

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 115: AMY EDMONDSON

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption.

My guest today is Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, best known for her pioneering work on psychological safety, which has spawned a large body of academic research in management, healthcare, and education over the past two decades. Her most recent book is *The Fearless Organization*.

Whitney: Amy Edmondson, we are delighted to have you on the podcast. Welcome.

Amy: Thank you for having me.

Whitney: I'd like to start by asking you two questions. The first question is, where did you grow up? And the second question is, as a young girl, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Amy: Well, I grew up in New York City, which sounds glamorous, um, and it was. It was wonderful. It was a growing up of so much independence, so much ability to hop on a bus with my bus pass and go to a museum and go to friend's houses, so it was a great, great upbringing. You know, I didn't know what I wanted to be, but when I allowed myself to really sit down and think about it, the answer was somewhat obvious. I wanted to be a teacher.

Whitney: What did you study in college?

Amy: I ended up studying engineering and design, which sounds a little funny. I was at Harvard College, and I think if there had been a such thing as there is now as an architecture major, that's what I would've done because I, I really liked design, I really liked drawing, and I really liked math, and it was a sort of a good combination. But I, there wasn't such a major, so I've put together my own major with joint, um, visual studies and engineering.

Whitney: So you created your major?

Amy: I created my major, and it, you know, and it was, it made no sense. I mean, if people ... when people asked me, "Well, what will you do with that?" I had no idea. I just knew it was really super cool, and I was having fun studying all these weird things. And I figured out, oh, I'll figure it out eventually.

Whitney: But, so I'm curious, what were you doing in high school? Because I mean, you went to college, you had a bit of a plan, so did you ... were you thinking, I want to be an architect? Were you, did you, were you drawing a lot? Like what was in your brain?

Amy: When I was in high school, I was mostly thinking about going to college. I didn't think too much about what next. I remember I was very short sighted, but I was a really good student. Like doing school was my thing. I was no good at athletics. I was, you know, not, not in, in a major theater productions or anything else. I was good at school and so I specialized in school and, and by specializing in school then high school, you know, what are you doing? You're doing history and English and math and physics. You're doing everything, and you're doing it in a very academic way, not a practical way. So it just didn't ... I just didn't worry too much about it. I worried about getting into college, sadly enough.

Whitney: You knew, but you knew you would figure it out. I love how you say that, you were very good at doing school. So, okay. So you go to college you major in engineering and design and then on a lark you reached out to a luminary. Tell us about what happened.

Amy: You have to, you have to realize this was back, you know, before email, before the internet, before there was a natural and easy way to find out about things or figure out how you get in touch with people. And so I was a huge fan of Buckminster Fuller. You know, he was, at the time, in his 80s, and he was known as a famous inventor and thinker and educator and, and his famous invention of course was the geodesic dome, which at the time and still covers more ground than the buildings of any architect in history.

I was inspired by, by Fuller. I heard him speak a couple of times, you know, in, in pretty big venues. And I thought his message was really, you know, how do we use our, our, our minds, our brains, and our ability to design things to make life better for people. That's our responsibility on spaceship Earth, he said. And how do we make a better future? That was kind of the message. So I thought I like that message.

And so I was, you know, getting ready to, you know, it's February, I was getting ready to graduate, uh, that spring and I, I sort of took a look at myself and said, "What's wrong with you? You're not looking for a job." And I answered myself. I said, "Well, I'm not looking for a job because I actually really want to work for Buckminster Fuller. And then my wiser self said, "Well, you can't do that. That's not a thing. That's not a job." And so I thought, I know I'll write him a letter. And not because I expected any reply, but because I thought if I write him a letter, I'll get this thing out of my system and then I'll go look for a job. So I wrote him a letter and astonishingly enough he wrote me back. Within about eight or nine days I had a response letter and, and him basically saying, "Come work for me in my Philadelphia Office." So I did.

Whitney: Okay. So what's one, um, one memory you have of working with him that you would like to share?

Amy: Oh my goodness. Well, you know, it's so funny because what I did was a combination of engineering, drawings, and um, and, and sort of calculations on the geodesic math, and especially on new projects where we were trying to do new things. And there was one project that we were working, and back then he traveled a lot. He traveled a lot to speak, and I was mostly in back in the office, so we would communicate, believe it or not in, in letters typed and longhand letters-

Whitney: Wow.

