

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPIISODE 147: TOM RATH

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of learning in your career and life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. This is the topic of today's conversation - when you climb the S curve of who you want to be by discovering how you're going to contribute, not by focusing on what you get but what you give, which for most of us, if not all of us, at least some of the time, is a big disruption in how we think and feel.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, and today our guest is Tom Rath. The New York times bestselling author of *How Full is Your Bucket* and *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, Amazon's top selling nonfiction book of all time. For the past five years, Thomas served as Gallup senior scientist and he recently co-founded the publishing company *Silicon Guild* with *Peter Sims* who we've had on this podcast in episode 37 and Tom has sold over 10 million books.

His latest books are *Life's Great Question: Discover How You Contribute to the World* along with the autobiographical, *It's Not About You*.

WHITNEY Tom, welcome.

TOM Thanks so much. It's great to be with you.

WHITNEY Tell us a little bit about where you grew up and what you wanted to be when you grew up.

TOM Oh, geez. Going, you know, going back a ways, I think a lot of my journey that I opened this new book with and started to talk about and I think more openly and this Last Great Question book is, when I was 16 years old, I was having trouble seeing out of my left eye and make a long story short doctors realized I had several large tumors on my left eye and within a few months and a lot of surgeries that lost sight in that eye.

And the doctors also told me that that was likely indicative that I had a very rare genetic disorder that essentially shuts off the body's most powerful tumor suppressing gene. And the product of that, they said, "You know, we're not sure how long you'll live." It'll likely be somewhere 35 to 40 years was the best prediction back then. But you'll, over that timeframe, you'll likely face kidney cancer, pancreatic cancer, tumors in your spine and just to name a few areas.

And so over the last, it's been, almost 30 years now, I have battled cancer in all those areas and that, that diagnosis, that young age really forced me to refocus my thinking about my life and my work at a pretty young age there and say, you know, one, what are all the things that I can do to get ahead of and prevent this condition and hopefully live longer? So I spent an inordinate amount of time and still do every morning researching how I can stay ahead of that condition from scans and imaging to drug trials, to diet and exercise and all I can.

I've written some books on those topics and most importantly, I guess that got me focused back then and continues to focus me on - what are all the little efforts that I can contribute to today that will continue to grow in my absence, not just when I'm gone and an existentialist standpoint, but what are the things I can do today that somebody might read tomorrow or that my kids might benefit from a week from now or a year from now. And that's kind of where this new book faces.

WHITNEY I have to tell you when I read your book and read your story about how when you were 16 years old, they told you, you might live until you're 40 - but I suspect, I don't know, is this true that you wondered if you would even live until you're 20. I mean, what, what, do you remember what you thought or how you felt?

TOM I remember thinking I had pretty limited time and it could be 20 it could be 40 it could be 60. I kind of pinned the over/under at 40 because I was optimistic and I knew I needed to build a lot of life into those years. I know it's kind of funny you mentioned that because I essentially tried to compress a whole life and career in before I was 40 and then I just recently I got to 40. I was like, "What do I do now?"

And the other part of this book and the stories I've shared recently are some of the answer to that journey about trying to optimize the ways I can contribute into the future.

WHITNEY Okay. So a couple of ideas are coming to my mind is you're saying that. It's interesting you, you've had a, it sounds like you had this little mini crisis of, okay, I achieved everything I needed to achieve and now I'm 40 I'm still alive what do I do. And, and I wonder if a lot of, um, it seems like, you know, you talk about the quarter life crisis for a lot of our, our youth. They get, you know, they graduate from college and they get their first job and they're kind of in this sort of at loose ends, I don't know, quite know what to do with themselves.

And so it's interesting that you said, "Okay, now what do I do? What do I say?" So I want to talk a little bit, I want to ask you about another story as well as story about your grandfather and, and his sense of his mortality as well. Before we go there, I want to just say thank you initially because as I was reading your book and preparing, I have always had very good health. My mother has good health, my father had good health and so there has never been any sense ever, really in a lot of ways of my own mortality.

