

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 53: Tom Peters

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Tom Peters, bestselling author of the groundbreaking [In Search of Excellence](#), and a thinker I've admired throughout my career. His most recent book [The Excellence Dividend](#), is part swan song, part coda and it is vintage Peters: original, commanding and cutting-edge.

Whitney: I remember reading in the book and you said that you're not a very religious person and yet it seems moral integrity is incredibly, incredibly important to you. I mean it's just you, your pages drip with that, that being important to you. Do you, where did that sense of moral background, backbone and fiber come from do you think?

Tom: Uh, well, I must say you and I both believe with every ounce of our being in developing people. On the other hand I do think it's incredibly important to choose your parents wisely. And you know, my, my, my reading of the whatever you want to call it, the human development literature and so on is between the gene kit that you inherit at birth and the first three or four years of your life here on earth. Uh, a lot of things are, are put in place.

And also, you know I was, we were not a hyper-religious family but, uh, I was indeed raised in the Presbyterian Church. But you know I think the other part of it, Whitney, is actually, actually learning. Uh, I partially dedicated to the, the book he was the second person right after my mom to my first commanding officer in Vietnam. Dick Anderson. Captain Anderson to me.

I was a 23 year old and I was in a situation that I was not prepared for and he was not at all like a father. He was a commanding officer of an 800 person unit but he really ... You know he was, he was a lower case R religious guy in the sense that he said, "Your first duty is to take care of the people whose charge have b-, to whom, to whom, have been assigned to you.

And so, I don't mean I'm not religious, you know, the point in modern times these days and for Heaven's sake you know this better than I. Uh, in, in modern times our principal responsibility is to help people grow and, and deal with, uh, a future, which is more uncertain than perhaps at any time in the past.

Whitney: I love the part in your book where you said you know, "Change is happening quickly and yet I know from my mom who, you know, lived for 95 years, look at all the changes that happened in her life so..."

Tom: (laughing) That's a cool page, Whitney. I would agree m-. I was just in a, I was just in, uh, a mood and I wrote down all the stuff that happened to her and I thought, "Holy smokes." You know what, and, and you know that for, that, that is true and God help us

should we have to deal with any of it. But you know if you were born in '09 and died in '05 on top of all the technology change including sending a man to the moon. Uh, she did have World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the Iraq War, uh, hydrogen bombs, atom bombs. And I mean there's uh, there's uh, another piece. Let me, let me digress because this really, uh, really is important.

My wife thinks I'm crazy, for many reasons, but I always talk to cab drivers. And, you know, I have this arrogant belief that if you've been on a 20 minute cab ride and you don't know the name of all the cab driver's kids you really weren't paying attention. But when Susan says, "What do you get? How come you get?"

I said, "Susan, every single one of them is more interesting than you and me. We have led a spoiled life." And in Washington, D.C. half of the cab drivers are Ethiopians. I said, "For Heaven sakes, they've been through starvation. They've been through revolutions. They've probably had a second cousin who may well have been executed, you know, in front of them. And those are r-, rich lives that, that are just beyond our comprehension. And so I talk to them to learn from them. They're, they're, uh, you know they, they, they know things that I could never imagine."

Whitney: You know it's interesting that you, you say that because your, your book that you've just written and is released on April 3rd. You talk about the, "Excellence Dividend." And, you mention a story at the very beginning of the book about to illustrate this idea of excellence. And, I'd, I'd love to hear you talk about what's the big idea in this book and then also share, um, some examples of excellence that you've discovered perhaps as you've talked to cab drivers.

Tom: I was just thinking about it because I've been sitting here signing books and one of the people to whom the book is dedicated is, uh, Herb Kelleher the Southwest Airlines Founder. But here's the situation and you and I both travel more than is good for a human being. Uh, I am in the Albany airport, getting ready to travel to BWI to Washington, D.C. Uh, maybe 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning. Uh, we are lined up at the gate as always. The flight crew is a little bit late and flight crews don't like to be late. As is invariably the case there are six or seven wheelchairs that are lined up. The pilot comes rushing from whatever gate it was that he was coming from behind schedule. He stops at the woman who is in the first wheelchair and says ... Whitney, I am sitting here and my hair is starting to stand on end. And says to this woman, "Would you mind if I pushed your, your wheelchair-

Whitney: Wow.