Amy: ... from wherever he was. So I actually have this whole correspondence, but we were sending ... I was sending him drawings, and I was sending him calculations and then he'd write back, and,

you know, at one point he wrote back and said, "You really should move this vertex closer to that vertex." And so on. And I wrote back and said, "You know, I think it's maybe better this way." And he wrote back, and then he wrote a thirteen-page letter where he detailed what he was trying to say. Um, and then by the time he got to the 13th page, he realized he had recreated my argument, and he wrote this whole, this, the last page was a two and a half inch letters that said, "Wow, wow, wow, you were right the first time!"

And then he signed it and dated. He was very ceremonial. He loved to sort of have fun and, and so, um, it was this, um, you know, this astonishing moment ... I just thought I wasn't being, either I wasn't being clear, or I wasn't seeing what he was asking for. Uh, but, but we had this lovely back and forth. And then finally we ended up in this place where he was acknowledging that I was, you know, I had it right, which was really fun, of course. And, I only tell it, I hope it's not a boastful story, but I tell it because he was so humble and full of joy and energy and loved to learn and, you know, as, as happy to be proven wrong as to be proven right. And I learned a lot from that, as you can imagine.

Whitney: Yeah. I love that story. And I, um, and so question for you, did you frame that? Have you framed that page?

Amy: I've kept and I, and I finally realized in the modern era I scanned it, so I have it on, on electronically. But I framed, there was one page of the 13 pages that was just an absolutely magnificent pencil drawing of a very complex icosahedral geodesic design. You know, it's like a beautiful little drawing with colors. And I, I framed it, it was on the back of, you know, computer paper. But still I framed that cause I thought it was so beautiful and it was signed, but I didn't frame the wow, wow, wow.

Whitney: I would frame that too [laughs].

Amy: That's not a bad idea. Maybe I will.

Whitney: So you go work for him for three years. How did you decide that you were going to go get a PhD? And, and as I look at your career and what you're doing now, which we're going to talk about, it's very different from where, where you started, basically being an engineer and designing and drafting. So talk to us about that journey to making this decision to get a PhD.

Amy: Well, you're right, it was a journey and it, I think it can be described as follows. In working with Bucky, I was doing engineering work, and I was seeing a much larger picture and a much larger world. He was very good at describing sort of how technology had changed humanity, you know. And he'd go back to the, the ancient times and he'd take you to the present, and you'd sort of see how this, this giant picture fit together. And, and that's only important in that I began to realize I was more interested in people and large systems and change than in the technical details. So I sort of filed that away.

But meanwhile, I was with working for, for Bucky for three years, and his wife who had cancer, they were both almost 88. And um, she got very, very frail and very sick. And finally she was in the hospital, and he flew back from wherever he was to be with her because they said she's very, very ill. And in the middle of the second day, he had a massive heart attack and he's in the hospital, but they coded him, but they could not revive him. And he died at her deathbed. She died too.

I only tell that story, it's an extraordinary story, but because I was suddenly, you know, oops, like suddenly without a job, um, and also full of grief and, and, and sadness. And, and so in that period, that's sort of, you know, next couple of weeks, I decided, and it was hopelessly naive, but I decided to commit to writing a book about his mathematical work because his own writings on

the topic, were pretty hard to read. And so I thought, you know, they might as well have been written in Greek, um, for how legible they were. So I thought I'm going to write a kind of, you know, "Bucky made easy" book, which is a crazy thing to do cause I wasn't a writer in college. I hadn't written papers, really had written problem sets, and it was, you know, but, but anyway, I decided, I would do this. For some reason it seemed important at the time.

And the only reason it's important to this discussion is, I did it. I moved back in with my parents back in New York City. So not, not so bad. And I wrote this crazy book. It's called *A Fuller Explanation*. And, literally, when math teachers got sick, I'd substitute for them cause my mother was a teacher.

So I filed away that this rhythm of spending much of my time writing and then the periodic coming out for air to try to teach and try to explain in some kind of, you know, compelling way and then go back to try to write again more clearly was a really good rhythm for me. Like I loved both the being on stage and then the disappearing and not being onstage. But I didn't know what field, you know. And so I ... that would indicate maybe I'm an academic, but I didn't know what field. I knew enough at that point to know it wasn't engineering, but I didn't know what it was.

