

## Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

### Episode 43: Michael Bungay Stanier

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and (live) all things disruption. Today's guest is Michael Bungay Stanier, CEO and Founder of [Box of Crayons](#), a company which gives busy managers tools to coach in 10 minutes or less. He's also the author of [The Coaching Habit](#), which has sold over 300,000 copies.

Whitney        Alright! Michael, tell me what your name is. I just called you by your name. And what you do for a living.

Michael        My name is Michael Bungay Stanier. Bungay Stanier is actually my surname because when I got married I took my wife's name and we combined them together. So it is the hardest name in the world to pronounce apparently because sometimes I get called Michael Banging Spaniel, which was a particular low point. But Michael Bungay Stanier is my full name. I am the CEO of [Box of Crayons](#). So Box of Crayons is a training company with a very specific focus which is we give busy managers the practical tools so they can coach in 10 minutes or less. That's all we do. I have a background in the world of innovation, and change, and coaching, and organizational development. And I've written five books. The most recent is called [The Coaching Habit](#) and that's been the most kind of best seller-y of all those five books. It's had a really surprising and delightful kind of burst of life to it.

Whitney        Alright! So let's talk about that really quickly. And how many books have you sold of [The Coaching Habit](#)? Which is an excellent book! Everyone must read it [laughter].

Michael        Thank you. It's closing in on about 300,000 copies now.

Whitney        Congratulations. And it's self-published.

Michael        It's self-published, I know. It's this kind of great story of three years trying to pitch it, and throwing myself against the wall of traditional publishers, and getting turned down. And finally going away and saying and shaking my fists at the Gods and going, "I'm just going to do it myself!" And self-publishing it and having it take off. So it's kind of-- particularly sweet that it's doing so well.

Whitney        Why did people not want to publish the book? What was the common refrain in terms of yeah, this is good but... What was the but?

Michael So it varied a little bit. So some of the initial attempts was, "This is not a good book [laughter]. This is not a good idea Michael." And that's not unfair because I went through various iterations of trying to write this book before I got it to the place where I'm like, this is actually a good book now.

So some of it was like, "We just don't like it." And then it got to a point where I was talking to a publisher who published my previous book called [Do More Great Work](#) and it had done well for them. It sold a hundred thousand copies or close to it. And so on the one hand, they kind of wanted to work with me because I'd been a success for them in the past, and I wanted to work with them for the same reason, but they couldn't quite figure out how to fit it into their portfolio. So they probably weren't as explicit about that as they might have been. And in the end, it was like-- I think they're like, "We don't really publish business books, and this is a business book." And it just took as a long time to get to that honest place of it's not a fit for what we're actually strategically trying to do. Yeah.

Whitney You went back to your first publisher, or not the first publisher but the [Do More Great Work](#) publisher.

Michael Yeah

Whitney But they were a business publisher, right? I mean--

Michael Well, they have dabbled in the world of business books, but I think what's strategically was happening for them is they're getting more focused about where they publish and who they publish. And it just wasn't quite a fit. It just took us a long time to figure that out. And in fact, it took me to say, "Here's the book. I've got it now. And this is the book I'm going to write. So you can know to choose to publish it with me or not." And they said no, and I wept a little bit, cursed them a little bit, and then went, "Right, well, I'm going to self publish it."

But the good news is self-publishing is easier than it's ever been. The bad news is, it's really easy to do a really kind of so-so job at self-publishing. So my commitment was I'm going to self publish this as a professional. So I said, what would a professional do? Well, they would hire a great designer, and they would hire a brilliant editor, and they would be rigorous around the editing process, and they would plan a marketing campaign, and they would execute as best they could on the marketing campaign, and they would lean

into other people for support around distribution and ISBN numbers and all that other stuff that I don't really care about but is really important.

And so I built a team and I tried to build the best team I could. And I did build the best team because they were awesome and they all really performed brilliantly. And I was good as kind of a direction center and I wrote the book and all of that sort of stuff. And so this plan which I had actually just worked. Most plans, they're saying, the way to make God laugh is to tell her your plans. Well, I mean, I had a plan and I expected it fully to not work as the plan, because they never do, but this actually worked exactly--

Whitney But it worked.

Michael --the way it worked exactly the way it worked and better, so it was pretty exciting.

Whitney How many people were on your team launching this book?

