

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 61: Chester Elton

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest today is Chester Elton, the NY Times bestselling co-author of [The Carrot Principle](#) (it's sold over 1.5 million copies). And he's a man who has been described by Canada's Globe and Mail as an "apostle of appreciation".

Whitney: Chester Elton, we're so happy to have you today on the Disrupt Yourself podcast. Welcome.

Chester: Thank you very much, pleasure to be here.

Whitney: I had the pleasure not too long ago of connecting with you the ... for the first time, um, and I heard you speak at actually an [MG, Marshall Goldsmith 100 event](#), and you are a fantastic speaker, um, and it was just so- so interesting and fun to hear you talk, and at the very beginning of your speech you say that you're the apostle of appreciation. How did that moniker come about?

Chester: Yeah, I I- ... I love that title actually, you know, total props at your high school reunion, you know, "What's your title?" "Apostle of appreciation," right? (laughing) Um, Adrian Gostick is my co-author, and we wrote a book called [The Carrot Principle](#), and it's all about how recognition, you know, engages your employees. It ... and all kinds of good things happen, you know, when people feel valued and appreciated, and the Toronto Globe and Mail, which is Canada's largest newspaper, uh, wrote a review.

Now Adrian and I both grew up in Canada, so this really was total props for us, and they dubbed us the apostles of appreciation, and it just stuck, so it's on my business cards, it's gonna be on my tombstone, I mean I just love it. (laughs)

Whitney: All right, so you're the apostle of appreciation, but that didn't just happen. So can you take us back to very early in your career, what did you study in college, what did you think you were gonna be when you grew up?

Chester: (laughs) Does anybody really know what they wanna be when they grow up? That's a ... that's a loaded question. Um, you know I- I grew up in a radio family. My dad ran radio stations, and so we all thought we would be in media, in fact most of ... most of us, uh, ended up in media.

I've come from a family of five boys, and so I studied, uh, communications and media sales at, uh, Brigham Young University, that was my ... that was my bachelor's degree, communications/media sales. So I went to work for a company called Blair Television that my brother Byron had worked for. Uh, I started in, uh, Detroit. We were there for about a year a half, two years, and then of course if you're in media, you want to either go to LA or New York, uh, preferably New York being the, you know, the epicenter for- for all things media, and we did.

So we- we moved to- to Brooklyn, New York, and I was working in, uh, New York City for Blair Television, um, selling TV time and unwired networks and all- all things, um, TV. I got an opportunity to work for a recognition company as a salesman, and the territory was Northern New Jersey, so I was selling recognition programs to pharmaceutical companies, if you know-

Whitney: Wait, before you ... before you jump though, so I mean your dad was in radio, you were gonna be in the media, so was it hard for you to make this jump from selling ad time to working for a recognition company?

Chester: No, you know, I- I love selling. I- I grew up selling candy door to door and I actually sold the Nave's Topical Bibles door-to-door to pay my way through college. (laughs) So, I just ... I just loved selling, so whether I'm selling, you know, media or selling recognition. I'll tell you what- what the jump to recognition for me was, is, you know, I- I grew up in a very athletic family, in a very award driven ... reward driven family, and so being recognized for achievement and doing well and, you know, moving up through, uh, various levels of achievement was- was very much a part of- of my life. And from jumping from media to recognition actually was easy for me, because I- I saw that as having more of a noble cause, if that makes sense?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It does.

Chester: You know, valuing people. You- you sell a spot and, you know, in the Super Bowl in- in Columbus, Ohio, and you kind of got to go along way down the food chain before you feel like you've made a difference, right? When you're selling employee recognition and somebody's been with the company for, you know, 25 years or they're the number one sales person, or they've- they've gotten a patent or they've, you know, um, uh, demonstrated extraordinary customer service and they get an award, well that's- that's an immediate connect the dot. And it's just a feel good industry, I- I loved it.

Whitney: Yeah, so- so when you sell employee recognition, um, talk to us about what that looks like, So you, uh, liaise or interface with head of HR at a company? Like what ... I- I know you're not doing that anymore, but just ... I- I would love to just hear the mechanics of that 'cause I think it's really interesting and- and I'm sure you started studying it as you went along, so what did that look like when you would reach out to someone?

