

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPIISODE 98: MELISSA SMITH

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. My name is Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. My guest is Melissa Smith, the CEO of WEX, a \$7 billion market cap company providing corporate payment solutions. WEX is one of the largest and best loved companies in Maine, in the northern, north eastern United States, and it's in no small part due to Melissa's leadership.

Whitney: Welcome Melissa.

Melissa: Thank you, Whitney.

Whitney: I understand you grew up in a very small town. Will you tell us what that was like?

Melissa: Sure. There were only about 400 people in the town that I grew up in, and I grew up on a farm, a working farm. And, and I said, it was a great way to grow up for many, many reasons. I, I think in part because you um, when you're in a small community everybody contributes just out of necessity, and so you learn that you can't just be a by-stander. You actually have to be active, which is, you know, I think the life is you've got to show up and, and you don't have to do that in a small community.

I also think working on a farm, some of my loves in life, my love of the outdoors, my love of, of being around not just people, but environments um, come from that. And uh, and again, even in my household everyone had to contribute just out of necessity, and so I think that was important to, to me growing up.

And then you actually don't end up having to pick your lane when you grow up in a small area um, because you can be many things. I was the captain of our math team, but I also was the captain of the cheerleading squad and on the soccer team. And this kind of concept that you pick one thing that you are, meaning that I'm going to be preppy, or I'm going to be smart or, that actually doesn't play out, at least in my experience it didn't in a smaller community, because you just by necessity need to participate in many different things. And so this concept of thinking of myself in one way or feeling limited, you know, wasn't presented in my uh, growing up experience.

Whitney: That's really powerful. So what kind of farm was it? Just so our listeners can have in their mind.

Melissa: (laughs) It was a potato farm, and actually the potatoes in Maine largely are seed potatoes for potatoes in other states, so we had animals and horses, and you know, things of all kinds of activity going through our house at any given point in time.

Whitney: So before we move off the farm, I have to ask what was one of the hardest job you did as you were growing up on the farm.

Melissa: My first job, when you get old enough you can see over the steering wheel, you actually drive the hay truck when you go to collect hay at the end of the year, but you're not big enough to actually throw them up onto the flatbed, but you're actually big enough to see over the wheel when you're propped up on some pillows. And the rule of thumb when you're driving the truck is that if you don't do it well, and you knock the hay off the back, you actually have to go reload. So I was really young, and so th-that, you know, you had to be conscious in the fact other kids were in the back of the truck and y-you can't roll off (laughs). So that was actually interesting 'cause it's one of my first experiences, and then as you'd get bigger, that it gets a little bit more physical. Th-then you actually have to be the person out there.

Whitney: How old were you, Melissa? Were you 10? 12?

Melissa: Uh, I was, I would have been older than 10, but you know, somewhere around that age. But by the time you're a teenager, you're definitely the one you know, moving things onto it. You get into much more of a physical mode.

Whitney: Alright, so you grew up on a farm, small, small town in Maine. Um, what did you, as you were growing up in, in junior high school and high school, think you wanted to be when you grew up?

Melissa: So my parents tell me that I, we had driven by uh, Gillette's offices, and I had told them that I wanted to be the CEO of Gillette, which was you know, the downside of growing up in a small town is you don't get that exposure to many different things. I liked the fact that my mother worked in the business world, and I always saw her working. And so I knew I wanted to work. I knew I wanted to do something in business, 'cause that kind of interested me.

When I started in college um, I happened t-to take an accounting class. It was one of the requirements for your business degree, and the accounting professor used to write on my tests that I should think about going into public accounting. You know, I, I had an aptitude for math and um, and he actually was the one uh, who then started having conversations with me about it's not as boring as you might think. There's actually, there's a social, an element of being in public accounting, which was really important to me. You actually, you go and meet with clients, you travel, you get to um, you actually get to work in many different environments, and you learn a lot. And he was the one who really got me on the path of, of moving into um, public accounting and having that be my first job.

Whitney: So uh, what was the name of this professor? He sounds like he was a really influential person in your life.

Melissa: Dr. Marshall Geiger is his name. The fact that he took time out, and it, it is a reminder to me that sometimes the little things that you do actually have a pretty big impact on other people's lives, and may he um, he just made effort of making sure that I had context as I made decisions, which was really important to me with my background.