And as I was reading your book, I realized I need to start giving myself a deadline, you know, in, and so I, I set a deadline 12 years from now, I need to get done what I want to get done and not that I will die in 12 years, but I need to get it done. And so just that mere act of saying that to myself has made me see a couple of situations where I might otherwise, kind of get triggered around something, I have seen it differently because of that. So I just wanted to say thank you at the outset, um, for that.

And, thank you for sharing that story and I'd love to now hear you talk a little bit about a book that you wrote with your grandfather when he was also sensing his own mortality.

TOM Yeah. You know, that's a, that first book. *How Full is Your Bucket* is what got me started in, uh, it's the only reason I wrote anything for public consumption in the first place. I, I was much more comfortable. I started at a college, I was working with my grandfather (Don Clifton) who'd built a

lot of kind of in depth personality profiles over the years. And we were trying to put something together that it could be used more broadly, um, across roles and occupations to help people think about their strengths in a new way.

And that project turned into the *StrengthsFinder 2.0* that some of your listeners may be familiar with. And along the way, we were a few years into that project and Don found out that he had stage four gastroesophageal cancer. And because of my background, I know that man and I also knew how to navigate the system. So I pull around with him to kind of leading medical centers trying to figure out how we could keep him alive as long as possible.

And somewhere in the middle of that process I remembered that you'd always talked about how it's a shame that we wait to celebrate people's lives until they're gone. So I wrote a long extended letter to Don about the big influence he'd had on my life.

A few days later he surprised me when he said, you know, I think we should write a book about using this letter as kind of a basis and some of his ideas about dipping and filling buckets he'd had over the years. And so, we spent quite a bit of time on that over the next year and write a draft of that book, which became *How Full is Your Bucket*, which was the first book that I worked on.

And really if Don hadn't said he spotted something unique and a talent there at that age, I, I never would have written an article that I would feel comfortable sharing with people because I was a numbers guy who my English teacher told me to stick with math and statistics when I was in high school. So, that taught me a pretty valuable lesson along the way from a leadership standpoint about just how important it is that we've got leaders who are constantly helping people to spot and uncover natural talents that they might not have even noticed themselves. And I think it's one of the most valuable things that we can do is mentors and managers and leaders today.

WHITNEY It's really interesting what you just said, Tom, is that your teachers told you to stick to math and science and you're obviously good at that, but what do you think they were missing? Because you're obviously a good writer. Any thoughts there that you've uncovered that might be helpful for people who are listening and, and don't want to misdiagnose someone's talents?

TOM Yeah, one thing I've underestimated myself in some of my work over the years is the importance of really challenging experiences. And one of the things as a part of this latest book, people go through this [Contribify inventory](#) and profile on the website and we ask them about their miles or their most influential life experiences. And that's a part of inventory that comes up on their kind of baseball card of who they are when they're done.

And what I've learned by asking people about their most influential life experiences is it always gives you another level of detail beneath what you'd see on a resume about how somebody learned something or why they learn through such, like in my case, such as searing experience, that experience with Don is one of the first things I put on my most influential life experiences because he said, "Here's the talent I spot and here's the challenge I want you to try under pretty extraordinary circumstances."

And if not for that challenging experience, I don't think that that talent would have been uncovered by any instrument or assessment or casual observation

WHITNEY What were your other two big accomplishments?

TOM You know, the first one we've talked about was that diagnosis had when I was 16 years old.

WHITNEY Okay.

TOM And then the third one was the birth of my daughter who's our first child. And that was such a big lesson for me. And just how awesome and liberating and meaningful it is to really orient your life around someone else being a lot more important than yourself.

WHITNEY Oh, that's beautiful. Beautiful. Okay, so you live past the age of 40 and you say, "What do we do now? What does the world need to look like?" And you've written this book and talk to us about this book that you've written called *Life's Great Question*.

TOM Yeah. And the *Life's Great Question* is essentially gets back to what Dr. King asked about in terms of what are you doing for others and what I would like people to spend more time thinking about what their work is, not how they can pursue their own passion or how they can find their purpose, which I think those are kind of challenging things to do because, if you start with your passion, it assumes that you're the center of the world. And I've learned it's a lot more productive to start with what the world around you needs and then say, how can you take point A which is who you are and map that pretty directly to point B, which is the needs of the community around you, the needs of the family around you, the needs of the organization around you, the needs of the clients and customers that surround you.

