

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 82: Lisa Kay Solomon

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, my name is Whitney Johnson, I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. My guest today is Lisa Kay Solomon, chair of transformation practices and leadership at [Singularity University](#), and co-author of two books, [Design A Better Business](#) and [Moments of Impact: How to Design Strategic Conversations That Accelerate Change](#), welcome to the podcast Lisa.

Lisa: Thank you so much Whitney, it is such a pleasure to be here.

Whitney: Well, we are delighted to have you, and I am really, really looking forward to the conversation today um, and ... and diving in on how to have a great conversation, but before we do that (laughs) I'd love to hear, and I think everybody who's listening would really love to hear about where you grew up, what you loved to do as a child.

Lisa: Oh, what a great question to start with, thank you for asking. Um, I grew up in the outskirts of Philadelphia uh, in the mainline suburbs, in just a beautiful area that was filled with a lot of warmth, a lot of care, we had access to great universities all around us, and I think one of the most formative things for me in my childhood is that I went to a Quaker high school, and had spent most of my education in public school, and in 10th grade switched to this different environment, and Whitney, I really think that's put me on the path to having a human-centered focus in life.

I ... I am not a Quaker, but through that experience learn the power of reflection, the power of what happens when a community takes responsibility for organizing itself, and it really put me on a path of being courageous in my own discovery of asking questions and creating community around me, so it's all-

Whitney: Why ... why did you change schools? I mean that ... there's an interesting story no doubt there, how ...

Lisa: (laughs)

Whitney: ... how did that happen?

Lisa: It is an interesting story, and there's actually quite a bit of drama to it uh, in the fact that not only did I change schools in 10th grade, which is not a traditional time that you change schools, I changed schools one week into my 10th grade year, and the honest story is that I was at a very large public s- high school that was socially hard, uh, it felt a little bit like "The Breakfast Club" where there was-

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: ... a lot of um, pressure to perform, and to be great, and the time I wasn't someone that felt great about my talents, and abilities, and who I was, and I had a very thoughtful and caring uh, mother who is a um, psychologist, and Chief Learning Officer, so who just had a ... a ... a wise perspective that said, "If you're in an environment that's not supporting you to be your best self, why don't we switch?" And uh, was just very fortunate that the school I switched to had an opening and truly changed the course of my life.

Whitney: Wow, you know, hearing you say that it reminds me um, a few episodes ago uh, I [interviewed Benjamin Hardy](#), he wrote a terrific book, which I highly recommend called um, [Willpower Doesn't Work](#) and the whole idea is ... is that it's ... it's our environment, very much determines what we want to do and how we do it, and if we want to change something we need to change our environment, and so it's fascinating to have you say you ... you know you could have said, your mom could have said, "You got to just tough it out here Lisa at ... at this high school where you're not thriving, and you both had the wisdom, and I think for you the courage 'cause you may have been in a lot of pain, but it was still probably hard to change schools. I mean you're 15 years old, and that feels scary, and yet you did it, and like you said it really made a difference.

Lisa: It really did. I mean I ... I know Whitney you've dedicated your career to thinking about disruption, and it's probably one of the most disruptive moments of my whole life, and as you said at 15 I couldn't have possibly known that. Uh, so I'm now as a parent so grateful to my parent to have the courage uh, and the willingness to say, "You know what? This isn't a great fit, let's try something else." Um, just to come full circle on this story, I now live in the Bay Area, I have for the last 20 years, and after writing my first book [Moments of Impact](#) I had the opportunity to go back to my Quaker high school as the Alumni speaker, and got to sit in on my beloved teacher's class, that really um ...

Whitney: Oh.

Lisa: ... changed how I felt about myself as a student, and got to see through adult eyes how he greeted every student, with care, with concern, with connection, welcoming them by their first name, checking in with them, and in my work now as an innovation adviser, and as you said aware of the power of environment, I was just struck by that moment, and how subtle but powerful it was for every student to feel seen and heard, and how if leaders could help every one of their team members, or people that are working everyday so hard to bring about value and impact feel seen and heard, what a beautiful place we would be living in.

Whitney: Oh, I just got chills, and I almost started crying, can you give a shout-out to this teacher, because what a great man.

Lisa: An incredible name, his name is Gary Nikolai, and he taught international relations, he touched many, many hundreds of students life ... lives, and he recently retired, and the outpouring of care uh, and love, and gratitude for this man was truly extraordinary, so thank you for giving me that opportunity.

Whitney: Yeah, when you said that, I can just picture in my mind you walking into the classroom and him looking at you, and seeing you, and calling you by name, very, very powerful, thank you ... thank you for sharing that Lisa, and it ... it sounds like as you said it's been formative and really informed your work um, throughout your career, so very quickly where did you end up going to college, what did you study, what did you think you were gonna be, and then I'd love to have us well let's ... let's start there.