So when I finished the book, I just started exploring and looking for a job almost randomly. And I met a wonderful thinker in the, in the organizational development and management training space named Larry Wilson. And, um, for no apparent reason he hired me, and I worked for Larry is his kind of, you know, chief of research. And, and that meant a combination of spending time in big, you know, global Fortune 50 companies and also reading the literature in some sense about change, and, boy, I loved it, and I loved, I loved meeting people in companies. I loved reading. And I slowly, and I mean slowly cause it took me about three years to figure this out - realized there was a, there was a field here, you know, called organizational behavior.

Whitney: Interesting.

Amy: And I also realized I had no formal training in it, so I decided to go back to school.

Whitney: Interesting. So that brings us to your decision to get a PhD and, um, to this book that you've just written. And while you were doing your doctoral research, you had this big Aha. So can you talk to us about what that was?

Amy: My wonderful, uh, advisor at the time was Richard Hackman and he, he was a great expert in, in teams and team effectiveness, and he'd done some really interesting work that showed that aviation crews, you know, cockpit crews, And they would experiment, and they showed things like better teamwork in the cockpit made for fewer mistakes and then, you know, less deadly crashes. You could trace black box, um, data also to break downs in the cockpit that would lead to deadly failures and accidents. Some folks from some nearby hospitals came by and said, "We really like your research, and we'd like you to join our team," this is to Richard, "to help us show that whether medical teams make fewer errors when they're good, when there's good teamwork."

And, and they said, "Will you help?" And he said, "Well, I'm not really in the mood." But here you can have Amy. You know, I raised my hand and said, "Sure, that sounds good." I mean, I was interested in learning and, you know, making a better world than it always seemed to me that one of the ways we learn, um, was through mistakes. So I said, "Yeah, that sounds interesting. Let's, let me go study the mistakes."

And so I had this really simple research question, which was if I can get a measure, and I can using Hackman survey instrument of team properties of healthcare teams in hospitals, and then

get someone else who's trained experts in finding medical error rates, cause I wouldn't know how to do that. Um, then I'll just run a correlation. Right? How, how hard can it be?

And six months of data collected, and I ran the numbers, and Lo and behold, like first there was this glimpse of good news where there was a significant correlation. And I went, "Yes." You know, like I have a paper I can, I can publish. And then I looked more carefully, and I realized, oh no, the sign is in the wrong direction. In other words, the data were suggesting that better teams made *more* mistakes, not fewer. And that was a pretty devastating thing to see. Like how could that be, right? You know, because that, it sort of suggests these, you know, the good teams maybe they're sloppy, you know, they're having so much fun, they're not paying attention. But that didn't seem right to me cause I knew enough about healthcare to know that it's very interdependent, it's quite challenging, and, and people, um, you know, really need to pay attention to each other and to be vigilant.

So I started thinking about it and it occurred to me, maybe they don't make more mistakes in these better teams. Maybe they're more willing and able to talk about mistakes. Like it suddenly seems so obvious. Now that that blinding flash of the obvious, um, was still a long way away from being able to kind of prove this with data. But it was this moment of, oh wait a minute, maybe people even in the same organization have really different experiences at work. Like maybe some groups are open and candid and engaged with each other and others are sort of fearful and, and authoritarian and so on.

And that started me on what really has been a 20 year journey of, of showing that an interpersonal climate I call psychological safety is really palpable and really variable even, you know, within organizations, not just between them. And that that matters for learning behavior, like talking about mistakes.

I talk about psychological safety a lot, and I'm often, you know, advocating for it to executives and others. And at some point someone will raise his hand and say, yeah, but, you know,. And the yeah but, is always I get it, I love learning, but we have to get things done. No, we have to hold people to high standards. And I say, I can understand why you might see these things in tension or at odds, I see it differently.

So here's how I see it. I see the horizontal axis as the axis of motivating people to achieve high standards, right? It's ... and that involves inspiration, coaching, um, clarity about goals and so on that, you know, really helps get people in the game. That's the horizontal axis. The vertical axis is the axis of psychological safety. You know it goes from low to high. At low, we're sort of terrified to speak up. I don't want to ask a question cause you'll think ill of me, you know, and high it's, I'm, I'm candid, I'm jumping right in, I'm bringing my full self to work.