And so many times right now we kind of start off by saying who we are through cold and sterile terms that you see on a resume. And what I've tried to put together with this really the *Contribify* inventory that accompanies each book, is a profile people go through to talk about the roles they play. So it starts with - what are the eulogy roles you play, not the resume roles.

So for me it's being a dad, it's being a husband and being a researcher. And then it gets into those life experiences we talked about. And then we ask people to what are the best words that describe their natural strengths? And then we take each reader through a journey of about 20 minutes of questions about how they want to contribute in their current team and in their current context.

And my hope is that that helps each person joining a team to look back and reflect and say, "Here's how I can best contribute." But then most importantly, if each of us, if we can sit around a table and say, "Here's who I am, here are the experiences that have influenced me and here's how I think I can uniquely contribute to what this team needs to get done." You know, it sounds kind of basic, but normally when we get running quickly with project teams, we don't sit around and say, here's how each one of us can best contribute. And as a product we all end up running in the same direction for sometimes months on end. And then it takes some big challenge or issue or problem for us to come back and say, "wait, we should have stopped and made sure somebody was operating and executing. We should have made sure someone was going to help us build stronger relationships. We should've made sure someone on the team at us anchored towards future planning and envisioning about how we teach people new stuff in the future or whatever it might be."

WHITNEY So, Tom, can you talk through the 12 ways that people can, you've got three major buckets and you've kind of touched on those - the operate, the relate, the create. Can you talk about the 12 different ways that people can contribute or at a very, very high level for those who are listening?

TOM Yeah. And I think it might be helpful to understand where that started and what I originally looked at was, well, if we're not asking the question about what the world needs when we think about what we're doing, is there a place where someone's kind of described what the world needs? I went through and looked at thousands and thousands of job descriptions and tried to narrow it down to what are 50 or 100 things that people do that's valued in our society.

And from that I whittled down to these 12 contributions that are pretty specific. And those buckets of creating, relate and operate, which are kind of things that teams do. And in create, for example, people have to initiate and get things started and they have to challenge one another to

say, are we doing the right things? And once they know they're doing the right things, they have to teach other people what they need to know and why they're doing it. And they need, as I mentioned, someone holding that vision out there about what should we do next.

And in the relate category of a team, you know, that's the one that's the most underestimated today. And most executive teams have a woeful inadequacy there where they need someone saying, "How do we connect people to our mission? How are we energizing the people to stay charged every day and make sure we have the energy we need to be our best?" And how do we look at each person as an individual and say, what does each person on this team need in order to thrive and be productive?

And then we need somebody selling that mission to the world and saying, how do we influence and grow our client base, grow our customer base? And the third and final kind of big category is operating - and within operating it's how do we keep things organized and make sure things run smoothly. How do we achieve and make sure we get things done. While we're doing that, how do we stay adaptive and respond quickly when the environment changes and then finally how do we scale and make sure that we can reach more people over time. And that's if there's no one dedicated to scaling things out. I don't think teams can experience that much exponential growth at least over time.

WHITNEY So, that's interesting you said when you look at the buckets, you said that teams tend to under index on the relate bucket, and then over index on create and operate or over index on create? What are you saying?

TOM Most executive teams I've spent time with, I think it's fair to say under index in the relate area. And a part of that, in my opinion is just the lack of gender diversity we have on teams today. And I think as we get better diversity of gender and of backgrounds and as much diversity as we can, that will start to make things better. Then the other issue there is it, I think relationships can often seem kind of soft and there's not as much direct monetary value put on it, but there's nothing in my experience and from the research I've done that creates more speed and energy and engagement among the team than if that team has really strong increase of relationships. So, that is the one area out of those three where I would encourage especially leadership groups to spend more time doubling down.

The creating piece kind of by nature I think people start to get, because you have to create some product just to get going. And then maybe the area that is, I'd say second on that list of need on averages, being able to operate and make sure things are done at a high level quality and they're ready to scale over time.