Chester: Yeah, most often it was the Human Resource Department. You know, they were in charge of, you know, employee engagement and employee benefits and it usually fit in there, um, and so those were the people I would call on generally. We would go to a lot of SHRM conferences - and make connections there. Of course it was always better to get to the top of the food-

Whitney: Wait, sorry. Sorry, back up. SHRM, S-H-R-M, is short for ... not everybody will know what it is.

Chester: Yeah, Society for Human Resource Management.

Whitney: Okay, all right.

Chester: Yeah.

Whitney: Keep going.

Chester: It's a massive organization worldwide, so yeah, but it was always better to get to the ... to the leader, to the top of the food chain and, uh, that's why, um, Adrian Gostick, who's my co-author and I, that's why we started writing books.

I- I literally called our CEO, uh, Kent Murdoch was his name at the time, he's since retired, but I said, "You know, Kent, if we were the thought leaders in- in employee recognition, it would make my job a lot easier, you know, people would call us 'cause we're the thought leaders. I wouldn't have to- to cold call so much," and I said, "You know, thought leaders write books, we should write the definitive book on employee recognition."

He goes, "I love that idea." He says, uh, "Write the book." And I said, "Kent, uh, you give me these crushing quotas every year. (laughs) I'm a sales guy, I'm not a writer." And then he said something that really- really changed my life forever, he said, "You know what Chester, you're a smart guy, figure it out."

Whitney: Hmm.

Chester: Isn't that great?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: So I- I played with titles and ideas for- for about a year and he called me back, and he said that, "You know Chester, I've always liked that idea of a book. I just hired a writer, his name is Adrian Gostick. Introduce yourself to him, and write the book." And so we did, we- we found a little publisher in Layton, Utah, and we wrote our first book called, [*Managing with Carrots*](#). And, uh, you know you don't know what you don't know. We sold 40,000 copies.(laughs)

Whitney: Wow, okay, there's a lot to unpack here.

Chester: (laughs)

Whitney: So first of all, when it came to writing a book, you were kind of dinking around and not doing anything, so your boss did an arranged marriage, is that right?

Chester: Yeah, well, it was interesting. I- I had all the relationships-

Whitney: Yeah.

Chester: ... and so basically our first book was ... were case ... it was ... it was all about case studies of my best clients-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: ... in new Jersey, and that- that sort of built in our- our buying base, 'cause we- we did, you know, we- we highlighted a bunch of pharmaceutical companies, and then when the book was ready, we said ... you know, we got their approvals to put them in there. It was always very positively, went through legal, you know, you learn all the things about writing a book, and we said, "Yeah, you're really highlighted here, it's really positive, so how many copies do you want?" (laughs) you know? "Shall I put you down for 5,000 or 10,000," you know? They'd laugh and say, "Well, I'll take 2,000 copies." I go, "Great." (laughs)

So we, uh, we didn't know what we didn't know, you- you know. We- we went to the publisher and said, "Gosh, you know, 30/40,000 copies, that's not very many, you know, uh, like [Seven Habits](#) has sold like, you know, 50 million." He goes, "Oh no," he says, "listen, Harvard School of Business, those books if they sell five or 6,000 or 7,000 copies, they're giddy."

He says, "Are you kidding, uh, 40,000 copies? What's the idea for your next book?" (laughs) and we looked at each other and laughed and said, "Well, we hadn't really thought that far," you know, (laughs) we thought it-

Whitney: Right, right.

Chester: ... was pretty great that we published this book, and- and that started a series of- of Carrot books. We wrote a book called the [24 Carrot Manager](#), [A Carrot a Day](#), [The Invisible Employee](#), how carrots brings out the hidden potential, you know, in all your employees, and then we wrote our seminal book, um, [The Carrot Principle](#) based on a- a massive database, and- and that's the one that really put us on the map. I think we sold almost half a million copies of that book. They're in like 30- 30 languages and really launched us.

Whitney: That- that's amazing. Well what's interesting, um, is that you said the book, your seventh book was it? That really launched you, is that what I just heard you say?