Tom: ... down the jetway? I have been on 9,000 flight legs and as I said to somebody I am now one for 9,000. That is the first time that I have ever seen that happen. And, you know, in the book there's a quote from the former President - she started I think as a secretary actually at Southwest, Colleen Barrett. It's in the section on hiring and she says, "We look for listening, caring, smiling, saying thank you and being warm." And they look for that, darn it, in the pilots and mechanics as much as the people who are at the front desks or flight attendants. And, and that to me, you know, you, you no longer need to buy any of my 17 books, that's excellence. And the question for leaders of course is how

do you create an institution, uh, and I believe hiring is a bit of it. You know Colleen's question, I'm sure. But I think it's the kind of culture you set. How do you, how do you create an institution where an act like that is natural? And, where people really do their first thought is to being helpful to the employees who report to them if they're a boss, but to somebody who's sitting there waiting to get on a plane who you don't know from Adam in a wheelchair. And, and, and you know it also happens that Kelleher's made a lot of money in a discount airline so it sounds to me like it's a pretty good business proposition as well.

Whitney: Yeah, it's an amazing story. So you, you just posed the question, how do you create a culture where that's possible? Obviously, people are going to need to read the entire book to know exactly, but what, at a very high level what are the two or three things that you came up with?

Tom: Let me be really perverse. Uh, there is nothing in my book, I've got a ton of degrees. Engineering degrees from Cornell, business degrees from Stanford. There is nothing in my book that requires even a high school education. You know it says, "Push the wheelchair down the jetway." It says, "Listen to your customers." It says, "Do your MBWA - managing by wandering around. Talk to people. Figure out what's going on at the proverbial coal face."

It's just not complicated stuff. There's a little story in the book that I loved and I wish I could, wish I could tout the book of the, that it came from but I don't remember it. Uh, this guy is the author who's a coach or consultant or what have you, is in a company meeting where divisions and groups are reporting. And, he's sitting next to the CEO. And all the stories are fabulous. We develop people. We did this, we made profits by taking care of our customers.

And at one point he turns to the CEO and he said, "I've been through 100 meetings like this. Why don't other CEOs do what you've done?" And the, the, this, the CEO turned to him and he said, "I think they're embarrassed to work on things like this. You know, they think they should be working on strategy. They think they should be doing this complicated thing. And so they don't work on you know, making hiring criteria - listening, caring, smiling, saying thank you, and, and being warm."

I don't want to talk about adults changing because I'm just not an expert in that area. I don't write and this started for, [In Search of Excellence](#), which is antithetical to the McKinsey Doctrine. And I was working at McKinsey at the time. I don't write books for big company CEOs. Uh, to be rude and crude and not entirely honest, I don't really give a damn about big company CEOs. When Bob Waterman and I were writing, we didn't do any CEO interviews for, [In Search of Excellence](#).

The person I wanted to focus on, Whitney, was the division general manager running a 50 million dollar division, in a billion dollar group, in a five billion dollar business because that person was a small business person. And I wanted to talk to them and find the ones ... Hey, first of all I don't ever change anybody. I said to somebody, "I talk to a thousand people. You know, maybe Tony Robbins and Billy Graham thought they could change all 1,000. But if I talk to a 1,000 people and four people go away really motivated to change

what they're doing. And incidentally all four of them agreed with me before they came in. And I just give them a kick in the backside at the right moment. I think I've had, uh, you know, one, one heck of a day."

Uh, and I think may say this also. I think I did say it somewhere in the introduction to the book, uh, I don't get many letters from CEOs and if I get them I don't collect them. The turn on and in, [In Search of Excellence](#), and ... I don't know about Bob Waterman, my co-author but I know about me. It was the thing that was totally unexpected. I do have boxes of letters but they're from police chiefs, and fire chiefs, and elementary school teachers, and elementary school principals. And people running seven person businesses who said, "This makes sense to us." I would rather be helpful to an elementary school principal than I would to the chief executive officer of a giant company

Whitney: The irony is that you ended up being helpful to people who were the CEOs of giant companies, right? That's, that's the grand irony of all this.

Tom: (laughs) That may be.

Whitney: Yeah. (laughs).

Tom: Well, that's fair. I, I do suspect we've, we've made it. But the ones, but darn it, Whitney, the ones we were impactful on already believed what we were writing about and you know, I hate to use football analogies- I really, really hate that.

Whitney: Oh, please. Why not? We love football analogies.

Tom: I know but I'm, I'm, I know we do but it's just, it's a guy thing. And I don't like guy things like that. Anyway, my guy thing point is if you are own, on your own five yard line with 95 yards to go, I don't think I can help you. If you are on your opponent's five yard line, I think I can give you a push that gets you over the goal line. I just don't have an inflated view of, of what I can, what I can pull off. I really believe that hiring is important and training and development are important.

