

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 151: MICHAEL BUNGAY STANIER

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast - a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice, which is an important word for this podcast, for how do you climb the *S Curve of Learning* in your career and life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, and today our guest is Michael Bungay Stanier. The number one thought leader in coaching is named by Thinkers 50 MG 100, author of *The Coaching Habit*, the bestselling coaching book of this century with nearly 700,000 copies sold, which is amazing, and a thousand plus Amazon reviews. As some of you know, we had Michael on the podcast in early 2018, an episode in which we learned about Michael's childhood in Australia. We also did a role-playing exercise in which Michael coached me live.

So, in this episode we're going to continue the conversation talking about Michael's latest book, *The Advice Trap*, a book on how to tame your advice monster. Coaching people rather than goading them up the S curve - disrupting yourself from a quelling adviser to a compelling leader.

WHITNEY Michael, welcome back.

MICHAEL Whitney, how lucky am I to be your first guest making a return visit. And you know what-

WHITNEY I know.

MICHAEL ...I was just thinking that, you know Disney movies, the sequels are always a bit disappointing. So, we've got to break the Disney curse and so the sequel's even better than the first one.

WHITNEY We're going to break the Disney curse and that means that *The Advice Trap* is going to sell even more books than *The Coaching Habit*. So-

MICHAEL Well I can't e- I can't see how that's even possible. As you said, it's this, this-

WHITNEY Juggernaut.

MICHAEL ...movement of angel dust being sprinkled over the, *The Coaching Habit*, which has propelled it to so many copies sold but however many copies it sells that's perfect. What's, what's important is I get to hang out with you a little bit.

WHITNEY Well and just for our listeners, one thing to be aware of is that most business books don't sell more than like 5,000 copies. It's like if you sell more than 5,000 that's considered a really, really good thing. And in fact on the interview before with Michael we, he talked a little bit about the publishing process cause you self-published that book you're self-publishing this book as well.

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY So, we definitely want to go back and listen to that episode. So, here's the big question, Michael. You published *The Coaching Habit*. Now you've written *The Advice Trap*. Why did you feel like you needed to write another book on this topic?

MICHAEL That is such a good question because writing books is this miserable, miserable experience. It is really hard to write a book. You're like, you have an idea and then you write this first draft and the first draft sucks compared to the idea in your head. And then you write a second draft, which is even worse than the first draft. You know like, "What's the point of this? I could be doing anything. I could be hanging out with my daughter. I could be going to my church, I could be lazing in a lounge somewhere, drinking martinis, anything but write a book."

So, it takes something to actually choose to really write a book. But here's the piece around it, Whitney, I, you know the book, *The Coaching Habit* has sold a bunch of copies and I get regular emails from people going, "It's amazing. I looked at the seven questions. And I started incorporating them into my life and it's changed the way I show up and I lead differently, and I interact with my family differently. So very rewarding." But I certainly don't get three quarters of a million emails and I know, oh, there are a bunch of people who have read *The Coaching Habit*. And even if they've gone, I quite like it because honestly, there's been one or two people who've hated *The Coaching Habit*.

Somebody on Amazon said, "This is the worst book ever written. And so, I was like, "That's a little harsh." But was like, "Okay, so what about the people who read the book, like the book, get it in theory, but in practice found it really hard to go? How do I shift from an old way of behaving to a new way of behaving?" And I was like, "I need to help those people make the transition. In fact, all people make the transition," because what I'm asking of people sounds easy and

it's difficult. I'm saying, "I want you to stay curious a little bit longer. I want you to rush to action and advice giving a little bit more slowly." Everybody gets that in theory, but in practice for lots of us, that's really hard. So, this book goes a little deeper into a key pattern around behavior change, which says, there are two types of change in this world. There's easy change, there's hard change. Easy change is, hey you know you need to learn something. You read the book, you watch the video, you hear the podcast, you pick it up, you practice, you get the hang of it and boom, you're, you're at the level you need to be.