Michael Yeah, so I had a-- let's call it their production team. So I had Peter, my designer. I had Catherine, my editor. I had Judy, my proof editor. I had Jesse (Finkelstein) from [Page Two](#) who was kind of this essential hub of this team. Page Two is a consulting company that help public people publish self-publishing books. They're kind of this interesting cutting-edge publishing company. So Jesse is a kind of coordinator, project manager, strategic thinking partner. You could say that I had Rob and Steve, who are the two major partners around distribution in Canada and the US. And then I had Cara, who's also on the Page Two team. For Box of Crayons, I had Shannon who's job was to execute on the marketing, which was following up and trying to get the book into people's hands. And we had a researcher who found people like journalists and podcasters, that we were going to reach out to. I had a researcher who did some research that fed into the book itself.

Whitney You had a plan. You had a strategy. You executed against it and were highly, highly, highly successful. I mean, what percentage of books sell more than 300,000 copies? Probably less than half a percent?

Michael Yeah

Whitney At most.

Michael           Certainly not. I mean, this is a-- we need another conversation because I know you and I both had conversations with people who would go, "I'm going to write a book [laughter]." I don't know what you say, but I say, "Are you sure [laughter]?" Because writing a book is hard, and it's miserable, and it's lonely, and it's almost never successful. I mean, the statistics I've heard, and they feel right to me, is 93% of books published, sell less than 1,000 copies. And when you think of how much work goes into writing a book, that's a lot of work for not very much impact.

Whitney           So you don't have to go by the book, as you were saying [laughter]?

Michael           Right

Whitney           All right. So, Michael, we launched right in. Let's back up for just a moment. You have roamed the entire British Empire [laughter]. It would be fascinating to hear your origins and some of globe-hopping that you've done throughout your life.

Michael           So I'm Australian by birth. I grew up in Canberra if you're looking for a Trivial Pursuit leg up, Canberra is the little known national capital of Australia.

So I grew up very happy in Canberra: awesome parents; good brothers; went to high school there; went to university there; did a BA in literature, which is what I really loved; struggled through a law degree there and, in fact, finished my law degree being sued by one of my law school lecturers for defamation [laughter], which kind of put the nail in any coffin that might have been about me becoming a lawyer. [crosstalk]--

Whitney           What did you do? Wait. What did you do? What happened?

Michael           One of the lecturers was talking about a piece of evidentiary law. And the point of law he-- the story he was using to illustrate that legal point was a woman being raped. And there was no particular reason why that story needed to be used to illustrate that point of law. So myself and a few other people kind of made, wanted to make the point that could you come out with a better story because this is distressing to a bunch of people. And the way that all played out was we went and talked to a dean and the law school about it, and the lecturer decided that that was a defamatory act, and so it all blew up.

And so what happened for me is, actually, I left because I won a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford. And there was this moment, I'm sitting in a College, the Middle Common Room at Hertford College at Oxford, and I'm reading the Times Higher Education Supplement. And there's a little paragraph about me being sued by this lecturer back in Australia. And what happened after a year is he dropped the lawsuit. And by that time, we'd all dispersed, and the moment had passed.

And it's really, it's a key moment for me in some ways because, for me, that felt like an abuse of power by the lecturer. And it felt like a stepping away from your duty by the law school because the law school did nothing about it. They just kind of backed away and went, "Let's hope this all goes away because it's too hard for us to deal with." And I think that was a dereliction of their duty to mediate, or deal with that, or address it.

Whitney      So how do you live your life differently because of that experience that you had in law school?

Michael      Well, I am quite driven by fairness as a value, in a sense of justice in this world. And so part of what I would hope that my work serves is people who are underserved and people who are not at the top of the power structure. And so, I mean, this is a bit contradictory, and maybe it's a bit privileged because, look, I am a 6'3, straight, white, over-educated male. So I have all the privileges. I have all the benefits of all of that. But there is some part of me that's wired to try and disrupt, rather than to be part of, the governing structure. My company is called Box of Crayons, and that's--

Whitney      All right. All right. So I want to drill down on this a minute because I don't think anybody-- so you just said you're by all accounts privileged, top of the power structure and yet there's something deep inside of you that feels a sense of justice which is why you're in law school, you realize that you're going up against the power and it could harm you in some way and you did it anyway [laughter]. What - was there something that happened for you as a child or in your experience that made you feel that way that you were willing to risk life and limb [laughter] and I use that a little bit tongue in cheek but not entirely, it's certainly emotional life and limb. What happened? Is it something you learned from your parents, what happened in your life that that's something that has become a core value for you?

Michael It's such a good question and I wish I had an awesome story I could point you to or tell you about but honestly, justice felt part of the wiring that I've always had. I mean, I'm getting a little better at not throwing myself on landmines because [laughter] often I get blown up and I don't make that much difference in the world.