Whitney: So he saw that you had an aptitude. He, he realized, "Oh, she could do public accounting well." And just gave you like you said, a little bit of context so that you could see, he could see a bigger world than you could see from your vantage point, and just shared that with you and guided you, it sounded like, sounds like.

Melissa: Yeah and-and he knew me well enough to understand what was important to me, and I had this image of you know, probably like a lot of kids would, but if you go into an area of accounting, of it being incredibly dull. And um, and he really just kind of said it straight and said uh, "You've got all these preconceived notions. Let me tell you what it's like, 'cause I've actually worked in that environment, and I can, I can actually tell you some of what your experience would look like."

Whitney: You know, I want to just say one more quick things about you know, you as a girl saying, "I wanted to be the CEO of Gillette." And the power of modeling. Um, you made a comment about how your mother worked and so, because your mother worked, you saw that. And I think we've all heard the expression, "If you can see it, you can be it." Um, I remember a few years ago, I was facilitating a session and having a session at a corporation, and they were asking people, "What do you want to be when- What did you want to be when grew up?" And most the people were I think in their 40s, 50s, maybe their 60s, and all of the-the men in the room were like, "Well, I wanted to be a firefighter, and environmental engineer." They all had something. And none of the women had anything. They were like, "Well, I think I wanted to be kind of an actress or s-." You know, something that wasn't really practical at all. And I think it's 'cause they didn't in those instances have role models whereas the men had.

And just interesting to me how your mother modeled for you, and because of what your mother was modeling, it wasn't a ridiculous thing to say, "Oh I want to be the CEO of Gillette."

Melissa: No, it, it is. Whitney you're, you're like hitting on something that's interesting all, so 'cause, my mother was different than other mothers growing up, and I remember being embarrassed because she would show up to my games in a suit when all the other mothers were in jeans. You know, and she- So it um, it was interesting, but I, it was never a question in my mind of whether I was going to go to college. It was never a question in my mind whether I was going to work, because that, not only did my mother do that, my grandmother did that. You know, it, it's, I've got this long history of, of strong women in my life, and that's what I've seen. And I've also seen in the home environment this partnership, where the, like my, my um, stepfather you know, did equally as much around the house you know, frankly if not more. You know, he was really involved of, of you know, all the things you have to do in life, and that's kind of what I had seen as normal and expected, right. When I went into you know, I got married I wanted that to be what my normal was, too. And-and I think that, that's helpful.

Whitney: That's interesting. So you saw in grandmother like, that was really groundbreaking. And then you saw your mom, your stepdad model for you what a partnership could look like at home, and it sounds like from what you're intimating is that um, it's the same now for you with your marriage.

Melissa: Yeah. Yeah, it, it is very much a partnership. I mean it's the only way that I think our life would work, either because um, because we have children, because we both have busy work worlds, and we both travel. And it, it is a lot of partnership and how we think about distributing work at home, too.

Whitney: Yeah. Okay I want to come back to that. Let's put a pin in that question and, and circle back to that in a few minutes, 'cause I, I think it's interesting to explore further. Um, okay so chronologically as we go through your life, so you go, it sounds like you go into public accounting, and then at some point you start as a financial advisor at WEX. At what, how many years out of school were you, and what were you doing exactly for that.

Melissa: Yes, I, I went initially to work for Ernst & Young, was a good fit. And then um, I was at an event, and the next day got a phone call um, from a person who worked for then Write Express, which is the predecessor to WEX. And he called me and said you know, of interest in me, you

left, and I have a job opening for financial analyst, um, I'd love for you to apply. And I told him at the time I'm really not interested. I actually like the path I'm on, and I've been in public accounting for five years I think. I was the manager. And like, I like kind of the path. I liked the work. I liked the people I was working with and, and my customers.

And um, he actually convinced me to come in and meet with the CEO at the time, which I did. And the CEO at the time was sick that day, and um, when I declined the job, I feel like he took that personally. Like, he felt like he could have performed better, and it became then a little bit of a mission for him um, and I ended up taking a job probably maybe six months later. And after the, a series of-of where they did some hardcore press recruiting. And at the end of the day, the thing that the, the, the then CEO said to me is that, "You're going to come work for a company um, where there, the growth of the company will create opportunities for you. You individually will be able to make an impact, and you'll be rewarded for the work that you do."

