

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 24: Lee Caraher:

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest today is Lee Caraher, CEO and Founder of Double Forte, a digital marketing agency and PR firm. Lee is the author of two books – [Millennials and Management](#), and [The Boomerang Principle](#). In this episode, we take a look at what Lee has learned from hiring millennials, why millennials get a bad rap in the workplace, why she hires former employees, and how she puts her history degree to work.

L: My name is Lee Caraher and I have many roles. I'm the CEO and Founder of [Double Forte](#), which is a national public relations and digital marketing firm. I'm an author of two books; I'm a wife; I'm a mom; I'm a friend. And I hope that I'm a champion of great people everywhere. I started my career in public relations, basically because my friend Ramona from college said, "Lee, I think you should go into PR," when I asked her what I should do with this Medieval History degree. And since then—which was many years ago—I've stayed in public relations and communications as a career. I started on the East Coast in agencies and then I moved to the West Coast and then I moved in-house and then I started an agency for Interpublic. And then after 9/11, which was a huge moment in my career—in my life—I left that company I was at and I was supposed to take a year off. Drove my husband crazy and then I started my own company. And today Double Forte is my company and we are in Boston, New York and San Francisco and we work with companies that we like, helping those companies do great things in their categories. And then a few years ago I thought about how to do something different in my career and became an author, sharing what I've learned the hard way about managing people and organizations so that they can make a profit and be good places to be.

W: Where did the name Double Forte come from? Is it...is it a nod to music, or is it something else?

L: It is a nod to music. It's a triple, quadruple entendre, basically. When I started my company I had a partner, Dan Stevens, who has since left and we had worked together for a long time in other positions, and every one of our personal performance reviews had the word 'forte' in it, we realized. And so we're really good at what we do, right? The 'Forte Group' was taken, but then we were thinking about it and I was like, "Oh, there's two of us; we're really good at what we do. I have a minor in music." Double forte means very loud in music, and as a practice, what public relations and social media work do is make people and companies very loud. So, we pulled it all together and we created Double Forte.

W: So, what did you study when you minored in music?

L: German lieder.

W: So you're a vocalist.

L: I am. And I don't practice much today. I was in a choir for a longtime; I sang at a lot of weddings and a lot of funerals early in my adulthood. Um, when I was a minor in music the music department wanted me to go on and become a German lieder singer, and the history department wanted me to go on and become a PhD in history. What I knew about myself is that I'm not good at focusing on one thing, even if you go very, very deep in it. So I felt that neither of those career paths would be good for me, but with my career path I can pursue the things that I love outside of my career.

W: German lieder—what is that?

L: German lieder is, uh, lots of heavy German songs, like Wagner and a lot of things that go LAAAAA! You know, you hear a lot of...

W: Okay...

L: ...you think about ladies...

W: ...so intense.

L: ...with horns.

W: So intense melodrama. Melodrama is probably what a lot of people have thought or felt or perceived when it comes to intergenerational issues and questions...

L: Yes.

W: ...in the workplace, and you have spoken and written, in your first book, about millennials in the workplace. What's the title of the book, and then, more specifically, what does the media and what does the general public not understand about millennials, based on your experience?

L: Right. My first book is called [*Millennials and Management: The Essential Guide to Making it Work at Work*](#). And I wrote it out of my own experience of failing miserably at retaining millennials in my business. And then figuring it out. Of course, failing miserably was a shock to me at that time. I had run very large organizations with many, many people—hundreds and hundreds of people under the age of 30 in them, before I hired millennials into my company, Double Forte. When we started Double Forte, we only hired people with 10 years of experience, so by definition they're about 32 years old. When we

started to hire young people—I didn't know they were called millennials then—we did not do very well at it, and it was a shock to me. And in one period of time we hired six millennials within two months of each other and within three months of that moment they were all gone. Either we'd walked them or they'd walked themselves. And I had never had 100% failure in the people part of my business, ever. One person could have been their problem; six people had to be our problem. And as the leader of a small company, it had to be me, right? I really took it personally.