Chester: Yeah, well, each book sold more than the last, which was really gratifying-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: ... so we went from like 40,000 to like 60,000. We wrote a book [A Carrot a Day](#), which was just a perpetual calendar, it sold a couple hundred thousand copies, and then we started to get on people's radar, you know?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: Uh, bigger and bigger publishers, John Wiley wanted to publish a book with us and so we did [The Invisible Employee](#) with them, and- and then Simon & Schuster called.

Whitney: I want to go back to something that you said earlier. You said you love sales, which I think is fascinating, because that is one of those words or those professions that is so fraught, um, you have people who, you know, don't want ... they- they say they're not good at it, or they don't want to be in sales, and then you have people like you who say you love sales, um, and then you have someone like Dan Pink who says we're all in sales now, uh, what is it about sales that you love, and I think more importantly I'd love to hear you make a case for the value of knowing how to sell?

Chester: When I went to- to- to BYU to study communications, I had a great, uh, professor and we were all looking for summer internships and stuff like that and, uh, uh, professor Johnson, uh, Clive Johnson, I'll never forget, and, um, it was really interesting to me, he said something I'll never forget, he said, "People say they hate selling." He says, "No- no they don't. They hate NOT selling. Everybody loves selling."

Whitney: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Chester: When peo- ... when people are buying there's no better job on the planet. It's when you're not selling that you hate it. And, uh, that was, you know, just put everything in perspective for me. Now, my approach to sales has always been, uh, it's a service, you know? I- I- I am bring you a service, I'm solving a problem for you. Now, if my product doesn't solve your problem and you don't buy it, that's fine, there's- there's- there's no fit, I don't worry about it.

We had the conversation, there wasn't a fit, you move on. I've always sold products that I- I- I believed in, and so once you bought my product, I knew it was gonna solve a problem, make your life better, uh, do something positive for you.

I never sold anybody a product that I didn't think they really needed or valued. And so I always had a clear conscience. I think where people get sideways on sales is they think that you're just taking products and you're selling people stuff they don't need, they don't want, it's- it's anything to make a sale, and if that's your approach to sales, yeah, I'd hate that job too.

Whitney: Okay, so you write your first book. What year was this that you wrote the first book?

Chester: Uh, first book came out in 2000.

Whitney: Okay, so 18 years ago, and so, um, you wrote a book and then a book and then your seminal book, and you said that's because you had a lot of research. Um, do you have a favorite book, or are they all favorite books?

Chester: You know, yeah, they're- they're all great. I mean there's nothing like your first book, you know? [Managing with Carrots](#). When we got that, it's a little book, but it was a hard cover and it was embossed and- and a good buddy of mine did the design for the carrot

trophy on the cover. The most successful book was probably [The Carrot Principle](#), and that's the one that really launched us as, you know, leadership gurus and got us on all the best sell ... best seller lists and- and so on, although we- we'd made, you know, the New York Times list before, uh, this was one that sort of went- went global for us and- and gave us a footprint.

And- and where people really, you know, sought us out to come speak at their conferences and where we developed training around it, and where I think we really made a difference for- for leaders and- and- and companies, uh, globally.

Whitney: All because your boss said, "Okay, write that book." It's interesting to me, because you thought that this book needed to be written, if you were a thought leader it would make it easier to do your job. Have you ever thought about what would've happened if your boss didn't push you to write that book?

Chester: Oh, yeah, uh, all the time. I mean I- I- I think I would've stayed in sales, maybe gone into sales management and still had a wonderful life. You know, when- when you are in sales, particularity in the sales I was in, where it was basically straight commission, you know, you- you ate what you killed sort of thing, and there was no- no limit, um, you- you ... I think that a salesman's life is a great life, you know, there's all kinds of incentives.

I mean we- we took these fabulous vacations every year to the Caribbean and Hawaii, all on the company, I used to laugh with my wife Heidi, we- we were walking through the doors at the Four Seasons Hotel in Maui, and I remember saying, "If they had any idea who we really were, they'd never let us in this place," (laughs) but because it's all been pre-paid by the company, they treat us like royalty, you know? So we got ... we got to see the world, and then of course, you know, but- but because we did write the book and we did take that- that path less traveled, you know, we- we were able to see so much more of the world, you know? Heidi and I were- were writing down the other day, we've ... we ... I think we've been to 50 different countries or something around the world and we have friends in- in all these different places and- and all because, you're right, my- my boss said, "You're a smart guy, figure it out."