Lisa: Yeah, fa- fantastic. Uh, so from uh, that wonderful Quaker school, I went to Cornell uh, I was a ...

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa: ... government major, I thought I wanted to change the world through politics, and my first job right out of school was actually working on a campaign, a Senate race for Pennsylvania where I was from, I was working for Harris Wofford, who is just a tremendous individual, pioneer, helped start the Peace Corps uh, AmeriCorps, and uh, was really fighting for what I thought to be the opportunity to have a public servant be in office that would represent the people. Uh, it was an incredible first job Whitney, because what I learned when you work on a campaign, it is that is the ultimate startup, there is this deadline called Election Day ...

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: ... and it is pure hustle, and there are uh, currencies involved with a campaign that are just unlike any other experience, uh, and so it really taught me the power of ... of building relationships, of being resourceful, of thinking outside the box every day in order to meet the milestones. Um, so it was a tremendous experience, and I will share that after that experience; unfortunately, Senator Wofford lost, it was disheartening across many levels, and sadly 25+ years later many of those systemic problems in our political system are still present if not more so, and I personally decided that that was not going to be my future, and so I ... I made a pivot to work at a consulting firm uh, that what we ... we would call it now a design thinking innovation firm, at the time in the early '90s we just called it marketing. (laughs)

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: Helping companies grow by building different kinds of relationships with their customers, and it was there uh, that I got a deep understanding of the power of creating value when you listen, and honor your customers deeply, and that set me on a whole course of using design as a mechanism for value creation.

Whitney: Interesting. So, couple thoughts that are coming to my mind, number one is your life may have been completely different had Harris Wofford won.

Lisa: Yes.

Whitney: Right?

Lisa: Yes, uh-

Whitney: Right? I mean him losing you're like, "Yeah, maybe this isn't for me," him winning, you might have felt differently, which is interesting like how sort of life decisions can turn on these seemingly small um, e- events and outcomes. The second question I have for you is I might not be the only ... I might be the only person, but I doubt it, I hear the term Design Thinking all the time ...

Lisa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: ... and I have no idea what it actually ...

Lisa: (laughs)

Whitney: ... means.

Lisa: Thank you for sharing that. Yes.

Whitney: Could you tell us, um, I think it's probably the same thing people hear disruptive innovation and are like, "What do you mean?" And so I have to you know distill it down for them, so when you're at a cocktail party, and people are like, "Design Thinking, Lisa what does it mean?" Can you give us just a very simple, simple example for our listeners who are like, "I hear it, but it doesn't mean anything to me."

Lisa: Right, it just sounds like gobbledygook, I'm gonna nod and politely not uh, smile but I really have no idea, yes thank you for asking that question. I actually like to talk about design thinking first by talking about design, what is design, and all of us are affected by both good design and bad design, and to me good design, even great design, is something, a product, a service, an experience that delivers two thing ... two things, one is functional utility, it helps us get a job done, and two, emotional engagement, it connects us at the human level right?

So when we sleep out at night to get the latest iPhone, we're doing that because uh, the iPhone allows us to do things from a connectivity and computing standpoint that we couldn't possibly do before, certainly not before it got created, and two, we love it. It makes us feel something, and so you could see lots of products that have a ... a ... a premium on design, Tesla, a Dyson vacuum, uh, a Herman Miller chair, why do we pay more money for these things? Because they deliver a job for us, *and* we feel something for it okay?

So that's great design, and I would love for all of your listeners to be both better consumers of great design, and also the next part is what does it mean to be a designer, to be better designers?

Whitney: Can we s- can we stop for just a second ...

Lisa: Yes.

Whitney: ... before you go to better designer? Because that's really interesting the way you describe that. So the parlance I would use, and so we can do a little bit of translating cross-cultural conversation, is something um, called jobs to be done ...

Lisa: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yes.

Whitney: ... and um, if I think about jobs to be done, I think about it in terms of whenever you're hiring a product, you're hiring it for a functional reason um, like you know when I buy a house I'm hiring it because I want a roof over my head, um, the size of the house or what kind of house um, largely has to do with emotional reasons, do I want it really, really big so I can entertain, or really big because I want to impress people, or do I just need it super small because I want to impress people, you know, because I want to have a small house, so that's interesting.

So good design is what you're saying is functional job makes us feel good, for me jobs to be done, what's the functional, what's the emotional job, and we need to have both of those boxes checked if it's good design, would you say that's accurate?