WHITNEY Yeah, it's interesting. So I um, I took the Contribify profile and I had two, in the create category I had achieving and teaching and I had one in the operate I had achieve, I had visioning and teaching and the create category and nothing in the relate category. But what was fascinating to me about is that on my StrengthsFinder, my two highest were empathy and relater.

TOM Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY So, it's fascinating to me that that came out. You know, those didn't show up in the relate thing. And I'm not surprised at all that we tend to under index on the relate.

TOM Yeah. And you know, it's interesting. It's a good, I'm glad you mentioned this StrengthsFinder piece because I tried to put this together to be something that was a very, complementary activity to StrengthsFinder about what your natural talents are and this is how you want to contribute to a given team. So if you join a new team a month from now, I think it's best to go through it again. And we

designed it so people could go through it an unlimited number of times based on the team they're thinking about and how they want to optimize their contribution to that given effort.

And I, in the same example you shared, I have relater in my top five on StrengthsFinder each time I take it. But yet when I've thought about a couple of teams I've gone through this inventory for that has not shown up. I haven't shown up in that area at all. For me, it's been almost everything in those kind of create, let's get things started and never finish it and not build a good team areas.

So it's important I've realized it's important for me to step back and think about how do I make sure with any project I'm embarking with other people who have clear expectations that even if we have to pitch in, in areas where we're not naturally the best, we need to do those things to make sure the wheels stay on the bus.

WHITNEY Yeah, that's so interesting Tom. And you know, I was thinking what you just said about when you're on a team and how you want to contribute to that team, it might be different depending on the context. So for example, if I'm running a business, then probably achieving, teaching, envisioning those, that's how I should want to be contributing. At least from my perspective. I was like, yeah, that makes sense.

But if it's like within my family context or where I'm in a volunteer situation and I'm not the leader of the team, you know, what does that look like and, and would the empathy come out more in a different situation. So it's interesting that, that the contribution piece is a little bit more context dependent it sounds like.

TOM Yeah. And that's, I've created, put a tool together that is quite a bit more situational so that it's something that people can continue to build on. So if you have some really important life experiences or context change, you're go in and you update it, do more of it. So it becomes a little bit more organic, like a, a more personal and human version of a resume over time. Not something that is a one-time snapshot.

WHITNEY So are you envisioning that resume that, that people start to take their cue and use what they're learning in this Contribify profile as language that they will start to use on their resumes? Is that kind of for you a little bit of the long game?

TOM Honestly for me the long game is that, my kids are about almost nine and 11, and by the time they're, uh, entering the work world, I want there to be much more efficient tools that helping people to land in jobs that they're more likely to experience success and growth and satisfaction, wellbeing because the mechanisms we have out there now or not that much better than flipping coins in random chance based on the survival.

I would hope over time that we can build a lot more humanity into the way we describe our work in a resume or in an online profile. I mean you couldn't imagine anything less personal and more sterile than the current language we use in resumes about tasks and skills and PowerPoint and VP titles and the like and well, I mean none of that stuff is the way people will describe you in a way that really mattered in the work that you did or in your life.

So I, if we can bring even a little bit of that into the context of why we're embarking on a job. Why we're joining the team. I think it will help us to do more meaningful and passionate work along the way and to come home with a little bit more energy and satisfaction in the process.

WHITNEY In the book you share a story about the importance of not just asking people what they do. There's a second more important question. What's that question?

TOM

I'm someone who's is as petrified about a cocktail party conversations as anyone. And you know, the generic question is what do you do? And the, the thing I've just learned to ask, the follow-up questions, because that's better than having to talk. And the follow-up question that gives me a lot more detail is, uh, well tell me what your typical day looks like. What does that mean?

So if someone tells me they're in commercial real estate, I know what, what do you spend your day doing? What's your time look like? And boy, that's when I, that's when I get the stories and can really understand how that person's work has an influence on someone and how it matters in their day. And I think we've got to find ways to push beyond the, "what do you do?" from a job description standpoint to the piece were just talking about and help people see how those daily activities they engage in actually do result in something that has a positive influence on another person.

