

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 65: Live Coaching Episode – Michelle Smith

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. And, as you may have noticed, it's Thursday. Not Tuesday, when we usually publish our podcast interviews. So continues the month of experiments, and today, we've got a couple.

First, between the extra radio shows (more on that next week) and the interviews we've recorded over the last few months, during July and possibly August, we're going to be airing Disrupt Yourself twice a week. We didn't want you to have to wait until the end of the year to hear from some of the amazing conversations we have on tap.

Second, as a follow up to last year's live coaching episode, we have another one today. Michelle Smith. When I [coached Stacy Olsen DiStefano live on the air last year](#), I put the call out to those of you who receive my weekly email and Michelle raised her hand.

Whitney: What is your current role?

Michelle: So my current role is the Chief Financial Officer–

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: And the Chief Operating Officer, which is, um, something that I was promoted to at the beginning of the year.

Whitney: And what did you, just quick background, what did you study, um, in college? Um, just if you can give me a quick rundown of your career trajectory.

Michelle: Sure. So I had a very linear career.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: Um, you know I came out of school and, um, I am from a, Bermuda. I'm from a really small island, so there's limited options, and international business was clearly the way to go. (laughs)

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: And, um, they needed accountants, so I became an accountant. So I, I had as straight a path as you could possibly get, which is, um, I came out of school, I went into public accounting. Um, I went into industry, and I moved up the ladder kind of in industry and

finance roles. I moved to the company where I am now as a Controller. I got promoted to CFO, where I am.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: So I'm the CFO of a subsidiary company in a large group.

Whitney: Okay.

Michelle: Um, so from a finance perspective I feel like I've kind of just been on a very straight path, but I'm also at a stage where I think I have much more to bring to the table than just a finance role.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: I believe, the chief operational role, kind of moving out of finance and into more areas of operation or even strategy, that's where it's been very challenging for me.

Whitney: So do you feel like moving to, from CFO to, to expanded, an expanded role of COO is more operations and strategy? Do you feel like that's been a departure, or no?

Michelle: Um, I think it's recognition of a role I'm playing more broadly in the company. I think I'm viewed as a leader in the company—

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: And so, um, it's maybe a step more towards, um, the front office, but it's still kind of managing more of the back office operations.

Whitney: Got it.

One of the things I thought was interesting, and just recapping for you for, uh, a few minutes, is um, when we looked at the [S Curve Locator](#) you were (laughs) um, at the top of the S Curve. So you took, you took this S Curve Locator back in October of 2017 when we met—

Michelle: Yes.

Whitney: At the [International Women's Forum](#), and you were, you scored an 89 out of 100.

Michelle: (laughs)

Whitney: Like, you were just, like “bang, bang, bang, bang, bang,” top of the Curve. Without a doubt it was time for you to do something new. What I think has been interesting is as I take a look at, um, January 2018 now you've been promoted to be the Chief Operating Officer, like you just said, and acknowledging that you've got, in de facto you've got a broader role that you're playing within the company, and this is recognition of that. Um,

now you're a 63 out of 100, which puts you right in the sweet spot. Now, what I think is interesting is that you've got this mix, because on the one hand, um, you are absolutely at the bottom of a new Curve by becoming COO—

Michelle: Yes.

Whitney: But because you've got this deep domain expertise as a CFO and it's just an expanded responsibility, you're still in the sweet spot of the learning Curve.

Michelle: That's interesting. I actually was surprised by that, because I thought it was actually a reflection of I'm at the bottom of one, at the top of another, and it kind of landed me in the middle. So ...

Whitney: Probably. I guess, I, I think the answer is “yes and yes.” So the way I'm interpreting it and the way you're interpreting it, I think both answers are right. Um, what's interesting to me, again, as I start to look at this and kind of, um, dive into what you said is - overall you're excited about, um, this new role. Um, or when asked the question “Overall are you excited,” you, you were neutral. So it meant you don't love it, but you don't hate it. Um, you, you know, questioned “Do you feel like you have a lot to learn.” Um, it, again, it was neutral. Yes, you have a lot to learn, but no you don't have a lot to learn.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: And so “Do you see opportunities for growth,” and you said “yes.” And so one of the things I'd like to ask you is what kinds of opportunities for growth do you see in this new role?

Michelle: I think all of that reflects into the extent this is a new role and there's things to learn in this role, it's not a huge step for me.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: And in a lot of ways I feel like it's just extending what I was already doing, maybe on an informal basis, to do it more formally. Um, and from that perspective, yeah there's things to learn, but it's not a lot of new things. However, I think stepping, having an opportunity to step out of finance and into this operations role—

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: May expose me to other areas of the company, and there may be opportunity there. So I, I guess I see it as a stepping stone perhaps to something else, I just don't know what the something else is.

Whitney: Talk to me about some of your biggest accomplishments.

Michelle: And, you know, my biggest accomplishment is my family.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: Um, you know, just my personal life. I have a large support system, and, um, I'm someone who, um, who, there's just a lot of authenticity to me. Like who you are at work, who you are at home, who you are with your friends, it's all the same person. Um, so to build this support network around me has been, is really one of my greatest accomplishments. My strongest strength is I am achiever, an achiever.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: You know, with [Strengths Finder](#) "Achiever" is like so dominant, and, uh, it's all about what's next for me. So I'm, I'm really proud of the company that I work for.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: Um, I came to the company as a start-up, and we've built up something really special. Um, and to have been a part of the management team that created that is, you know, that's kind of one of those career-defining opportunities. So, at the time I joined the company I was with a much larger, stable, company, and everyone warned me about the risk of going to start-up, but it, it's been a phenomenal experience for me, and I'm really proud of what we built.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: And then even within that company, you know, I have been in charge of the finance team, um, for a long time now, and I, I just have this incredible team of people and, uh, no matter how stressful it gets, no matter how crazy it gets, you know, we always say "We, each other keeps us coming back." You know, we enjoy working with each other. There's a great collaborative environment. There are people that, um, will give their all to everything they do, and Um, it's, it's, I think it's one of the best teams in the business.

So then on a personal level, um-

Whitney: Which, by the way, Michelle—

Michelle: Okay, yeah?

Whitney: You realize how rare that is, right? (laughs)

Michelle: Well, you know what's funny? One of the interesting things about doing the IWF Fellows application is I honestly believe it was the first time in my career that I actually stepped back and reflected on what I had achieved. Because I was the achiever, I'm always looking for what comes next. And a lot of the angst I feel right now is because I don't see that clear path.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: And it was really the first time that I kind of sat back and said "Wow, this is ..." Like, "Oh, I've done pretty good for myself."