I started looking into it, and everything was so negative. Oh, my gosh—there was not one thing positive to find about working with young people. I found that they're millennials because I looked for 'managing young professionals' and up all this stuff about millennials and they're terrible and they're entitled and they're lazy and they can't work and they're rude and they want trophies and they think they can be the boss tomorrow—all this stuff. And I was so taken back by how vitriolic I felt the writing was—particularly the stuff that showed up in the first ten pages of Google search—that I decided to ignore it and figure it out myself. Because basically a business or an organization without a millennial is a business or an organization without a future. And I decided my business should have a future. So I actually interviewed lots and lots of millennials; I interviewed lots and lots of boomers and Xers and I read a lot of stuff. And....

W: Okay, Lee, just to interrupt for a second....

L: Yeah.

W: So, millennial, for our listeners, just to be clear on the definition. You...what's the...when were millennials born?

L: Right. So I use—there's lots of different definitions. I use Pew Research, just as my lodestone on that, and Pew Research says millennials are...were born between 1980 and 2000. Gen Xers are 1965 to 1979 and Boomers were born until 64, basically.

W: Okay, got it. Ok. All right. So, you're getting all this just negative, as you said, vitriolic information about millennials, and you said, "There's got to be something else going on here; I'm going to figure it out." So what did you figure out?

L: What I figured out was a lot of the negativity around millennials was more based in Boomers' and GenXers' dissatisfaction with their own situation. And a real misunderstanding of what technology and access to technology has done...has afforded people; has really changed in terms of peoples' expectations in the workplace. I also looked at lots of other trends such as helicopter parenting, everybody wins soccer; grade inflation...three big things that I think

have tremendously impacted other people's points of views on millennials. And I think that what is also germane to this conversation is 79% percent of the people in the millennial generation don't think they're millennials. So, they don't like it.

W: What? What do you mean?

L: It's so negative. They don't call themselves millennials. "I'm not a millennial." Well, millennial only says when you were born, right? There's so much negativity laded into the term millennial that even the generation in general issues its own moniker. So, that's what I did; I went out to do it and by trial and error we figured it out in my company. Right? Trial and error. And I sort of brought the whole group along. We're not going to be relevant if we don't have any young people. We'd better figure it out.

W: So what did you figure out? What were some of the things you figured out?

L: So the few big myths, right—They're entitled; they want a raise and a trophy just for showing up. They're rude, they don't know how to work, they're lazy. I went point-by-point and I went to see if they were true or not. And what I found out was, most of them are not true. Some are true; most of them are not true. But they're all explainable and when you understand the genesis of the feeling—because basically negative, negative things are feelings that people are loading words into, right. They're lazy—well, by definition I am not.

W: So let's take entitled; let's drill down on that, because that's something I talk about in [Disrupt Yourself](#) is the importance of battling entitlement. So what did you discover about entitlement as you started to peel back that emotionally fraught word?

L: An entire generation cannot be entitled.

W: Right.

L: It's statistically impossible.

W: Right.

L: People can be entitled...

W: Yep.

L: ...and there are entitled people in all generations, all creeds, all races, all ethnicities. I mean, you know, it has nothing to do with a generation. What we do see though is that millennials in general have been conditioned to expect certain things, and those certain things look like entitlement when they enter

the workplace. So those certain things include being able to talk to anybody they want to, being able to email anybody they want to, being able to show up in any meeting, being able to show up in the CEO's office day one and go, "Hey Joe, how's it going?" Being...expecting to be invited to any meeting. Expecting to have any information, expecting to be promoted on a regular basis regardless of merit. Those actions I just gave to you—are regular; we see them all the time, particularly in newly graduated people and....

W: Where did that come from?

L: That comes mostly from their parents and the education system.

W: Oh.

L: So let's talk about this.

W: Yeah.