Whitney: Yeah.

Chester: and- and supported us.

Whitney: Right.

Chester: And supported, put the money up behind it-

Whitney: Exactly.

Chester: ... and all that good stuff, yeah.

Whitney: Exactly. So important. So you've written a book, um, your most recent book is called [The Best Team Wins](#), um, talk to us a little bit about what the best team is.

Chester: The reason we wrote the book is, um, we- we didn't write our books in the right order. You know, after we did all the stuff on carrots and recognition, we- we wrote a book called [All In](#), uh, how the best leaders create a culture of belief that drives big results. And, you know, back to your question, which one is my favorite book, that's- that's probably my favorite book.

You know, *Carrots ...* [The Carrot Principle](#) by far the most successful, but the- the- the [All In](#), to me, was about culture. About, you know, that's the emotional connection to work, that's the differentiator that your competitors can't replicate, and if we were to write our books in sequence, we would've written that book first, 'cause when you get the culture right, everything else makes sense.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: You know, and then- then we wrote a book, uh, that we self-published actually for our training company called, uh, [What Motivates Me: Put Your Passions To Work](#). Then it was all about when you look at great cultures, you get the right people in the right jobs, not ... doing not just what they're good at, but what they're passionate about. Again, that emotional engagement.

The next logical step was, uh, well over 80% of people that work, work in some kind of team. So what are the dynamics of a team that then delivers on the cultural promise? You know, whether it's innovation or on time delivery or sales or whatever it might be. And when we looked at teams, and we took a really deep dive, we looked at 850,000 engagement surveys.

We have our own motivators assessment, we've had 50,000 people take that. So we're, you know, we were punching up over 900,000, uh, data points, was that most of the books that we looked to for teams, which are excellent by the way, were written 15, 20 years ago. And so the- the- the foundations of great teams and good communication and- and having a noble cause and so on, those are all very foundational.

The different is, is that now with five generations in the workplace, with the- the- the globe getting so small, with multicultural, multilingual. Diversity not just in gender and race but- but in thought and- and- and upbringing and culture, there needed to be a book written about the new disciplines of high performance teams.

You know, you've got gig employees and- and- and- and on, and on, and on. So that's why we wrote [The Best Team Wins](#), these- these five disciplines or the five differentiators that we just have never seen in the workplace before. And then the- the last book we would've written would've been [The Carrot Principle](#), how you use recognition then, you know, build those great teams and cultures and- and keep people motivated. We never looked at a great culture or a great team or a passionate employee that didn't find a way to celebrate their success.

Whitney: I love hearing the- the chronology and- and yet what's so interesting about your talking about those books is, I think it's very indicative at a meta level of- of what a life looks like, or what a career looks like if you were ... you were to put the pieces in place going backwards, you would probably do a lot of pieces differently and yet over time you kind of put all the pieces together even though it's not necessarily in the order that you expected. Um, so let's talk about what are those top five, um, attributes that you talked about a- a- about a- a great team.

Chester: Well, first off, uh, manage, uh, generations.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: You've got to understand that. You know, old school as we- we sort of treated everybody the same, 'cause that's fair. You know, we have a policy, it applies to everybody. Well, in- in the new teams, you've got to learn how to, uh, manage generationally, and what that means is, how do you communicate?

You know, we communicate differently in different generations, and- and- and, you know, ever has it been so, right? My- my father functioned differently than I did, and different than my kids, and I've got kids that are Gen X, and I've got kids that are Millennials, and you communicate and you talk to them differently. If you tried to talk to them all the same it- it- it just ... it just doesn't work, would you agree with that?

Whitney: I- I- I would, absolutely. It's- it's- it's interesting, yeah, I mean even just thinking about communication where, you know, I don't talk to my children on the phone-

Chester: Right.

Whitney: ... we either FaceTime or Skype or text, but we don't talk on the phone.

Chester: No.

Whitney: I talk to my husband on the phone, but not to my children on the phone.

Chester: Yeah, it's gotten to the point where if I ... if I phone somebody out of the blue, I go, "Look I'm going totally old school here, I thought I just call you." (laughs)

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: You know, and- and- and I do love that experience, you know, I will call my son Garret and he will text me back.