And my, my other favorite thing in the book, because we don't think of pharmaceutical companies typically as kind and gentle places, is the small, midsize newish pharmaceutical company CEO who I've got in my hiring section who says, "We only hire nice people." He said, "Even when it comes to some very sexy bio tech degree there are a lot of very smart people around. And among those very smart people - I want the nice ones."

Whitney: Yeah.

Tom: And he is really tough. You know, I have, I'm the CEO. I have an interview with you. You're the smartest human being who ever came down the pike. I am completely mesmerized by you but after you leave my office, and he uses this term not me, "You have to run the gauntlet." You've got to interview about 15 or 20 people and they are

principally focusing on whether you're the kind of person they want to work with and each one of them has veto authority.

And I just think that's absolutely fantastic. And what he says though, which is really key, and he's not running a giant company. It's, uh, you know, it's uh, it's a middle size company. He said, "My problem is I so much believe that a single person can ruin this culture if they don't have the right attitude."

Whitney: Yeah.

Tom: And, I mean that is - a strong, darn statement.

Whitney: Let's go, let's back up a little bit. So it turns out that today is Good Friday. The day that we're doing this interview. And it's an anniversary of sorts for you. 40 years ago today you gave a presentation that changed the course of your (laughs) life and I think for many people the world of management thinking.

Tom: (laughs).

Whitney: Just a little bit of hyperbole but probably not entirely. What was your big aha? What happened with this presentation? Who did you deliver it to? How did it come about? And how did it shift your thinking?

Tom: Okay, I'm at McKinsey-Guyman, the San Francisco office. The managing director has Dart in Los Angeles is a principal, uh, customer. He's getting ready to make a big presentation to Dart. The computer crashes. And of course in those days in the office you probably only had one computer. And so his highly analytical team is unable to give their highly analytical presentation. And he knows that I've been working on this organizational effectiveness stuff and we can come back to that at some point. And so he comes up to me and he said, "Tom," he said, "Some, somethings gotta happen. I got to give this presentation to Dart. You've been working on this stuff." He was not a great supporter. He was not Bob Waterman, my co-author. Uh, he was not a great supporter. He said, he said, "Do something, write a presentation. Come down here. Mesmerize them. Get them off my back."

And so there I was, uh, I was traveling all the time as a McKinsey person. I am horrified to say the number of, uh, family events that I missed. Uh, the night during which I had to make, prepare the presentation my wife and I had tickets to the San Francisco Ballet. Uh, I had skipped out on stuff too many times in the past. And she said, "I hope you're not going to skip out on this one." And it wasn't said with a smile or with a tear it was said in that, "I hope you're not going to skip out on this one." So I said, "Sure," and I went to the ballet and it was a fabulous performance and I was mesmerized.

So, I go home. It's 10:30 at night and now I have to start on my presentation. And this darn ballet bounces around in my head. And I don't know where it came from. I don't believe it was a bolt of lightning, lightening from above even though it was the Thursday before Good Friday. Uh, but, but I, j- and I don't know whether I'd used the word

excellence six or 6,000 times in my life. But I started thinking about the excellence of a ballet performance, or a symphonic performance, or an incredible play, or an incredible sports team thing. And I thought, "Why in the heck is excellence a normal word to use for ballet, theater, symphony, football, but we never associate the word excellence with business.

And, and, and what went through my head, Whitney, is I thought, "What is a business? It is a collection of our fellow human beings who are attempting to be of service to their clientele and we hope their community as well. And so excellence applies to them in their HR bi-, Department, or in their 40 person business, or what have you. Excellence fits their life or should or could as much as it does to the conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. Uh, or the choreographer for the San Francisco Ballet." And so I wrote this darn presentation and, uh, you know then the mystery writing took place and the title of the presentation was one word and it was excellence.

And it's not that I was off to the races. Nobody took it seriously. The skies did not part. But it, it just kind of got stuck in my head because we all love excellence.

And, I just wrote something in a Tweet by the way and this is, this is really important, uh, on this topic. I said yesterday was the, as you and I talk was the first day of Major League Baseball season. And I said, "Excellence is not when your son hits a two run double with two people on base at a critical time. Excellence is when a teammate slips or falls down or better yet an opponent slips or falls down and your son is the one who runs over to him and gives him a hand. That's a human act of an extraordinary sort. And, the double is fine." I said, "The double y- you're welcome to applaud for the double (laughs) but the thing that you really want to pay attention to and the, and the, the, by the way the sign that you may have done a couple things right as a parent is when that child helps somebody else when that other person is in difficulty."

And again I personally think that applies to bakeries. And I think it applies to five person roofing companies. And also to the, you know to those giant companies we talked about.