L: So trophies...trophies; that is true. Right? Trophies. People do expect, you know, to get awarded for things that their older colleagues are aghast at. And of course, their older colleagues are the people who gave these younger people trophies and ribbons for things that were just around participation. And there's been a lot of study by more important people than myself about the impact of everybody wins soccer and on trophy giving and stars, which is wonderful for up to first graders and should not go past that but does go through the entire educational system. So, what we find in the education system is that through college, the average grade point average in college in the last fifteen years—basically, the last fifteen years when millennials have come to the workplace—has risen a full point. So a 3.5 ten years ago is a 4.5 today. Well if you go through your college career thinking you're a 4.5 on a 4.0 scale and you get into the workplace and you're work is not good—it's not good enough—because it's really a 3.5, not a 4.5, it is a shock to the system. And indignation sets in. 'This is good enough.' 'No it's not. It's not good enough to go to the boss.' 'It is. I'm done.' 'You're not done.' Because there hasn't been enough rigor around these things. And then the third piece is technology. So technology in our hands...most millennials had grown up with more power than went to the moon in their hands since...at least since they were 15. And now, today, GenZ has them in their hands at three and two and one even, with iPads, right? Well, but technology is a wonderful thing; it's afforded us so many conveniences, so many advantages, but the biggest thing it has done in terms of an expectation, is this expectation that I can reach anybody, I can tweet at anybody, I can reach any person, anybody who has an email. I at least have the impression that I can get to anybody in the world, and I have the impression that I can have any information I want. Even though it's not true that Google serves up all information in the world, the impression that I can get to any piece of information I want, or any knowledge that I want through a simple click,

definitely has an impact when, in a hierarchical world which most Boomers and Xers came up in, in their career—hierarchy is antithetical to the millennial experience. So when you have a hierarchical boss and a non-hierarchical body of people working for them, that tension just comes at you really fast.

W: Let's stay with this idea of entitlement—now that you were aware of this, what did you do differently at Double Forte to accommodate these difference?

L: So the first thing we did was, when I started my company my husband gave me this silver bar that said, "Just because I said so." And it was very cute and very nice, and then I had to throw it away. Cause it does not work with this generation. It worked with my generation and I'm a Boomer. It worked with me; I just did what I was told. Right? If you do not provide context for virtually everything that you do, you will not have a successful relationship with your younger, millennial employees. So what we started to do, one, was make sure everybody understood why we existed, why does this company...why I started the company? What was our mission in the company? How did we choose clients? Everyone had to understand why they showed up at our office every single day. So that context really helped. The next thing we did was provide a context on every project, so at the beginning of a project we sit down, half an hour, here's what we're doing, here's why we're doing it. Here's what success looks like. And then we add this next big step in is, "How can we make it better? We want your input at the beginning." Because if we ask for input at the beginning while giving this context, that's the number one thing you can do to let people know that they matter is that you want their input. They may not be able to give you any; you may not be able to incorporate it all. But if you ask for people's input, particularly this younger set, all of the sudden, all the questioning went away. All the grumbling went away. Context plus the asking for input. The next thing we did was set real solid expectations. We set clear expectations, things that many, particularly Boomers think they should not have to say, and that's the hardest word to have people understand what they're saying—they should not have to. Why am I doing this?

W: Right, but that's a Boomer thing...

L: That's a Boomer thing.

W: ...around being entitled, right?

L: Absolutely.

W: I shouldn't have to explain myself.

L: Right.

W: If you want the person to get the job done, yeah you do. How do you then create a culture—a company culture—that accommodates a millennials approach to the world, which as you so pointedly said was in part created by the parents of the millennials, who happen to be Boomers; I mean, how do you create a culture that accommodates both their approach as well as a Boomer's approach? Because you want millennials to be comfortable at work, but you also want Xers to be comfortable and you want Boomers to be comfortable. So how do you...

L: So true.

W: ...how do you manage all that?