Hard change is that stuff you keep bumping into it where you're like, "I want to do this, and I can't. I can't get up that S Curve. I keep getting halfway up the slope and then sliding back downward again." And that's what this book is about is really going, here's a process for tackling hard change in particularly in the context of curiosity.

WHITNEY So why is, why is the need to give advice? And could you talk a lot about this, staying curious longer. And actually, let me, let me ask a different question. Why? No, I want, actually I want to ask this question. Why is the need to give advice such a trap for so many people?

MICHAEL There's nothing inherently wrong with advice. And what's, the message here is not never give anybody, ever advice ever again? Cause that's patently ridiculous. Advice is a critical form of communication between us. I mean-

WHITNEY Right.

MICHAEL ... Whitney is an author, podcaster, and a speaker. All of those are moments where she transmits her knowledge about how to disrupt yourself, how to manage the S Curve to the world. So that's advice. What we're trying to break is that when there's a default pattern, that advice giving is your instinctive and unthinking reaction to most situations. And that's true for most of us. Somebody starts telling us something that's going on and even though we don't really know the context or really know the people or really know the details or the technical specifications, after about 10 seconds we're like, "Oh actually I've got some ideas around how you should go about fixing this."

And to answer your question about why it's so difficult? Well, there's two levels to the difficulty. The first is we've just spent a lifetime practice in giving advice and being rewarded for it. You know in school it's like, do you have the answer? In the university, it's like, do you have the answer? In your early career? It's like, do you know what you're doing here? Do you have subject matter expertise? And there's a way that that's continually rewarded and promoted as this is what success looks like, because you know stuff.

But it quickly becomes clear as you become more senior, as this world gets even more complex and interconnected and chaotic and also answers are just available everywhere. You know, you can Google anything, that having the answer is not enough anymore and not sufficient in terms of what leadership

looks like. And so, the deeper questions like, well knowing that, why do we hang on to, hang onto that, I need to give advice. Why? What does it give us? And that's actually the interesting question. That's kind of what's that? How you start tackling what hard changes is. What are the prizes and what are the punishments of the former behavior? And there are prizes to being a person who gives it advice. Now in the book we say, look, this advice monster, our goal is to tame your advice monster. The advice monster has three personas, tell it, save it and control it. And I came up with these three personas because I thought each one of those points, is a lens to a benefit we get out from giving advice. So when you're in tell it mode you, what, the prize you get is being the person with the answer.

Adding value because you've got a solution. Being seen as the smart person, having people come to you and sit at your feet going, "Whitney, please cast us a pearl of wisdom and a nugget of gold from your big brain. Tell us what's going on." And there's all sorts of advantages just to that, you know, ego advantages and status advantages for sure. And then the second advice monster, which is save it, is that whole piece around, "Oh, I get to save the world. I get to rescue everybody. I get to feel like I am the person who is holding it all together, caring for everybody. I get to carry that kind of paternal and maternal energy around. It's my job to make sure that nobody fails, ever." And there's a sense of gratification that comes from that and responsibility and status and all of that.

And then that third piece, which is control it. The third persona of the advice monster that's saying, "Look, there's a real advantage to gain." And so when you're giving the answer, you're framing the conversation, you're framing the topic in control. You're not letting chaos arrive. You're not giving power over, you're not giving control over to anybody. So you stay in control, which makes you feel safe. So there's just a part of your brain that goes, "Look, even though my advice isn't as good as I think it is, and even though my advice isn't often trying to solve the wrong problem..." There's a way that when you're the person that has the status, that is the person who's giving you advice, your brain goes, "Look, your advice may be wrong, but at least you're in control. And you're safe and you're doing your thing and you're the most important person in the room." "That's good. So keep doing that." So it's a, it's a neurological thing that we're trying to overcome here.

WHITNEY Which goes back to the idea of hard change.