Now if you don't have either, so low, low, bottom left hand quadrant is, I call that the apathy zone, right? That's where people quit and stay, you know. They still, they still come to work in the morning, but their heart's not in it. That's, you know, very few workplaces that I see qualify as the apathy zone. The upper left hand quadrant, which I call the comfort zone, is the one that just seems to terrify executives. They're worried, you know. If I start being the listening leader, I'll, I'll put people in a comfort zone. They'll sort of, they'll come in, they'll have a great time, they'll mail it in. I say, you know, I can see the concern, I'm less concerned about it, but, but, well let's come back to that.

The bottom right hand quadrant, which I call the anxiety zone, is the one that does keep me up at night. And that's, that's where people are absolutely clear and motivated, like most healthcare workers are, to do great work, you know, to, to do the best job they possibly can for customers or patients or whatever. And yet when they're in over their head or when they see something wrong, think about the stories we've read recently about Boeing, you know, workers saying, I

saw quality problems. I felt if I raised my hand I would be fired, but when ... because of the pressure and so forth. So that's the anxiety zone, and it's a very dangerous place to be.

The upper right hand quadrant, which is what I absolutely believe to be possible. And, and see in various workplaces. I call it intermittently either the learning zone, or the high performance zone. And that's where people are absolutely motivated, they're engaged, they know what good looks like, they want to achieve good, and they would never hold back with a work related idea, concern, question, you know, mistake because they know what's at stake.

Whitney: So what you're saying is all too often we end up in the anxiety zone where-

Amy: Yes.

Whitney: ... standards are high, there's low psychological safety-

Amy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: ... and you cited an example of Boeing. Not necessarily the entire company, but within that particular-

Amy: No, it's a South Carolina plant that was described in the New York Times and other places.

Whitney: Right. And then you've got the upper, so high standards and high psychological safety, the learning, and high performance zone. So could you give us an example of what that can look like?

Amy: Pixar is a great illustration. It's a great illustration of a company that has worked hard to have very high standards. And boy, incredible achievement in terms of the output and in, um, both creative and commercial success terms.

But also they've put, put in place a culture and lots of systems that allow people to be straightforward with each other, that allow people to ask for help when they don't know how to work something out, that allow people to candidly criticize shortcomings in, in the emerging product as, as it goes along. So that's a, you know, that's a good example that many people are sort of at least familiar with the product of it, if not the company itself. And then just, you know, closer to home, there are wonderful teaching hospitals here at Harvard. I've spent time in, in really all of them. And, uh, it is easy to find pockets, you know, departments, uh, units where, where this culture, which often in healthcare today is called a just culture, is very carefully cultivated and very much present.

And, you know, that means absolutely committed to the highest possible standards. And because of what's at stake, people recognize that they're going to have to take interpersonal risks of speaking up, of asking for help, of pointing to, you know, mishaps or potential mishaps quickly.

Whitney: What did you call it? A just culture.

Amy: Just culture, right. Because it's, it comes out of the phrase comes out of this idea that well, gosh, you know, if we, um, if we make it psychologically safe, you know, it's that same worry again. If we make it psychologically safe, does that mean we won't be able to hold people accountable when they do, you know, really unconscionable things, you know, like show up at work impaired, um, um, abusing substances or something like that. It's like, no, of course we can hold those people accountable and still make it psychologically safe.

Whitney: Right.

Amy: I mean, we have to, I'm not saying it's easy, I'm saying we have to do it.

Whitney: Right.

Amy: And so they call, they call the upper right hand quadrant a just culture where people are motivated, engaged, and they understand that there are consequences for, you know, blame worthy behavior but not consequences for human error.

Whitney: Interesting. Okay. So in my work, I use a lot of, I've re-imagined the S curve, the EM Rogers popularized and look at it as the S curve of learning and thinking about managing people at different points along the curve. And so at the low end of the curve, you've got people who are inexperienced, they're brand new at what they're doing. And so I want to just talk you through what I'm thinking and you tell me-

Amy: Great.

Whitney: ... how you would, how you would transfer this. So low end of the curve, brand new, and so the psychological safety aspect at the low end would be - make it safe for a person to say, "I don't know how to do this."

Amy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And also make it safe for them to say something like, um, um, I am seeing, "I'm seeing this, and I don't quite understand why we're doing it this way, couldn't we potentially explore doing it another way?" So, um, so any, any thoughts for, as you would think about like someone who is brand new, how do you make it psychologically safe for someone who's brand new in an organization?