Whitney: Right.

Chester: And I remember we had this conversation, and we only had to have it once. I said, uh, "Hey buddy, uh, you're at school and if you'll recall, the guy that's paying your tuition,

your room and board and your food, is me. So text everybody else, but when I call, pick up." (laughing)

Whitney: What did he say?

Chester: He- he- he called me immediately. (laughs)

Whitney: He called. "Hi, Dad."

Chester: "Hi Dad," yeah, he- he's- he's not an idiot, you know-

Whitney: Yeah.

Chester: he's, um-

Whitney: Right, (laughs) so you've got ... so you've got communication, that's the first one.

Chester: Right. Understanding the generations, and then manage to the one. And this is the difference between really good, uh, managers and extraordinary managers, and or leaders, right, is that they really take the time to understand what is the key motivator for e- each person on their team and be able to play to that emotional engagement.

And- and- and the third one follows right along that is what we call speed to productivity, you know, the- the- the big trend that you've seen is, you know, my dad, uh, worked for the same company for 40 years. He ... we'll- we'll just never see that again, right?

Whitney: Right.

Chester: My generation, you know, we'd stay, gosh, anywhere from literally, you know, seven to 15 kind of ... kind of thing. We'd have maybe four, maybe five jobs during our careers. Gen X dropped to about seven, you know, five to seven years, and now Millennials, it's about a year and a half to two years. So this constant churn that you've got on your team, we talk about speed to productivity is making sure you make the right hire and you get them up to speed and productive as fast as possible.

Uh, simply because they're gonna be leaving you in a year and a half to two years. And rather than getting mad about it, or gripe about "Oh, this generation just doesn't get loyalty," that's- that's not the point. What are you doing to engage them, what opportunities are you creating for them that makes them wanna stay?

And have you empowered to- to be in charge of their engagement, you know, find out what they're passionate about and get them doing that? So that was a ... that was a big aha. My favorite is- is the discipline number four and we talk about creating a culture where it's safe to challenge everything, you know?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: The speed of business, it's just so fast that- that emotional safety that there are no sacred cows, that there's always a better idea, and if we don't come up with it, our competitors are gonna come up with it and then we're really in trouble. So how do we, you know, put the guidance ... and it's ... and it's ... and it's- it's a hard thing to do, because when people express their ideas, it's very easy to be cynical.

It's very easy to ridicule, it's very easy to laugh, and- and embarrass somebody. I mean you think about all the cyber bullying that's going on and, you know, uh, e- even look at comedy, it's- it's meant to embarrass people-

Whitney: Right.

Chester: ... and so that translates into- into the workplace. Once you take that out and you create a safe place where you can challenge the idea, but not the person, uh, things get really good really fast then. I've got a friend in-

Whitney: What's the safest ... what's the safest sort of work situation that you've had when you- you think about a place where you could really challenge ... or either with a team or a colleague where it's been really comfortable and safe to challenge ideas for you?

Chester: You know, such an insightful question (laughs) because, um, it- it wasn't until Adrian and I formed our own company that we really felt safe.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: And- and I found that really interesting. I'd always worked for pretty big companies, and the idea was - be innovative, but it better work, you know?

Whitney: Right.

Chester: Like we want you to be ... think outside the box, but don't fail 'cause if- if it doesn't work, by golly, and we actually had that situation in our- our previous employer ,where we were trying to do all this stuff out of the box, to sell lots of books, get them interested in our training that would then create, you know, a funnel for- for recognition programs and so on.

And, uh, we- we send out the wrong list of, uh, of emails and it was right when everybody's, you know, really paranoid about, protecting their employees' emails. And it was ... it was a horrible mistake, it really was, and we- we threw ourselves on our swords, we- we got them all back, we apo- we didn't lose any customers, but it was I- incredibly embarrassing, right?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: And we thought we had gotten past it, and then the new CEO called us up in front of the entire s- senior executive and said, "You guys need to apologize to everyone in this

room, and promise us that that will never happen again." And I thought. "Sure, I can do that, you know?" Um, "I'll never give you another good idea as long as I live."

Whitney: 'Cause you just publicly shamed me, but sure. Happy to.