Whitney: How was the world thinking about management at the time? Um, you talk about how there was some resistance, which I think is fascinating because now we look back and it's been what 35 years since you wrote the book? You probably have the number in your head. 36 years? Is that right?

Tom: I'm afraid I do, it's 36. (laughs).

Whitney: 36, okay, got it.

Tom: Let's stick with 35, Whitney.

Whitney: 35, 36, years and we look at it now and we like, we say, "Duh, right? Duh. Of course, why would there ever be any resistance to this?" And yet you mention there was a little bit of resistance at the time. And, I'd love for you to share that because I think history is

so instructive for us all when we have a new idea and we're trying to put something out into the world to see things differently. Could you share a little bit of that story with people?

Tom: Two things and let's start with number two. Uh, the Americans obviously emerged, uh, in better shape than anybody else on the planet at the end of World War II. Uh, and we ruled the roost and we thought it was our birthright to rule the roost. And then suddenly in the '70's, uh, the Japanese started delivering cars. They did steel and various other things as well. But kind of cars are the national symbol in America and the Japanese had this incredible secret. And the secret was their cars worked.

Whitney: (laughs).

Tom: Uh, we, we, we were teaching marketing at the Harvard Business School and the Japanese were teaching through kanban and these various other traits were teaching people to make good cars. And we had the daylights embarrassed out of us by that. And so people started looking for answers and interestingly and you did your thing relative to excellence a few minutes ago. The, the first thing that I can remember was this wonderful article in the Harvard Business Review written by Bill Abernathy and Bob Hayes - two professors there. I had one of them when they were at Stanford. And the title of the article etched in my mind was, "[Managing Our Way to Economic Decline](#)," great article title.

Whitney: Mm-mm.

Tom: And it basically was an attack on their own institution, the Harvard Business School. And it said, "We're teaching too much budgeting, too much analytics, uh, too much this, too much marketing. And we're not teaching about building good cars." And you know, we didn't steal it (laughs), though I certainly read it but that's essentially what our book was about.

There is second thing, which, which plays into it and that is McKinsey was getting the heck beaten out of them for the first time in their lives by the Boston Consulting Group. And we were the greatest counselors to management on earth and that might even be true. Uh, but BCG was selling this other thing called ideas. Uh, the Cost Curve and various other things.

And so our managing director said, "Boy, we got to get, we got to get some of those ideas." And he started a big project on business strategy because that's what people talked about and a project on, uh, efficiency in operations. And then he started a little project that was invisible. The other two were in New York where headquarters was and this one was in San Francisco and I was tapped to do it. Mainly because I'd just gotten a PhD, I was not a partner or anything like that. The others all had senior partners. PhD in organizational effectiveness at Stanford. And so when the, when the managing director called me in. Ron Daniel, he said, "Tom," he said, "I've got a long term itch that I'd like to scratch." And he had done a lot of really great work in Europe in particular. He said, "My itch is that we develop," we meaning McKinsey, "We develop the most extraordinary

strategies for our clients and then in 9 out of 10 cases there's an implementation failure. Will you look at this?"

And you know essentially that was an invitation to me to look at what I had just finished a degree in, which was, "Not how do you make a great strategy but how do you execute?" And you know those, those were the two things that, that really led up to the book. And it's not what the business schools were preaching that's for sure. At McKinsey, they were making all of their money on business strategy. Uh, and that's unfair but it's pretty close to it.

And so when I started using these profanities like the word culture there were a whole lot of people who wanted my scalp who were very senior. But Mr. Daniel who had commissioned the study, uh, happened to have the after his name managing director and so he protected me. He said you know, "The last thing Tom's working on isn't really very important it's pretty invisible so you know, let the child play with his toys." And you know obviously we had some subsequent success...

Whitney: Tom, let me just call this out. You're like, "We subsequently had a little success." Let me just say so from what I recall you can correct me if I have the details wrong. Um, they printed out when you were doing this silly little thing. I would argue that you were a disruptor.

Tom: (laughs).

Whitney: I know you don't like that word, but they printed out 5,000 copies and a year later a million copies had been sold. I mean that is astonishing. And so when you sold a million copies did these people who were resistors kind of get on board and say, "Wow, Tom, Bob." Did they change or what, what happened? What was, how did people respond when- when you had this runaway hit?

Tom: Uh- Mainly (laughs) bitterness. Whitney, the far more important answer to your question is no, it did not take hold, except as a rump group thing even with the book sales but it did overtime. And in fact it is said and I cannot demonstrate that this is the case but it is said as much as almost a half of McKinsey's practice these days is involved in organization stuff and leadership and so on.