I've been really impressed by a lot of the recent work, by Adam Grant, who I'm sure you know as well and others about don't look at the influence of tying those efforts to the productive difference it makes for another person. And you know, he's looked at it in call centers. I've seen other studies that have looked at it in medical settings or with even in food service, if someone preparing food in a kitchen can see the person they're preparing the food for enjoying the meal, they make better quality food that's rated higher by restaurant goers and they make healthier food and they feel better about it in the process. So we've just, and I mentioned the healthcare example of a radiologist sees a picture of a patient appended to that radiographic record, they produce better quality radiographic write-ups and reports that are longer and they have a higher diagnostic accuracy.

So we've got to find ways to bring the face of the person we serve into our work and bring some humanity back into it on a functional level as well.

WHITNEY

Can you reconstruct a typical day for us and then tie that idea to this notion of being able to see the person you're cooking food for or the person who's, um, X-rays you're examining, kind of tie that together in your mind for us?

TOM

You know, one of the questions that Gallup has asked for many, many years about strengths is "I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day." And the phrasing of those questions is really important because it's not, I get to use my strengths all the time throughout the day. Nobody does.

If you have a chance to do something that really fits who you are as a person tomorrow, and if tomorrow you can - even for a moment - see how you took one customer who walked into your retail store and let's say they were frustrated and exhausted when they walked in, you put a smile on their face for two minutes. Boy, that's a big victory that we often don't take the time to stop and pause and acknowledge.

And you can see that whether it's, you know, in a retail environment and call center environment professional services, you're usually dealing with internal customers throughout the day and you can see that your work made an influence and acknowledged that maybe most importantly, if you can call that out for another person you work with to acknowledge something they did, they had a positive influence on a customer or client or someone they've served.

Those are the things that, I mean ideally right now most people go home from work with less energy and lower wellbeing than when they got to work in the morning. And if you can turn that around so on most days you get to go home or a colleague or friend of yours gets to go home with as much or more energy than when they showed up in the morning, then I think we begin to day by day reverse the equation of having better lives because of the work that we do.

WHITNEY I love that. Just flipping that. One of the things that you said in the book, and this is one of my favorite quotes from everything in the book is “contribution is the sum of what grows when you are gone.”

TOM That’s a product of the personal story that we started off talking about where I started thinking about that kind of an a big, from a big picture standpoint of how can I work on a body of research, a book, a website. It’s spending a lot of time on the development of one person I care about. And those are things that continue to live on even when I’m not around at all.

I think we can orient our hourly and daily efforts to make sure that, that’s a kind of a clarion call to pull us out of the minutia where it’s a lot easier for me for the rest of this day to day to try and get to inbox zero and respond to all emails and return my messages. And even feels good if I get that done right?

But if instead, I challenge myself to say, you know what, first you need to do something that actually is a productive product of your work that might help somebody out tomorrow or a week from now. Then, at least I can have some satisfaction when I’m driving home tonight to say, yeah, I did something that wasn’t just getting to inbox zero, which nobody’s going to remember or care about a year from now.

WHITNEY So what does a typical day look like for you, Tom?

TOM A typical day for me it looks like waking up and getting my kids out the door for school and everyday asking them if they got a good night’s sleep because boy, do we value in our household after I’ve studied it. And if they don’t, we kind of work back from what do you need to do to fix that for, for the next night. Because one good night’s sleep is a miracle. It’s kind of like a reset button on a video game where you get a clean start on the next day.

And then an, an ideal day for me, it’s getting to walk to school with my kids. Their school’s about eight blocks from our house. And I know that if we all walk early in the morning, it’s a really good start from an activity and a creativity standpoint. None of us get anywhere near enough movement time throughout the workday.

So, that’s a really good day. And then to spend some time, first thing and my day on are usually, it’s reading through a lot of medical abstracts and research and you know, I read research about health in particular with my condition because all the things I read about in the morning and just give me hope because every morning there tens if not hundreds of scientists who are publishing work they’ve spent years on that show how we can all live better and longer lives and good health.

So I read to give myself hope in the morning and then try and put a little bit back into the world from a research or a writing standpoint before I allow myself to be pulled into the, uh, path of least cognitive resistance, which is kind of responding and getting back to things late in the day when I have less willpower-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

TOM So that’s, that’s a typical day for me.