Lisa: That is exactly accurate, and I'm so glad you brought up jobs to be done, because when I taught at the design MBA program for many years here in the Bay Area in San Francisco, that was a core tool that we used, and model for helping students understand how to be better investigators of the job to be done, and going back to your question around what is design thinking, I would argue that design thinking is a methodology that allows us to discover what job needs to be done, so being in ... in inquiry mode, and being open to understanding that a job to be done for our customer, or user, or partner may be very different than the job we want done right?

So you have to ...

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

Lisa: ... employ empathy and uh, curiosity around that first part of the discovery process, around even identifying what that job to be done is.

Whitney: Right.

Lisa: The second part of Design Thinking is then experimenting around an idea that might meet that job to see if that idea you have is desirable, do they want it, feasible, can it be built, and viable, can it make money. So that's really design thinking, design thinking is a process of discovery, and experimentation around a certain target user trying to identify what they actually need in their life.

Whitney: Can you give us a really good example of that?

Lisa: Yes. I'll even go back to uh, my very, very first Design Thinking project, which again we didn't call it that at the time, but uh, I was in my early 20s, I got this job at this

innovation firm, we were hired by Dunkin' Donuts who was worried that in the early '90s uh, their customers had discovered that donuts were actually fattening ... (laughs)

Whitney: (laughs)

Lisa: ... that they were a fried product, and this was a revelation watching me, and Jane Fonda was very big, and everyone was very interested in losing weight and cutting calories, and they said, "This will disrupt us." Because no one ... all of the market research shows that no one is going to buy a doughnut anymore, and at the same time there was a brand new startup that had just emerged on the southeastern part of the United States called Krispy Kreme, and rumor had it that Krispy Kreme had lines around the block of people waiting for their fresh doughnuts, which flied in the face of all of this market research.

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: So I went down to Krispy Kreme with the largest video camera you can imagine, because again this is early '90s, it was not in my phone ...

Whitney: Right.

Lisa: ... and I started interviewing people, and trying to discover what job was that donut doing for those people, what was the-

Whitney: Uh, tasting the donuts I hope?

Lisa: Tasting the donuts of course.

Whitney: Okay, all right. What job the donuts were doing, okay what did they say?

Lisa: Um, what it ... oh my gosh it was a bonanza, Whitney, they said anything from, well if I bring in a dozen of Krispy Kreme donuts to my PTA meeting, everyone's gonna say yes, to my idea, to - I'm buying a donut because I have the worst day ahead of me, and this tiny bit of goodness is gonna make me feel so good going into this hard day, to - I'm gonna bring them back for my kids because they're gonna love me much more, and so it was this perfect example of all of these very different jobs that this donut was doing for these people other than I want to lose weight, or be healthy.

Whitney: They were all emotional jobs too, right?

Lisa: Oh, emotional jobs, emotional jobs, social jobs, communal jobs, um, strategic jobs, not functional jobs, we know there's not a lot of nutritional value in those doughnuts uh, so we took back this footage and we showed it to the client, and what they realized was possibly the worst thing they could have done was create a low-fat donut, and take out that social joy of what a donut represents, by cheapening the quality of their product, or lessening it, and ultimately led to the discovery of, well, what if you enhanced the other

big product that you sell, which is coffee, and this was the origins of them expanding their coffee line into flavored coffee, and different kinds of coffee.

Whitney: Interesting, interesting. Okay, so then to go back to the design thinking, you said is it ... is it feasible, is it profitable, what was the first one?

Lisa: So, is it desirable right? So is it desirable-

Whitney: Is it desirable, is it feasible ...

Lisa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: ... okay, say it through ...

Lisa: And is it viable.

Whitney: ... desirable, is it feasible, is it viable.

Lisa: Right.

Whitney: Okay.

Lisa: I ... I would say the Design Thinking part in particular is best for the desirable part, because it is so human centered, so human focused.

Whitney: Interesting. Okay, that's a great example. All right, you are currently the chair of transformation practices and leadership at [Singularity University](#), what do you do exactly? I guess first of all w- who and what is Singularity University for all of our listeners ...

Lisa: Yeah.

Whitney: ... and then what do you do there?

Lisa: Singularity University is an organization based in the Bay Area, but has a global footprint, it was started over 10 years ago by two wonderful futurists, Ray Kurzweil who wrote [The Singularity is Near](#) who is now a director of engineering at Google, and Peter Diamandis, who is a big bowl visionary thinker, responsible for many moonshot ideas, like uh, uh, the [XPRIZE](#), like uh, uh, mining asteroids for natural resources, (laughs) like uh, trying to help us all live to be 150 years old, so these are big thinkers uh, that came together to create an institution that would educate executives, and entrepreneurs, and changemakers around the world, about all of the emerging technologies that would meaningfully disrupt our future.