MICHAEL Which goes back to the idea of hard change. Yeah. I mean, the inspiration for this for me was, um, from two Harvard educational psychologists, um, Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey, and they wrote a book called *Immunity to Change*.

WHITNEY Okay.

MICHAEL And it's a profound book. It's, for me, it's, it's the most powerful change process that I've encountered. Once you get into it, the book itself, I mean Bob and Lisa are lovely people. They're also academics. So you would not call this a punchy,

lean book. You'd say it's a book possibly written by two academics. Um, but their process, which, you know, they're, they're drawing on, on ancient wisdom around this. But the key insight is to say, until you understand the competing commitments, which is their language. What I would call is the prizes you get from a certain way of behavior. It's hard to figure out how to change that behavior. And that's what we've been trying to do in this book is like, understand the, understand the prizes which you've just talked about. Get clear about the punishment, the price you pay and others pay for you behaving like that. And only until you've done that work, can you start seeing a way through the changing of behavior.

WHITNEY Okay. So you've got tell it, save the world, control it, which are all personas of the advice monster.

MICHAEL That's right.

WHITNEY They either make you feel like you're the smartest person in the world - a person who is very maternal, paternal and or safe and in control. Can you just talk us through briefly one thing for any of us who are self-diagnosing of, Oh I'm this or you know, I tend toward-

MICHAEL Sure.

WHITNEY ...this persona. One quick tip that you could give people that want to start shifting a little bit.

MICHAEL Sure. So, and you know, for people who actually go, well actually I'd love to know which of those three personas I might be, where we've got a little questionnaire on, which, you know, honestly when, you're the inspiration for this cause I love your questionnaires and that kind of helped self-diagnose. So thank you. But if you go to theadvicetrap.com, there's a short questionnaire, I can't say it's super rigorously based in science, but it's pretty good in terms of giving you insight as to which maybe your main persona and some strategies around that. But-

WHITNEY Which one are you, Michael, which one are you?

MICHAEL ...I control it. For sure.

WHITNEY Okay.

MICHAEL Oh yeah, I kind of, I mean I've kind of mastered talent, which you think I'd have to, cause I wrote a book called the, you know *The Coaching Habit*.

WHITNEY Uh-huh (Affirmative).

MICHAEL Um, and I'm not too bad at avoiding save it.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL Um, but control it or, well, that's hard for me to, that's, that's hard. That's hard for me to give stuff up.

WHITNEY Okay, cool. All right, so everybody can take the quiz.

MICHAEL Before I shared some tactics, what's your hypothesis around what your persona is?

WHITNEY It's a great question. Definitely not save the world. I think there are moments when I'm tell it, uh, but it's probably, I probably-

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY ...hew towards the control it, is my guess.

MICHAEL Yeah. And, you know, we're all, we're all a mix, you know, I, you know, a model is not the world. It's not reality.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL It's just a way of helping you understand reality. So we're all a mix, but it's useful to know what your, what your dominant advice monster persona might be.

WHITNEY Yeah, and the only reason I say that is because my children will say to me, "Mom, you need to stop micro-managing." Or sometimes, "Nano-managing."

MICHAEL (laughs).

WHITNEY So I'm using that as a clue of like, Oh yeah, I'm probably on the control side.

MICHAEL I love that.

WHITNEY I'll tell it. But the motivation is, is controlling things.

MICHAEL Yeah. That's funny. I've never heard of nano-managing, but I'm going to steal that. That's a really, that's a nice phrase.

WHITNEY From my children. A gift to Michael.

Okay. So what are a couple of tips that you might give to people around each of these kind of, you know, beating back the advice monster.

MICHAEL Sure. So the starting point for each one is you have to see the prizes and punishment. So let's go one by one.

WHITNEY Okay.