Chester: And- and- and it was the beginning of the end of our careers there. Um-

Whitney: It's interest ... it's so interesting-

Chester: Yeah.

Whitney: Yeah, so and- and how ... right, uh, i- it's a fascinating thing of how do we make it ... so you said you started your own company, you were able to make it safe, um, and then the question is, is ... I think the bigger question for us is how do we make it safe for the people who work with us and live with us, how do we do that? And it's really hard isn't it? It's hard to do.

Chester: Well, it's simple in concept.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: It's- it's hard in execution.

Whitney: Yeah.

Chester: I've got a brilliant friend, and- and I give him total props, he completely changed my outlook on- on how you lead. His name's Scott O'Neill, and Scott and I became great friends. I first met him when he was at the NBA in charge of season tickets, and then he ran Madison Square Garden Sports, and now he's the CEO of the New Jersey Devils and the Philadelphia 76ers, and in a very short period of time he comes in and changes cultures. He's remarkable.

For example, he took over the Philadelphia 76ers, uh, three years ago, and they had the worst winning percentage of a professional sports team in professional sports history over those (laughs) three years. I'm mean there's 82 games-

Whitney: Wow.

Chester: ... yeah, there's 82 games in a basketball season and last year they won 12.

Whitney: Hmm.

Chester: 12.

Whitney: Hmm.

Chester: I mean (laughs) that ... I don't care ... and yet, they broke the NBA record for season ticket sales on the first day of season ticket offering in Philadelphia.

Whitney: What?!!

Chester: I know! I mean (laughs) how do you ... how do you do that? And what he did is he came in and- and talk about safe place. Scott lives by the rule of three, and- and to sum it up ... and it- it- it morphs and so that's probably not this three now, but he says look, world class is number one. Everything we do, we're gonna be world class.

Secondly is no surprises. Surprises in business are rarely if ever positive. You know, we're gonna be proactive, and third is we cheer for each other. Now it's that cheer for each other that creates the safe environment, and I'll explain to you how that works.

So he says, "Look, I want a culture where we challenge each other." Again, we challenge the idea, not the person. As soon as it gets personal, he's got this wonderful little thing he does. And he'd say ... I- let's say you and I were discussing something and all of a sudden you kind of started to attack me personally, "You know, Chester, this isn't the first stupid idea you have had," (laughs) you know, something like that.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: He would stop and say, "Whitney, you know, I- I just don't get the sense that you're cheering for me on this one." (laughs)

Whitney: Oh, interesting.

Chester: And then he laughs and everybody backs up and goes, " Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right."

Whitney: Wow.

Chester: "I apologize. I'm sorry. Let's get back to solving the problem."

Whitney: Huh.

Chester: And what is interesting, when it gets to the point where you can't cheer for each other, that's when he calls you in and has the tough conversation. He says, "Look, um, Whitney, uh, not only are you not cheering for me, uh, the team isn't cheering for you."

Whitney: Huh.

Chester: "And you know what? It's time for you to join another team. This isn't working out."

Whitney: Interesting.

Chester: It's just such a wonderful way to put it in context, 'cause he says, look, think about your team. You know right away who it's easy to cheer for, right? They're your top

performers, they always deliver, they're good people, they're integral people, they, you know, they deliver. And then you say, yeah, but who am I not cheering for? Ah, that's the question. And who's the team not cheering for-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: ... 'cause the team will know before you. And that's simple and of course it played perfectly into the Carrot Principle, right? All the work we did on recognition, and I- I just love the way that he does it. And in a very short period of time, he attracts remarkable people with and an incredible esprit de corps to the point where he can sell you a season ticket package to an NBA team that only won 12 out of 82 games. (laughs) I mean it's just remarkable.

Whitney: That's amazing. And has the team started to win now, because people love being there? Are you seeing any correlation between that?

Chester: They had this- this theme, it was trust the process.

Whitney: Hmm.

Chester: And so they had all these great picks and this year they- they went to the second round of the play offs, they lost to Boston in the semi-finals of the conference, but they've got a core ... and what they did was is, is they said, "Listen, we may not win the game, we will give you a 100% every time we play and we will give you an experience and access like no other."

