

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 112: MARCUS BUCKINGHAM

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Our guest today is Marcus Buckingham - New York Times Bestselling Author, Researcher, and Founder of the Strengths Revolution.

WHITNEY Marcus Buckingham, it is such a pleasure to have you on the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. Thank you so much for making time to be with us.

MARCUS My pleasure.

WHITNEY Very first question for you is, where did you grow up, and what did you want to be when you grew up?

MARCUS I grew up in and around London in the, uh, 1930s. Um.

WHITNEY (laughter)

MARCUS In the, in the 1970s.

WHITNEY Uh-huh (affirmative).

MARCUS And I actually didn't know at all what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was fascinated by school. I really enjoyed school and was quite good at it. I went to Cambridge to study modern and medieval languages actually is what it was called. But it was really French and Latin. And I was pretty sure I was going to end up sitting in a café smoking [French language 00:01:17] cigarettes and drinking very strong French coffee and being a philosopher. That was (laughs) that was as far as I got mostly because that sounded really fun and cool back in the '70s.

And yes that didn't really turn out to be the case at all.

WHITNEY When did you realize that you weren't going to be a philosopher?

MARCUS Well my father had been in the HR profession. He was the, what you would call today the chief human resources officer of a company called Allied Breweries. My grandfather before that had been the personnel director at British Overseas Airways, BOAC, which was the precursor to British Airways. So I've had HR in the family I suppose. And my dad's job in a sense was h- how do you find pub

managers for 7,000 pubs? And the beer is the same, is the same, is the same, so the quality of the pub manager is the difference maker really for, for pubs in the UK.

So dad had gone over to the US to try to find some way to be systematic in finding pub managers with, with talents that matched the talents of the very best pub managers. And he found Don Clifton at the Gallup Or- actually it wasn't called the Gallup Organization then. It was called, uh, um, Selection Research Inc. He brought him over when I was 15, 16 and I became, you know, came over for dinner a bunch of times and then we talk about how do you measure human personality and can you measure things about people such as their attributes or their strengths or their talents that you can't count but can you measure it?

And I, for some reason I became completely fascinated with how do you measure things about humans when they know you're trying to measure that and yet still get accurate and valid results about them?. And I had summers off and then everybody else seemed to be going to exotic places around the world but dad said, do you want to go to Lincoln, Nebraska to get work experience of what applied psychology in the world of work is like? And I said, sure I'd love that. So from 16 on every summer I would go to Lincoln, Nebraska and study under Don Clifton and his team there.

And I was, I think I was hooked from the very first time I realized that, that if you ask an open ended question of highly productive people in a role and the same open ended question to less productive people in the same role, that the most productive people, even though they didn't know each other and even though they hadn't checked signals with each other, would all give the same answer and it would be an answer that was similar to themselves but different from people in the same job but doing it less well.

For example if you asked great managers, you had a study group of really good managers and you asked them a question like how closely should someone be supervised, it was bizarre to me that all these people on the phone, individually, unbeknownst to each other would all say the same thing and the best managers would say, how closely should somebody be supervised? It depends on the person, depends on who they are. Not depends on how long they've been with you but just depends on who they are and how they think.

And you ask the same question to average managers in the same company and they wouldn't say that. And the moment you sort of, I found out that, I was fascinated.

WHITNEY

Wow. So interesting, Marcus, listening to you talk about this and I, I, I think some would debate what I'm about to say but I do think it's interesting how we talk so often about what's in our DNA, you know. We get our eye color, you get the hair color or your height, um, from your parents. And yet it seems, and something this is just a hypothesis but frequently people seem to be very interested in what their parents were interested in. And so it's fascinating to hear you tell me what your father did, what your grandfather did and how it, one wonders if that's potentially in ones DNA of your, your fascination and then, and then, and then the context becomes available to you because you were able to connect with Don Clifton and then study. And then the opportunity started to open up.

MARCUS

Yeah. Th- it's sort of the nature/nurture thing isn't it? I mean we now know of course that people's personalities aren't affected by nurture very much at all. We

know that at least 50% of the variation in my personality is a function of the genetic inheritance that I get from my parents. But the other 50% is not connected to how I was raised. It's connected to either chance or to, to some extent the interactions with my, with my peers before the age of 13. And it, the, the jury on this is, it's funny to see the debates written about this. Is it nurture or nature?

But because of the extensive study of identical twins raised apart, the jury's gone out on this and come back in and said parents don't make their kids have certain personalities by the way that they're raised. Um, if you are shy it's because your parents had shy genes. It isn't because your parents raised you to be shy. And of course we know that because you can take people, we have taken people, who are genetically identical, raised by different parents, and the results are conclusive.

So I am the way that I am in terms of my natural patterns of occurring thoughts and feeling and behavior because of the clash of the chromosomes of my mom and my dad. Having said that of course, a lot of life is contingent. We don't tend to make generally massive sweeping moves into some other life. I mean it's instructive that the most highly predictive, um, element of, of who you will form a relationship with in college isn't your religious affiliation or it isn't your major or it isn't even your socioeconomic status. It's whether or not you were in a dorm that was proximately close to the other person. Um, location is just-

WHITNEY (laughs)

MARCUS ... just gets you close to people and then we get close to people, we tend to hook up with people.