And it- I, to this day, say the same thing to people who come and work at WEX. You know, I came to work for a \$50 million company, and you know, we're around \$1.5 billion now. So the company is totally changed from then to now, but that same sense of an individual can make an impact is really important to me.

Whitney: Wow! So it took them six months to recruit you. You got to the point where you thought, okay I can make, like you said, he said you can make a real impact here, and I misspoke earlier, I said financial advisor. You joined as a financial analyst, so.

Melissa: I did.

Whitney: So, um.

Melissa: Senior Financial Analyst. (laughs)

Whitney: Make sure we get that senior in there.

Melissa: Yes. (laughs)

Whitney: So you joined the company because the CEO basically recruited you. That's obviously a pretty strong selling point. It was small at the time, but none-the-less. He took an interest in you and in your career. Talk us then through some of the, the moves that had, you've made since, since then.

Melissa: Yeah. And, and say another thing it, it pointed to the little things matter, the first day I came uh, he wasn't there. He was traveling. He left me a note just to say sorry he wasn't there my first day.

Whitney: Wow.

Melissa: So he, he was really good at um, at making people feel connected and um, and my first couple of years, I, I would describe as hard. It was a really hard transition for me to go from um, almost never being in an office to being in an office every day. And um, and the consistency of that, it was, was really hard for me in the beginning, and um, and some of the, you know, great people who worked here encouraged me to just be patient and make sure that I gave it some time.

Um, and it, and then you know, two years later, I mean really pretty happened, happened really fast, I got promoted um, really pretty quickly I became the manager of the group, and then I became the controller. And um, by 2001, so I started in 97, so within four years I became the

CFO. So it, it, it once um, once I started getting promoted, it happened fairly rapidly. And you know, I kind of rule of thumb was to make sure that I was um, really doing really good work um, and if anything helping making whoever my boss was um, their life easier.

And I learned so much in that period of time you know, about the company and, and about um, how to think about th-the path we're on. It- One of the things I fundamentally believe when you're in that finance role is that your job isn't as much about the numbers, 'cause anybody can do the numbers. Your job is about teasing out the story that the numbers are telling you, and-and making sure that you do something with that story. And so the story- may be at any good in point in time, good or bad. But to be able to talk about in a way that is, is um, beyond just the, the data itself.

Whitney: Where do you think that instinct came from, Melissa? 'Cause you-you said earlier that you were um, you know, you're a math, you're a math geek, a quant. Um, where do you think that instinct around um, storytelling and narrative around the numbers came from? Any, any sense?

Melissa: Uh, that's a good, really good question. I never really thought about it. Uh, it's always just been there. My mother's got a Master's Degree in math, you know, the, speaking of the math thing, th-the, being able to see a trend behind the numbers is something that probably just happened for me

Whitney: What does WEX do exactly? I said global payment solutions, but for the uninitiated that are listening, can you say you know, one liner, two liners-

Melissa: (laughs)

Whitney: ... what do you- When your, when your 10 year old child, I know they're not quite 10 yet, but when your children are going to say, "This is what my mom does.", what would you say to them?

Melissa: So we uh, would refer to us as a fin tech company, and so what we do is all about the technology that enables people to make payments easier. And it starts with the technology and integration of the technology into businesses.

Whitney: So payments for fuel, for example.

Melissa: Yeah payments for, it could be for fuel. It could be for healthcare. It could be for travel. It, it's all B2B and um, and you know, at the end of the day, uh, there's typically, we're using data that we're, we're picking up at that, the point of transaction, and we're using that data to make people smarter about the-their purchasing patterns that they have.

Whitney: Hmm.

Melissa: And we do it in a way that, that's reconciled into their financial system that minimizes the amount of touch points.

Whitney: So you not only provide the solution, but then you analyze the patterns and give them information, so they can get better at how they're doing it over time.

Melissa: Yeah and some of that may be through data analytics tools, so we could do it visually. So um, y- we can just lay on a screen a series of transactions in a way that you can see. Think of it as like a scattergram, and you can see an outlier, so you know that those outliers are something that warrant further investigation. Um, or we can add front end control that limits what people can

buy uh, in a way that reduces misuse. And so a lot of what we're doing is-is either creating efficiency or reduce misuse of how a product w-would typically be used.

