling like a partnership, as opposed to just a take, take, take? Yes, thank you both so much. This is wonderful, and I would recommend. Anybody who wants to consider the two of you on their boards, you can buy their book, and you can learn through their advice that way.

Adaira Landry and Resa Lewiss, thank you so much. Your book again is called *MicroSkills*. Is it available everywhere? Everywhere, right?

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**AL:** Yes. It'll be available at all major bookstores April 16th, 2024. You can also request it at your local bookstore, independent bookstore, and your local library. It'll also be on Audible and other audiobook bookstores.

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**FT:** All the ways, all the ways. Yes. This is airing right around the book launch, so we will encourage everybody to go grab a copy and an audio copy because did you – who narrated it? Did either one of you narrate?

[00:34:08]

**RL:** We both did.

[00:34:09]

**FT:** Oh, you both did. Wonderful. That's special. Thank you, again.

[00:34:13]

**AL:** Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:34:16]

**FT:** Thanks to my guests, Adaira Landry and Resa Lewiss, for joining me. Their book, again, is called *MicroSkills*. It's out soon. You can pre-order it now everywhere books are sold. I'll see you back here on Wednesday, and I hope your day is So Money.

[END]