WHITNEY Hm.

MARCUS So contingency's important. So the fact that my dad and my granddad are both being in this profession legitimized the profession.

WHITNEY Hm.

MARCUS And made it kind of easier for me to bop over there and go, you know what this is a legit way to make a contribution in the world.

WHITNEY Interesting. Interesting. Uh, thank you for sharing some of that research that you've looked at that I, that makes it, the discussion, uh, certainly richer. So, you graduate from university. You come to the United States. You work at Gallup for, um, for about 20 years, is that right?

MARCUS Yes.

WHITNEY Okay.

MARCUS Uh, 17 years.

WHITNEY 17 years, okay. So rounding up, close to 20 years. Um, and then after that you decide to go out on your own. Can you talk to us, um, a little bit about the decision that you, I know it's been a few years ago now but that decision that you made must have been a very big decision. How did you make the decision to go out on your own?

MARCUS Well number one, as you know you, you're likely to stay at a place that depends significantly on your relationship with the person that you work directly with. And for me Don Clifton was a complete genius and I was in awe of what he did and how he was. And then he, um, uh, he stepped down and, and sadly passed away soon after. And his, his son took over and he was, Jim's a great, great guy but I didn't quite have the same connection. So there was that point where I was like, huh what do, I've been here 17 years, what, what now?

And I think for me too, Gallup was an incredible measurement company but I became interested in what you can, rather than just measuring engagement what could you do to build it? My interest became less about measurement and more about change in the world. And so I decided that it would be good to step out of the purely measurement world of Gallup and into the world of coaching, education, software, tools. What can we actually help people to do differently on Monday, to, to use that famous Drucker phrase. What are you going to go do differently on Monday became kind of a preoccupation for me and I didn't think I could do that at Gallup.

WHITNEY So when you started your business, what's something that really surprised you that you're like, oh I didn't expect that when I started my business?

MARCUS The, the funny thing about being an entrepreneur is you have to decide that you want to go across town. Across town, in my definition, is this new world. And you got to be really clear, I felt anyway, that, that I understood in my own mind what across town meant. And what was I trying to do in the world? What dent was I trying to make in the world?

I wanted to be clear about that and yet you then have to (laughs) realize that to get across town you have to go stoplight to stoplight to stoplight to stoplight. You can't wait until all the stoplights are green before you start out. So that for me was interesting to realize that, that, that entrepreneurship is, I mean you can plan all you want.

WHITNEY (laughs)

MARCUS All the stoplights are here and then I'm going to go left and then I'm going to go right. And then you start and you bump into a stoplight and it goes red and then it's orange and then you get, uh, oh you know like maybe I turn left and then I'll, I can turn right on red so if I turn right on red then I end up ... so (laughs) you have to both, it's an interesting juxtaposition. You have to keep in mind what is across town for you. What's your destination if you like? And then, and then be really open to duking left and duking right as you make your way across town. If you wait until you notice all the stoplights are green, you'll never start out.

WHITNEY So was there something in particular that you, um, found that you had expected would be one way and then you started to move across town and you realized, oh (laughs) that's not the way it works?

MARCUS Yeah well I, you know, became really apparent to me as I was going to this world that I'm in, the world of human performance at work, that, um, tools trump training. Equipment trumps, trump education. It doesn't matter how much good coaching you give people. It doesn't matter how persuasive a book is. It doesn't matter how compelling a speech is. If the existing tools that are in place that

people actually have to use every day fly in the face of what you just learned, the tools win in the end. The tools are relentless.

WHITNEY Hm.

MARCUS So in a world of people and performance, if you talk about let's say focusing on people's strengths and capitalizing on people's uniqueness and things like that, and then they go back to tools that are built on exactly the opposite premise and most performance management tools, performance review tools, coaching tools are different in two ways from what I was talking about. They, they are aimed at homogeneity that we define a list of competencies for people to have in a certain job and then you are measured against the competencies and the goal would be to acquire as many of the competencies as you can. Which if you work for the federal government is actually by an act of congress you have to in order to get promoted, possess these lists of predefined competencies.

So the world is designed to try to get people to be the same if they're in the same job. And then second of course, the whole approach to development is remedial. So we find out where you are not matching up to the model. We call that a gap. And then we tell you to go plug your gaps with various training or, uh, other interventions. And I was standing on stage going, well actually look at the best managers. They don't do that. They realize that people are unique. They realize that they need to capitalize on that uniqueness. And in fact the best way to do that is to help people to refine and maximize their unique strengths.

Well I can talk about that all day. But if the actual tools by which someone gets paid or promoted or trained or fired are built on the opposite premise, then the tool wins. So about halfway across town (laughs) in my-

WHITNEY (laughs) How many years were you in at that point [crosstalk 00:16:25]-

MARCUS Probably about 2013. So we started the company 2007.