Whitney: So you took WEX public. Were you the CFO at the time? Were you the CEO? And how did that feel? What was that like? What was that experience like of taking a company public?

Melissa: So I was the CFO, and it was 2005 so um, a while ago. And um, it was, it was one of those things that I learned so much from. It was enriching uh, and incredibly hard. W-we went public really fast. So the, the company that owned us decided to do 100% IPO, which is a really unusual transaction where you send out 100% of the company. Um, and they did it because they wanted to acquire um, another business, and so they had some urgency behind it. Uh, and at that point in time, for us to be independent and to go public we felt was incredibly meaningful to the employees of WEX and also like to the customers, because it allowed us to do um, more of what we wanted to do. And so we worked really hard for a really short period of time. So we, we actually uh, went through a series about it. So we had to go through a stand-alone audit, um, and file the first S-1, the document that you file right before you're-you're gonna go public with the FCC.

And we did that uh, all in about four months I think. You know, so really, really quickly. And then um, and then from the point we filed the initial S-1 to when we went public I think was maybe another two months. So within six months or so from start to finish th- we took the company public, from when it was a gleam in their eye to when we actually were standing on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, and, and able to ring the bell. And you know, so it was really exciting for us because we felt like there was so much we could do with this business, and at that point we were about \$200 million in revenue, -ish. Um, and um, and so you know, we have to on- from that point and there, our market cap- market cap at the time was about \$700 million, so we're about \$7 billion now. So it's, it's been a nice ride.

Whitney: Order of magnitude larger. Yeah. So um, any advice you'd give to people who are listening who are running companies that they want to take public? One, one or two pieces of advice that come to mind?

Melissa: The two things for us that were big lessons that, the first w-we are a very entrepreneurial company even now, um, but at that point in time, going through uh, stocks compliance and um, all the things you have to do t-to be a, you know, really hardened public company were a-an amazing shock to our system. And it's taken us a little bit of time to figure out that balance of, of um, making sure that you have enough profit in place and controls in place without um, killing that entrepreneurial spirit that you have. And so, so the first thing would be, make sure you've got really good um, forward members who can help you balance that. Uh, and I think that's something we have done really well. We've got people who think about risk, but we also have had people that have also worked in high growth environments, so that you can have a dialog around choices that you're making along the way. A-and that would be my first thing.

And then second one, um, people give the public market a really bad image, and I have a little bit of a different view. I think that the public markets aren't for err on any given day. So if you, if you're paying attention at any given moment, you may not be happy. But I actually think that, if you do a good job of um, laying out what you want to do strategically and setting expectations, that generally they're just holding you accountable to what you say to them. And, and so, I think that you don't have to be really short sighted or short term focused if you set up the right expectations up front. So I think that, that- What you do that first year, and how you set up the environment by which you want to, to have relationship with your investors and, and the expectations you set is really important.

Whitney: You know it's interesting, I, I've been an equity analyst um, and so I've, I've been that person who's been you know, looking at what your numbers are and holding you accountable at some level. But it hadn't occurred to me, and I think it's because I'm thinking a lot about accountability partners recently, but if it's done right and done well, when you're a publicly traded company you have this, this accountability partner that helps you actually get done what you want to do if you're, if you're willing to do it that way.

Melissa: I I think that's actually really fair. I think at the end of the day there is an accountability component that I like about being public, a-and um, i-in a world where thing happen super fast, you know, increasingly faster, that um, having that you know, immediate accountability, I think there's a benefit to that. It's, it's um, thinking you want to know, it, if you're talking about a penny one way or another, that that to me sometimes can get overblown in th- in the day of your announcement. Um, but over time, that does seem to settle out into a, I think what's ultimately fair. You just have to be a little bit patient I think to on, on the, the side of the business, and-and not over react to what's happening in any given moment.

Whitney: Alright, so when did you become CEO, and how did that, how did that play out?