For example, season ticket holders, they get into the game early and they let them stand down on the floor and- and right close to the players and see them warm up. I mean that ... if you're a basketball fan, being on the floor-

Whitney: Wow.

Chester: ... then get this, their coach, Coach Brown, everybody bought into it, you know, they the guys that were in the concessions, the guys that were doing security, even though those were farmed out jobs, right, to the sales guys, to the ... to the trainers to the- the doctors. The coach came up and said, "Look, um, I've got an idea. Once we've done the game plan and we send the players out for their last warmup, um, I've got about 20 minutes. What if we brought in some of our season ticket holders and I sat them down and I white boarded them the strategy for the game, would that be cool?"

Whitney: Are you kidding me?

Chester: (laughs) Um, no, I'm not. And so they said, "Of course," so you can imagine, you get to the game early, the- the players have left the locker room. You walk into the locker room, he maps it out for you, and you're sitting in the stands and he says, "By the way, don't tell anybody. Here's gonna be our substitution rotation, here's how we're gonna defend LeBron, blah, blah, blah," and then it happens. They let their season ticket

holders come to their practices and sit up in the stands and the players come over and talk to them and I mean, you know, that's-

Whitney: Wow. Wow.

Chester: ... even if you're only winning 12 games-

Whitney: You don't care. You don't care. You don't care.

Chester: Yeah. Yeah.

Whitney: You don't care. That is phenomenal. Okay, so to bring this back to this idea of making it safe, you're saying he makes it safe for people to have an idea and then, um, and because of that, there's all sorts of ideas that have bubbled up, people try them and so now people ... and this ... I love this theme and- and maybe it's 'cause I was a cheerleader in high school, but this idea of cheering, right? There's this cheering for the team and who am I not cheering for and what does that look like. It's a really, really powerful image.

Chester: Yep. I'm cheering for you. I just love that expression.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: And I use it all the time, you know?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: I'll, uh, I'll sign off with my kids and I'll say ... you know, we- we have this thing, we say "Who loves you?" They say, "You do." I always say, "Who loves you more than me?" They go, "Nobody." (laughs) Yep, that's right. I say, "Never- never forget your dad's cheering for you."

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chester: It's just such a great way to ... and, you know, and then it- it comes right down to the- the fifth discipline in our book, once you've got that safe environment where we are cheering for each other and new ideas is, don't forget the customer. You know, we're doing all this stuff like the Sixers, to create a customer experience that has them just ... they're not just loyal customers. They're raving fans of your products and services and, um, and those are our five disciplines. And we've had a ton of fun as we've done the research and- and the case studies and- and presented it to ... literally all over the world. How do you build those great teams?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, if you had to pick one of those five attributes, what would it be?

Chester: I love the challenge everything. I- I love that, Because to me that's the culmination of, you know, you understand generally ... generationally that you're gonna have different aspects and different views of life. You know, I've taken the time to get to know you individually. We've- we've brought you up to speed, we've given you the tools and- and- and everything you need to be productive, now, all to bring it together to just create incredible products and services for our customers. So to me the build up is, have we created the safe environment where the best ideas win and we can create these remarkable teams?

Whitney: All right. So, *The Carrot Principle*, um, if you had to summarize it, you kind of have but just can you give us a soundbite for *The Carrot Principle*, which is your, uh, your brand?

Chester: Yeah, you know, um, my mantra to *The Carrot Principle* is- is simply this, uh, be good to everybody, everybody's having a tough day.

Whitney: Hmm.

Chester: I mean it's that simple.

Whitney: Right.

Chester: You know, um, Google did this phenomenal study on the most innovative teams at Google, called the Aristotle study, right? 180 Teams over five years, and they said number one attribute was this emotional safety. And I heard the interview on NPR and the interviewer said, "If you had to sum up emotional safety, uh, in a couple of words, what would it be?" He said, "Oh, it's simple. Be nice." (laughs) Be nice to each other, and to me that's [The Carrot Principle](#), is assume positive intent, assume the best about people, assume that people are trying hard, and-

Uh, you wanna recognize effort and you wanna reward results. Uh, everybody needs a little pat on the back, and- and what I always say is, "Look, when you show up to work and the people on your team show up to work with and for you, you don't know what they just came from. You don't know if they've got, you know, having trouble with one of their kids, or they just got some bad news, or, you know, there's, uh, uh, financial pressures that ... you don't know ... here's what you do know, is that when they're- they're working for you, that they can feel safe, that their ideas matter, their voice is heard. They- they believe they make a difference, and what they do matters, and when they do something that makes a difference and it matters, you noticed it and you celebrate it." So ...