WHITNEY Okay.

MARCUS 2012, 2013 I'm like, oh my gosh we've got to build, we've got to build tools. And it's interesting. We went around to a bunch of the big software providers, I won't mention their names, and then the big systems in- integrators and said, listen we've got a whole bunch of IP here that is based on entirely different premise from the one that's been promulgated by these human platform management systems. Do you want to partner with us? Weirdly they all went (laughs) was upset about it at the time, they all went, no not really.

And so we said, you know what then we better be a software company. We better build ourselves into a software company which is a crazy thing to do. And if I knew how difficult it would be to build really, really good software at industrial strength software, then I probably wouldn't have (laughs) started with this.

WHITNEY (laughs) But you did.

MARCUS Yes.

WHITNEY You did. So that's interesting. You discovered that tools trump training and five years in you, we've got to build software. You decided to build the software. You started to do that. Talk to us about the software that you're very proud of and if I understand correctly, you were acquired by ADP research institute not too long ago. So tell us about the software and then the evolution of the business to date.

MARCUS it's an interesting challenge right now in that purpose and productivity in the United States, the growth of that over the last 50 years is anemic. It's a little less than 1%, which given all the money in technology process improvement that we've thrown at the productivity problem, it's an unbelievably bad return over 50 years.

So we're clearly doing something wrong at work in terms of getting people to be productive. And then engagement too. I've been measuring engagement since my Gallup days and we just finished this 19 country study, studying engagement levels around the world. And the number comes back between 15 and 16% fully engaged around the world.

So 85% of people are just coming to work. So whether you're looking at engagement or productivity, we've, we've got a problem. Whatever we're doing at work isn't working very well. Um, and one of the major elephants in the room that prevent us from doing this is that almost all work is teamwork. We do work in teams. That's, in everywhere we are at work, the, the number is actually 83% of us say that most of our work is done in teamwork. And 63% of people say that they do work on more than one team and three quarters of those people say that their team isn't reflected on the org chart.

So one of the interesting discoveries from that is that if all work is teamwork, why the heck don't we build any tools for team leaders? Why are none of the tools to get people to be engaged or productive focused on team leaders? They're either focused on one end of the continuum, the level of culture. So we do employee engagement surveys, that level of the board and the board of the C suite is the first people to get the data. And, and then the pronouncement will come out that we need to build a culture of innovation or a culture of, um, authenticity or c- whatever it is.

Or we go to the other extreme to the individual and we do individual training or we do individual coaching or we do ... but in the middle is the fulcrum, where everything comes together, which is the team. And we don't build tools for team leaders. I mean in part, as a result we can't see the teams. I mean it's a weird state of the world we're in right now where Google doesn't know where its work is. You know, you see stuff that's written by the Google folks about like what happens in our best teams and yet the truth of the matter is they can't see the teams. They don't know. And they don't know where the teams are because teams are emergent. Most teams are ephemeral.

They come into being because of a series of requests and acceptances happening invisible to HR all the time in a company. But unless you give three team leaders a tool to invite people onto a team and get them to accept it, unless that's part of the, the things that hit them in stride when they do their work, then they won't use the tools. I mean most of the big human capital management systems that we have, and I won't mention the name of the companies, um, just aren't used. There's stuff that they, they're Saturday work. Stuff that you have to do on a Saturday, set your

goals for the year or do a performance review or fill out an employee survey. It's not real work. It's parallel to it.

You know, this is crazy. Work happens through teams and particularly through team leaders and team member's relationship. Where do they go? Where do they go that helps them know their people better or know what they're working on or coach them better or know what the mood of the troops is right now. Not because HR told you to know that but because that's what any team leader would want to know. So if you think about what are the most basic questions that any team leader would have, and you can sort of boil it down to three of them.

One, what are my people like? Two, what are they doing right now today and how can I help them? And three, how are they feeling right now and what can I do to help them feel better? Just those three things. Where is the integrated tool set designed to solve the team leader problem? The answer to that question is nowhere. We don't have any tools for team leaders. Employee engagement surveys are HR tools, performance management tools are HR tools, succession planning tools HR tools, 360 tools H- I mean weirdly to serve itself HR has built tools to serve itself. But of course that means that the people who are actually wanting to use the tools aren't served.

So we built this tool set called StandOut and the basic core apps in the tool were those three apps, to answer those three questions. Can we help a team leader know the particularly unique strengths of a person? Yes. Can we help a per- a team leader check in with each person about their work? And can we deliver to that team leader individualized coaching based upon the unique strengths of the team member? Yes. And can we give the team leader a simple and reliable way to measure engagement on their team and then give them customized feedback to build engagement right now? Yes.

Then let's build that. So we built that and we luckily, we had these great client who helped us and that's another thing with entrepreneurship by the way, you do actually need, you know, you do need customers.

WHITNEY (laughs)

MARCUS You don't have c- you don't have customers you don't have a company. Um. And then ADP came and said listen we've been known mostly for, for payroll over the years and we're really trusted and we're really secure and we've got these huge client relationships but we haven't really accelerated any more into the world of people and performance at work. We'd like to take your product, which is, which is industrial grade and you've got these really marquee clients like Cisco and, and Stanford Health and Facebook. And we'd like to build off that base.