Melissa: I became CEO at the beginning of 2014. I went from being CFO to then they added on um, Operations IT, and then they made me President of the US, which at the time was a little bit awkward, because it was 90% of the business, and, and the CEO was still there. So I took on the US, and ultimately became President globally, and then CEO. Um, so it was a series of steps along the way, and um, and for me, the hardest of the steps of any of the ones that had is when I went from being the CFO, to um, being the President of the US.

Because for the first time that I was really running a full P&L and had revenue responsibility. And it, it really just changed how I had to think about myself, 'cause before that my value when I added to a certain extent became from my technical skills um, and then it always came from ability to build teams. I think that's always something I care a lot about is, is creating a diverse and talented teams, but you know, there was always this element of your own individual technical skills playing out into that, and as the role has gotten bigger, broader, it becomes less about your technical skills and much more emphasis around how you affect those people around you. The ability to build teams. Ability to bring people in.

But it, I had to really start to think about myself differently, and how I can add value and, and um, and also get more and more comfortable with not knowing all the answers, which is, which is hard.

Whitney: I bet.

Melissa: It's a hard thing to do. (laughs)

Whitney: Do you remember, Melissa, um, any, was there any one moment where you had that ah-ha of like, "Oh, I, you know, I've relied on my brain and my technical skills, and that is not, that's not the job that they're being asked, they're asking me to do here."? Do you remember if there was one moment where it just kind of hit you of like, you needed to like, broaden your tool kit?

Melissa: Yeah, Whitney. That's, it's actually a good question, and it's a silly point. I, I'm like embarrassed to even say it. But I had gone to a conference, um, and I remember sitting in the conference learning, and realizing that that wasn't my job. That actually my job was to go network. You know, and that, that instead of being the person soaking in the information, I probably like, I needed to get out and spend time um, with people. But it, in, it was just one of those moments that I had sat in the session and, and I, and I just realized this is not what I'm, this is not what I'm supposed to be doing anymore. I need to um, spend my time in very different ways.

Whitney: That's a great, that's a great moment; a poignant moment. And, and it's, it's interesting that you, you do remember exactly when that happened.

Okay, so transitioning just a little bit, um, you have three children. Um, while CEO, you had twins, um, and I have heard that that is very, very rare. Um, I'm wondering not about that so much, but you know, I remember being in the workforce and, well actually I'm still in the workforce, but getting pregnant, and having to have this conversation of, "Hey, I'm pregnant." So I'm wondering, how did that conversation go? How did you manage it, and any advice? Because it's, it's, it's an interesting sort of ... How are you going to manage things strategically when you announce that you're about to have a baby? Any, any thoughts? Any story that you'd like to share around that?

Melissa: When I took over as CEO, I must have been concurrently getting pregnant. It was funny I want to say, I, 'cause my um, oldest son was born September fifth, and I became CEO January of that year. So it was, it was literally about the same time, and so I, I didn't know before I took the job, um, nor could I have.

And, and so I had this um, you know, period of time of trying to figure out what, how do I tell people, and then ultimately what I ended up doing was um, talking to a couple of, of people on the board. And we ended up doing research around the subject of how much do you need to disclose, and was it a disclosable event, and um, and the thing that I was most surprised about is that there wasn't any um, precedent. So um, Marissa Mayer had, had taken her job knowing that she was pregnant, but they couldn't find any other public company CEO that had become pregnant when they were um, CEO.

And so, what we ended up doing out of an abundance of caution is um, I did an interview with the Wall Street Journal, and that way it could be, you know, publicly disseminated all at once. And, you know, the hardest part about that is my neighbor found reading the Wall Street Journal 'cause I couldn't tell anybody. (laughing) And so, in hi- ... It was, it was not the way you would want it to, to play out, but actually was fine. And the most remarkable thing for me happened um, afterwards, that no investor flinched, you know, mentioned it. And they would be coming in to meetings with me when I, you know, I was eight months pregnant. It was obvious (laughs) I was pregnant. Um, but they you know, it just wasn't even a topic of conversation. Made it seem really clear that it wasn't that relevant to them, you know, and, and it became a non-event when I had my son in that world.

And in a positive side, I got this flood of notes um, from you know, all you know, walks of people, and um, and the thing that surprised me the most, 'cause I ... You know, women support other women, and, and I got you know, many really positive notes from women. But I was really surprised how many notes I got from fathers of daughters, um, and how important it was to them that um, that people could choose to have a family and a career and be able to do that publicly.