So we had this thing that we used there called the McKinsey 7S Model that Bob and I invented. And you know, one managing director said you know, 30 years later the Seven 7S Model was still the best organizational diagnostic tool that we use. And you know, 7S model said, "There are hard S's and soft S's. There's the strategy stuff and then there's the people stuff we call the staff and so on."

But the resistance was significant. My happiest day, uh, was Lou Gerstner was at Ameri-, was a McKinsey partner who was unhappy with me. Uh, ran part of American Express, ran RJR Nabisco and then was famous for turning IBM around, and [wrote a book](#) about it afterwards. Called something like, [Why Elephants Can Be Taught to Dance](#). And somewhere in the beginning he said, "When I came in to this job I was mostly focused

on metrics, and analytics, and strategy. But I came to see that in fact culture is the game. It is not part of the game. It is the game." And that was the, you know, the greatest vindication in my life.

Whitney: (laughs) So, so the title, [The Excellence Dividend](#). It's a bit of a double entendre, isn't it?

Tom: Tell me what your translation is.

Whitney: Well, I think that there's a dividend from being excellent - for the companies but there's I think a meta-or a more personal meaning for you, um, the, than you of, of having pursued this idea-of excellence.

Tom: The basic argument is that we are faced to use a term that I'm not unhappy with, Whitney. We are faced with a string of disruptions particularly technologically driven disruptions. Particularly Artificial Intelligence driven disruptions. There is no issue about that and how do we succeed in that context? I refuse to use the words fight back because that suggests defensiveness. And I believe that excellence is an offensive strategy. And I believe to go back to an earlier story that hiring pilots who will instinctively push a passenger in a wheelchair down the jet way is a terrific differentiating strategy in 2018. Maybe it won't be in 2038, but I'm worried about the next five or 10 years.

Whitney: Well, or as you like to say the next five minutes, right?

Tom: Well, the next five minutes is you know as well. And you know, uh, among other things the, the, the, the real, the real irony whatever the heck it's not the right word. Is that if I'm, if I've created this airline Herb Kelleher uh, like, like Southwest by Herb Kelleher. And if that pilot pushes that wheelchair down the jetway. And if that pilot five years later starts a small business I think that he or she is going to probably focus on differentiating that business with extraordinary human acts. And I think those human acts for the foreseeable future are going to be, not fight back, they're going to be the differentiators.

I, you know, I, I have some one page in there where it says how much I despise the word commodity. And I talk about, "What do you do if you're an electrician? And 20 things you do to not be a commodity from, you know, clean shirts and a clean truck, to writing a little blog on you know, plumbing problems or electrician problems or what have you." I not only don't think excellence hasn't aged since '82. Given the disruptions I think excellence is 10 times more important today.

Whitney: What's a moment for you? For you personally of true professional excellence where you felt like you were excellent at, at, at your craft?

Tom: Not yet, but hopefully tomorrow.

Whitney: Not yet.

Tom: Uh, and I, and I, I really mean that. I remember Tom Hanks was interviewed one time you know at the peak of his career and he said, "Well, I wouldn't give myself more than a C grade on any movie I've participated in." And I will not give myself an A grade on any of the 3,000 speeches that I've given.

I find that when I give a speech, boy this was, this was really personal between you and me and the people who are, who are listening, Whitney. I, not, I don't do drugs, and I haven't had anything to drink for 12 years. But when Robin Williams left us in such a difficult situation, I remember reading somewhere he would give a performance, which of course would be magnificent and he would have five minutes of euphoria and then he would go into despair about all the things he could have done to make it better and that's the way I am with a speech except I don't do drugs and I don't drink.

I give a speech and I'm really excited about it and then at the five minute mark I start thinking about how it could be better and how it could be improved. And you know a lot of people say nice things about my speeches. Well I, I haven't gotten one right yet. And I do believe, I must say, and this then takes me into the preachy part that there's you know only one secret to success in addition to the right parents and so on. And that's to work harder than anybody else.

I remember there's this wonderful interview in the Wall Street Journal and it was, uh, with Sallie Krawcheck, the former city court, highest ranking woman in Wall Street finance people used to say. And she said, she said, "I you know was always the smartest person in the room and I believed in myself. And then I went to work for Goldman Sachs and I discovered that everybody else in the room was at least as smart as I was. And I thought I've only got one strategy left, outwork them." And, uh, you know that worked pretty darn well for her or is continuing to work pretty darn well for her. But I've, I've never, I've never had uh, I've never had a real euphoric moment.