And then we'd like you to run our institute. You're a researcher. We have historically had our institute be known for the national employment report that we put out every month and that Wall Street uses to determine the health of the economy. It's more trusted than the Bureau of Labor Statistics survey. Um, but we, we would like to now extend it frankly into all things people and performance at work and we'd like you to help us 'cause we think you know psychometrics. And I was like, you know that's a, that would be a very i- and right now as we're sitting here we, we don't have any b- there's nobody that we turn to for reliable, unbiased database discoveries about the world of work.

Instead, in the world of humans at work, we simply have a bunch of content marketing. Bunch of people putting content, white papers, research. But it's really just lead gen. Lead g- lead generation.

WHITNEY Interesting. Yes.

MARCUS And so if, if you think about it today, you want it to go, what is the core driver of engagement around the world? How big should a span of control of a team be? Um, what is the key activity for a team leader to do to get people to be more productive? If you had any of those questions, you would have nowhere to go. There's no definitive source of truth, unbiased. No source of truth. There's no institute that's simply saying to the world, we want to make a contribution to reliable knowledge about people at work 'cause clearly at the moment we're not doing it well.

WHITNEY Interesting.

MARCUS And so for me-that was like, that's, I'll, I'll do that for a decade.

WHITNEY So now you're part of ADP and that's-

MARCUS Yeah.

WHITNEY ... you're t- taking on this really big and exciting project. So which leads us to the book that you've just written called *9 Lies About Work*. It is a terrific read and you've started to touch on the basic idea of, of teams, et cetera. And so what I thought could be very useful for our listeners is for you to talk a little bit more around the research and the findings that you and your coauthor, Ashley Goodall found around the teams and some of the data that you, you were able to pull from working with Cisco. And then talk, I, there were a few that I would love to have us tease out a bit but if you could just share a bit of that data that you found in, in, um, analyzing what was happening at Cisco, that would be a great way for us to start.

MARCUS You know, if you look at the story of Cisco the last five years, uh, it's funny. It's not really a flashy company. It's just, it's just one of the most important companies in the world and some, something north of 70% of all internet traffic goes through a piece of Cisco kit.

And when, and when Chuck Robbins, the CEO, took over in 2015, their stock was, I think it was 27, 28. But if you look today, I think it's in the 50s. I don't know that anyone's had in the last five years quite as good a run as Cisco has. And yet the challenges were huge 'cause there were a hardware company primarily back in 2015 and, and they've needed to migrate to creating, keep doing the hardware but then build software on the top of that to make the whole thing more agile. And that's really, really, really, really tricky and, for them it was like gosh how do we, and global, how do we corral this and turn this whole ship around. And they brought Ashley over from, from Deloitte. And Chuck's focus was, it's interesting. Sometimes you need your discoveries to come from research and sometimes you need them to come from your own real world experience. And it was Chuck and then the CHRO, Frank Hatsutas's commitment to say, if we want to build agile, um, tensile strength across Cisco, we've got to do it through teams. We can only do it through teams.

We've got to have lots and lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of really, really good teams. How the heck do we do that, given that we don't see a lot of the teams and that we don't ... we, we, we can talk teamwork as a concept and overlay it on our existing structures and work design. But that's not very sensible. How do we actually get into where the work's happening at Cisco?

And so they brought Ashley over to start measuring this stuff. Ashley brought StandOut in and they, um, in their context of it they, they call it Team Space. Um, and they've made it the way, the primary way in which every single team leader and team member engages with one another. Um, and they've found all sorts of interesting ... first of all of course if you give team leaders an opportunity to invite people onto a team, then you actually start discovering how many teams you really have at Cisco. Not just the number of boxes on the old chart. You start, for them they discovered that they had twice as many teams as they thought they did. All of which were invisible.

WHITNEY Interesting.

MARCUS And now they've done this beautiful social network analysis to see how these teams link with one ... but what they're finally really seeing is just the work. Oh, the work happens here. They found other things out, like we've discovered at Cisco that manage a team leaders who check in with each person one on one every week. But levels of engagement are 20 points higher on those teams where people, individuals are checked in with individually one on one every week, 10, 15, 20 minutes a week, than those teams where some managers are doing it once a month.

And you go, wow really? The frequency of once a month versus once a week, that matters? And the data are unequivocal. Yeah it totally matters. In fact there are some places where if you check in once a month your engagement goes down. It's almost as though the team member is saying, if you're just going to check in with me once a month, I can't remember what I'm doing. You can't remember what I'm doing. That means we're going to spend once a month talking in generalities. When it comes to leading frequency trumps everything.