What they observed was that you could go to individual institutions to get expertise on say robotics, or digital biology, or uh, AI, but there was no one place to go to get a cross view of how these technologies were going to impact the world individually, and by

converging, and so that was the idea. It started 10 years ago, and uh, it has uh, over the years educated many of these e- executives through a variety of programs uh, including ones that ... where people come to Silicon Valley to do these deep dives on these technologies. I got involved with the organization about three years ago, because they realized, we're doing a really good job introducing these executives across all sectors to these technologies, but what do they do with that? How does that then change their behaviors when they go back to their organizations? What new questions are they asking? What new practices are they embodying to model a different kind of leadership, and to support their organizations to become more flexible and resilient in the midst of all this change?

So I started developing complementary practices, these transformational practices, that would allow leaders to apply what they were learning on technologies to their strategies and organizations. So therefore uh, they could come back and help bring their knowledge back to their organizations in uh, accessible and meaningful ways.

Whitney: So you've been there for three years, and um, and so people go, they do this really deep dive, they learn about AI, they learn about blockchain, and then you help them basically translate and say, "Okay, you've learned all of this, let us now help you figure out what to do with this and apply it inside of your organization."

Lisa: Absolutely, and ... and particularly in the last year what I've been focusing on is the leadership part, so what does this mean for you as a leader?

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: And you know Whitney I don't know where your e- early training was around uh, thinking about leadership, but for me it was very much the model of the heroic leader, when I went to business school uh, about ...

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: ... 20 years ago, it was you know leaders have vision and they cascade it down to the organization, well given the world that we're living in, that model doesn't work anymore.

First of all, it's very hard for a single individual to have all these answers, uh, so we really need to change our frame of leadership, and going back to what we were talking about earlier, leader as condition creator for everyone in the organization to be curious, to observe what's going on around them, to have the facility to bring something forward that might then amplify to meaningful change, and so what I've been doing is articulating new leadership practices a- that I believe complement some of the old leadership models around um, presence, and reflection uh, to help them understand how can they, for example lead like a futurist, how could they get more comfortable dreaming boldly about what the future might hold, and comfortable with the ambiguity that might come with that.

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: How can they get comfortable leading like an innovator, bringing new ideas to life, and rigorously testing that, how can they get comfortable leading like a technologist, understanding that technology is and will continue to be an increasingly important driver of change, and how most importantly can they lead like a humanitarian, making ethical and responsible choices for people in the planet, and that leading this way is teachable and learnable, but we have to get serious about it.

Whitney: So you've been doing a lot of innovating around leadership, or leadership models?

Lisa: Yes.

Whitney: You've been at Singularity for three years, you've been thinking very deeply about how to apply these ideas, and what does leadership look like so that um, people can lead as futurists, how have you changed as a consequence of the work that you've been doing the last few years?

Lisa: (laughs) That's a great question. Each day Whitney, I think I'm more humbled (laughs) by the things ...

Whitney: (laughs)

Lisa: ... I don't know. Um, I think the biggest change for me is to be ... is to remind myself to be in an open stance um, just about every uh, conversation I have, every opportunity um, to both educate uh, leaders and ... and ... and work with them, but equally important learn from them. Um, I ... I think that uh, the more open we are to showing up as learners um, it's the best stance we have towards uh, first of all imagining the future we want to bring to life, and then taking steps to actually do it.

Whitney: You know, when you say the word stance, it's interesting because I'm just ... I'm listening to a [book on body language](#) by Joe Navarro, he was a CIA intelligence officer, and he talks about body language, so when you think about stance, um, and you're listening to people and being open as a learner, what does that physically look like in your mind when I'm listening to you, or you're listening to me and your stance is open to me, what does that physically look like or conjure up for you?

Lisa: Yeah, it's a ... what a great question. Uh, for me first of all it looks (laughs) like this may sound crazy Whitney, but first of all it looks like looking, putting the phone down, and making eye contact.

Whitney: (laughs)

Lisa: So it actually starts with you know having your shoulders square to the person, perhaps leaning in, and actually looking at them as if ... and hopefully you truly are ... curious about what they're about to say.

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: That ... that you recognize that the ... they're ... the other person sharing ideas or questions is a gift to you, is an offer. Um, I've been doing a lot of work in the last few years around incorporating practices of improvisational theater into my work ...

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa: ... as a facilitator, as an educator, um, because the premise of improvisational theater is that you have to see uh, what's offered to you as something that you can build on, and take in, and it really puts you in this generous stance. Um, so ... so the presence is leaning in, being um, uh, embodying a desire to be where you are, to be present and to be open to whatever is going to come your way.

Whitney: Yeah, the image I have is just like really opening out your body, and just being ... your toes pointed to them like you said, their shoulders, etc.

Lisa: Yeah.

Whitney: So, fascinating, okay.

Lisa: So can I give you another quick anecdote of something that's just-

Whitney: Absolutely.