Whitney: Well, you have- But it lasts for five minutes you said

Tom: It lasts-... lasts for five minutes. You know you, you ...

Whitney: Yeah. So how do you prepare for a speech, Tom? I think, I think it's such an interesting question and, um, for anybody whether they, they speak on stages like you do but we all do presentations. And I mean most all of us do of some form or another. And I think it would be really interesting because it seems like your fairly maniacal about preparing for a speech. Could you walk us through a little bit of your, of your, uh, regimen for preparing.

Tom: Well, the, the most important part is choose your mother wisely. Um, (laughs)

Whitney: (laughs).

Tom: I'm kidding. Uh, I, I say in the book somewhere and I will double back to what you asked me in just a second. I, I have this thing under in my leadership chapter I was at a social dinner with, with, uh, with an investment banker guy who was not Warren Buffet but

he's in that league. And we're chatting about this, that and the other and he said to me at one point, um. He said, "Tom, what do you think the number one failing is, of, of CEOs?" And being a smart-aleck, I said, "Well I can think of 50 but I can't narrow it down to one." And he looked at me and he said - you could have knocked me over with a proverbial feather - he said, "They don't read enough."

And the answer is my mother had me ... I was not a great athlete, Whitney, but I was reading she used to say by the age of four, uh, or three (laughs) or something like that. Uh, I study. I read. Uh, I read and read and read and read and read about the subject matter. I will never give, I, you know I use PowerPoint slides by and large. Everybody wants the PowerPoint slides a day ahead of time. I will never give them the slides until the morning of the presentation because I would guess particularly when I always wake up at three o'clock in the morning before a speech. I would guess that I make, I really bet this is true, 700 or 800 or 900 adjustments to those slides, uh, during the four or five hours before the speech.

And you know, I certainly have conversations with the company. I read the material about them. But it's mainly working on these things that you know, you see as ideas in the book. And how is this going to fit with a company, uh, which is selling home care services? How does it work there? What's it like? I said to somebody one time when they said I'd given a good speech I said, "Well I somehow am able to put myself in the place of the person who is in that audience." But it's you know, it's just plain old second grade, third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade studying.

Uh, I am a fanatical studier. You know relative to the material that you're much better at than I, surrounding the current technology change. I said to somebody, "I had the arrogance to believe that for 20 years I was a half a step ahead of the herd and then I woke up one morning and I couldn't see even the tail end of the herd." And I took a year off.

Whitney: Really? You did?

Tom: And on this stuff that has to do with AI and so on. I read for 12 months. I am not at the front of the curve in 2018, but I darn well can have intelligent conversations with people who are at the front of the curve.

Whitney: Okay so I, you took a year, when you say you took a year off-

Tom: I mean I cut my speech, my speech schedule by probably 85% and just stayed.

Whitney: And you went back to school.

Tom: I went back to school. And the school was called books, books, and books, and books. I am, you know, I just am such a believer in books uh, (laughs). I hate watching speeches. I'm really awful. I know it's the importance of the TED stuff but I said to somebody one time, "You know, it's a 17 minute speech. You speak at 125 words a minute. That's about two, 2,000 words, give me the paper. (laughs) Give me the academic paper. It's

2000 words long, I will digest it. Memorize it. Look up half of the references that are in the paper." I hate speeches. I can't listen to myself, uh, or anybody else for that matter.

Whitney: That's so funny.

Tom: I remember, the, somebody who was a good friend said to me one time he said, he said, "Holy smokes," He said, "I've never seen people who work as hard as McKinsey people but in terms of preparation I've never seen anybody at McKinsey who worked half as hard as you did." I mean my mother, you know my mother gave me, she lived to 95. She also gave me my father was a lovely guy. But she gave me stamina genes, there's no question about that.

Tom: And that's-That's, you know, I just do want to say relative to what you and I both do-I think you agree with me. Uh, it, it helps to be lucky and get the right gene package. You know, if you are my age, which is 75, which means I was born in 1942. To be born as white male Protestant, American of intelligent parents that was the first 98% and the rest is details.

Whitney: Right. You won the lottery. So couple of questions as we start to wrap up. Who, and I, I, I, think I know the answer but I'm still, I'm gonna ask the question and we'll see if I square with where you're going to come out. Of, of the reading that you've done over the last couple of years who is the woman who has most influenced your thinking? And who is a man that has most influenced your thinking? Or not most, who are one of those people, I'm not getting my grammar correct.

Tom: Well, I- The, the woman is very easy for me. Uh, and it's Susan Cain who wrote the book, [*Quiet*](#).

Whitney: That's what I thought you were going to say so (laughs).