Talk to your people every week about near term future work. Don't over complicate leadership. Talk to people near term, about near term future work every week. If you do that, measurable, your engagement is 20 points higher. So it's like we could stop all this engagement work (laughs) we're doing and we could just go hey, if you can't take an initiative with your people 'cause you're too busy or you've got too many people then you're too busy and you've got too many people. (laughs)

WHITNEY Yeah I thought that was really interesting in the book where you talked about the span of control. Like what's the right span and it's just based on what, how many people you can check in weekly. That's a great, great metric. What I think would be very interesting now is you talk about these 9 lies and then truths. Truth number five I have down is people need attention.

Um, but I think the lie is people need feedback.

MARCUS Yeah.

WHITNEY And so I would love for you to talk about that a little bit. And I'll tell you the, the specific question that's on my mind today as a consequence of, of having, um, read through your work? So what's the lie and then what's the truth?

MARCUS Well the lie is that people need feedback. And the, the reason of course that's a lie, and it, we're in the middle of a feedback fetish at the moment because one of the problems people saw in the world of work is that people didn't get enough time with their team leader. They don't, they're not focused on one another enough. We do performance reviews once a year and we have a lot of people coming to work and feeling lonely and ignored and, and there's no question. If you want to really disengage someone then ignore them.

And so-

WHITNEY (laughs)

MARCUS ... we've, we've got (laughs) we've, we've tried to address that by saying we can't ignore people by only paying attention to them once a year. We need to give them constant, ongoing, frequent feedback. And there's no question that's right. I mean people do not flourish when you're just paying attention to them once a year. So the continual more ongoing part of the feedback fetish at the moment is right and real. The problem is, is that we've then connected the continuousness to something called feedback. And feedback is the way that it's currently practiced, is based on the idea that the way to help you excel is for me to tell you what you're doing wrong and to tell you what you need to do to do it right.

And the premise there is that excellence is defined in isolation from you. I've got a model of it over here. Uh, and second that I'm the source of truth about what you are doing wrong and you need the benefit of my point of view on this because if you didn't have me here you wouldn't see the truth about you. I'm the source of truth about you. And then of course the theory of learning that feedback embodies is that my way is your way. That I'm going to tell you how to do it. And you should try and learn how to do it because learning is really just filling up an empty vessel. And that's what feedback is based on.

But if you want them to excel, you've got to have a whole different set of interventions. Excellence in any role, whether it's nurse or teacher or sales person, is idiosyncratic. It's, everyone who excels at being a pub manager, everyone who excels at being a sales person or an emergency room nurse doesn't do it in exactly the same way. So the very first point that I can get you to excellence by telling you to remediate how you don't fit into a model doesn't work. The best team leaders in the world, the best teachers in the, the best parents in the world know this.

If excellence is idiosyncratic, I can't tell you how to do it. What I can do simply is pay attention right now to what's working with you. Because if I want you to get to great, the raw material of future greatness is current goodness. Your current goodness. Which means that the best thing I can do for you as a team leader is to pay attention to what's currently working about your actions or activities or situations right now.

WHITNEY Right.

MARCUS I, I've got to help you pay attention to those. And so really I'm not a source of truth about who you are. I am a source of truth about my own reactions. So I can tell you

my reactions. And in particular, what's really useful is my reactions to when I leant into you or when I saw something work with you or when I saw that other people were fascinated by what you were doing or saying or what they were reading of what you'd written. And if I help you pay attention to the reactions of people, then you can use that as raw material to build yourself to excellence.

Well that's not feedback. That's attention. And in particular I, I'm paying attention to what works about you. Gosh if you do that, you know, we, we tend to think of good job as the end of a conversation. Good job. Now let's focus. No. Good job is the beginning of a conversation.

WHITNEY So Marcus, it, it raises a really interesting question for me. In fact just later today I'm going to be doing, um, a, a, a 360 with someone and I'm thinking as I'm listening to what you're saying, um, that the, your prescription would be is focus on what is this person doing well right now. How do we build on that, how do we build on this person's strengths that they can go from, you said it much more eloquently than I did, but from good to great?

MARCUS Hm.

WHITNEY And so the question is, um, um, but that person in, is going to have this expectation. I think you talked about, you know, they want the negative, that's the Velcro. The positive is the Teflon I think is how you described it in the book. How do you pattern interrupt and say to them, okay I know you want to focus and, and obsess and persevere over what you just, you see in this report as being negative, but we are only going to focus on what is positive and what you're doing well and how do you do more of it? So how in your experience have you gotten people to go to that place away from focusing on the Velcro of the negative to making the positive be Velcro? What have you done?

MARCUS The first thing you focus is on the person's own, um, emotional state and you say to that person, um, if you want to be happy and productive in life, you've got to start with where you're happiest and productive now. Where are you? Where are you at, what are the things right now for you? Just, I, I know you want to get better. Of course we want to get better and many people are ambitious and they want to grow. Of course they do.

But what works for you right now is a great place to start with someone. That's why I love telling someone to spend a week in love with their job. I can't give, I mean I have a slight problem with 360s anyway because the measurement tools-

WHITNEY (laughs)

MARCUS ... are so, if you look at, I don't know what items you're using in the one that you're going to use today, but parenthetically be very careful with 360 tools, where the items inside the tool itself are asking anybody outside of the person to reach into the person's psyche and rate them on some quality that that person does or does not possess. Humans can't do that. That's lie number six, that human beings can be reliable raters of other humans. We can't. We know that the, the way I rate you reflects me, not you. And that doesn't mean unconscious rater biased towards race and gender and age. It means I actually can't see you.