L: I think that what's really...what you said is really important for everyone to understand. We are in a place...actually, we have Boomers, GenXers, Millennials and GenZers coming and we still have some Silent Generations—people who are over 70—in the workplace. This is the first time in our American history where we've had at least four generations in an office situation together. And, while people are people, and generations shouldn't be, like, you know...I hate how we all say, "Oh, all millennials are this way, or all Xers are that way," but there are definitely similarities, right? And so there tends to be clashes. What I've found is when you create an environment where millennials can thrive, Boomers, Xers, Silents thrive more. But the reverse is not necessarily true. Because who doesn't want to know that their opinion matters? Who doesn't want to know why they're doing something? Who doesn't want to have a say in how we can make this better? Who doesn't want to know...you know, be excited about why they're coming to work every day? These are human conditions; they're not necessarily millennial conditions. But the workplace, particularly a hierarchical one, has created what millennials would call artificial boundaries, to access and to being able to contribute fully to the position. The other piece is, really on a cultural perspective, this expectation of learning and an expectation of appreciation. So we know that teams that are appreciated, that feel appreciated—it's a feeling, you know; it's a subjective thing—the teams that feel appreciated outperform those that don't by a factor of up to 30% to the bottom line. That's real money. That's real money when you're dropping 30% to the bottom line just because people are feeling better about how they're doing. And that has nothing to do with the generations. So, one way we did this, the fastest way we found, actually, was this please and thank you thing. And I grew up...my father is a retired cardiac surgeon, and he grew up...we grew up saying, "Please and thank you are implied." So, cause, "you know, Lee, if I say please and thank you in the operating room, someone dies." So, this was the hardest thing for me. The context was not hard; I'm a really quick person, so in my whole life I've always had to, like, slow down and tell people, "This is what I'm thinking; so what do you guys think?" But the please and thank you thing was very challenging for me, because I'd never...although I understand what is polite, in my household

it was all implied. So, I started saying please and thank you myself; I didn't share this information really with anybody. And went from saying nothing, really, to saying please and thank you and I appreciate that, would you please, all that kind of stuff, for a full week. And I didn't tell anybody what I was doing. I felt like such a tool, Whitney, I was like, "Oh my God, they're going to know...they're going to figure me out; they're going to know that I'm not...they're going to think that I'm totally disingenuous," and everybody reacted so positively. I was shocked. I was like, "Oh my God...."

W: Just because you would...you would....

L: Just because I was saying please and thank you. And I'm a relatively nice person. You know, people like working for me, in general, you know? My whole career, I've had hundreds of people wanting to be in my organization, so I'm a relatively nice person; I treat people well. I compensate them well. But this please and thank you was a game changer.

W: You said it was a game changer, it was writ large. But can you think of one single instance where that please and thank you really changed...

L: I have an assistant in my business and at that time the assistant—who is now our office manager, Kathy—I said "thank you" when she did something that she did every single day for me. It wasn't getting...it was work. I mean, it wasn't getting me coffee or go and get me lunch or something. It was doing a report that she did every Tuesday. And she gave it to me and I said, "Thanks, Kathy, I really appreciate it," and she almost burst into tears. And, she didn't burst into tears but I'd known her for a long time and she's very stoic, so I was like, "Oh, my gosh, she's on the edge." And I was crushed; I was so crushed, Whitney. I was like, "Oh my gosh." This woman has worked for me for eight years and didn't think I appreciated her. Not I...of course I came at it with a, a...with knowledge, right? I was like, "Oh my gosh." And I was skeptical but I knew...this was one thing that I knew that I didn't do. So when I...when she looked at me with tears in her eyes, I was like, "Did a great job; I really appreciate it." And then of course I had to close my door, because I was in tears.

I then...I made...then I tortured my staff for a few weeks. I...we have staff meeting every week...for 12 weeks in a row we had everybody at the end of staff meeting do an appreciation. So everyone had to find three people—we have 35 people in my company—everybody had to find three people—and say something they appreciated about the other three people, one by one, that had nothing to do with gratuity. It wasn't like, "I like your hair today or your nail polish." It was I appreciate that you held the door open for me. I appreciate that you were early today, because it's a busy day and, um, I was so happy to see you at your desk a little early to help me out. You know, that just went the extra mile.

W: Ok, so here's the question: have you seen your profitability go up?