Whitney: So, as I'm listening to you talk, it sounds like you really love your company. So, this isn't "Michelle wants to find a new job at another company." It's "What do I ... How do I figure out how to create what I want to do inside of this organization."

Michelle: Yes.

Whitney: Is that accurate?

Michelle: It is. It's just a phenomenal place to work, and there's amazing people here. And I, they believe in me.

Whitney: Yeah.

Michelle: They support me.

Whitney: Yep.

Michelle: And I want to really take advantage of being in this position to move to the next step.

Whitney: Did you recently turn 40? Like, are you around the age of 40?

Michelle: (laughs) Since this is public, sure. (laughs)

Whitney: Yeah. (laughs)

Michelle: So, yeah, couple of years beyond, but yes.

Whitney: Yeah. Yeah, because I think one of the things that happens, um, is that when people move, they turn, they have these big milestone birthdays there tends to be developmentally inside of our psyche a "What am I really going to do with my life? How am I really going to contribute?" So I do think that that's part of, in addition to your having been at the top of a curve, because you've been at the same organization for 10 years, you were, you've been CFO. How many years were you CFO?

Michelle: Uh, five or six.

Whitney: Five. Okay.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: So absolutely at the top of the curve.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: Time to do something new.

You said at the very beginning as I asked you, you said, um, when I spoke about strengths and superpowers, you said "I realize that all the areas that made me different and I thought were not valued in my industry were actually my assets." Can you talk about what one or two of those are?

Michelle: Um, I think the, what I bring to the table—

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: Is that I can connect with people.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: The fact that I've built this team, I can lead people, I can empower them. I can help them see where we're going and the role they, they play, and the value they bring in making that change happen. Because change is really scary—

And my company has been really innovative, and has done all sorts of craziness in these really tight deadlines and no resources, and we always get it done.

And I think the fact that I've been someone who's been able to make those strategic plans become a reality has been through people. Um, now I work in a company that is, um ... So first of all I'm, like, one of the few senior women in the company—

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: So there's a differentiating factor. I'm an accountant in a company that is full of underwriters and actuaries. They are exceptionally intelligent people. These are the smartest brains in the business in my mind, um, and, and I've been really lucky to learn under them. But you are the people-person with the softer skills in a highly technical company and industry. And so as I was looking at "Okay, so what are the next steps for me," I'll be honest: I felt like I could never be a CEO in this industry or this company because I don't have the technical background. And I went into Houston with that mindset. And then when you spoke and you talked, you were, you were talking about, um, your market risk—

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: You know, "What is it that you have that's different?" Well, I know mine. It's, it's my people strength. It's my leadership, you know, the fact that I can mobilize people. And, um, in that moment you helped me to realize that is what makes me different, and that is what makes me stronger—

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: Because there are lots of highly technical actuaries and underwriters, but there aren't a lot of people who can come with that ability to connect with people.

Whitney: So this is your distinctive strength, the fact that you are able to connect with people. And by the way, you are a highly trained accountant CPA.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: Let's not forget that, right?

Michelle: Yeah. (laughs)

Whitney: So, so you've got, I mean, there, you, that's your pay-to-play skill, right?

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: It allows you to be in the pool.

Michelle: Yes.

Whitney: Um, but then once here in the pool with your CPA accounting chops, then the fact that you are um, able to connect people, something about being a female I'm sure plays into that, that starts to become your distinctive strength.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: Um, and, and I would even argue being an accountant, so in a, in a room full of actuaries, um, an accountant, it, it's a different, it's a different bird, right?

Michelle: Yeah, definitely. And, and, you know, at the end of the day you said, I think you've said I've got a lot of experience in this industry, so I have a lot of knowledge in it as well.

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

Michelle: I don't know that, um, I guess it differentiates me in the company I work for, because I can approach things from different angles than they're looking at.

Whitney: Right. Right.

I'd like you to talk about, um, something that's been really difficult for you professionally. Um, you talked about in 2012 when your company made a big acquisition. Can you talk about that-

Michelle: Um, it wasn't so much of the scale of the acquisition, but as a part of the acquisition we had to, um, completely take over all of their systems and do a full conversion in a very short window of time.

Whitney: Mm-hmm. (affirmative.)

Michelle: So, you know, normally if you do an acquisition you kind of go through the legal work first, and then integration of that takes years sometimes to do.

The, the pressure so intense—During this timeframe. Um, the stress that you were under that you, I, the anxiety, you could, you could physically feel it crushing you. And what I would often do is, um, my office was in a corner at that time, and I had a big wooden desk with a wooden front, and I would, um, sometimes crawl under the desk in the dark and just lay on the floor. Because I found it grounded me.

Whitney: Yeah.

Michelle: And, you know, you could take a couple of deep breaths and calm yourself and, and come on out and keep going. Because it was literally around the clock for a huge, like just this entire three month window. Um, the funny thing with that was people would kind of look to see if I was in my office and I wouldn't be, and then I'd come out 10 minutes later like "I was just in there."

Whitney: (laughs)

Michelle: So ... (laughs)

Whitney: That's funny.

Michelle: So, I'm like "Oh, I don't know why you didn't see me."

Whitney: (laughs)

Michelle: Um, but it-

Whitney: "Because I was under the desk." (laughs)

Michelle: (laughs) I didn't tell anyone at the time. Not many people know that story. I guess more do now. But, um, the, the amazing thing was we got it done.

Whitney: Yeah.

Michelle: We got it done, done in the timeframe. So you have this tremendous sense of accomplishment. And, um, as a result of the, the challenges we had, we were able to set the stage for what we needed to do to be better positioned for a future acquisition. And we have had acquisition since that have been much smoother as a result of this.

Whitney: As I, um, looked at your Disruptive Strengths Indicator and where you scored on taking risks, and, um, battling entitlement, and failure, and embracing constraint. Your score on embracing constraints was low, and you said in your thing that you had not found creative ways to deal with problems. And I was like, "What is she talking about

(laughter)?" I had just read this thing of, from, you know, this challenge of integrating this acquisition and you had been incredibly creative. So I just wonder, why, why do you have this perception that you haven't found creative ways to deal with problems?

Michelle: I think my mindset, at the time of answering that question was to the extent that I have been looking for what comes next for me?

And so I've been extremely creative (laughs) in finding solutions throughout my career. I guess it's the achiever in me where I, I have this, you, you know, I have a singular focus in terms of, "This is my next goal and I haven't conquered it yet."

Whitney: Let's talk about constraints for a second. Is what do you feel like your constraints are today in terms of being able to...what are some of your constraints in terms of where you're going to live, what company you're going to work for, um, uh, how much time you have etc.?