And so we, that's called the idiosyncratic rater effect. I'm idiosyncratic in my rating of you. So my ratings of you on qualities that supposedly you possess

actually reflects me, not you. And that's called systematic error, which means when you add six more people, uh, who are systematically blind to what's inside your psyche, you get more error, not less. So as you look at the tool today with a person you're doing 360 with, make sure that the items that you pay attention to are only the items where the rater is rating their own experience of the person.

Like if I, if I'm looking at items where the rater is rating the other person on something like empathy, rate the person on ... that's, that's a terrible data source. Um, a better data source is a question like, I feel heard by this person. Okay I can rate that. It's like after an operation the doctor comes in and says, tell me on a scale of one to 10, with 10 high, how would you rate your pain? It, I, and I can do that. I can rate my pain.

And if I say three, the doctor doesn't go, that's not a three. Your pain is a six.

WHITNEY (laughs)

MARCUS Like that doesn't, like that's no-

WHITNEY Right.

MARCUS Human patients are, are a- are reliable raters of their own pain. So when you look at the data this afternoon, make sure you pay attention only to the items where the particular raters are rating their own experience of the subject or the person.

WHITNEY Hm.

MARCUS Having said that, so I will always start with the person going, spend a week in love with your job. Uh, draw a line down the middle of a page. Put loved it at the top of the one column, loathed it at the top of another. And then any time you see signs of love in an activity or situation or context write it down. And by signs of love I mean before you do it, you can't wait to do it. While you're doing it, time speeds up. 'Cause love does something funny with time.

WHITNEY Hm.

MARCUS And, and when you're done with it, you kinda want to do it again. It's when you leave a person you're in love with, you just can't, I mean love does a funny thing because before your with a person, if you're in love with them, time drags on. When you're with them for an entire day it feels like you were with them for two minutes. And then when you're finished seeing them, it's like time drags on again. It's the weirdest thing.

So, so spend a week in love with your job and just pay attention to the activities you fill the job with. And, and then the activities that you lean into put in the love column, the, the activities where you procrastinate and time drags on, put in the loathed. What an interesting way to spend a week. Just paying attention to your emotional reactions to the week at work. And then frankly before I would do any 360 I would do that because the raw material of what someone scribbles down in the loved it column, they are the authority on that.

You start there. You start with what your emotional reactions are because they're not random. And they are meaningful. And if we can help you identify what we

called in the book these red threads, then if you don't take them seriously no one else will. Don't try to understand yourself through the murky lens of somebody else's rating of you. They don't know you. They don't even know themselves. Spend a week in love with your job and then come back to me at the end and boy we would have a rich, rich conversation about where your loves are and where your loathes are and what we can do with both.

WHITNEY Hm. That's terrific. So speaking of loves and of red threads, what are your red threads?

MARCUS One of the pieces of research from the Mayo Clinic says that we, as some of you know we have a huge doctor and nurse burnout problem right now. 73% of doctors would not recommend being a doctor to their kids and it's just, nurse's levels of PTSD is higher than returning veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It's, it's not a good (laughs) it's not a good job.

So the Mayo Clinic did some research and they found out that if you, if you have 20% of your job is red threads. So just 20% of your job doing activities that you love, each percentage point below the 20% number, so 19, 18, 17, shows a commensurate 1% increase. It was almost a linear inverse relationship, 1% increase in burnout risk.

WHITNEY Hm.

MARCUS And, and yet so basically that means of course that if you can weave some red threads into your job, you reduce the risk of burnout because those red threads seem to be made of different material. They lift you up. They're so valuable and yet funnily enough, beyond 20% they didn't get a commensurate decrease. So 25, 30, 40% of your job of red threads didn't seem to get you that much, uh, commensurate decrease in burnout risk. So that conclusion, and obviously we need to continue to replicate this and understand this, but their conclusion was a little love goes a long way.

You don't need a red quilt. Your job does not need to be made entirely up of red threads.

WHITNEY Hm. That's important.

MARCUS Which is important to note, yeah. Um. You've got 72% of people in the US said that they have a chance to maneuver their job to fit their strengths better. And yet only 18% of us do. So it, it's not as though every single person is in the wrong job. It's just that we've got the freedom to maneuver but we don't know how to use it. So with me, the advice in the book in chapter eight was you've got the weave ... you have to take your red threads seriously 'cause no one else will. You have to weave them into contribution 'cause no one else will.