L: Yeah, so here's what we found. So we track every 15 minute increment, um, in my business. Everyone tracks that. And we also track non-billable time. So we track billable time and non-billable time. What I found was within the first two months of doing this, our non-billable time went down by 8%. So the time people were doing things that did not add to the agency billing reduced. And since then, our...that was the first two months...today our non-billable time is, we have a business model that is atypical in our agency world, and our non-billable time is, 15% of our day kind of thing, and it often doesn't even reach that because people are finding things to do. And, we have the same targets in profitability as other agencies, but we don't have the same model in terms of utilization and so we have a much more generous utilization target meeting... we don't expect people to bill as many hours, but we still make the same number of dollars, in percentage, that the larger agencies with the other models make. And what this means is that people are out of the office at 6:00 on Friday. Right? Which is very atypical in the agency business.

And millennials in general—they're called job-hoppers; I call them career builders, right? And, in San Francisco—it's a little longer in New York—but in San Francisco when I was doing this—so this was 2010/2011 when I was figuring all this stuff out—the average millennial under 30, and in that time they were under 30, so today the millennials are up to 35 years old, but, um, millennials stayed in a job between 14 and 16 months, right? That is brutal on a company.

W: Yeah.

L: It is brutal, brutal, brutal. So my goal was just to double it. I said, "Ok, I'm going to...if I can get my millennials to stay here two years, 24 months instead of 12, 26 months instead of...you know, 13 or whatever it was then I will know that this is working. And now today, our average millennial stays, um, three and a half years...

W: Wow.

L: ...if they're 26 and over, so, you know, 26 years older, we have them at four and five years. So, it's working on that and they don't get to stay unless they're working out. You know, we have very high performance targets, and people are making it so our average...our average tenure of people is in the fours and fives and over 35 years old it's seven to eight years. And then our average client...our longest client's been with us for ten years; we're 15 years old. And in San Francisco, if you don't count startups, the average tenure of a client is two and a half years. Our average tenure of a client is five and points...

W: So four times....

L: ...5.25, you know, five and a quarter.

W: Wow.

L: So, that's real money as well.

W: In some ways, I almost wonder if you've ever gone back to the six millennials that left because they just did you a huge favor; I mean it led you to this....

L: I have.

W: You have gone back to them.

L: I have....

W: What's happened when you talked to them?

L: Actually, [in my second book, when I talk about the boomerang principle](#), one thing I have...I really recommend everybody, every company, every organization do, is to create an alumni group that they manage. Not that's a rogue one on LinkedIn...

W: Yeah.

L: ...but a formal corporate alumni group. And of those six people, five of them are in the alumni group and three of them I've had on my own podcast and two of them I've helped get new jobs and, um, I've reached out to all of them. I've reached out to all of them; not all of them have accepted.

W: Wow, fantastic. Yeah, but that's a better hit ratio than 100 percent failure, right.

L: Correct.

W: That's...

L: That one person was their fault, not mine.

W: Yeah. Yeah. So, so wow that's amazing. And I think that really does segue nicely into your more recent book and what you're thinking about now, which is this idea of the boomerang principle. Can you talk us through, at its simplest, what that is?

L: The boomerang principle is the belief that those companies that encourage their former employees to return to them have a strategic advantage over those that don't. So if you rehire someone, your company has more advantage in the marketplace than if you say those people are dead to me. And the book actually came out...this book actually came out of talking about my first book, because everywhere I went—I still go—people are like, “Ah, those millennials are not loyal. Where's the loyalty? They're just job hoppers. They're dead to me. Why put all this time into them if they're just going to leave me?” And that kind of thing. My reaction to them all is “No, no, no, no, no.” You need to not worry about them leaving. Of course, they're not loyal like you were loyal—you 60 year old person—like you were loyal when you came into the workplace. The whole job world has totally turned upside down. And millennials have been told don't stay in a job too long. You add that into the whole expectations that I talked about earlier; you know, they're disappointed that they can't be CEO, can't walk right into the CEO's office. If you don't have a good place for millennials to land, right out of college, they do tend to move around until they get the whole life thing done, right?