Michelle: I think the first thing that I see is this constraint is, is, funny enough, is probably my own experience. So to the extent that my experience has been in the finance field, it feels that that is a constraint in terms of how do you move into something completely different when this is your background?

Whitney: Okay.

Michelle: And, um, I did evaluate for quite a while like was with my current employer the right place to stay? Was there somewhere else to go? And I actually think here I am seen as more than that.

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: So I, I think I have the most opportunity here to, to be that change, you know, to kind of make that change happen.

I think probably one of my constraints is my, um, um, the way that I'm wired. Again, you, you know, I, I kind of set myself on a goal and I kind of tear blindly towards it.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: And to the extent I have a goal but there's no, you know, it's not clear to me exactly what that is. Um, that creates, um, anxiety in me. It creates a lot of discomfort because I've always been the kind of person who knew exactly where I was going. This experience of be open and, um, explore what's coming is new to me. So I have to manage my own kind of drive and my own n-, n-, need for more clarity in that.

Whitney: So having to be in the middle and having to deal with the uncertainty is really, it's really been hard for you?

Michelle: Oh, it's been a huge ... that's probably been the biggest challenge for me because it's, it's I, I like to know where we're going, right? You know, for something as important as this to me, like my, my ... what I do, I, I put all of myself into what I do.

Whitney: Yeah.

Michelle: Um, so k-, kind of leaving it up in the air is, is like this is something very important to me that doesn't have a lot of clarity and that is really, really disturbing (laughs), so.

Whitney: So let's do a CEO for a day, right?

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: So you're, you're not an Actuary, fine, you're an accountant. You're not a man, fine, you're a woman. Um, you have lots, you're able to build a team, a lot of people can't build teams. So if you were CEO for a day, what kinds of things would you do or could you bring to your organization or ones similar to it that could be of tremendous value in terms of executing on the strategic vision for your, your unit or for the group as a whole?

Michelle: Well, that's tough, Whitney (laughs). Um, so I think to the extent there is a strategy, I, what I would bring to the table is bringing all of the parts together to execute on that strategy.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: I think, um, I have a cl- ... even without the technical background, at the end of the day, I have a clear vision of how things can work.

Whitney: Yep.

Michelle: Um, I, you know, I can see it all the way from, "Okay, this is where you're going, have you considered X, Y, Z, and then how do you make it? How do you execute on it?" I would tell you the challenge I have internally and fully visualizing myself in that role is having had the experience of working with the people I've worked with. When I see how they craft deals and, you know, the client facing side of things, um, you know the way they think, uh, that isn't ... I, I don't have that skill today.

Whitney: So I think you're pretty clear on what your strengths are, the question is how do you deploy those in a way where it feels like there's something more? Now, let's talk about that something more because there's something inside of you that's saying, "I need to do something else." Can you articulate at all what that something else looks like or feels like to you?

Michelle: I can articulate what it feels like more.

Whitney: Okay.

Michelle: So, um, it's, uh ... and, and the word I use quite a lot is authentic, you know, when you, you look at the principles of authentic leadership, when you look at what it is to be an authentic person and bring it to work. I think you bring all of yourself.

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: Um, your values, what you care for, you know, your intellect, everything. And there's a real excitement in the air, you know, and I, I've been very lucky in that in certain projects that we've worked on you've kind of had this, there's the tangible energy in the air with what you're doing. And you know you're doing something really special and it could be you're kind of r-, regardless of what the project is, um, there's a buzz, you know?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: Um, people are performing at their best all around, um, and I, I wanted to access that. I want more of that in my day.

Whitney: Okay.

Michelle: And I want more of that and less of we can't do it because, we can't do it because.

Whitney: When was the last time you felt that on the job?

Michelle: The buzz, oh, it's been a while.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative), okay.

Now you talked a little bit about you're working on a LEAN management implementation and you're really excited about that. Um, talk to me about that, why that's exciting to you?

Michelle: Um, I, uh, so this actually started as a result of conversations we had to do with IWF, and, um, it's something the President's really interested in and he was like, "Here's a book, read it." And I did, and we've had a lot of great chats about it. And the whole philosophy around LEAN, in my mind, is just common sense (laughs).

Whitney: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Michelle: But the, the thing about common sense is not everyone has it, so it's not so common. Um, so I love that it took things that just make sense to me, and it puts it into a framework and a management style or a philosophy like there's rules, there's things you do, there's some real concrete action. And the byproduct of this is that employees are empowered in their work and, um, they ... I, I feel personally like when you're empowered in your work and you feel that what you do makes a difference, you have a better experience.

Whitney: So, but aren't already doing all of this? So what's curious to me is what, what about this is exciting to you? Because it seems to me that this is something that you're already doing in your work every day.

Michelle: It's funny you think that I'm doing it already because it, it is very much the way I think.

Like I, I ... it's, it's just, you know, when you talk about who I am and aligning I'm like, "Yeah, this is it." Like this is, for me, it is all about how do you empower the people who you're asking to do the job for you? To have a voice in what they do to make it better.

Whitney: It almost sounds like when I hear you talk about it, like you found, you found the playbook, right (laughs)?

Michelle: Yes.

Whitney: You had a playbook and you've now ... and you, you realized, "Oh, there is a playbook and I could have written this and here it is."

Michelle: Yeah (laughs).

Whitney: Um, that's what I hear a little bit in your voice.

Michelle: Y-, yeah, I would agree with that. Like when I, when I read the book I'm like, "This just, uh, uh, of, of course. Like somebody else got there first but, of course, this is it is. This is what I try to do."

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: So-

Whitney: It's so logical (laughing).

Michelle: ... um, I know. It, it's, it's funny because one of my challenges is always like the path is always so clear to me, and it's a matter of bringing everyone else along.

Whitney: So just a quick reminder, um, one of the ways you know you can identify your strengths, um, is to look at what ... Whenever you find yourself saying this is just common sense, that's a signal to you or a flag that you are, um, talking about one of your strengths. And so for you, when you look at this LEAN and you're like, "I can see it, this is exactly how it should work because this is what you do every single day," um, that's a sign to you that this is one of your superpowers. I want to drill down on this a little bit more but I want to put in a pin in it for just a second and ask you a question. Is there are some or anything, um, and sort of strategic something that you feel like your company could be going after?

So let's think about market risk for a minute of this idea of playing where no one else is playing. So we've talked for a few minutes about, you know, jobs inside of your

company that already exist, the COO didn't exist but has been created. Are there any other things that you feel like your company could be doing that would allow it to be more efficient, more, you know, either drive efficiencies or drive revenue? Some sort of open space market risk opportunity that you've identified given that you are every day in the operations of the business.