For me I, 'gosh, when I took the StandOut strengths assessment my top two strengths roles were creator and stimulator. Creative says you want to be by yourself noodling over ideas and data and stimulator says you want to bring people's emotions up. You're excited by that, you sense what people's emotional balance is. You want to lift it. Which for me means I'm more, and this is always true with people strengths, right, they don't necessarily cohere beautifully. Sometime they pull you in different directions (laughs), your strengths do.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MARCUS And so for me I've got a pull to be alone and a pull to be in a sense on stage. Alone, on stage. Alone, on stage. And so my, some of my red threads, I love looking at data and finding patterns. I love that. Like just lean it, might bore someone else to tears but for me I love that. Figuring out how to tell that story or figuring out how to make that, that particular correlation coefficient come to life.

Like that's a weirdly specific red thread but I love that. Um, and if I deliberately build my life more around red threads like that I'm better. When I get off track on that and I have weeks that have no red threads in them, I am, I'm annoying to be around. That's for sure.

WHITNEY So given that, um, s- some of the questions that you like to ask about people's experience now today, would you say that this has been a, an optimal red thread week for you? It's a, it's Friday as we're having this conversation. Has this been an optimal red thread week?

MARCUS Um. Yes bits of it. I'm not really very good at juggling a whole bunch of different projects. It stresses me out. And I've got, without going into detail, I've got a number of complex things that are all coming together next week. And landing every one of them (laughs) so that they all land at the same time in the right way, I don't, I've got to remind myself, I hate multitasking. I hate jumping from one thing to another to another to another because I, it doesn't really ever give me a chance to f- sink into a subject and feel comfortable within it.

So I've had a bit of that this week and I need to fix that.

WHITNEY Is there someone that you work with who does love to do that?

MARCUS Yes. So I've found people who do do that. Just this week I've been pulled into it more than I want to be but that's the way the world works, right. It's like you, we're not suggesting in any way in this book, *9 Lies About Work*, or in previous, um, books and contributions I made, no one's suggesting that the real world isn't messy. There's going to be some weeks that pull you off and some weeks that you have got to step back and reframe and other ... the world is a messy place filled with people with very different goals and agendas than yours.

And so the hope is for me myself as well, as you bounce through your 52 weeks, can you make sure that each week, you're intentional anyway, about weaving those red threads? And loving them for what they are. Paying attention to the ones to, through them for what they bring to you. Can you do that? So for me, as I think about next week, I've had this week I would say, and this is one of the things you get to do in this, in the *StandOut* tool is ever week it's like did you have a chance to use your strengths e- every day this week? We, we check that every week.

And so for me next week I'll be like, you know what I'm going to make sure I double down on a, a couple of red threads for the next week so that I feel I'm more in control of how I'm drawing strength from life.

WHITNEY Yeah. Fantastic. So everyone who's listening, it's a terrific book. There are nine lies, nine truths. We only had time to touch on a couple of them but I, I just wanted

to, um, uh, read one quote from your book and then ask you if you have any final thoughts. And then just to share one or two things as, as we wrap up.

There's, on page 171, um, one of the lies is that people have potential and you say the truth is that people have momentum. And I love what you say here. "The careless and unreliable labeling of some folks as high pos and others as low pos is deeply immoral." And I just think that that's really, really powerful. That it's important for us to think and consider very carefully the labels that we use. And I love the truth that you have is that people, they don't have potential. They have momentum. And I don't know if you have any thoughts on that but I just wanted to call that out 'cause I thought that was very powerful and important.

MARCUS

Yeah. Each of these lies, there are nine of them. And I think now of course is a tremendously important time to, to, to push on what our core assumptions are about people at work. Because we're about to embed these assumptions into algorithms that are the core of our AI and our machine learning. So part of that AI and machine learning will be to automatically help a particular company zero in on more high potentials. Where are our high potentials? Who are our high potentials?

I mean that, that will get built into math. And so, and same with feedback. We'll get AI vis-a-vis feedback and we'll get vis-a-vis selecting better candidates. I mean, an awful lot of our core assumptions about people are about to be built into math. And so now is a perfect time to really push on those assumptions and go, are these true? Because we got a lot of software engineers building tools that frankly are not expert about human conditions that work at all.

Our tools, as I said earlier, trump everything else. So we've got toolmakers defining how people's entire sense of themselves at work is going to be defined and the people building the tools are not qualified. One of the things they're not qualified to say is whether or not something called potential exists. In most companies today, that, uh, there is some program called a high potential program and that if you are high potential it is a Willy Wonka golden ticket. It gets you anywhere. It gets you more money, more opportunity, more development, more coaching, more mentoring.

Um, and it's about 15 to 20% of people in a company are identified as high potentials. And if you, if you get into that group it's great. Um, but what about the other 80%? Are then, are they low pos? Are, are they no pos? What an awful apartheid. How morally bankrupt is the idea of high potential? If you use it with one individual, you say to a person, hey Marcus you've got potential, well that's, that's not a lie. That's true because that simply means, Marcus you have ways in which you can grow.

And every one of us can grow. We all know that you grow most in your areas of greatest strength. I'm not a tabula rasa. I, I can't become anything I want to be. I got to find out who I am and then become a really, really great version of that. But everyone can grow. So the idea that, that Marcus has potential is really wise. The idea that there's such a thing called potential, that we can measure it in Marcus or a bunch of other people and are ascertained that Marcus has more this thing called potential than everyone else is just wrong. We can't measure that. That's not findable. That's not knowable. That's made up.