Amy: Oh, I love that because I think where you're going is that it ... psychological safety is going to take a slightly different flavor at different points in a learning curve, and it has unique challenges at each point. So a new learner has the challenge of - I'm new around here, I feel a little bit inadequate, I feel insecure, how do I, you know, how do I speak up and say, I don't know how to do that. Or why do we do it this way? Hey, by the way, every once in a while when they say, why do we do it this way, they're the wonderful outsider who realizes there is a better way. And so we really do want them to feel safe to do that. Um, and, and we want them to feel safe so that they can learn as fast as they can.

To me my response would be make sure that you frame this learning challenge, which it's obviously is a learning challenge by definition, as a learning challenge. In other words, you say, "Hey, you're new here, you're not supposed to know anything yet, so your questions are gems." Right? Your questions are valuable to us. We want them all. You are, you are doing yourself and that the community a favor when you ask your questions-

Whitney: So that's what

Amy: ... or know something.

Whitney: safety looks like.

Amy: Yeah, that's what they say. In other words, make it explicit because you can sort of assume like, oh, you know, doesn't the beginner know? Of course, they have permission to ask cause they're a beginner, they ought to know that. But no, they may not. Right. So it has to be made explicit.

Whitney: Interesting. Okay. So, so you get into the sweet spot of your learning where you know, you know enough but not too much. It's hard, but not too hard. Easy, but not too easy. And so it seems to me in that place you're in the sweet spot also potentially a psychological safety because there's a lot of back and forth. You see things that aren't working, you're reporting those. So that's, that's a place where it's probably working pretty well, is, is my guess.

Amy: Yeah. Good point. Yes cause you're vigilant still cause you're not comfortable, complacent, you're vigilant, you're sort of still paying attention, but you have a little bit of competence or, you know, just enough mastery to not feel in over your head every single minute.

Whitney: Okay. So now we're going to get to the high end and, and actually this is where you're at the high end of the learning curve and like you said, you start, you know, from a cycle, kind of a neuroscience perspective or chunking, you're maybe a little bit bored. People know they need to jump so that they can unleash that innovative capacity, but then they're afraid of failure-

Amy: Right.

Whitney: Which brings the risk of failure. And so how do you create psychological safety there?

Amy: You know, the saying nothing fails like success. You know, that's what you're talking about because you get, you get good enough that you're complacent, you're not paying attention anymore, you know, and things can go wrong. So you've got to, you know, you've got to feel safe enough. And also you don't want to lose this lovely feeling of competence and jump off and try something new.

So the three kinds of failure that I talk about, one is preventable failure. You know, those are the things, hey, you've got, this, um, please don't screw up the things that you're supposed to know how to do that are straight forward, that are simple, there's a formula, you know. Don't put salt in the sugar, you know, in the, in the cookie recipe, right? It's not going to be tasty.

Whitney: Right.

Amy: The second kind of failure are complex failures, and those are the kinds that happen in, you know, reasonably familiar context, but where, you know, a few things might be different, and we might not notice, you know, we might not correctly diagnose that, oh, you've never seen something quite like this customer before or this client before. And so those are sort of because of the, the, the sis ... I don't know the, um, what's the word? The novelty, but it's not obvious. It doesn't announce itself as a novelty. Um, it's just-

Whitney: Interesting. Okay.

Amy: You know. Anyway, so those, those kinds of, those are, um, set of factors come together and create, you know, create a problem. We've got to be vigilant, we've got to be attentive, and you're at risk of those. And those aren't, you know, we want, we want to try to minimize those kinds of failures. The third kind of failure, which we can call an intelligent failure, is the result of a thoughtful experiment, right? A thoughtful hypothesis. Like, here we are in new territory, I'm not quite sure, but I have a pretty good hypothesis that this might work and lead us somewhere new that's good that we've never been before. And so we try it and lo and behold, we're wrong. We fail.

That's okay. We got the data. We, we, you know, we learned something, and we learned it fast, and it was not something that we could have just Googled it to find out whether it's true or not because no one's ever been here before. So those are intelligent failures. They're the third kind, you know, they're the source of innovation, they're really important for people, I think in that, on that point in the learning curve to be experiencing.

Whitney: So you're saying, all right, so there are preventable failures you're at the top of the curve, you've got to deal with those. But we want you to do potentially an intelligent failure. We want to, we want you to jump, we want you to do something new.

Amy: Right.