Tom: Uh, yeah. I have never ... been so embarrassed in my life. When I saw Susan I said, "Susan. I consider your, your book to be a personal frontal attack on me." (laughs) Yeah and you know and it, it was, you know, I, I'm kind of noisy although actually I'm quite shy in many settings. But you know the first of all she's a lawyer and she did incredible research. So you know there's nothing about it that is not absolutely sound and solid and couldn't have been written by a Ph-, or could have been written by a PhD from Stanford or Harvard in the Business School.

But, uh, you know, the, the short and long of it for me is that we, me, had been ignoring half the population. Uh, and that is the introverts. And, you know it's not that simple and her book is much more subtle than that. But it was just, I remember the first speech I gave after reading Susan's book. And it was in fact to a very high tech company. And I walked in and I said, "I was really looking forward to talking to you guys but then I discovered what idiots you were."

Whitney: (laughs).

Tom: And so my whole speech was on Susan's book and you know why we were hiring the noisy ones - and the ones who actually keep their mouths shut might - using sort of her language - might actually be thinking. So let's forget our male. Let's just stick with Susan because in terms of a single tome written by M or F that made the biggest difference to me in the last half dozen years. It was, uh, I think it was Susan's book.

Whitney: And you've told her that, right? She knows.

Tom: Absolutely. I've told her that so many times that she won't return my emails anymore.

Whitney: Good. I'm so glad.

Tom: (laughs) And her, and [her quiet revolution](#) I think is- ... is a very cool thing as well. Uh-

Whitney: Yeah, absolutely. Okay, so final two questions. Uh, you talked a lot about in your book, um, about the importance of working across, um, silos and you didn't do that way in the book. I think you used XCX-

Tom: Cross functional Excellence, yeah.

Whitney: XFX. Right. Cross functional excellence. Yes, okay. So, my question to you is who would you like to collaborate with? Who would you like to do some work with? Who would you like to partner with, explore ideas with, see what comes up as you collaborate?

Tom: I said early on that you know big company CEOs were not my favorites. Um, but I am in love with the small and medium size enterprises who employ 80% of us and who are the job creators.

And I'm in love with a particular subset of those companies and that is people who do things in boring industries. Uh, you do not have to be in Silicon Valley, uh, to do stuff that's incredible. And one of them, uh, who is in Seymour, Connecticut to whom my book is dedicated. The book is dedicated to about a dozen people, is a guy by the name of [Larry Janesky](#). And he runs a book called [Basement Systems, Inc.](#) and he says we deal with every thing basementy. And you know 25 words or less among other things they clean the mold out of your basement. Which A), may save your life. But turn your basement into a family room, an extra bedroom or what have you. And he's grown a 100 million dollar business doing that and he also incidentally has 29 patents along the way and he's won awards for best company to work for, best entrepreneur, and so on.

But in this world of insane change, technology, uh, rule with all and he uses tech very effectively. I love it that somebody can create an awesome thing in basements. And Larry now is, is not as young of man as he used to and he's, he's in his giving back stage. And I'm actually going to be talking to him about this in about three or four weeks. And he's interested, as am I, in the trades. The people who have an 11 person roofing company. The people who have a 15 person appliance services company. And helping these people adjust to the change, become better business people. And I, I just really, I don't know whether we'll do anything together or not. But I really, really love that. And,

and I just want to say one thing, which is vaguely related but it also gets back to another question that you asked and that in my opinion gets back to the essence of your books and maybe my books.

We have a Sub-Zero refrigerator at home and it had a problem with the compressor. And you know there's a service person, not a company service person but it's a local service person who came out and I chat with cab drivers and I chat with people who repair compressors and refrigerators. And this guy who I would guess is 45, Whitney. Uh, had just come back on his own nickel. He has about a five person company. Had just come back from a three week course on, "Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence," as it applied to his world of appliances.

And I just, you know I wanted to give, to hug the guy. Now he really couldn't afford the time. He knows the level of change and indeed our refrigerators will be talking to everybody on earth including the Russians probably.

Whitney: (laughs).

Tom: Uh, but, when this notion that you and I, I think are both obsessed with about human growth in the face of these disruptions. It's, I love that when I see it in a 45-year-old who has a four-person company that's working on Sub-Zeros and other things like that because that's somebody who gets it.