Michelle: When we were in startup mode, there was a clear goal that every single person in the organization shared, you know, everybody was pushing to be successful, and, and the goal was very, very clear in that. So now we've, we've grown up, we've grown bigger, um, the industry we're in is, you know, it's a tough industry right now. And so I think now is absolutely the time to think about, "Okay, well, who do we want to be when we grow up?" Because what got us here is not necessarily going to be what takes us to the next level.

Whitney: Yep.

Michelle: And I think, um, and, and obviously efficiency is all around that, but I, I think it does require taking a step back and challenging everything that we do where you can break it down into meaningful pieces. But, um... and again, for me, it's on the operations side. It's not on the technical side. I think it's more of saying, "Okay, how... how should our systems work? How should our employees interface with each other?" And, um... "How can we take these areas that have been pain points for us, and turn them into strengths?"

Whitney: I wanna just point out a couple more things, then I think I have some potential homework for you.

Michelle: Okay.

Whitney: So, one of the things that I thought was really interesting, is when I looked at your disruptive strengths indicator, you came up really high on being a risk taker. And I thought that was interesting because on the one hand, um like you said, your career's been very linear. When you think about yourself as a risk taker, how... do you actually define yourself as a being a risk taker?

Michelle: Um, yeah I think I am 'cause I kinda have this crazy confidence in myself that I will get things done, regardless.

Whitney: Okay.

Michelle: So I-I define myself as a risk taker in that regard. And I... Even though my path has been linear, when I look back over my career and I think of the things that I did, and the experience that I had when I decided to do it, I'm like, I was... I was too stupid to know I didn't know what I was doing. So, um, but I believed in myself.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And I knew I'd get there. So, I... from that regard, I do consider myself a risk taker.

Whitney: On your strengths, um, you were quite low and I thought that was interesting because it sounds like you actually do know what your strengths are, and you actually know what sets you apart from your team. And so I wondered, um, is that more a reflection of your feeling like... like you know what your strengths are but at some level your feeling bridled, and you're just waiting to like move forward into something. Like, you-you're waiting to break through, and so you're feeling like you're not able to tap into everything that you have at your disposal in terms of making something happen.

Michelle: Yeah, I think that's definitely a part of it, is just kind of... to end... I think the discovery of what my strengths are, in fairness is... you know... it's-it's somewhat recent. Like, you know

Whitney: Oh, okay.

Michelle: I think, um. Again, going through the IWF Fellows Program, you know, they really do focus on "This is what you bring to the table, and here's the value in it". I think that's the... that's been the missing piece for me, is to the extent I knew what I was good at, I didn't necessarily see the value in it, in the field that I'm in.

Whitney: You said the fact that you-you are a CPA, um, in a firm with a lot of actuaries and you're in the insurance business. But the fact that you're a CPA, the fact that you can build teams, the fact you're a female, are all strengths that you bring and they're actually very valuable in this particular context, even though it's not what everybody else is doing.

Michelle: Yes.

(chuckles)

All of that.

Whitney: Anything else you want to tell me before I give you your homework? Or start to talk about your homework.

Michelle: The one thing we haven't touched on that I do struggle with, is there is a personal aspect to this which is you do give a lot in your career.

Whitney: Yep.

Michelle: And when you're a mother, and you-you know, you have to give a lot to your family. So I would say that's also something that, is I've been going through this anxiety, and you have this other element of "Okay, this takes me away from here" and "Is it really worthwhile?" Like that's-that has definitely been something that I've struggled with.

So they're ten and four.

Whitney: Ten and four, okay.

Michelle: So the ten-year-old's old enough to tell me she doesn't want me to get on the plane.

Whitney: Got it.

Michelle: So, um, you know. There's that element of stress in all of that, and I think when you are a mother and you are... you know, th-there's lots of men who do this as well. But particularly mostly women, you know, the reality is you spend all day at work. You spend all evening taking care of your family. And the last person you do take care of is yourself.

Whitney: Yeah.

Michelle: So, that's been something that I've been challenged with as well is... you know, to the extent I'm pouring all this into work or into my family. My own self care has been neglected, and finding that balance as well. So as I'm fi... trying to figure out what comes next, how do I do it in a way that's... you know, again, integrated and doesn't sacrifice more of myself than what I've already done.

Whitney: Where do you feel like on the spectrum of health right now in terms of like energy level, and you know physical, just "mojo". Where would you say you are right now? On a, you know, sort of... where you've been historically, are you... is it a really good place, sort of average, needs to be a lot better. Where would you say it is?

Michelle: Needs to be a lot better. Definitely needs to be a lot better. I'm actually working with a team of doctors to kind of address kind of some of the... the-the medical issues that are causing the low energy. In terms of like a daily care ritual, that is something I definitely need to disrupt myself to put into play.

Whitney: What do you do currently to take care of yourself?

Michelle: I sleep.

Whitney: You sleep? Okay. And are you getting like eight hours of sleep?

Michelle: Yeah that's my one... I will not sacrifice. Yeah.

Whitney: Okay. Okay.

Michelle: We'll start there.

Whitney: Yeah, well sleep... Sleep's important, and a lot of people don't sleep. So I... I-I think that's a really really good start.

Whitney: Are you doing anything like meditation?

Michelle: No.

Whitney: Okay. So, you heard me on my podcast talk about Headspace.

Michelle: (chuckles)

Yeah.

Whitney: And I will tell you, um, I thought of [Headspace](#) when you were talking about that experience of being under the desk and just like, "Oh my goodness, I just... I don't know if I can deal with all this anxiety". And I think that one of the things that a lot of high achievers have, I know I struggle with it, it sounds like you have, it's certainly in that one situation with the acquisitions struggle with anxiety. I think that, um... and we don't ever talk about it, but I then a lot of us deal with it. And something, like a Headspace, doesn't have to be Headspace. It's just that, that's what I've been using, and it's really powerful. I would encourage you to check that out.

Michelle: Yep.

Whitney: Because I think that that would be helpful. So that's one of your pieces of homework is to... for the next, um... you know, until... between now and when we talk again, which will probably be four or six weeks-

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Whitney: Is to check that out and see what happens. And just do it every day, religiously. In fact, I'm going to commit you to do it every day, religiously, and see how you feel.