Don't say they're dead to you; say, “Good luck” and actually welcome them back. Because if you welcome them back and they come back to you, you are reaffirming your culture and you're spending less time in any negative thing. And I believe strongly that inefficiency, which is just profit-eating, because...particularly in my kind of business where we chart all the time, right. Inefficiency is mostly driven out of bad communication and ill will. Right? Ill will that I am harboring myself against something else. I don't know what the hell is going on? I don't know what she's doing. Why doesn't he appreciate me? This creates inefficiency, because the more time and energy we're putting into those kinds of feelings, the less productive we are.

W: It's interesting. I'm actually thinking about this in the context of someone that I recently was working with who was working with me; they got this great opportunity to go do something else and, um, and sort of was like, “Well, let's kind of work together a little bit while I'm leaving,” and you know, it doesn't work out because their new, sort of new gig, their new S curve starts to take over their life, as you would expect it to.

L: Right.

W: And I'm having that experience right now of, ok, I get to choose right now. I get to choose whether I'm going to be annoyed and frustrated that they've left me in the lurch, or say to myself, “You know what? They did a great job while they were here. They didn't quite calculate how much time they were going to have; they miscalculated.”

L: Yes.

W: And so I need to wish them well so that, like you said, they could potentially come back. But it's hard, I will say...

L: It is hard.

W: ...when you...you know, we talk about this idea of the boomerang, but it does...it's difficult to actually do it because there's some sense of yourself that you feel—at kind of a very immature way—a little bit of betrayal.

L: Every time someone leaves you they can hurt you or help you. Neutral's hurting, actually, in today's world, right?

W: Yeah.

L: So every time they...we need to be doing everything we can for our...just forget...take ourselves out of it. Our businesses will be healthier the more people are saying good things after they leave us. Right?

W: Right.

L: Every time we hire someone we know they're going to leave. We know. When we hire someone, we know they're going to leave. We are disappointed when they leave when we didn't plan it. Right?

W: Yep.

L: So....

W: Yeah.

L: And we see potential. "Oh my gosh, if they'd only stayed two more years they could have done this." But it's all in the context of our businesses. Right? So, instead, I say that the first week someone joins us I said, "I know you chose to be here. Thank you very much. You've actually earned your way in here; it's not actually easy to get here. I hope you stay for a long time. I know you don't have to. I know you're going to leave." This I say week one. "I know you're going to leave us. I hope you're here for a very, very long time and I know you don't have to stay. The most important thing to me, Joe, is that when you leave here, that you are proud to have been at Double Forte. That is a most important thing for me. And if there's any moment in time where you don't feel proud to be here, I expect you to tell me. And if you find that we cannot accommodate your goals—your life goals—here, we will help you go be successful somewhere else, if you tell us. But we hope that you leave and we hope you come back." So I say that week one, right? So it sort of takes that whole...the guilt out of...

W: Yeah.

L: ...the whole conversation. And it puts the onus all on them. Like, if they're unhappy, say something.

W: Yeah.

L: You've got to tell me if you're unhappy...

W: Yeah.

L: ...I cannot read your mind. And I reinforce that all the time and all of the people in the agency reinforce it all of the time.

W: One of the things I'm so excited about is this idea of the boomerang employee; in fact, I talk about it in my next book - your idea is really a way for a person, or a company, to play where others are not. To be willing...

L: Exactly.

W: ...to hire back people that have already worked for you.

L: In our 15 years we've rehired 14 people and we've rehired four people twice. They come back, they come back trained in things I could not have trained them, the company could not have trained them, because it was experience somewhere else. They come back super appreciative for our culture, our expectations, our workstyle. Every time someone comes back it is affirming for the people who are still there, that this is a great place. Because I only hire great people. I...you know, one guy who worked for me, he had a hard time with my...this idea, right. He had a hard time with, "Don't...aren't you worried that I'm going to leave you?" I'm like, "No. I know you're going to leave me. I'm worried that you...when you leave, that you say good things, that you're happy that you were here. That's what I worry about most." I assume my whole team is getting poached. I don't like that, but I assume it because if I don't have a team that's ready, that other people want, I do not have a relevant team in our marketplace.