Lisa: ... so exciting? Uh, so last week I had the opportunity to be in New York and attend the [Stephen Colbert](#) show, and if you want to see someone who has prepared themselves to listen, I think all of your listeners can watch a masterclass in listening by watching the [Stephen Colbert](#) show, it was extraordinary. The way that he uh, engages his guests in true conversation um, is really incredible.

Whitney: Wow. Okay, everybody are you listening? It's time to go-

Lisa: How's that for a homework assignment?

Whitney: ... it's time to go watch the [Stephen Colbert](#) show, which leads us to the question that I alluded to at the very beginning, is you've written a book called [Moments of Impact: How to Design Strategic Conversations That Can Accelerate Change](#) and you gave a TEDx talk on this, and some ... here's some interesting statistics, and this is especially timely for me, because I was having a conversation with a CEO client just yesterday who was talking about we need to have more productive meetings, so he ... here are your statistics, 1.2 billion hours wasted in America every year, I'm assuming, I actually don't know whether it's year or month, but anyway ...

Lisa: Yeah.

Whitney: ... at 1.2 billion it's a lot of hours, an average person spends four hours per week in meetings, important discussions happen in the overtime after the meeting, and then you talk about four types of meetings um, the strongman meeting where you cram in as much as possible, you've got the military meeting where you follow the agenda and time regardless of value, the thousand flowers meeting - no agenda everyone just throws stuff in, and then the groundhog meeting, conversation just repeats over and over again. So I'd love for you to comment on that, and then let's talk about what makes a great meeting, and how people can have better meetings.

Lisa: Yeah, absolutely. I'm so glad that you brought this up, um, and maybe some of your listeners can relate even just to the descriptions of these different meetings and say, "Oh my gosh, I have one of those coming up right now." Um, yeah, I mean the genesis for the book, [*Moments of Impact: Designing Strategic Conversations to Accelerate Change*](#) was this realization that my co-author, Chris Ertel and I had, which is that we're actually not really taught how to have a great conversation, and certainly not taught how to design it. So getting back to our conversation earlier around what's the job to be done in this conversation.

We're taught to manage meetings based on the constraints that we had, how much time do we have, who needs to be in the room, and what do we need to get decided right? What are the agenda items that we need to go through, that is not a conversation right? That is jamming information uh, down whoever's in the room right? Just ... just getting through it. Conversations are interactive, conversations have connectivity, conversations often start with generative questions, but we're not ... we've never really been taught how to do it, and you know the interesting analogy of this is thanks to for example the uh, TED channel, we all now know what a fabulous presentation looks like right? We've seen hundreds of them.

How many people have seen a great conversation, and then had the discipline to understand what made it great? So this was really a power tour around what makes for a great conversation, we interviewed over 100 what we call black belt designers of conversations, people that really had a different sensibility about what a conversation could be, and we wanted to offer best practices, not a recipe, but principles, and ideas, that anybody could put into play.

Whitney: With that, let's talk about designing a great conversation. Can you give us some tips um, for how you would do that, if I said to you, "Okay, Lisa, I am about to go into a meeting, and we've got, you know, an hour scheduled for the meeting, we've got you know 15 people coming into the room, um, we're ... some things that we need to go over, and analyze, see what our thoughts and sights are, where we want to go next." Um, what would you say to me? How would you, you know, just give us some tips.

Lisa: (laughs) I get that question a lot Whitney. Uh ...

Whitney: I'm sure you do, it's probably ... it's like ... it's like me telling you know talking to a doctor and telling them that I have a problem, you're probably like, "How do I structure a meeting?" So, all right, so you've ... you've got a ready answer I hope?

Lisa: Well, sure. I mean the first thing I would say, and I ... and I ... and I think again a lot of your listeners can probably really relate, that they probably have one of those coming up tomorrow. The first thing I would say to you is Whitney pretend the meeting is over, right? So your meeting is from 1:00 to 2:00, pretend it's 2:01, what has happened? If this meeting was successful, this conversation was successful, uh, what do the participants know as a result of their time with you? What have they uh, discussed and socialized, and equally important how do they feel? Are they energized? Are they motivated?

So first of all just designing backwards is a really helpful place to start, because as you said a lot of people start with the agenda. I have one hour, so here's what I'm going to do, first five minutes, opening welcome, second five minutes is going to be an update, third five minutes, and so they design it from the bottom up without saying, "Hey, if we carve out the time that way, is that really gonna meet my goals? Is that really gonna get the job done?" So that can be the first and most important question that anybody listening to this can ask themselves, it's - let me design backwards, it's the end of the conversation, it's the end of the off-site, it's the end of the fill in the blank, what has happened?

Whitney: Is there any ideal length to meetings now that you've structured what you want to have happen at the end um, any thoughts there?