Whitney: Yeah. And that so their daughters could grow up and say, "Some day I'm going to be the CEO of WEX." Um, okay, so to do what you do, we kind of talked about this a few minutes ago, but I want to circle back around, um, to this idea of people in your partnership et cetera. You're not an island. Um, who are some people around you, whether at home or at work, who know how to do things that you don't know how to do? That you rely on in order to get some things done um, that, you know, the disrupting that you're doing out in the world would not be possible without? Are there one or two people and/or roles that people play? Maybe that's even more important; roles that people play in terms of you being able to, to navigate the world as, as a CEO and as Melissa Smith, you know, wife and mother.

Melissa: Oh that's a big list. I mean it's a big list. But I would say that um, uh, my mom. I always start with my mom. My mom in this kind of give back mode, sold or has move uh, a couple miles a couple miles down the road from me. And so she has definitely a cornerstone in that, and um, and enabled me to have comfort that, you know, that she's there in the background.

Whitney: Yeah, that's wonderful.

Melissa: And um, yeah it's been fantastic. Um, it, the ... BC, my husband, um, yeah I think of him as, again, as uh, the partner in all this. It, our life has changed dramatically. We you know, you know, we got married and had three children, and I became CEO all within the last, let me think about this, five years? (laughs) So you know, it's, it's been a lot, you know, of um, of change, and um, and he's been kind of you know, step by step doing this with me. And so I think of him.

And I have one of my um, friends who has grown children who are phenomenal um, and had a, a really big career is always really good counsel to me. And one thing she said to me early on is um, that outsource the things that you know, really don't matter. And so, she was like, "Don't feel like you actually have to cook or clean or..." Like there's certain things that your children are not really going to care if you do or don't do, and um, and I've kind of lived by those rules that there's, the things that I can outsource, and I say it's got my own little GP in my home that, those are things that I do outsource on a day to day basis. And um, so that when I'm home, 'cause I travel, when I'm home I want to be as focused as I can be on my, on my kids.

Whitney: Right, right. So your mom, your husband, and one of your dear friends are really indispensable for you to do, do what you do in the world.

Melissa: Yeah. And, and also, nanny. You know, it's like I'd be remiss not to say there's a nanny in the background here.

Whitney: Got it. Okay, so four, four people who are, are, are pivotal, um, alright. So just a few more questions. You, you've said something that I thought was really interesting, and I want to share this. Um, you said, "Be incredibly open to people telling you that you're wrong, which happens to me with some frequency. Then move from that point into something that may be even better." End quote, Melissa Smith. Any thoughts on that, that you'd like to share?

Melissa: (laughs) uh, yeah actually, and this happens to me, I, I'll do it in a um, town hall or in to end an event, and in my mind they call me the finger pointing moment with them looking at you, with either their head bobbing or their fingers moving, and they'll, they start with "let me tell you". And I actually have to have that moment of like, actually really have to tell myself to breathe, because this is what you want. You actually want people to feel enabled and empowered to um, have a point of view, and um, in, and to realize that um, you're not the expert anymore in, you know, most anything frankly. And so you actually need to be able to learn from the people embar- around you.

So it starts from, people all over the company would say that you know, there's some of that that happens, and I try to create environment where people can actually talk and, and give me their perspective. But also, even in my staff, I intentionally have very different backgrounds. I believe in diversity of thought, and I, I believe very strongly in diversity of backgrounds. But the reality is, that means you're the middle of, of um, an environment where people have incredibly different perspectives constantly.

People will you know, often tell me what they think, and it is a dialog. And then, I think the important thing is end it. Like if I um, am incredibly open to people giving me their perspective, which is different than I agree with everything someone's going to say. And that's ... I reserve

the right to disagree, and I do have the right to make a different decision, but I, I am incredibly open to that um, to feedback, and, and differences of thought.

Whitney: I think that's an important distinction as you're open to, hearing what people have to say, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to act on what they've advised. Yeah.

Melissa: Yes. Yeah, then and closing that down, and one, one of the rules I have with an executive leadership team is I, different perspectives are great. You have to be willing to voice them, and so it has to be in the room, voice them, and then when we make a decision, there's no new trade, move on.