Whitney So at the very beginning, you said what it is your company does. Can you say that one more time?

Michael Yeah. We teach 10-minute coaching so managers can build stronger teams and get better results. So it's all about giving managers--

Whitney So how long did it take you to figure out how to describe what you do?

Michael Well, so Box of Crayons has just had its 15th birthday [laughter] and we've had this tagline in some version for probably about five years but we've had the courage to say that's what we do for about a year and a half.

Whitney Fantastic. Okay. So you go into a company and you say we're going to help you coach your people or teach you how to coach so you can get better results with your team. What are three things that you say to people at the outset?

Michael Well, the starting point is probably having that conversation with the organization to make them, to see whether this is going to be useful for them or not. And part of the place where we start is just to say look, almost certainly you already know about coaching and why coaching is a useful thing for your managers to be doing. Because it's probably going to help your engagement which means you have the good people stick around and it's probably going to help you with your productivity which means you focus on the stuff that makes a difference and that's good for your company and it's good for the people as well. And we say, and if you're like most people, you've been a bit frustrated by attempts to make your managers be more coach like because everybody gets it intellectually but it's pretty hard to shift your behavior because the behavior change that we're talking about, Whitney, for us comes down to this, can you stay curious a little bit longer? Can you rush to action and advice giving just a little bit more slowly [laughter]? And most people are advice-giving maniacs [laughter] they've been practicing--

Whitney Guilty. Guilty as charged.

Michael No, exactly. Everybody. I know.

Whitney Yes. Absolutely.

Michael I wish I could claim to have purified myself of advice giving but I so have not [laughter]. And in fact, most people don't even realize how wired they are to leap to solutions and leap to action and leap to advice giving. And of course, there's a place for that. I'm not saying never give anybody advice ever again. I am saying it is a massively overly developed muscle and staying curious a little bit longer is an undeveloped muscle. So that's the starting point which is-- really the starting point is let me-- this is a great question. It's getting me excited [laughter].

Whitney Yeah. Go.

Michael So the first thing to say to managers, because managers are sitting in a room with us and they're like, "I don't know why I'm here. This is another crazy HR initiative." And really we're saying to them, look, first of all, be more-- first of all we're not going to turn you into a coach because actually, most managers don't want to be a coach, they just want to do the best they can by their team and by themselves and get home and see their family. We're going to help you be more coach like. Which is just be curious a little bit longer, rush to action and advice just a little bit more slowly. The second is, we're going to show you how you can do this in 10 minutes or less because we know that the biggest reason you're like, "This is why I don't coach. I don't have time for this stuff." So if you can't do it in 10 minutes or less, you don't have time to coach.

Thirdly, we go, "Look. This is not about adding to what you already do, this is about transforming what you currently do." Because we know you don't have any room to add anything to what you're already doing because you're already crazy busy. And fourthly we say, normally when coaching gets talked about, they talk about how good this is going to be for the people who are about to be coached and that's true, it is good for them. And they talk about how good this is for the organization because of an increase in engagement and productivity and that's also true but to the poor Joe-schlow manager, they go and we're sorry about that but you just have to work harder. Here's more obligation for you. And the fourth point we make to them is we can make your life better by being more coach like because we can show you how to work less hard but have more impact. So what we're doing, Whitney, is trying to be really manager-centric in this kind of teaching around coaching to

say we're starting from the point of - we've got to make this good for you and remove the barriers you have to be more coach-like.

Whitney Okay. So let's do this right now. Let's do it live. Let's have a simulation.

Michael Okay. I love it.

Whitney So I am a manager, and I have got a person on my team who is at the top of their learning curve - the top of their S curve - and they want to go do something new. They've plateaued. They're going to start getting complacent, or bored, or some combination, or they're going to leave. So I know I need to let them move, but I really don't want to. And so I'm this manager, and I'm trying to deal with this. Let's role play and have you coach me through this.

Michael So I'd start off with the kick-start question, which is the first question we talk about in the book. I'd go, "So Whitney, what's on your mind?"

Whitney Well, I've got this guy - so talented. He's starting to plateau. He really wants to do something different. He feels like he's plateauing. I feel like he's doing a fantastic job, and I don't want to lose him because the productivity in my team, it is going to drop. I'm worried that we're going to hit our numbers and yet if I don't let him try something new inside of our organization, I'm afraid he's going to leave. So I'm kind of concerned about talent retention right now.