Lisa: I'm not sure, it would very much depend on what ... what needs to happen. Um, I'll give just another uh, bit of color to the, once you've decided you know working backwards, what is it that you really want to be done. Um, one of the most important things that you can do is to really decide the purpose of the conversation, um, and what we articulate in the book is that there are really only three big purposes to any conversation, um, one is building understanding right? So a lot of times we get people together to just make sure we're all aligned on, hey what's our goals for next year, or um, hey uh, we want to start this new innovation process, why are we even doing it, um, hey we ... we're about to enter a new market, what does success look like.

So notice we're not making decisions, we're just socializing understanding around a new initiative, or a new goal, that's ... that's one purpose.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa: A second purpose is then shaping options, so sometimes we'll say, "Oh hey, you know what? It's important that we um, initiate an innovation program." Okay? Again, we're not saying how, we're just ... we're all getting aligned on the why, then the next purpose is, "well, how might we do that? That's the shaping options conversation ...

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: ... and then the third purpose, or kind of conversation is making decisions right? So once we build understanding, and once we've explored a range of options, now we're ready to make decisions. Now you can see Whitney the tension here, because a lot of times we get in a room with each other, and what's the number one goal people say, "Hey

what do you want to get out of this meeting?" I guarantee you, more than 90% they'll say, decisions, next steps, I want to get to outcomes, but I can promise you if you have not done the legwork on building understanding about the why, around then the range of options so that everybody's aligned around how those range of options may or may not meet that why, the decision you make will not be successful, and that's what happens.

Whitney: Right.

Lisa: We jam these uh, three different purposes into one meeting, they're not framed properly, and so the outcome, everybody's nodding, "Yup, great meeting, yeah we got to a decision." But they leave there and they say, "I have no idea what I just agreed to." Or ...

Whitney: Right.

Lisa: ... even more insidious, "I agreed, but I actually don't believe it's gonna work."

Whitney: Question, you talk about discovery oriented conversations, what is that?

Lisa: Great question. First of all, discovery oriented questions has to start with a real desire to learn something. (laughs) Right? It sounds silly right? But ... and ... and that's so important in this world that we're living in filled with all of these wicked problems these adaptive challenges that don't have easy answers right? We have to first as leaders, as change makers, say to ourselves, "Look, I know this is a problem, first of all is the problem I'm observing the right problem?" Right? "Am I framing it the right way?" Because a lot of times the presenting problem, or what's causing us concern, is actually just a prompt to be in discovery mode about the larger set of issues going on, so that when we apply problem-solving methods we're actually applying those problem-solving methods on the right place, right? On the right problem.

So for example, and I'll give you just to bring this way, a lot of times a company will say, "We need to improve our product, we have to improve our product, let's make incremental improvements to improve our product." When sometimes the right question is to say is, "Should we even be continuing this product at all? What's changing around the customer behavior that we need to pay attention to, to see if our product is even the right product to meet their need?"

Whitney: Okay, so the discovery oriented conversation then is starting with some reflection around, are we ... what are the right questions to be asking?

Lisa: Absolutely, are we even asking the right questions, and one of my favorite just being very practical here, because I imagine your listeners really want tools, um, my favorite technique of doing this is something called question storming, so we all know about brainstorming right? Which again is symptomatic of the fact that we are walking problem solvers, which is wonderful, except if we're solving the wrong problem right?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa: So someone will say, "Hey, we've got to fix uh, this market." And was like, "Try this, try this, try this." So what question storming does, is instead of throwing out all these ideas around how to solve the problem, you start with a statement, and then you actually brainstorm the questions. What are all the questions that come up when we say this statement? So for example, if you said, "Hey we've really got to create an innovative culture." Okay, great. We got to create an innovative culture, put that in the middle and then allow people for 10 minutes to come up with every single question that pops in their mind about creating an innovative culture just to see what comes up, and then you can cluster the questions, you can refine the questions, and you'll probably get to a different um, set of things to research, to wonder about.

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: But it just makes sure that you're not narrowing too quickly.

Whitney: Love it. It's ... i- it's interesting um, so earlier this week I did um, I did an off-site and so you know oftentimes you do key notes but sometimes I facilitate workshops, and I was thinking about just this whole as you're talking I think about this process 'cause facilitating a workshop is a very, very, very, very different skillset that actually delivering a keynote, because it requires you to do what you just said, and I'm thinking. "Oh there's so many things that I could do different and better now that I've heard this."

Lisa: (laughs)

Whitney: Which is really exciting right? Because now the next off-site will be better because I asked you these questions and you gave me these wonderful answers, so um, but it is interesting to think about um, when you're having that kind of conversation that requires you as the facilitator in that conversation to be very willing and open to um, allowing questions to emerge that you hadn't thought of and then to allow the group to see where those questions take you, and it will frequently be probably unexpected places.