MICHAEL So tell it, advantages, you feel like you're the smart person. People come to you for advice. The punishment is you become the bottleneck. You, um, disempower others from having the advice. Cause you know, you're the person who sucks the oxygen out of the room cause your advice is THE advice. Your answer is THE answer. People rely on your advice and it's actually not that great. I mean, if you doubt how good your advice is, there's a thousand TED videos on cognitive biases that go, "Look, your advice is typically lousy, particularly if you think you give good advice." So there's the, the fact that your answers aren't actually as good as you think they are, and you become that bottleneck around, okay, everybody has to come through you. So, you get overwhelmed and you disempower others, you giving them the message that your idea is only as good as my ideas.

And, and then you need to sit in a moment and go so to the prizes outweigh the punishments or do the punishments outweigh the prizes? I hope for the people who listen to a podcast like yours, Whitney, the people are like, yeah, you know, the prizes kind of outweigh, that the punishments outweigh the prizes here. Sure. I get that short-term gratification of being the smart person, but the longer-term impact doesn't serve me. Doesn't serve my team, doesn't serve my organization. Let's go through the three advice monsters and then we'll do tips.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL So the, the save it piece. The prize is you get to be the person who rescues people. You get to be the savior. You get to be the white knight. You get a sense of burning martyrdom because nobody appreciates just how hard you're working to make everybody feel good. The punishment is A, you're getting in the way of people taking responsibility for their own freedom. Your, you know, there's a model I talk about in the previous book, *The Coaching Habit* called the drama triangle, the Karpman drama triangle, and the three roles in the drama triangle are the rescuer, the victim and the persecutor. And in this context, we know the save it is the rescuer and rescuers create victims.

Or rescuers create persecutors. It's another moment of disempowerment. We are saying to somebody, "You can't solve this yourself. You can't fix this yourself. You're not strong enough to, to deal with failure. You're not..." I'm not allowing you to learn from your mistakes and I'm not allowing you to make any mistakes. So again, there's something in the moment where you go, I get something in the short term, but there's a price that you and others in your organization pays from a behavior that infantilizes and disempowers people to put it kind of in a slightly extreme way.

WHITNEY And I think parents, I mean like even if you don't do this in the workforce, I think there's such a temptation to do this as a parent.

MICHAEL Oh sure. I mean, so I'm happily child-free so I can't really comment on that. But you know, you read about the helicopter parenting syndrome.

And that's kind of what this is about. And you know, parents showing up in it, attending job interviews with their children, like, what? What is going on with that?

And you understand why, you know, with all of these, all of these behaviors, it's with a good heart. You're like, I'm trying to be helpful here. Just this is a behavior that has served you in the past and it stopped serving you now to get your next level of how I show up in the world.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL So the third advice monster persona is control it. So, what the advantage you get from that is like you have fingers in every pie, you keep it safe. You are the puppet master. You know, you're able to shape the conversation and shape the direction and have your thumbprint on everything. The punishment is that you disempower people again cause you're not allowing them to take responsibility to step up to steer, whatever that ship might be. You're also not allowing the future, you know, and allowing the input of serendipity and outside forces that will allow you to kind of add more than you can cause when you're controlling it, you're creating a closed system and you don't get to open that up.

And again, there's advantages in the moment where you're like, "I feel good because I've got my fingers in the pie and I'm making sure everybody's fine. And it's going the way I want it to." But you and everybody pays a bigger price because in all three of those positions for you, you are overwhelmed and frustrated and exhausted and stuck and you're like, "I'm just trying to do my best. But this is so irritating." And you're like, "This is..." You are part of the problem here.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL So how do you get beyond these three personas? Well, let me ask you Whitney, cause you know I'm a lazy interviewee. Now you see the pattern foot for, actually just got to control it.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL Because that's the one you and I both recognize. When you go to control it and you're like, "Oh, I see. I'm seeing some of that in me."

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL What immediately comes to mind for you around what you might, have tried to do a little bit differently?

WHITNEY Okay. To our listeners, do you see how he did that?

How he is doing that? Which is awesome because it means he's practicing what he's advising us to do. All right, so let's see. What are some thoughts there? I think one thought that I'm having as you're suggesting that is to, um, uh, before you go into a conversation with someone is to just take a breath, um, exhale.