Michael Got it. So what's happening is you've got a bunch of things going on you're throwing out. Some of them are challenges. Some of them are kind of potential solutions and what's happening to the person on the other side of this conversation normally is they're like, "All right. What do I know about talent retention? What tips can I give you? What advice can I give you? What solutions can I offer up right away?" And I can feel all that coming up and I know a bit about that myself.

Whitney So that's your advice, that's your advice -- what did you call it?

Michael I call it the advice monster, which is like--

Whitney The Advice Monster?

Michael Exactly.

Whitney So the Advice Monster wants to come out, but you're not going to be an Advice Monster. What are you going to do?

Michael So I'm going to ask what I would call the Focus Question. Because at the moment we've got this kind of scattering of stuff going on and truth be told, I don't really know what the problem is yet. So I'm going to ask you, "Whitney, what's the real challenge here for you?"

Whitney I'm worried about hitting my numbers if I let this person do something new.

Michael Got it. So there's that concern about hitting your numbers. I get that. What else? What else is a challenge here for you?

Whitney I feel a little bit almost betrayed in a way because I've gone out on the line for this person. I've really developed them. I've given them all these opportunities, and now they want to leave, and it feels to me like they're abandoning me, and I feel a little bit, sort of this mix of sadness and betrayal and abandonment and kind of this combination--

Michael Anger, yeah.

Whitney Yeah. Anger. A combination of things.

Michael Yeah. I hear that. Let me ask you one other time. What else is a challenge here for you?

Whitney Umm...I think that's it. I think that's it. Those are the main things.

Michael Yeah. That's great. So what's already happened if we kind of pullback in a little meta-commentary here, is, already the conversation has shifted because it shifted away from talking about that person to now talking about you. And part of the magic around that was I just asked, "What's the real challenge here for you?" And with the "for you," the spotlight swings from the problem to the person dealing with the problem. So it immediately becomes more personal, a little more vulnerable, and people will have heard that because now we're talking about what you're up against rather than that person and what they're doing.

The way their question is constructed, and remember, I just asked it

effectively three times. I said, "What's the real challenge here for you?" And what else and what else? I'm not asking what's the challenge. I asked, "What's the real challenge?" And that helped you focus. And then I went, "What's the real challenge for you?" And that made it more personable.

And of course, there is that moment when I asked it the third time and there was that silence. I don't know, what? Three seconds of silence, four seconds of silence as you kind of sat there and tried to figure out what was going on. And what that often does to the person on the other side of the conversation is make them extremely anxious [laughter]. Like, "My God, it's silence. Should I fill the silence? Is the question a bad question? What should I do?" And they often would jump in and fix it and fill the silence.

But I know that - that's just part of the thinking process and my job is to hold the space as best I can so that you can work through whatever your question is. And in fact, the third time you went, "There is no else." I'm like, "That's cool." That's not a failure. That just means we've explored this a little bit further. So we can just lean into this one more time.

Okay, so you've talked about worrying about hitting your numbers, you've talked about a sense of betrayal. And let me ask you to kind of to really focus our conversation out of all of that. Now, what feels like the real challenge here for you?

Whitney

I think the real challenge is-- so my feeling is of, kind of sadness or anger. I'll have to figure out how to deal with that. That's kind of my thing. I think the bigger issue from a business standpoint is how I'm trying to make sure that I-- I've got to manage up to my own boss. And my boss and my boss's boss are looking at me saying, "All right. You've got to deliver. You've got this plan. And if you lose your ringer, you know, your best player, then how are you able to deliver on that plan?" So what I'm trying to figure out is, okay, I really think this person is terrific and I want them to stay. And more importantly, I want them to be happy. So I want them to jump to do something new. But how do I manage letting them jump and at the same time be able to accomplish what I have committed to do with my boss and my boss's boss? So how do I figure that out?

Michael

So that's beautiful. And can you see how we're just not really talking about that other person at all now [laughter]? Now it's about--

Whitney Correct. Correct.

Michael And so if I'd been off-- and so my instinct was of course, "Ah, great. Talent management issue. I'm going to tell you a whole bunch of advice around that." And now, what would have been happening is I would have been busy solving the wrong problem. And honestly, my advice probably wouldn't have been that useful for you anyway.

So I'd have been offering slightly crappy advice to solve the wrong problem. Which would mean that I've just been wasting everybody's time as part of this conversation. But now, you've got to this point of real clarity about, "I've got to let them go. I've got to manage my feelings around that. This part of me is betrayed, this part of me is happy because they've got potential. And I've got to hit my targets. I've got to manage my own boss around that." So if managing your own boss is where you want to start, now what's the real challenge for you in that?