Lisa: I could not agree more. I mean, I think one of the most important skillsets that all leaders, and I imagine all of your listeners can really make a commitment to getting better at is facilitating conversations. It is an entirely different skillset, and again, we're not taught how to do it. To be a facilitator means you're in service to the people in the room, that you have to be open to what arises right? The offer that arises and to be in extreme listening mode, to look for themes, to look for connections, to look for tensions, to recognize them, and to be able to find patterns, and be able to synthesize what the room is offering you. That's hard.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative) I think everybody who's listening is gonna feel like, "I've never thought of a facilitator that way." I mean you've really elevated it in my mind and probably to a lot of people's minds. Um, so one other quick question for you before we talk about some ways that people can learn and observe great conversations, um, you

talk about peak emotional moments inside of a group meeting, could you just talk a little bit more about that?

Lisa: I don't know about you Whitney, but a lot of times when I'm invited to facilitate um, a very important conversation, a board meeting, something that will meaningfully affect the trajectory of an organization, uh, they often find ... they often reserve the boardroom, right? Something very serious (laughs) you have a big table, big oak table, you know, deep leather chairs, and the conversation is often uh, kind of anchored in a PowerPoint with a lot of numbers right? And we're talking about serious stuff, and uh, what tends to happen is that the emotional level in the room is like flatlined, you know? It's completely neutral, because we're talking about serious stuff all right?

Whitney: (laughs)

Lisa: ... and what's ... what's missing, and what's so critical is that emotion piece right? When you ask a provocative question, or when you bring in a different perspective right? Or when you share a story, right? Let's say you bring in someone that you're trying to serve, your customer, a beneficiary, into the room, and they share their story, what happens? Emotions start going, and we might feel excited, or motivated, or inspired, or we might feel sad, or upset, or fear, and what I want to suggest is that there's incredible data in those emotions; in fact, more insightful data in those emotions about what got us excited, or what made us fearful, that are important to incorporate into the conversation about the future of that organization ...

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: ... and when we default to having board meetings that are run by PowerPoints with mostly numbers, we are missing that data, and so a lot of what [Moments of Impact](#) is about, is about giving designers of con- conversations, facilitators of conversations permission, and in fact even motivation to allow that emotion to come into the room in a helpful way.

Whitney: Right, and that takes a master.

Lisa: (laughs)

Whitney: That takes a master and what's-

Lisa: It takes courage for sure, it definitely-

Whitney: Right.

Lisa: ... takes courage because you don't know right? You don't know, and because also just socially we're not used to it, we're not used to you know emotion - that's sloppy, versus emotion - that's useful, thank you ...

Whitney: Right.

Lisa: ... thank you for sharing who you are, thank you-

Whitney: Right.

Lisa: ... for giving me that insight that you care about this, now we can do something about it.

Whitney: Yeah, and it's interesting too what you said earlier, is this idea of design thinking, and we're so focused on the functional, which ...

Lisa: Yes.

Whitney: ... you were saying board meeting functional, but we're leaving out the vast, vast, you know, expanse of the emotional, which is really what ... what really actually like. I remember hearing a saying once a ... a long time ago, an investor saying, you know, "We make decisions emotionally, and then we come up with the data to prove what we want to do." And I think that happens with so much of our life. We make a decision emotionally, and then we try to come up with the data to prove why we're gonna do what we're gonna do. Okay, all right, so super interesting, now my question to you as we start to wrap up, how can people um, watch and observe good conversations at work so that they can have a master class like they do with TED and presentations, any thoughts?

Lisa: I wish I had the conversation channel for them to just pop into, oh go see the conversationchannel.com and Whitney maybe that's an idea you and I can play with after this.

Whitney: Uh, yeah. (laughs)

Lisa: (laughs) But the tru- the truth is um, first of all just to bring their awareness to this as a skillset that they can master, pay attention to conversations that they are in, in the course of their day, that actually were meaningful to them, where they actually kept thinking about it, that stuck with them, so they can learn to observe colleagues that seem naturally good at having conversations, and then maybe ask them, "Hey, how did you have that conversation? What did you think about?" Um, so you can just start to observe people around you, and start to inquire about their approach to having that conversation, what did they do ahead of time to prepare for it, why did they make that decision in the moment to go down one path or another, so that's one very practical thing people can do.

The other is similarly like we talked about watching [Stephen Colbert](#) on television, watch for great hosts. I used to watch Oprah uh, to ta- to ... to see how she would engage her guests and the audience, she is a master of conversations.