So that's on the self care side, the other thing I would say is, um, with your children, um... remember that the most important thing for your children is that they feel safe, and that when you're with them you pay attention to them. And so, I would really encourage you to, um... when you are with your children, especially with your ten-year-old, so when you're with her, um... you know, make sure you're focused on her, and also one thing that you might want to do is sometimes if you gotta go run an errand or something, take her with you on the errand. Because then, because you're doing something else, you're able to focus on her because in the process of doing something else, then you can also focus on her. It's kind of like, for me, it's hard for me just to talk on the phone. But if I'm driving and talking on the phone, I can do it because then I feel like I'm doing two things at once. So, if you... That might be another way is just to make sure that when you're with her to actually focus on her. Even if it's for 10 minutes.

Michelle: Yep.

Whitney: 'Cause she'll pick up on it.

Now in terms of your work - here are some things that I'd like you to think about. If you were going to disrupt your company, how would you disrupt it? From an operational perspective.

The other thing I'd like you to consider is I heard in your voice, uh, that you were really excited about this idea of LEAN. I think you have an opportunity to analyze not only what you're doing inside of your team, but across the various silos in your organization. And I think that there's potentially a really exciting thing for you to do, which is to figure out how to make your organization operationally the best in the business.

I believe, that if you will start thinking through that as if you were brand new at this company, coming in and had to figure out how to be the COO. Leveraging your accountant skills, leveraging your ability to build teams, which is indeed a super power. It is a super power. What would that look like? I think that that would give you the buzz that you're looking for.

Michelle: Yeah. Like even just, kind of... t-t-taking, you know... the thought of stepping outside my normal and just crafting that is exciting.

Whitney: Yeah. I mean, like I would even go to your boss and say, "Look, I-I-I need a week, and I just need to leave, and I'm gonna go and just work on this, and think through this, and figure this out.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: You've got this wealth of information in your head. And this is where the step-back to grow comes in. I loved that story that you told of how you were going to become a CPA. Or what you were gonna... What was it? You were gonna pass the test, and you figured out exactly what the score was gonna be. And everywhere you wrote, you wrote "Michelle Seymour CPA". So, I think if you can say, you know, um... Come up with a something you want to visualize, okay? Like if I were going to disrupt the operations of a reinsurance business, how would I do it? Start there. I think you've got probably 10 ideas, you could just start ticking them off immediately. So use that visualization again in your... you've done it before, you know it works.

Michelle: Yep.

Whitney: Use it again.

Okay. So as we wrap up, for this session, what are some of your big insights?

Michelle: Um, one of them is that I-I-I... despite my best efforts to kind of see my value, and own it, and kind of know your own worth, there are many instances that you had to remind me of it.

Whitney: (laughs)

Michelle: So, it is really... That's obviously something I've gotta work on, 'cause when you... it's great for me to talk about empowering everyone else, but at some point you have to empower yourself to do what you want to do, to move forward.

I think for me the real take-away is about empowering myself, and believing in myself, to kind of, um, make this happen. And I will definitely remember try to stop... stop looking at the... looking for the mountain. I think that's something that I have been fixated on is, you know, kind of what's next? What's next? Where's the goal? Where's the path? And I, to some extent, I... I think that's very valid and in writing that story, it-it didn't even occur to me that I was doing the same thing again.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: You know, you're looking at the summit going, "I'm never going to make it", or I'm looking for the summit and at some points it's all just about taking a step at a time. So, um... y-yeah. I'm really... Those are all kind of the big take-aways

Whitney: Good. Okay, so- [crosstalk 01:13:06]

Michelle: Thank you, Whitney.

Whitney: Fun Michelle. So, so, so fun.

Michelle: I have to say that, um... this is really powerful stuff. So thank you for putting it out there.

Whitney: Oh, you're welcome.

Michelle: And thank you for challenging people to go down this path, and to disrupt themselves. And I'm-I'm so privileged to have... you know, had this time with you. I can't wait to see what happens in four to six weeks.

Whitney: Yeah. Me neither. I'm super excited. Thank you for being willing to do it, and, um, I'll-I'll talk to you soon.

Michelle: Thanks, Whitney. Bye-bye.

Whitney: Alright, take care. Bye-bye.

Sometimes when we hear about people disrupting themselves, we picture huge, dramatic change. In Michelle's case, she's not looking to change companies or move or even change jobs - she just needs to take some deliberate steps to feel like she's empowering herself at work.

Whitney: Let's take a few minutes to talk about what you've learned some of your insights, and then, um, and then talk about some of what you've done on the back of the conversations and what you've, yeah, learned and what you've done and kind of where you are.

Michelle: Sure. I think the first thing is you need patience with this.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: You know, you, you think there's going to be a single action or that silver bullet that, um, one thing will happen or you'll do one thing and then now everything else will fall into place and it doesn't work that way.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: Um, you know, it- it- it definitely takes times. You need to be patient with the process. What I found in this process is there's this concept of time and space-

Whitney: Hmm.

Michelle: ... that if as long as you're on the hamster wheel, you can't disrupt yourself. So you actually have to make that time and space sacred to actually think about what meaningful ways to make the changes that you wanna make, what are the changes you want, what is it that you're looking for, and you know, which of these is the right approach? I think that was the other thing. You know, when you go through the list of the steps for disruption, it's not a one, or two, or it's, it's a one and two and. So, um, I actually found ... I kinda had to try quite a few of them, you know?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: The step back to learn as well as kinda following your strengths, uh, you ...

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: ... I really tried to multi-prong approach. Maybe-

Whitney: Yeah.

Michelle: ... m- m- sometimes subconsciously versus consciously, but, um, it was definitely something that you, you ... It was kind of a mix and match, you know?

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: You, you had to-

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: ... pick several of them and try them, and some of them worked, and you know, some of them didn't or actually I wouldn't say they didn't. I think you, you found different paths that you might not have seen before.

Whitney: Exactly.

Michelle: So, um, ...

Whitney: Right. And I think you're making an important observation where you can have them in sequence and they work in sequence, um, but they're not necessarily meant to be sequenced.

Michelle: One of the things I did was I actually came up with an action plan. So I actually came out with very specific steps that I was going to do, and some of them felt very natural to me.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And some of them really did not, but I was, I kinda committed to I'm gonna give this a try for a period of time.

Whitney: Yeah.

Michelle: And, uh, especially when it's something that is not k- kinda in your comfort zone or just doesn't come naturally, um, it's tough to make changes.

And you have to be disciplined about it. It was very easy to get caught up in old habits.

What would happen as you come into the office and then literally you get caught up in something completely different than what you laid out. So, sometimes it's as different as just don't follow the same habit. You know, like my habit was as soon as you come to work, you get your coffee, sit at your desk and then people who kinda start bombarding you and recognizing that time and space is sacred. I kinda have a private work space that it would go in there for like the first hour of the day.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And just kinda get myself focused so that it was more deliberate-

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: ... in what I was spending my day on.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: Um, so it's, it's a little how just changing my location made a big difference for me. You know, even in terms of the habits of, um, for me, there's kinda inflection points in the day, you know?