Whitney Ah, got it. Yeah. So the real-- oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Michael And to the people listening in to our conversation, what you've noticed so far is I've used a grand total of three questions in this conversation. I asked, "What's on your mind?" I've asked, "What's the real challenge here for you?" I've asked, "And what else?" And that's it. I've just used those in combination. But it's helping us in a pretty efficient way, like less than three minutes so far. Shift the conversation and get into a juicy conversation.

Whitney And I love that question, "And what else?" That's like emblazoned in my brain. "And what else?" Okay, so let's finish playing this out. So the real issue is how do I get buy-in and sell this to my boss and etc. So what would you say to me next?

Michael Well, it sounds like you've got clear on what the real challenge is. Does that feel true? Does it feel like you've got clear on that?

Whitney It does. Absolutely.

Michael So my bet is you've got some ideas on how to do that. So what's your first idea on how you would actually do that?

Whitney Yeah. So great question. I think my first idea on how to do that is to be able to frame this conversation and be able to sit down and talk to my boss and say, "Look, we're playing a long game here. This is where the retention piece would come in and we're playing a long game. We know that we want to have the best talent at our company. We also know that the best talent is going to need new challenges and so one of things we've got to figure out is, this person needs to move and we think this is going to help the organization over the long-term. It might not help my P & L but it will help the overall company--

Michael Right.

Whitney --so here are some solutions and things that I'm thinking through, how we can fill in that gap. In the near term, I wanted to run them buy you and get your thoughts on how would we do that and also suggest to you that there are two or three people that I think are kind of raw and up and coming talent and I'd love to see them developed and get your thoughts on this game plan and how we would do that."

Michael Boom. So this is awesome. Again, what most people would've done when you go, "I think we figured out what the real challenge is. It's about managing expectations of your boss", they'd want to jump in going, "So let me give you some ideas are in how you do that".

Whitney Right.

Michael We have three principles around coaching, Whitney, it's; be lazy, be curious, be often.

Being curious we've talked about cause that's about, can you stay curious a little but longer.

Being often is about recognizing that any interaction with somebody can be a bit more coach-like cause it's just about, can you be curious a bit more.

But being lazy is what you're seeing me role model here which is, who's doing all the work in this conversation? It's not me. What content have I added to this conversation at the moment? Not a bit. Now that's not because I don't have content, cause I do have ideas, but I'm self-managing myself and my need to add value in a conversation by going, "If I can get Whitney to do this

work herself, A, she owns her own ideas. So she owns the insight. She owns the ideas. It means it's much more likely she'll actually do it. B, she's going to have better ideas because she actually knows what's going on. She knows her boss. She knows the person. She knows the raw talent. She's actually gonna have some smart ideas around that. C, her brain is changing. She is actually becoming more confident and more competent, and more self-assured, and more autonomous, cause she's doing this work rather than being told what to do and I am still keeping my ears out for potentially a place where I could add value.

So, you know, Whitney, we could carry on this conversation, I could go, "I love that first idea about what to do. What else could you do?", and Whitney would come up with some other things that she could do cause I would see, she's thinking about it and she's figuring it out. And what I might do at the end, is I might go, "Look, I love all of those ideas. I'm right behind you. Let me suggest one other thing that you might do. You might also do this."

And now, I'm giving her that support, I'm offering up my own idea. I'm not doing the normal boss thing cause as soon as a boss offers up an idea, it sucks the oxygen out of the room cause everybody knows that your boss' idea, and I'm making air quote signs here, your boss' idea is in fact an order, everybody knows that. Let's not kid ourselves. And if you're the boss, don't think that your ideas aren't being interpreted as telling me what to do - cause they are. So what I'm doing is I'm resisting as long as possible to share my ideas so that it's just one other idea and we've got all of Whitney's good ideas out of her brain.

So in like four minutes, we've gone from talking about this guy leaving to actually shifting the topic completely, getting clear on the real thing which is, I've got to manage my boss's expectation, generating your own ideas on that, me adding a little bit at the end, doing it in four minutes. I barely did anything other than use four questions or three questions and you go away going, "That was an amazing conversation".

Whitney            Exactly. So let's go to the very last question that you're going to ask me cause I know what it is.

Michael            Perfect.

Whitney Our conversation's now, now wrapping up

Michael Exactly.

Whitney What are you going to say to me?

Michael And I know that my job as a manager or a leader or a colleague is to help my people learn, and they don't really know when you tell them stuff and they don't learn when they do stuff. They learn when they have a moment to reflect. So what I'd say it's like, "So, Whitney, that was great. I love that we've figured this out in five minutes or less, but before you go what was most useful or most valuable for you from this conversation?"