Whitney: Yeah. Um, Alan Mulally who is a mentor of, of ours. Once said, he's former CEO of Ford for those of you who are listening, once said that when you're a CEO, your face isn't yours anymore. Any thoughts on that, Melissa?

Melissa: Yeah it's kind of a sad statement, but yes. (laughs) Yeah, what I would say, I'd, I you know, I obviously think Alan's fantastic, and I love his perspective. People read into um, almost everything. And those are things that I've had to learn, 'cause I um, I don't naturally think about those things, that making sure the little things; you're making eye contact, that you're making sure the people that you acknowledge other people that, that your face is set in a way that, that they're not trying to see it. Y-you know, people are constantly trying to read stress or um, you know, some type of emotion out of, out of you, um, and it's a barometer on what's happening in the environment. So your physical presence I think actually does matter.

Whitney: Yeah.

Melissa: And actually, I, I remember um, we've, we've actually had many, many good quarters. We had one quarter um, years ago which wasn't awesome, and I remember the, a chair of the audit committee was the CFO at the time called me, and I remember him saying to me, "Melissa, you're in your office?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Those people out there work just as hard to give you those numbers as they did if you'd liked them a little bit better." Meaning my finance group, and um, so get out there and spend time with them, because it's important that they feel good right now. And um, I remember that it was another one of those lessons. Like, okay it's actually not about me anymore. It's almost never about me anymore. It's about how you affect the people around you.

Whitney: More great advice. Alright, last question. What is one thing that you are going to do in 2019? You've, you're just going to do it. We talk a lot about learning, and we're constantly taking in knowledge and ideas. Um, but what's something that you're going to do in 2019? Something you're going to act on?

Melissa: So, I, I actually, I have a big list. Um, so I want to narrow it. So I, can I give you three things?

Whitney: Absolutely.

Melissa: Okay. Alright, so first thing for me is being much more active about gratitude. The things that are in my mind are things that I think that I'm trying to make sure that I overtly express. So, that's my number one. Just do it.

Um, number two, I am being much more conscious about how I spend my time, and thinking of that as a precious commodity. And so that's uh, another thing that I've got going on in the background.

And number three, I believe the girls' trips are good for your soul, and so on my list is a girls' trip.

Whitney: Where are you going to go, just so we know?

Melissa: I, I have no idea. It's not ...

Whitney: (laughs)

Melissa: I, just be clear, it's not planned yet, but it will be, I intend to do it, and I will. (laughs)

Whitney: Okay, got it. You are committing to do it. Got it.

Melissa: I'm committing to do it, yes. (laughs)

Whitney: Well Melissa, this has been a, an absolute pleasure. Thank you for taking the time and um, best of luck on your girls' trip, being grateful, and what was the third thing?

Melissa: Spending time on all the right things.

Whitney: And on all the right things. Thank you again.

Melissa: (laughs) Thanks Whitney.

I was reminded in listening to Melissa talk about wanting to be the CEO of Gillette that the seeds of aspiration are often found in what we see modeled around us, the horizons that our parents and teachers show us. Though Melissa's mom was different from the other moms, showing up for games in her business suit in a small farm community, that difference gave Melissa the horizon of a career to shoot for and has made the difference in her trajectory.

Another fantastic quality of Melissa's that has its roots in her upbringing - by growing up in a small town, she didn't feel like she needed to pick a lane. She could be on the math team and be a cheerleader and be on the soccer team. She's done something similar in her career. From her professor who suggested she should be an accountant, then shifting to a financial analyst and now she's the CEO of WEX. And even though she says the discipline to think of herself differently as her roles have changed has not been easy, she's been able to do it without getting stuck.

Practical Tip:

We all have people who support us in doing the things that matter most to us. Melissa mentioned a few of the people who help her. Who are the unsung heroes in YOUR circle? Who makes it possible for you to do what you do? Send them a text, an email, a handwritten note, and be specific in your praise and appreciation. If you want a primer on what that looks like, give [Episode No. 81 with Bob Nelson](#) another listen.

If you want to learn more about how to Build a Great Team and Be a Boss People Love – like Melissa Smith - we've got a free PDF with 6 key steps. You can download it at <https://whitneyjohnson.com/6keysteps>

Thank you again to Melissa 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.