Whitney: Hmm.

Michelle: Going home at night, you know that's another one tend, you know, you, you tend to get stuck at work and kinda, uh, again email is a great thing where you kinda go down the rabbit hole an email, sometimes just closing your email. So again, you're being very deliberate in your action. That- that's kind of the habits that I found very easy to get stuck in are the, the ma- the task that can distract you from what you're really trying to do.

I, I found that as well where I'd check it before I left home, you know first thing in the morning. And then you're driving kids to school, and you're going through in your mind, uh, all the ... you're trying to respond to the emails and it's like, "No, I need to be present. This is my time with my kids." So just, that simple habit, don't check it until you get to work.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: Um, be, be deliberate in when you check it as opposed to being reactive. Being careful to carve time-out in my day. Um, you know, I tend to let everybody else put the time in my calendar and what's left over is what I got.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: So, one of the first changes I made was I actually said, "Okay, I'm gonna carve out the time that works for me to do the projects that I want to be working on."

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And try and take a bit more control of it. So again I think it all goes back to being very deliberate. Um, the one thing that I think did surprise me along the way was the step, the step back to learn has multiple meanings.

Whitney: Hmm. Ah-huh. (Laughs)

Michelle: When we, when we spoke about it back in October, when we spoke about even when we had our first session, uh, you know, um, the visual image I have of step back to learn is step into a more junior position.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And it's not that. It's just-

Whitney: It could be.

Michelle: Right. I- I- It can be, absolutely it can be, but for me, the way it manifested was almost in a recognition of I'm at a place where I want to learn new things and it was recognizing it and honoring it. And I, I kinda had his revelation with the IWF Fellows Program. We had

a week at Harvard and it was just an incredible experience, and to be sitting in the room, uh, with these incredible women, with these incredible professors, I, I just felt like a sponge. And I just really tried to make the most of the experience.

And I realized how much I missed learning. And in that moment, I'm like, "Oh, step back to grow." So I actually very deliberately came up with where the areas where I believe I need to strengthen, um, other things I want to learn more about or skillsets I'd like to, um, improve on. And, uh, how do I seek that? And, and for me that's how I interpreted step back to grow.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: So, there's one particularly technical area of the business that I'm in. And I went to the person who's the head of the department. And I said, "I'd really like to learn about this." And he was so excited to have someone take that interest that he's actually planned like a session with me with some you know, examples and case studies to work through to help me understand. Um, you know, signing up for a course, um, you know with just different takeaways, uh, it just, it made me very much appreciate, um, that step back to grow means more than your position that just means take ... For me, it was take time-out and think of where are the areas I want to grow in.

And it's not all work related. Some of it is personal as well. So, that was the one that definitely caught me off guard. I'm like, "Aah, that's what Whitney meant." (Laughter)

Whitney: Anything else of what you learned before we go to some of what you were going to do and what you did do?

Michelle: The patience I think is another one in terms of I, I am a recovering perfectionist. (Laughs)

Whitney: Hmm. Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: Um, and you know, you ... I've always had this very clear path. And I think one of the, one of the reasons the disruption really appealed to me was recognizing, I didn't see that clarity of path any longer and I was, I was looking for it. And again, you're looking for that kind of for ... right the first time straight through kind of movement, um, and realizing that you, you have to experiment.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And you're going to make mistakes along the way. And as long as you're learning from those mistakes, then you're growing. And that's a part of the growing, and learning, and disruption process. So for me, it was letting go of, "I have to have the answer. I have to get it right. There has to be a, the clear path," and becoming comfortable, comfortable with ambiguity.

Whitney: Hmm.

Michelle: And comfortable with experimentation and comfortable with failure. Um, you know, uh, there's someone I know whose kinda says you wanna fail small, fail often, and learn from the failure. And, uh, I- I ... It began to kinda resonate with me. Obviously, you don't wanna have this big catastrophic failures, but, you- you- you're gonna fail along the way, and if you aren't failing, you aren't learning new things and you aren't growing. So, that's also a big part of the process that I think was kinda getting comfortable with that. Perhaps, it wasn't something I didn't know as much as, okay, this is how it applies to me, and it's okay, because I'm growing from it.

Whitney: Let's talk through with what you had agreed to do and then, and then talk about what you did.

Michelle: So, the one that was actually a hu- a huge, huge, huge success was, um, the time with my children. So I actually did enlist was the support of my daughter. And, um, every night at bedtime, we actually do a gratitude journal together. So, this has been something incredibly rewarding, uh, for, I ... at least for me and it's, it's become a very special time for the two of us. You know, she's 10 years old so she's kinda at that age where the teenage years are looming, and I feel like this has really kinda help lay the ground work for that closeness to stay there when we go through the next couple years.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And then we, we have also been doing the Headspace. We, we don't always get to the Headspace every single day, but we ... I have a little achiever of a child as well, so we, we kinda aim for a certain number in a week. And we only do like three to five minutes that's the span for her, but it's become our nightly ritual and that has been fantastic. That's been wonderful. That's been a gift. Um, I've also been speaking to her as well in terms of what I'm trying to do. One of the things is in the last couple months, I've started to travel more.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: Uh, which is a change for them. So I'm talking to her about why am I doing this and what eh- what am I doing and why? And kinda bringing her along in the journey. Um, in terms of the presence, one of the things I've learned, my son is constantly asking for someone to play with and often you know, you're trying to do 10 things at once.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And I, I've just decided like, "Just say yes." Just sit with him on the floor and sometimes it's only 10 minutes and then you can go on with what you're doing, but that you really need to kinda make ... you need to be present.

I think something that I've done for myself I- it's kind of acknowledging the IWF leadership program. So, um, we had the Harvard Week in the middle of it. And I really made that time sacred. So I prepped work that I would not be available for that week. I don't think in my entire career have I ever said I'm not available.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And for that week, I was not. And my colleagues all honored that. Um, I prepped my family as well, so we had a limited amount of time every day to speak. We made it ... We've made a time, but we stuck to it and that was it. And I really viewed it as a retreat for myself. So while there was a kind of, an, uh, a business learning aspect there was very much a personal learning aspect as well. And I really made that a key part of my takeaway. And that was where I really ... that concept of time and space really became very clear to me. Um, the step back to grow, the where the areas that I want to move in ma- making an action plan. Because it is all about me growing in the ways I want to grow, so.