Whitney I love that question so much, but I'm going to pretend like I'm in the role. I think the thing that was most valuable for me is realizing that I can solve this problem, that I need to think through how to frame this with my boss because it is a manageable sort of strategic conversation that I can have that will actually make me look good because I'll show that I'm thinking strategically. But also that there's some element of this person wanting to jump to a new S-curve that makes me feel kind of sad, and even though I'm happy for them, I do feel like they're leaving me and I think that that was an important thing for me to realize so that I can manage it and deal with it because it is manageable but it's something to be aware of because it can kind of muck things up a little bit if I don't manage it. So that's an important insight for me.

Michael Yeah, beautiful. And so a few things to comment on, on kind of a meta-level again. The first is if I'm trying to really strengthen the relationship, what I would then do is I would share what was most useful for me out of that conversation.

Whitney As the coach.

Michael As the coach. So it felt like an exchange of information, an exchange of insight and vulnerabilities. What I would celebrate is insight about what worked for you, and that's great because I'm seeing you learn, but also I'm getting feedback so I'm like, "Oh, next time I'm going to try and do this again because obviously this worked for Whitney." And I might think to myself, "Oh, I was kind of feeling all sort of awkward when she went into that 'I'm feeling sad and betrayed,' and I'm like, 'Oh. I don't know how to deal with that.' But actually, just that recognition and that speaking those feelings was helpful for

her. So the feedback from me is, 'Michael, deal with your own discomfort because when people bring that up, it's often a useful part of the process for them.'"

Whitney I see.

Michael So I'm getting feedback and learning from myself.

Whitney Yeah. So super fascinating. Thank you for letting me put you on the spot. I suspect that people listening are going to find this super helpful, and I love how our two worlds are colliding because obviously one of the conversations that I want people to have is, "Okay. If you're going to have people stay at your company, you've got to allow them to jump to a new S-curve." But it's really, really hard to do and so I wanted to do this of having you help people think through what can that conversation look like as you're trying to coach someone through? So I have two more questions on that. So I was the manager. In that particular instance, were you being a coach from the outside or were you potentially even being my boss? Who were you?

Michael Honestly, I'm just a person you're talking to. For me, a big part of what this is about is let's not overfetishize the coach.

Whitney Got it, got it.

Michael Peter Blocker who I mentioned before, one of my heroes, when he wrote a blurb for my first book - this is such a great moment for me - he went, "Look, coaching is not a profession but it's a way of being with each other."

Whitney I love that.

Michael And I do, too. I didn't even know I believed that but when he wrote that, I was like, "Oh, my God. That's what I think I believe." And so a big part of the driver for me and for Box of Crayons is how do we make being more coach-like something accessible to everybody it's a way of being with each other

Whitney And you know what else is so interesting about your process is that [I just interviewed Donald Miller](#) who wrote [StoryBrand](#)--

Michael Love that.

Whitney

--and I was thinking the way the coaching habit coaches or this way of being is you're allowing the person that you're talking to, to be the hero and you're being the guide. And I think that this desire that we have to over advise-- guilty, guilty, guilty. Please everybody who's listening that I've given way too much advice to please forgive me and know that I'll probably do it again and so you'll need to forgive me again. But it's this idea of I'm allowing and you're allowing the person that we're talking to this way of being to be the hero on their own story and we for a moment have this privileged position of being their guide and they're being vulnerable enough to share what's happening with them and what they're trying to figure out with us and asking us to give them a safe space to think through that.

Michael

And the thing to say just to reassure people is that, "Hey, you do get to share your advice and your ideas, you just wait." You're just waiting a little bit longer to decide what's actually most useful for you to share and to allow them to do as much of the journey themselves because the more they work the part themselves, the better they are for it.

And the second thing is to say that you're the guide and I love that you're using that language Whitney, because it means that when you see the person walking to the edge of the cliff, you are allowed to intervene. You are allowed to say, "Yeah don't do that because that would be terrible." Because in our coaching conversation, you go on so I'm going to go into my manager and I'm going to resign because that will show him for doing this and that. I may be going, "Well let's talk that through." And we'd find a way to kind of come up with the conclusion that that's not such a great idea after all. So it's not about giving up control, it's not about not having your people's back, it's about, can you slow down the rush to action and advice. It's not never give action, never move to advice, it's vice versa never give advice, never move to action. It's about can you slow it down? You still maintain control but you're giving up the in the moment control to increase engagement whilst still controlling the arc of the conversation.