But now we're going to take this made up thing called potential and turn it into, into a whole system deployed through technology at scale. Okay, that's awful. And that needs to stop right now. Otherwise we're going to end up in some future state where there's another act of Congress where some people are going to be anointed with high potential status and everyone else is con- signed to less thans. And it's, that's not only morally bankrupt. It, it's deeply unproductive.

WHITNEY Yeah. The implications are, are astounding and-

MARCUS Yes.

WHITNEY ... as you said, unproductive and, and I, I, yeah. It's, I think that's really an important point. So, um, any last thoughts from you today? Anything that you would like to share other than read this fantastic book? Any, any other thoughts?

MARCUS Well no. I, I mean I thank you for, for this time. It's always, you know, it's great to dive into some of these things. I, I feel as though at the moment the data would suggest from all different sources that human beings are endearingly unique. If you have a sibling or two you'll know what I mean. (laughs) You're raised in the same household with the same genetic inheritance as your brother or your sister and you look around and you go, how did she (laughs) end up so different from me?

And so the challenge then is, is at work, how do we contribute that uniqueness? The, the power of human nature is that each human's nature is unique. That is not a bug. (laughs) That is a feature. And so I hope that everyone listening can think to themselves in their own life and if they're leading a team, the people on the team, and if they're leading teams of teams, for those broader teams, can think to themselves how do we actually do work together that intelligently capitalizes on the fact that each human is unique. As opposed to trying to fix people so they aren't.

People aren't broken. We don't need to fix them. We need to identify their unique dent in world or dents, plural, in the world and then help them to make those dents. I have two kids, 16 and 18. I want them to go to work for 40% of their time and have that work be at the best expression of themselves. And at the moment, the work is designed explicitly to not have that happen. That is a shame.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MARCUS And I think we can make it better.

WHITNEY I agree. I agree. So Marcus, I wanted to just say thank you. Uh, several years ago, it's been about six or seven years ago now when I wrote my very first book, you were kind enough, you did not know me, to blurb the book, Dare, Dream, Do. And it probably wasn't a very big deal for you but I think this goes to this idea of really seeing people and paying attention to them and, and having them feel that they matter.

When you did that kind thing, you sent the message that I mattered. And I wanted to just, um, end our episode today by saying thank you to you for that. For being willing to, to, to, to do that generous, kind act, which was possibly simple but very kind and very meaningful. So thank you.

MARCUS Well I, I appreciate it. I know how hard it is to take ideas. I'm sure you've had this too. People go, I want to write a book. You go, oh okay. Write a book proposal first. If you can't write a book proposal you can't write a book. And then once you go to write a book it's like, oh my word these white pages are just staring at me. So anybody who has taken the discipline and the time to take their ideas seriously enough to craft them into a piece of extended reading for a reader, like you did, like hats off to, to, to you or frankly to anybody who's, who's taken themselves that seriously.

WHITNEY Yeah. Well thank you. Again it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much, Marcus.

MARCUS My pleasure.

There is so much that goes into building a team, which is a topic I obviously love researching and talking about. But Marcus' statement - tools trump training. Good reminder. You can read and think and get all sorts of training, but if at the end of the day, the tools (or the environment) that you have in place don't support the changes you're trying to make, the changes won't happen. If existing tools fly in the face of what you've learned or what you're trying to implement, the tools will always win.

Another thing I'm thinking about is the importance of checking in regularly. If by checking in with your direct reports each week you could measurably increase engagement by 20 points--- What could your team accomplish?

Which brings up another critical point - capacity. When Marcus was talking about the number of people that you should directly manage – it's limited by the number of people you're willing and able to check in with once a week - that is a fantastic metric. Think of your team now. Are there individuals with whom you aren't checking in weekly? How is their job performance? If you either change your schedule so you can meet with them or reconfigure your organization so they have someone to check in with, the data shows that engagement will grow. It's a small, but powerful shift.

And just to follow up on the coaching client I spoke with after interviewing Marcus. At the end of that coaching session, I had him read out loud, from his 360 what his peers think he does well--- this is raw information can be used to build excellence.

Practical Tip--as if you didn't already have enough from this episode, here's what you might want to do:

Spend a week in love with your work. Do as Marcus suggests and draw a line down the center of a piece of paper with Love It on one side and Don't Love It on the other side. Record your activities throughout the week and look for patterns. It's a simple exercise that can ultimately grow your "red thread count" once you learn to weave in those activities that really make you come alive.

If you'd like to learn more about building great teams, obviously you will want to read Marcus' book. We are giving away one copy. If you want to be eligible for that copy, sign up for our newsletter at whitneyjohnson.com then e-mail us at wj@whitneyjohnson.com. Simply write in the heading Signed up. If you are already signed up, then good. We'll provide instructions in this week's newsletter.

You may also want to check out my book *Build an A-Team* with Harvard Business Press, download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Marcus Buckingham being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Ritty, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.