Whitney: And for our listeners, can you just say what IWF stands for?

Michelle: Sure, it's the International Women's Forum. Um, and it is, uh, a group of some of the, the leading women in the world who have this forum, and they have created a leadership program. And you have to apply to be a fellow, but the, uh, the program for the fellows is for women who have been successful are looking for the next step in their growth as a leader. Um, the program's designed with Harvard and INSEAD, uh, it is just an incredible, incredible network of women. There's 35 of us from around the globe.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And it- it is truly been a privilege to be a part of this organization. And I, I am just learning so much out of it. And I still have another six months to go. So, it's tied in really nicely with the disruption.

So, um, the other thing is make sure I took ... I take care of myself. We talked about the adrenal fatigue last time we spoke. And, um, again Harvard was very sacred to me, so I made sure I took care of myself. So I took all of my supplements. I ate the way I'm supposed to eat. I made sure I got sleep. Um, something that was critical was I recognized how hard it would be to come out of that week and go back to my normal life. So I had a transition plan. Um, one of them was before I flew home, I spent a day with, uh, a some friends who are very close to my heart. And, um, my friend actually like brought me breakfast in bed, she booked me at the spa, like she, she just took care of me.

And then when I did get home, I took a day off of work. Again, I wanted to make sure I had my action plan in place, I organized myself and just made sure I was ready for kinda jumping back into day to day life.

Whitney: So smart.

Michelle: And I did work on how I would disrupt the company. And what I found once I was done, actually I kinda do ... S- I sat with it for a while. And what I realized was, uh, the- the, the steps I came up with, the actual disruption was not as important as what it said about me.

Whitney: Hmm. Say more.

Michelle: And one of the things was ... So there was very much a common theme in all of it, because I do work in a highly technical industry. And there was nothing technical about my answers. My, my plans for disruptions, it was all about, um, empowering employees. It was about how to make the work experience better for the employees, how to bring kinda marry up the best of employees and what they do and link that to the company. Um, rec, uh, you know the one thing I am constantly thinking of is our company is kinda at an inflection point. And my ideas were all around how do we help accelerate that growth from a people perspective, not a data, not a customer, not an industry, uh, none, none of the technical things that, um, you might expect. And I really struggled with that for a while, because on the one hand I thought, okay so I'm, I'm not ... I'm not thinking technically in a technical company. And this was that balance of do you play to your strengths or do you s- you know, again, it was like, how do I apply step back to grow in this particular area? How can I improve myself in these areas versus this is an area that I'm obviously very passionate about? And how do I move forward?

And I think the place I've landed is owning that this is who I am and not trying to be something that I'm not. Yes, there are definitely areas I'll kinda want to grow in those other areas, but I'm never going to be an underwriter, but I'm really great at empowering employees, and helping them achieve strategic vision. I can do that. And I get really, really, really excited about it. Like that's a mountain I want to climb.

Whitney: And to be clear, I think for people who are listening, it's not that you don't have technical skills, right?

Michelle: Yeah. (Laughs)

Whitney: Right. So I- I wanna emphasize that, because I think sometimes, someone listening might think, "So, is she saying," and you're not saying, right? You're a CPA, if I remember correctly?

Michelle: Yes, yes.

Whitney: Okay, you are a CPA.

Michelle: I am a CPA. I ... Yeah and I, I don't give myself enough credit because I know the business. I know the business really well.

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: Um, I ... You know, I've been in the industry for quite a long time and I, I can speak the business language, but what I really get passionate about is the people in the business.

Whitney: Right, right.

Michelle: So my, m- my power comes from the people side. And I can apply that to getting the technical deals done and understanding the business, and delivering customer value, but it's okay to come from that place as opposed to the place of how do the numbers work. I can play both sides. My passion lies in the people.

Whitney: What a great insight. So you were-

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: ... there was a sense you're saying that you needed to focus more in technical skills or data in order to drive the business forward, and you have this realization that actually, the way you in particular would drive the business forward was not more domain expertise, but the ability to leverage, and encourage, and inspire those within your sphere of influence to leverage their domain expertise.

Michelle: Absolutely. And I remember when you and I first met in, um, Houston in October-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: ... um, one of the first things you said is what makes you different is your super power.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: And it was ... it was really owning and kind of recognizing, this is mine and this is good, and this is okay, and there's a place for it here.

Whitney: Right.

Michelle: Because this, this is something that I, that I do think differentiates me from a lot of the other people is that I, I had ... the strength is delivering those results through people.

Whitney: And so, so to ... Uh, again, so eh- in a room full of, of, of 10 CPAs, being a CPA is not, it's a strength, but it's not a super power.

Michelle: Correct.

Whitney: Um, in a room full of 10 CPAs where you've got really, really powerful people skills and where some people may not, because they like numbers, then that starts to become a distinctive strength is something you do well, while the people around you do not.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: And if you're willing to own it like you said, you've been on this discovery, journey of discovery of, "Okay, am I willing to own this?" You're like, "Yeah, you know what, I am willing to own it.

Michelle: So, the one thing I did not do well was the visualization.

Whitney: Hmm. Why do you think that is?

Michelle: Um, which is a ... Um, I think because it's eh- I think for me it was easier to take the time and put pen to paper.

Whitney: Hmm.

Michelle: Than it was to sit and try to empty your mind and put a picture in front of you.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: I, I think it was just a, um, comfort zone.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: So, in the step back to grow, I need to (laughs) strengthen that muscle perhaps. Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Whitney: I suspect one of the things that will happen as you're, as you're doing this meditation process that that will come. And also I think, um, one thing is that you only ... So you live in Bermuda, so you live near the ocean? And you think about, um, I was just recently listening to Bob Proctor who has written a lot-

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Whitney: ... on this idea of the human potential and, and visualization. And he uses the whole metaphor of a ship, a ship's captain. And when you ask them where they're going, they don't tell you the 10 different places they're going. They just tell you the next port.

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Whitney: And so I think one of the ways that you can maybe break this down into steps that will be smaller and more manageable for you is to say, "Where do I wanna go next? What do I wanna do in the next two weeks? What do I wanna do in the next month?" And then once you decide on that whether it's with your children, whether it's with writing, you know your personal life, whether it's on with your work life is to pick that one goal and then focus doggedly and with determination on that, so.

Michelle: (Laughs)

Whitney: You know, when you wake up in the morning, I am so happy that I have accomplished ... So for you, um, it might be I'm so happy and thankful that I'm spending 10 minutes quality time with my son at night, or, um, you know, something very, very specific and concrete that it can be a very short-term goal. And that's what the visualization can look like. And maybe that's more concrete and then therefore easier to do.