Whitney

Right, love it. How did you decide and how did you discover this process, and that you had a gift and a passion for becoming a coach? How did this come about?

Michael

Well it kind of taps into a little bit around where we started this conversation which is I got annoyed by the way coaching was becoming an elite experience. You're like you either have to be a senior person in an organization or you typically have to be a fairly wealthy middle class person to get a coach. And

also how do I democratize coaching? How do I make coaching not a profession but a way of being with each other? So that's the kind of the base motivation there which is, look, I think coaching can spread so how do I do that? So I think part of it's around how do you make coaching accessible? And that kind of connects a bit to where we were before around so what are all the assumptions people have around coaching that might not be true and what we might be able to strip away so that they see that coaching is really simple. I mean stay curious a little bit longer, here's a few good questions...

Whitney Did you grow up thinking you're going to be a coach? When was the moment you discovered-- I know that you said that coaching is a way of being but in your particular instance, you do make a living, you put food on your table as a coach at what point in time did you sort of say, "This is what I'm going to do. This is who I'm going to be. This is how I'm going to put food on the table."

Michael Well, I figured out that I was good at listening as a teenager because I would be the person in the car with my friend at 2:00 AM listening to them talk about their angsty teenage life, and I'd be listening more than I'd be sharing. And I remember even as a 16-year-old going, "Well, I love that I can do this, but I wish I knew was doing [laughter]. Is this good? Should I be doing something else? What should I do when somebody's talking like this?"

And so at university both in Australia originally and then in England, I joined and was trained for kind of youth suicide hotlines. So I did some basic counselling training, and that's kind of more around this process of being able to listen and being able to take a conversation a little deeper through questioning.

But what I did when I moved to the states and I moved to Boston from London was actually hired my first coach because I was like, "I should try this out because it looks like something's happening here." And whilst I wouldn't have said it was a brilliant coaching relationship, it showed me that there was something here that I wanted to pursue. And so over the-- I did, I was trained as a coach and I'd go to coaching practice. But actually then I dismantled my coaching practice because for me the greatest fulfilment I get in the work I do is actually not by coaching people directly myself, but it's about being a teacher around how to be more coach like. So now I don't actually coach anybody, I'm--

Whitney So you disrupted yourself.

Michael Yeah. And part of it is that quest to-- the language I use is to do more great work. So what's the work that has the most impact and the work that has the most meaning for you? And I'm like, "You know what, there are a lot of brilliant people who love coaching and can be great direct one to one coaches." I'm pretty good, but I wouldn't have said that I was totally brilliant at this. But I can write a book like nobody else can write and I can design a program like nobody else can design, so let me put my higher skills to their best use.

Whitney Any major along this way over the-- let's call it the last 10 years, any major failure or hiccup that perhaps in the moment certainly gave you a lot of sadness, maybe even a little bit of shame because shame is one of those creepy crawly things that we all struggle with, that as you dealt through it and walked through it, it's turned out to become formative in many ways for you?

Michael Yeah. So the first thing I would say is, I'm lucky to be wired around being very resilient around failure because often when stuff goes wrong like you know, being sued by a law lecturer for defamation or being banned from my high school graduation for something, and part of where I go is-- there are all these juicy stories.

Whitney Okay. Can you say just really quickly why you were banned from high school graduation for? Sorry, I have to ask because everybody listening is going to want to know what it is, so you have to tell us.

Michael We've been told as a graduating class we weren't allowed to do anything because of our headmaster's retirement year and the class beforehand had caused havoc. I mean they brought in a flock of sheep [laughter] into the middle of the school, they wrote rude words in weed killer so six weeks after they'd left various expletives appeared on the fields. They filled all the locks up with glue. I mean, they kind of actually cost the school a lot of money. So we were like—you're not allowed to do anything at all. And of course, you've heard about my relationship with power so I go, "Well, let's [laughter] see what we can do then."

And all we did and it's very benign was we went in and we filled the chapel with helium balloons. I know, it's like the most benign thing but we just wanted to make a point that we'd been in and we'd done something and we'd snuck past the security guards and all of this. Anyway, it turns out we hadn't successfully snuck past all the security guards so a bunch of us were hauled off

and banned from our high school graduation. Another moment of misuse of power in my opinion by the school, so that's another thing that fueled me--

Whitney Wow. What an amazing thread and theme you have [laughter] and I still believe that there is some incident in your life that's kind of fueling this sense of social justice.

Michael Yeah. I have to figure that out.