Whitney: Mmm. I wanna give you one quick, quick tribute and then ask, um, a final question. So when I still worked on Wall Street I came across your magazine article, I can still see it the magazine cover. I can still see it in my, um, my mind's eye. The Brand You. And, um, I'm pretty sure I haven't told you this but I, I was working on Wall Street. I was an equity analyst so I was covering stocks and had to say you know, "It's a buy or sell," etc. etc. And I remember being so taken by that and American Idol was popular (laughs) at the time. And so I took your ideas. I took American Idol and I made a presentation to all of the equity analysts about how we needed to develop our own brands. And I just remember that, that was you know now it seems like such an obvious thing, right? But I think that's what's so interesting and exciting about your ideas is that they become mainstream but at the time they're quite, quite unusual and surprising for people and so I just wanted to let you know that, that really that was really kind of just aha, big aha moment for me and, and has certainly influenced my thinking over the last 10 or 15 years, um, since it came out

Tom: That's a lovely story. Thank you so much.

Whitney: So my very last question to you, Tom, is what are you going to do in the next five minutes to be excellent?

Tom: Um. Try to say something profound to you to wrap up this interview. Uh, (laughing).

Whitney: (laughing) Okay.

Tom: No, I'm, I'm, really, I'm, really serious about that. And I, I actually did another interview, it was a video interview and I was looking at, at the guy and I said, "The key is" and it's also the key to speech giving. And it is the key to our conversation. Um, "I love my wife. I love my kids but when I'm having a conversation with you, you are the only living human being on earth as far as I'm concerned." And I really want to do the absolute positively every iota of my being intellectually or emotionally that's developed over the last 75 years, I want to apply that to our conversation.

What do I have, Whitney? I don't have the next interview. I don't have the last interview. I don't have a book in my hand at this minute. I have you know, 45 minutes to talk with somebody I respect – you, namely - about ideas that I care deeply about. And in turn the thing that we're talking about is going to be transmitted to other people, that's my whole life. Period. Nothing else.

Whitney: Mm-mm

Tom: You know for those 45 minutes I adore my family, but I don't have my family, I have you. And I have an opportunity to talk about things I care about, that's it. The beginning of the world, end of the world, nothing else.

Whitney: That's so powerful, so powerful. So the person right in front of you that you're talking to is the most important person in the world in this moment.

Tom: Absolutely.

Whitney: Super powerful. Tom, thank you so much. I so appreciate, um, your taking the time. Best of luck on your book. I'm sure it's going to be a New York Times Best Seller and I'm so happy for you and look forward to being able to help you in any way that I can.

Tom: Well, no, that's, that's really great and I think you know, a huge share of, of the reasons that I think we've had a good conversation is I, uh, I think it would be very hard to find anything that the two of us disagree about in a significant way.

Amusing. Complacency-disturbing. Disrupting. That's Tom Peters.

I love how he champions small and medium-size businesses. SMEs. As he writes in his book -- you'd never know about SME dominance from reading guru literature or checking out a business school course list. Which he says is a bad idea. There are so many great SMEs in so many fascinating places, doing so many fascinating things. And, while yes, the whole point of his first book is that there are superb giant firms, their contribution to the economy when it comes to employment, job creation and innovation are over-rated!

And what about his work ethic? I have three keynotes I'm giving this week. I've shared with you in the past that I have this checklist to prepare for a presentation. If you'd like a copy of

it, e-mail me at wj@whitneyjohnson.com. But I think it needs to be revised. If Tom Peters who has given thousands of speeches relentlessly prepares for a speech. If Tom Peters thinks he still hasn't given his best speech. If Tom Peters needed to take off a year to study. I think I need to add to my checklist in preparing for a speech -- What would Tom Peters Do? WWTPD. That's work ethic.

Oh, and super fun, his shout-out to Susan Cain; [we interviewed her on Episode of 14 of the Disrupt Yourself podcast](#); and we'll include links in the show notes.

Finally, I loved his answer about what he would do to be excellent in the next five minutes. As he writes in his book, excellence is the boss's next chance meeting in the hall, the next phone call, and yup, the next ten-line e-mail or two-line instant message. Excellence is a moment-to-moment way of life; there is only right now.

Practical tip: Treat every single person that you talk to and interact with as the most important person in the world. It will win you friends because we all think that we're the most important person in the world, but it will also change you, because as you are willing to see others that way, it will change how you see yourself. I've tried it. And it's working.

If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes, we hope you will leave a review, even one sentence. And for the first three people that do, if you'll e-mail us at wj@whitneyjohnson.com, we'll send you a copy of Tom's book *The Excellence Dividend*.

If you aspire to be a talent magnet, a person who can persuade others to jump to a new learning curve – like Tom Peters did with me just now – check out *Build an A Team*, my book with Harvard Business Press that will be released on May 1st, a week from today. You can pre-order it now. Download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Tom Peters for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.