So, I can't worry about that. That is the...I can't worry about other people's goals, right. I have to worry about my goals for my company and creating the environment where people stay and they're happy but if they're not happy they have to go because I really think the most loyal thing you can do as an employee is leave when you are not excited about the opportunities that that company provides for you.

One woman left; she had only been in the agency world, she really wanted to go to the startup world. She really wanted to be part of, you know, what we call a unicorn. A unicorn is a company that's valued at a billion dollars...

W: Okay.

L: ...usually pre-IPO.

W: Okay.

L: You know, she got a job at a startup, a very hot startup. I didn't think that she was going to be very happy there, because I knew some of the people there, but she...this is a person who did not ask me for help beforehand. So, I would have guided her in a different way if she'd asked me for help beforehand. But she didn't, and I just pointed out, "I want you to be aware of this; here's where you can take advantage; here's where you're going to have so much more experience. Just be sure you know that, blah, blah, blah." You know, three months later she called me, she goes, "I'm so miserable. Can I come back?" "You can come back; you can't come back right now, there's no job for you right now. You need to be there for a year. On your resume...don't worry about coming back here; worry about what's going to be on your resume the next time. Right? So you need to be there for a year, and then in that year I want you to write down everything you want to learn—everything, EVERYTHING you want to learn in the next nine months"—cause three had gone by—"what are the things you want to take back, to here or wherever else you go." And she rejoined us at a year and a day—or a year and a week, I guess—and she was so much more grounded, she was so much more confident in her work; she knew what else was out there because she had created other alliances when she was in a different company. And they were all having the same kind of experiences she was, and so she knew what was out there—it wasn't just one anomaly—and when she came back she was so much more confident. Someone comes back and they're much more valuable the second time around. So I think that is one thing....

W: Great example.

L: Another...and that was something that...we've had one person leave us to go to another agency; she called within two weeks. And she's back. The culture was so terrible there. Her boss told her, "Everyone cries for the first six months and then they get used to it." And this woman said that to me...this former employee told me what her new boss had said to her. I said 'that is not normal. That is not okay...'

W: No.

L: "So you don't have to come back here." And we did not have a position for her, you know, when she was ready to jump, so she quit before she had a job because it was just so terrible. And as soon as we could we took her back into the company. And, she's much higher level than that earlier woman I told you

about, but that experience helps her with her younger people, right, when they are sort of pushing at the boundaries, and “why can’t I just move up,” and, you know, that kind of thing. And she’s able to bring that experience to bear in her regular work.

W: Is the boomerang principle...was that something that was kind of out there?

L: I started this idea, actually, in 2000, when I was running another company. You couldn’t keep butts in seats, basically. Everyone was poaching everybody else. And the edict from HQ was ‘Keep Everybody and Counter Every Job Offer’ so you could keep people. If you can’t bill, you can’t make your number. If you can’t make your number, you know, blah, blah, blah. It was so exhausting, Whitney. It was just so, I mean. Everyone knew if they showed up in my office they got a 20% raise. They left. Six months later they’re back. It’s not me. And this is where I really learned that I have to have rules that make sense in my own heart to actually be effective. I woke up one day and I was like, “I’m done. I’m not countering any more. This is exhausting and we’re not going to do it anymore.” And we had all this reserve money over here; why don’t I just...I can put it in these people who are not looking for work, right? And I decided I wasn’t going to tell HQ. I didn’t even have a chance to tell my own leadership team when someone walked in my door that day, the morning that I woke up with this epiphany; I was just so tired. So tired of this all. And he sat down and he said, “I got another job.” And I said, “Good luck!” And he said, “Wait, what? Aren’t you going to counter me?” And I said, “Nope. I’m not. Where are you going?” And he just told me because he was so flabbergasted he told me the story. And I just laughed because where he was going was so much worse than where we were...than where he was. But I just said, “Okay, you’re going to go over there. They have some good clients. Make sure you get on that client, you know, make sure you get to sit, you know, not next to the boss cause she’s a little nutty,” and I was giving him all this advice and he was still pissed. “What do you mean? You countered Joe last week.” I said, “Yeah, I’m done with that. No more. But I really hope you come back here. And when you’re ready to leave that company in a couple of years, you call me, and hopefully there’s a job here. I just want you to be successful; I want you to be happy. I’ll do whatever I can to help you do that.” “But I want to stay here.” “But you already quit.” “But I thought you were going to counter.” “Nope, not doing that anymore.” So he was really angry and he left my office and everybody knew that...why he was there. It was sort of a bullpen situation...