Whitney Something for you to-- yeah, it's a fascinating question because it seems this runs so deep within you and it's so powerful and so much a guiding principle for you. So all right, so okay.

Michael So over the last 10 years--

Whitney You don't get to deflect, you don't get to deflect, I still want you to answer the question [laughter]. Last 10 years.

Michael So one of the great success we've had at Box of Crayons and one of the hardest things at Box of Crayons is my wife was my business partner for six years, I think, while at Box of Crayons. She retired a year ago, the end of 2016. And [laughter] we had so many rough starts. It's so hard to work with the person you're married to because A, part of why you love them and why they're so brilliant for you is they also can push all your buttons like nobody else. And partly working with somebody actually uncovers new lines of power that need to be dealt with and addressed. And it took us like four false starts before we finally got into the groove of working together and we worked brilliantly for five years. Really without her work, we would never have kind of got over a couple of humps which are part of the S curve. We hit plateaus and her coming in was part of what allowed us to get back on to the next S curve which is fantastic. But the last year was really hard because we were growing fast, we'd kind of gone beyond both of our capacities to manage this and we didn't do a great job at managing that both kind of as stewards of Box of Crayons, but also as two people in a long-term relationship. And learning from that and processing that is still going for us. So that was hard,

Whitney So what's one thing because it's still fairly new so you probably haven't made all the meaning out of it that you will over time, is there one thing that you've already sort of said, "Okay, I learned that and we learned that." And so what's one thing that comes to mind?

Michael So one piece is around to understand as a leader when it's time to kind of ensure-- to put the money on your bet. You got to make the call.

Whitney Interesting.

Michael And what had happened to us is we kind of got a little bit stuck around my vision which was around growth, and her vision which is around, let's keep it at this size for it's working just fine. And what I did--

Whitney Oh, wow. So this natural tension of growth versus stability played out in the personalities of your marriage. Fascinating. Okay.

Michael Exactly. So we had that. And that is actually how we play out, as personalities. She's more wired to say, no, and I'm more wired to say, yes. I'm like, "Let's try it. Why not? Let's go for it." She's like, "Why don't we not try it and do the thing that we know works." And that could be--

Whitney Yeah, which is why you're a good match.

Michael Yeah. It's a really healthy thing most of the time and occasionally, it's kind of messy. And I would've said that in retrospect, what I would want to do is make a cleaner, bolder decision and say, "I'm making this decision, this is the implications, and now let's figure out how we manage that," as supposed to kind of smudged it and go, "Yeah, we'll try and figure out a middle way here," and there is no middle way.

Whitney Fascinating. So you can only be at the low end of the S-curve so long where you're iterating, and at some point, you have to make a decision, lock and load, and decide to scale-- scale the decision. Fascinating. That's a good lesson. That's a really good lesson. And your marriage is still intact so that's even better.

Michael Our marriage is intact that way. In two weeks time, we celebrate the 25th anniversary of our first date. So that's awesome.

Whitney Congratulations.

Michael Thank you.

Whitney      Yay! That's so wonderful. I think that there's something-- when you're able to work through those things and you have this laboratory, it's an amazing, amazing growth opportunity for a marriage but for us as individuals.

Michael      Exactly right.

Whitney      Michael, this has been so fun. It went in lots of unexpected directions but an absolute delight, I really appreciate you're taking the time to be interviewed. And I know our listeners are going to love hearing what you have to say.

Michael      It was so good. Thank you, Whitney.

You know how we just learned from Michael that when you as a busy manager is coaching someone, you are supposed to listen, and say, and what else? Well, when my editor Heather Hunt, listened to the episode, she pointed out five different times where I didn't say 'and what else?' I changed the subject.

This was such a great learning moment for me, I thought it might be helpful for you too. Here's what Heather pointed out. When Michael started to tell us about his company, instead of letting him finish, I jumped to another idea. When he explained his coaching approach, instead of letting him wrap up, I jumped in. Not because I was trying to be rude, but because I my mind was awirl. When we finished the simulation, because I was worried about time, I became abrupt. And when Michael talked about his experience of running a business with his wife, rather than letting it be, I annotated with my point of view. It was meant to be helpful to the listener, an editorial, but to her, and maybe to him, it was a bit tone deaf.

So, practical tip -- dear listeners, no matter how well you think you know to do something, like listen, and say what else, it's really hard to do. And not because you don't care, it might even be you care too much. Remember to ask, and what else -- what was your big insight today?

Thank you to Michael Bungay Stanier for being our guest, sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Heather Hunt, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.