WHITNEY Thank you for sharing that. So after listening to this podcast, um, and people are further intrigued by your work, um, one question is if they want to learn more about it sounds like you’ve done a lot of work around health, etc., what should they look at? What can they read that you’ve written? First question. And then the second one is just, if people want to engage with you further around the ideas in this most recent book, *Life’s Great Question*. What’s the best way to do that?

TOM Yeah. There's information about all of the books including a *Eat, Move, Sleep, and Are You Fully Charged?* that are more kind of health and wellbeing specific on tomrath.org and I think on tomrath.org you can also find links to *Life's Great Question* and the contribify.com website and that's the profile that I'd encourage people to check out and build and see if that can be a part of some of their team and career activities.

WHITNEY Okay. All right. So, um, last two questions. Uh, you, do you have the book in front of you?

TOM Uh, I do.

WHITNEY Okay. Could you read, um, you dedicated it to your grandmother. Could you read the dedication?

TOM It is to my late grandmother, Shirley Clifton, uh, who lived from 1924 to 2016 who showed me how a life of contribution lives on forever.

WHITNEY Tell us more.

TOM Yeah. You know, I've talked a lot about my grandfather who I worked with really closely, but I was, I actually spent almost all my time growing up at their house with Don and his wife, Shirley, and she's the one who just spent endless hours reading to me and investing in my growth and development, when I was a child. And by the time I was in kindergarten I was entering contests and reading 50 books a week I think was the one time.

And it was because she instilled that desire to learn and growth and just spent all the endless time and attention that I could imagine. It was probably the purest contribution to the growth of another human being as I've seen and it's inspired me and my mom and my wife and my kids who knew her as well, the, uh, think about that as a part of their growth as well. So that's why I dedicated this book to her.

WHITNEY Beautiful. Any final thoughts?

TOM No, I think just encouraging people to, when they orient, when you orient your day toward the, the contribution you make to the life of another human being, it just makes everything easier and less stressful as you move through a really busy world today.

WHITNEY Tom Rath, thank you for being with us.

TOM Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure and honor.

I talk a lot about embracing constraints as means of accelerating up your current S Curve of Learning. A lack of money, time, expertise, buy-in --- any or all can help us grow. But until reading Tom's book and talking with him, I hadn't seriously considered that a health diagnosis could create a constraint for how I choose to show up for life every day. As I said to Tom, I've always been in good physical health, and so has everyone in my family. He's inspired me to put a bounding box of time around my dreams and plans. To help me make better use of the precious time that I have.

I was also very intrigued by how Tom codified the different ways we contribute - create, relate and operate, and how those come into play depending on the team we are on. Knowing that we tend to under index in the relate area, and hearing Tom declare that "there's nothing in his experience and from the research he's done that creates more speed and energy and

engagement among team than if that team has a really strong relationships,” this is making me wonder how I can leverage my StrengthsFinder strengths of empathy and relating with my own team.

I just love the premise of the whole book. Instead of following your passions, start by taking a good look at what the world around you needs. What does your family need? What does your community need? What do your customers need? What problems are they facing? And if that is too daunting, then you may want to do what I’ve been doing since I interviewed Tom. Each morning after I say “Today is going to be a great day which I learned from [BJ Fogg on the podcast a few weeks ago](#), I’ve been asking myself, “How can I contribute today?” It’s a great question --- and one that helps me who up differently.

On the topic of contribution, more people are finding the Disrupt Yourself podcast because you are sharing your favorite episodes and takeaways on social media and have taken the time to leave [5-Star Ratings and Reviews on Apple Podcasts](#). So, I want to take a moment and read our review of the week from Hyphen Nation.

Everything you want is on the other side of disruption.... Disruption is part of our world. Those who choose comfort and try to avoid the inevitable find frustration and stagnation. Those who choose courage and embrace disruption find growth and expansion on the other side. Through this podcast, Whitney Johnson provides a masterclass in understanding and harnessing disruption to shift your world. Don't miss a moment!

Thank you again to Tom Rath for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, 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.