Whitney: So what are some things, some questions, some framing that people can do, whether it's an innovation or whether it's a person. What are two or three things that you would suggest people say or do to help that person feel like, okay, it is safe. Like, it's safe for me to do this. So I'm, I'm terrified, but I'm going to do it anyway-

Amy: Yes.

Whitney: ... because the situation has been set up that it feels psychologically safe for me. Any suggestions or thoughts there?

Amy: You know, we're at this place of great competence in some dimension, but we don't want to get complacent. We could, we could easily be blind-sided by, you know, a better actor or a competitor, um, you know, a new innovation that we missed. So you, I think you're, you're framing the work, you know, with such statements as, hey, we've got to try stuff out. You know, we've got to, we've got to be willing to fail, smart failure so that we can learn new things and learn them quickly.

And just to, I mean, I think, I think maybe what you're getting at is how, how do we just help each, you know, in the moment, how do we help each other-

Whitney: Yes.

Amy: ... feel safe.

Whitney: That's what I asking.

Amy: Like how do we sort of point out it's, it's obvious in a way, but it's often not said like, I don't know, I need help. I made a mistake, you know. How do you, how do you sort of, um, just keep reminding each other that we're fallible human beings. That's who we are. That's okay, we all are. And just keep, you know, I think a sense of humor goes, goes a long way. Uh, but, but you're, you're pointing out and making explicit that this is an opportunity to learn about the unknown.

Amy: First of all, questions, and you're showing that today and asking questions. Questions are really powerful in creating safety because they indicate to someone that you actually want to hear their voice.

Whitney: Oh.

Amy: Whether you're the boss or a team member or anything, every single one of us can practice the opportunity to say things like, what can I do to help? What are you up against? What are your

concerns? You know, I, I'm, I'm all ears. I want to hear from you. Is the, is the implicit message with those lovely little questions.

Whitney: Mm-mm, they are gems and they're the hardest ... the people that-

Amy: Yeah.

Whitney: ... I found it's hardest to do with or my children.

Amy: Tell me about it.

Whitney: An order of magnitude harder. Um, we could digress but we won't.

Amy: Yes.

Whitney: So, as we start to wrap up, there were a couple of final questions I wanted to ask you and one is, um, I actually wanted to tell you something that I learned and did differently or I'm in the process of doing differently. So on page 170, you talk about proactive inquiry.

Amy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And, um, something that a nurse did who was trying to create a sense of psychological safety. And-

Amy: Yes.

Whitney: ... um, would you share, or share a little bit of the context of what-

Amy: Yes.

Whitney: ... happened there and the questions-

Amy: Yes.

Whitney: ... that she asked. Because I just think it's lovely.

Amy: I do too. So Julie Morath was at the time, the chief operating officer at Children's Minnesota. It's very, uh, you know, uh, an extraordinary children's hospital in Minneapolis, St. Paul. And she was new. I mean she was reasonably new and she came in and her passion and her aspiration was to lead a patient safety initiative, you know, to do what she could to help the hospital become 100% safe, um, for its very vulnerable patients.

And so she starts talking and presenting data in forums big, big and small. And pretty soon it becomes clear that people are sort of resisting the change, not because they don't like her, they like her very much, but because in their heart of hearts, they sort of think the hospital's pretty good. After all, it's recognized each year, it's one of the best children's hospitals, right? So they, they don't believe they have a problem. And now if you think about being a change leader and someone who's trying to get people on board, I don't know about you, but in, in her shoes, I might have been tempted to advocate or to come back and say, "Hey, you guys just don't get it. This is a complex error-prone system. All hospitals are, things are definitely going wrong, you're just not talking about them." She didn't, right? That's not what she did.

What she did instead, which I think is magnificent, is she stepped back and she said, "Well, maybe you're right. You know, think about it, after all, I'm new here, right?" She said, "Maybe you're right. Let me ask you to reflect on your experiences last week with your patients." And then she says, this remarkable question – "Was everything is safe as you would like it to be?" And then she says, "My office became a confessional."

So she shifts the tone, you know, 180 degrees from people kind of going, yeah, she seems great but not interested in helping, to how can I help? And to me that shows the power of inquiry. And we are all tempted, especially experts are attempted to advocate, you know, to explain, to explain one more time while you're wrong and I'm right. Um, but when we can shift that energy into inquiry, and I think it's important to point out that the nature of the question is important too. She did not ask, did just see lots of hazards

Whitney: [Laughs].