Whitney: Yes. It's beautiful. How do you apply it with your children and your wife?

Chester: Yeah, well, all these principles translate perfectly to your family, right? And- and, uh, you know, we're a very devout, very religious family and we- we have family prayer and we go to church together, and- and- and they ... the message is always, "No matter what, we love you, no matter what." You know, and it's safe here. This is safe. We have

a- a wonderful tradition in our family, when you graduate high school, we- we, um, we make a family ring.

We invented this family crest and it's got all kinds of symbols of our family, and when you graduate high school we actually ... I have a little award ceremony, and we gift you the family ring. And we read the story of the, um, the prodigal son and you- you'll know the story well where the- the son took his riches and- and squandered them, and he came back to be his father's slave.

And what his father did was, if you know the story is, first thing he did is he put shoes on his feet, you know, because, you know, free men wore shoes, slaves went barefoot. He put a robe on him to let people know that he was his son and then it says he put a ring on his finger, and that was the family ring. And then he killed the fatted calf and they celebrated, and so we- we go through that ceremony.

And we go through the symbolism in the ring and we give them the ring and we say, "Never forget that family is forever, that no matter where you are, you're an Elton, and when it gets really bad and you're in the depths, pawn the ring to get a bus ticket and come home. You're always safe here," and that's, you know, be good to everybody 'cause you never know, right?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's so beautiful. I think that's a perfect place to end. Chester Elton, thank you so much for being with us today, for sharing your thoughts on how to motivate people, how to recognize people and most importantly how to recognize and motivate and appreciate your family.

Chester: Well, it's been a pleasure. You- you can call me any time. You're a great interviewer, I loved the question and always fun to talk to smart and innovative people, and- and that's you.

There were a couple of really powerful moments in this conversation.

The first was is that we all say that we don't like sales, but what we really don't like is not selling. Wow. Having just launched a book this definitely on my mind. The tendency--at least for me—is to think, well, then if I want to sell more, I'll just do what Chester did-- how many books would YOU like to buy. Which is probably a bad idea. There's no easy way to do this. Because you and I need to sell like we sell, not like Chester. So if we don't like NOT selling, if we don't like not getting buy in, then it's time for us to battle our sense of entitlement – that belief that, I have an idea, it's mine, therefore it's brilliant. We've just got to learn how to sell. How to get buy-in for our ideas.

And I think there's a clue to all of this with the NBA team the Sixers... Look at the constraints this team had. It's hard to sell tickets for a losing team. So instead of focusing people on the winning of games, they focused on winning hearts. Likewise there are features you or your product don't have. But if you are like everyone else, you're not like anyone else, and for that there are lot of tickets to be sold if you can figure out how to sell them.

Finally, the story of the prodigal son. That was so moving. The story of how they have that ring for every single person in their family when they graduate from high school. Would that every single person could feel that there is somewhere and someone to come home to or to go home to.

Practical tip:

In your life right now there's something you are trying to sell. Maybe it's a product. Maybe the product is you. There will undoubtedly be features you don't have, but what do you have? And importantly, how will what you have to offer make that person's life better. I mean--if you've gotten to listen to an NBA coach tell you his game plan, and you've gotten to shake the hand of an NBA player, do you even care if the team won or lost?

If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes, we hope you will leave a review on iTunes, even one sentence.

Thank you to Aidan McCullen for leaving an iTunes review; where he said he learns something new every episode, and appreciates that we get the best of from our guests. Thank you Aidan! I know with today's episode--that was especially easy!

If you want your people to feel appreciated, if you want to be an apostle of appreciation like Chester, one way to do that is to give your people the opportunity to learn. You can learn how to help people learn by reading my new book *Build an A Team* published by Harvard Business Review Press. You can get the first chapter in whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Chester Elton – we appreciate you being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager and editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis, Libby Newman, and Heather Hunt and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.