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: Um, how did she do that, and it takes a tremendous amount of prep, and I think that's the thing that people don't really realize, it's not that they're not capable of having great

conversations, they probably haven't done the prep. What we used to say when we would prep for strategic conversations, or off-site, and I'd be curious to hear your perspective on this, it takes at least three times the amount of time to prep for the conversation than you're in the conversation, so if you have an all-day off-site that's eight hours, it should take at least 25 hours, perhaps even 50 hours to prepare for that.

You have to think through every detail, that's really hard to do in a world that's forcing us ... us to speed up right? Forcing us to be reactive. So carving out the time to honor the fact that you are responsible for all of these people coming together to have a meaningful experience, how do you prepare for that ahead of time?

Whitney: It's a great advice. Can you talk to us about a conversation for you that has been especially meaningful?

Lisa: I think one of the most meaningful conversations I've had is with a colleague of mine that actually uh, teaches improvisational theater over at Oxford um, wonderful gentleman by the name of Robert Poiton, who really taught me this concept of offers, um, how do we look at the world through the lens of offers so that we can have more agency in making choices, and I remember talking to him about uh, a situation that I was in that felt compromising, that just felt like uh, I was ... I was working with a group of people who were exhibiting values that were not aligned uh, with my value system, and he just reminded me to say, "Can you find some offers there?"

You know, what ... what are the offers for yourself, you know, how can you notice more about why you're feeling what you're feeling in relation to your value system and their value system, um, and is there anything in the exchange between you and this organization that um, that you can build upon noticing more about what you care about to ask a different question to hopefully get them to reflect on something that they might learn from, um, and to you know at some point realize that perhaps you know continuing to work with them wasn't the best choice. So, you know, a- another part of what he shares around improv is can you let go? Can you let go of a preconceived notion that you need to solve something, or that you need to make them better, but that you can acknowledge that you have a differences of approaches, and that maybe that, right?

And so can you ... can you let go with grace ...

Whitney: Hmm.

Lisa: ... and stay true to who you are, so.

Whitney: It's lovely. Okay, lovely, lovely. What are you gonna do to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

Lisa: Well, I'm very excited um, that in the uh, coming month uh, next month, I will be s-teaching a new class at Stanford with my dear colleague and friend Tina Seelig, who's written quite a number of books on innovation, called "[Inventing the Future](#)," and we will be creating an entirely new class that will allow students to do deep dives on

technology, fused with futurist practices, to uh, enter into debates, ethical and moral debates about where these technologies are going, and I'm so excited Whitney because there is no doubt that every single class I am going to learn as much if not more than these students, and so that makes me very excited.

Whitney: Hmm, that sounds like a ... a fun, fun, fun class, I'm thinking, "How can I be a fly on the wall of that class?"

Lisa: (laughs)

Whitney: So, that's always a good sign when people are ... are clamoring to hear what you have to say. Well Lisa thank you, this has been an absolute delight, um, my brain is whirring with ideas and not ... not worrying but whirring um, and just thank you again for being with us today, it's ... it's truly been a pleasure.

Lisa: Whitney, thank you so much, it's been a fun conversation, and uh, I really appreciate all the wonderful questions you asked, and this chance to uh, to learn with you.

There were so many takeaways for me in this conversation with Lisa---

Like, before you go into a meeting, think about how you want people to feel at the end of the meeting. We think about this for a speech. And there are a lot of resources or models for us on how to deliver a great keynote. Just go to [TED](#). (By the way, you have [June Cohen](#) -- we had her on our podcast -- for being able to watch these talks online.

But what about a meeting. A class you are teaching. It may not be big lights, big stage. But a workshop, facilitating a conversation that is its very own kind of hard. With its own kind of magic. Hearing from Lisa that you need to spend 24 hours preparing for an 8 hour workshop, really elevates the role of facilitator. It includes lot of improvisation. It's a conversation where there's a lot more can go wrong, and a lot more that can go right. I loved her suggestion to watch [Stephen Colbert](#). It made me think I want to take an improv class—so, open to your suggestions, dear listeners. I also wonder if whereas TED can help you learn how to keynote, can podcast interviews, help us learn to be better conversationalists?

Practical tip: Next time you are preparing for a meeting with your colleagues or clients, instead of thinking of this as a presentation (like you would classical music) reframe it as a conversation (jazz-improvisation). What are you going to say? And what do you want to hear? And when things start to move in a direction that's unexpected, what will you do? For further help, listen to the podcast episode with [Harold O'Neal](#).

If you'd like to have more conversations with us about all things personal disruption, you can sign up for our weekly newsletter at whitneyjohnson.com. Or just e-mail us at wj@whitneyjohnson.com and say you'd like to subscribe. If you talk, I'll talk back. Politely, of course.

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

I'm Whitney Johnson and This is Disrupt Yourself.
And this is Disrupt Yourself.