Michelle: I think that's much more achievable. I think I took the visualization as, "Where am I gonna be?" Like again I started to-

Whitney: Too much. Too big.

Michelle: ... make it that mountain. That's right.

Whitney: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, and-

Michelle: Yeah. So what- what's the next step? What's ... I, I like the timeframe pick, pick a smaller timeframe. It's definitely achievable.

Whitney: Right. Yeah, a very near time- timeframe. And I think, um, I think once you do that, and so you're going to have a con- bunch of ideas that are going to float through your mind. They're going to be 10 or 20. And so, the way you'll figure out what it's going to be is you'll say to yourself, um, "First of all, am I able to achieve this?" Because sometimes we have fantasies that we're actually not able to achieve. And you're, you're not ever going to really want to visualize something that you're not able to achieve. But once you're able to say, "Okay, this is something that I can do," um, then you know, like, I want to do a triple Axel in ice skating, right?

Michelle: Yeah. (Laughs)

Whitney: That's not going to happen, uh, you know at this point in my life. Um, so I'm not able to do that. Um, but once you've kind of sort through what you're able to do, then you ask yourself, "Am I willing to do this? Am I willing to pay the price that it will take to make this happen?" Once you're able to set on those two things, then it can become a goal and then you can start to visualize around it.

Michelle: Yeah.

Whitney: And the visualizing again is just reminding yourself, writing your journal, "I'm so happy and thankful that this is happening." At night and then throughout the day as you're driving to and fro. And then you'll start to concentrate all of your mental faculties on actually making that happen.

Michelle: I think that owning where I am has actually opened doors to me. I, I, I'd begun to see new doors that perhaps I didn't before. Um, I, I think part of it is whether it's kind of you- you exist somewhat in a box. And when you take yourself out of that box, then suddenly there's lots of other opportunities available.

So, I definitely ... Uh, I don't ... Again, it's like I'm not quite sure what the mountain is, but I feel like okay there's a couple different projects here that I can focus on. I'm not quite sure where they're going to take me, but I feel really comfortable that it's going to take me where I want to go.

Whitney: Fantastic.

So, point of instruction here. So, what's really interesting and exciting is that when you're willing to play to your strengths, when you think about this from an evolutionary perspective, when you play to your strengths, you feel strong. And when you feel strong, you're willing to play where no one else is playing. So lever of change number two is strengths, lever change number one is play when no one else is playing. And so when you play to those strengths, those, that gives you the courage and the confidence to play where other people aren't and that those two together become this flywheel to allow you to move up a learning curve. And so it sounds like that's exactly what happening, is happening.

Michelle: Eh- I would ... Uh, the- the way you've described it is, is perfect. Like for me, it just feels, this feeling is strong, that's how I feel right now. Where I'm sitting today, I feel strong. Where I was sitting when I first met you or even in January when we first spoke was just this feeling of anxiety, and uncertainty, and, um, certainly not strength. And today I, I feel strong. Definitely feel strong.

Whitney: That's fantastic. Okay.

Michelle: I feel like there's nothing I can't do.

Whitney: That's fantastic. So any other thoughts as we start to wrap up?

Michelle: Um, I think the main thing is this concept of disruption. You know, I, I love the message that you're sharing and for me, it's a matter of sharing it with others. Everyone is so focused on their day to day, that no one thinks about how do we pause day to day and look forward whether it's a month, three months, a year, five years, whether on a work level or a personal level. Again, people, people are just going about living their lives. And I think until you're unhappy ...

Whitney: Hmm.

Michelle: ... until you're in a place that you're not content, only then do you look like, "How do I get out of this place?" Whereas building this into your daily life or you know, even kinda having those checkpoints in your life that you kinda stop and think about it, am I, am I growing? Am I disrupting myself? I think there's so much power in that. So, I know when we first met, um, I think I said to you, we were in a room of 30 people and I thought you were just speaking to me. Well, the rest of the room disappeared.

Whitney: Hmm.

Michelle: And, um, I'm really grateful that you came into my life (laughter) at that moment especially. And I really hope to share some of this with you know, the people around me because I, I just think there's so much power in it.

Whitney: Hmm, thank you. Oh, that's lovely. Thank you for sharing that, Michelle.

My last question for you today is, um, as you've been talking and thinking out loud even today, any final insights, um, and/or something that you're going to commit to do to going forward?

Michelle: Well, I'm, I'm definitely gonna commit to the visualization.

Whitney: Probably.

Michelle: You know, the way you've described it makes it much less scary and I'm definitely going to commit to that. Um, and the one thing, uh, when you describe playing to your strengths and that feeling of strength, I want to te- like right now where I'm sitting, how I'm feeling is definitely a very strong position. I, I had struggled for the word, but that is definitely it. I just ... you know, it's, it's not overly confidence, it's not cocky. It's just, I feel strong. Like I feel strong, I feel empowered of myself. And that, the one thing I wanna make sure is that this particular feeling in this moment, I hold onto it, because this disruption and making change happen is hard.

Um, you know, in Harvard someone said, "Change feels like failure in the middle." So, I'm gonna hold onto this feeling right now, because this is a part of the growth process. And on those days when I don't feel I'm gonna remember, no, it's here. And this is me playing to my strengths and what I'm meant to do. And kinda keep my focus by this feeling right here.

Whitney: Hmm.

Michelle: This feels great.

Whitney: It's lovely. Okay, Michelle thank you so much. It's been super fun. Thank you for being willing to do this experiment. (Laughter)

Michelle: Great. Thank you so much, Whitney. It's definitely been my pleasure and a privilege to do this with you.

One of the things we learned from Michelle is that we need time and space in order to think through changes that we want to make. Notice how Michelle structured her time before and after the Harvard Week for the International Women's Forum. If you're on the hamster wheel, you can't disrupt yourself. If you're not sure where to start, start with the seven levers of disruptive change beginning with taking the right kinds of risks. You don't have to take them sequence, but you do need to start.

Practical Tip: The next time you are traveling somewhere, give yourself an extra day on the back end of the trip to think and reflect before re-entry.

If you're interested in being coached live on the air, I'd love to have you join our online tribe of disruptors who receive our weekly email. We'll be sending out a call for another episode like this soon. So visit whitneyjohnson.com/newsletter to sign up.

And, for those of you, that want LIVE, live coaching, one of my mentors Marshall Goldsmith and I will be teaching and coaching in Boston, MA on July 27th. You can find out more at whitneyjohnson.com/marshall. Or, you can go to the link in the show notes.

Thank you again to Michelle Smith for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, 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.