W: Right.

L: ...and I hear him go, “That bit...” You know, bad word. She didn’t counter me. Blah, blah, blah. And it was quiet, right? And he’s making a big commotion. And he ended up not being boomerang eligible, by the way he left, but later that day I had a meeting. I called an all staff meeting; I said, “Everybody in.” I said, “I’m done. No more countering. No more. And we’re

going to...I'm going to take that money...," and I explained the whole...the business philosophy of that whole things. I said, "You know what we're going to do? Tomorrow we're going to the ballgame." I didn't even know if we could get tickets to the ballgame, but I said we're going. And we started putting that money into play. And when I stopped countering, people stopped leaving. And my numbers went up.

W: Fascinating.

L: So that's where I came up with it...

W: Yeah.

L: ...sort of by accident out of this epiphany. And that's how I've run whole businesses since then. My perspective—if you have a business driven by having people come back to you, you have a business where it's hard for people to leave and when they do leave, they boomerang in many other ways; they may come all the way back to you as an employee, but they come back to you as a recruiter: "You know, you should go take that job, Whitney. You're going to learn a lot at Double Forte." You know? "Or, hey Lee, I found this...I saw this kid the other day at a networking event and I want you to talk to him because I think he could be a great account coordinator." That just drives friction out of your business, when you have people out there doing things for you.

W: You mentioned earlier that you have a medieval history degree and I think I read somewhere that you use it all the time.

L: Yes.

W: Can you talk about a way that you've used it?

L: That's so funny. Uh, yes, because I do. I'm actually...you know, I went to college thinking I was pre-med like my dad and realized early on that I detested the classes that I was going to have to take to become a doctor. But I loved my medieval history classes. I went to Carlton College, a liberal arts college that you sort of roll out of there. History is the practice of investigation, articulation and defense. Investigate a point of view, articulate that point of view, and defend it and propagate it. And that's what I do every single day for our clients. Who are they? What difference are they going to make in the world? How are they going to do that in a compelling fashion? Let me tell you the story.

W: Lee, how are you going to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

L: So, in the next 12 months, I am focused on the plan that I wrote when I disrupted myself three years ago, after having major surgery, and realizing that I had sort of not been fresh with our business. And coming out of that was a

realization where I'm not going to be doing all the work. So this year, particularly, I am removing myself from the work of propagating the business, so it's not just about me. Which is very challenging. My name's not on the door on purpose. I didn't want it to be all about Lee. But making sure that it's not about Lee is actually a practice and a discipline that is...it makes me sit on my hands a lot. But it is what is going to keep the business healthy and it's what's going to help me get to where I want to go personally in the next phase of my career.

W: Lee, thank you so much for spending this time with me. I know we spent longer than I was expecting, but you were just so interesting I had to ask you more questions. Thank you again and best of luck to you.

L: Thank you so much, Whitney. What a joy to be with you.

Thank you. There is so much power in these two words. When I say, "thank you," I am acknowledging that what I did was in possible, in part, because of you. That takes humility. No wonder it has a financial impact.

I'm fascinated too by the notion that everyone who leaves your organization can help or hurt you. Which do you choose?

And boomerang employees! It's so logical! But because of ego, it doesn't happen all that often. Personal disruption involves playing where others aren't playing. Hiring "boomerangers" is hiring where others aren't.

If you want to do a deep dive on Lee's ideas, you can find links to her books on WhitneyJohnson.com.