Amy: That instead was everything is safe as you would like it to be. It's aspirational, right? It gets that part of us that just wants to create a better world. Um, not the part of us that's worried about being scolded. Very-

Whitney: Yeah, I love, I love that. So, so Amy, as I read this, I thought to myself, so a couple of things that I learned from you is to ask a question was everything as positive with our clients and with our vendors this week as we would like it to have been.

Amy: Wonderful.

Whitney: And so that's something that I learned from you. And then another thing that I learned from you around the importance of framing the work that you're doing is asking myself the question, have I been explicit that it is just as important that you, and this is something, yeah, it's just as important that you on our team grow as it is for us to grow our company and to help our clients grow. So those are some things that I learned from you, some takeaways in, in reading, reading your books.

So, um, one last question for you. What are one or two things that you do with your team of people to help them feel psychologically safe? Anything you've done recently?

Amy: Well, you know, I've just finished my MBA teaching for the semester and I often, near the end, find myself reflecting. I mean the students are so terrific. Um, but part of why they're so terrific I think is because we give them such a good platform. And so this may feel like an echo, but I think that how I teach is partly what I teach and how I teach is through inquiry. It's case method. I assume, and I hold them to high standards. I assume they've read the material, I assume they come to class prepared, and they do. Um, and then I ask questions.

Now what does that do? One, it conveys that I respect their thoughts, right? Cause I ask questions and then I listen and I listen really carefully. And this is similar in my, you know, in my team and my, with my doctoral students and doing research. I'm asking questions, but I think most importantly I'm listening to what they're saying, to what they're struggling with because as I listen, then I can, I can try to be helpful. But, but I think as important as the answers I might give is just the respect of listening and the creating that safe climate for not knowing.

Whitney: Interesting. Okay. So you asked the questions that convey that you truly are interested in what they have to say.

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

Whitney: And then once you ask the question, you stop and you listen.

Amy: Yeah, you listen. You don't look at your phone, you listen.

The one thing when you said, um, it's, that you took away and I'm so pleased to hear it that, you know, it's just as important to grow the people as to grow the organization. I actually think by growing the people you do grow the organization because you're growing, you're growing their capabilities to then add value to your clients. Um, and, and to the teams on which they work. So to me it's like a, a mechanism, you know, you want to grow the company, you got to grow the people.

Whitney: Agreed. Yes, absolutely. Beautifully said. Any, any final thoughts?

Amy: No, it's just such a treat to talk to you and the time has flown by.

Whitney: Well it, it's been my pleasure, Amy. Thank you so much for making the time. And I think people are going to learn a ton from you. And thank you for sharing some of your early career journey and the meanderings. It's, it's, it was really fun to get to hear that, that backstory. So thank you again.

Amy: Thank you.

When we think about safety, we may think of creating an environment where we are completely protected from harm, but one of my biggest takeaways here is the reminder that we create safety for others by giving people the tools they need to do their work well. Safety goggles help a welder confidently do the work they need to do. Safety belts in our cars give us a sense of confidence to go out on the roads with a little less fear and more trust. Psychological safety then, involves not coddling people or shielding them from hard things, but doing the hard work of being willing to be open-minded, to allow people to make mistakes, and to treat others with dignity while still holding them accountable. Doing those hard, sometimes scary things are what allow us and others to feel safe.

To that end, as I listened to Amy talk about her career, all of the opportunities she's had have come from a willingness to raise her hand and make mistakes. All brave things. Wasn't it fun hearing about how she got her job with Buckminster Fuller? Instead of wondering what might happen, she did the brave thing and reached out. It worked, and changed the trajectory of her career.

So often, we talk ourselves out of taking chances because we're so worried about what could go wrong, but what if we flipped that (Like Erik Orton taught us in Episode 101) and asked, "What could go right?" We might not always get the job or the thing we're seeking, but better to go from a place of "What could go right?" and open up the possibility than talk ourselves out of it guaranteeing that what we're hoping for won't happen.

Practical tip:

This week, practice asking questions. (Remembering that questions are really powerful in creating psychological safety because they indicate to someone that you actually want to hear their voice.) What are your concerns? What can I do to help? What are you up against?

If you'd like to learn more about the S Curve of Learning, Amy and I talked about, check out my book *Build an A Team* with Harvard Business Press, and download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Amy Edmondson 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.