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY And just pause for two minutes and not, not two minutes, two seconds, and just kind of breathe and take a moment. Because otherwise I think one of the things I think about from a control perspective is that, a lot of it is the anxiety is just building.

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY And building and building, whenever you've got to go into a coaching conversation or any sort of meaningful conversation with someone, right. It's not even necessarily coaching-

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY And so just taking that moment and breathing and then building on this idea that I've been thinking a lot about. I had just had Jim Ferrell from the Arbinger Institute.

MICHAEL Oh!

WHITNEY He wrote a book, Leadership and Self Deception on the-

MICHAEL It is such a good, it's such an annoying book cause it's one of those books when you read it, you're like, "Oh my goodness, this is me all the time. I mean, I'm in the box. I've never out of the box. Argh" Oh yeah, that's a fantastic book.

WHITNEY Exactly.

MICHAEL If people don't know that book, get that book and read it. Cause it is profound.

WHITNEY It is profound. And, and I, but to just let you know, Michael, I had the same kind of feelings when I was reading your book as I did when I was reading Leadership and Self Deception. Both of those books kind of make you go, "Oh, Oh, Oh-"

MICHAEL (laughs).

WHITNEY "... okay. Yes, I know. Yes, that's me. I'm doing that thing." So, the other thing that I'm thinking from a, you know, control it, and this is not just a coaching situation. I'm thinking about like when we are in a social situation with people

we don't know, I'll tend to try to control the conversation, because it makes me feel safe. And again, children being the ultimate truth tellers, they're just kind of like, "You don't need to control the whole conversation." And this goes back to your idea of serendipity but building on the Jim Ferrell piece, I think for me, the notion is, is just stop for a moment and see the people that I'm talking to as people and not objects that I'm trying to control.

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY And so those are some, you know, as you're asking me those questions, that's some of the kind of coaching that I've been doing myself around that idea.

MICHAEL Yeah. Let me, let me respond to both of those ideas. Cause they're both, they're both profound solutions to, to a way of showing up in the world. And what's profound about them in part is that these are behaviors that stretch across all three of the advice monster persona. So, this is not just control it, this is all of them. But first is to understand that when the advice monster has you by the reins, which is the reaction, you, you, it's a habit. It's the Advice Giving Habit AGH or the Advice Giving Habit and you're just responding. And when you're in the advice monster mode, you're you've kind of disengaged your kind of conscious mind you're in kind of, you actually in fight or flight mode and when you're in fight or flight mode, your shoulders go up a little bit. You hold your breath because you're kind of, your brain's going danger, danger.

And one of the great ways to move out of that lizard brain is to breathe. You know, it kind of connects back to people like Amy Cuddy's work and that power pose piece, which is part of what's great about standing and sticking your hands in the air or, or hands on your hips is you, s- you, you get oxygen into your system and then your oxygen flushes the brain and you get smarter and get more subtle in your thinking. You get more willing to stand in the moment of ambiguity because what you're being invited to do all the time here is to say - actually stay in this moment of ambiguity and uncertainty, cause this is, this is servant leadership.

I mean if you go back to Robert Greenleaf's book from the, when it was like the 70s or the 80's you know, it's a bit of a, it's a bit of, I'm just trying to reread it at the moment and it's pretty dense, but there's a profoundness to it, which is your job as a leader is to be a servant leader and your job, that means are you leaving people better than you found them. And part of that is to say, well then you know, to put it kind of maybe it'll really, you need to suffer a little bit. (laughs).

WHITNEY I think that's a great-

MICHAEL You need to give up power, right?

WHITNEY Yes.

MICHAEL And in the act of the act of empowerment, I mean everybody, when you talk about empowerment, like that sounds good. I'm not anti-empowerment, but it means you are giving up power and control to the other person.

And that moment is hard. And that's the part of that process of moving up the S Curve to being a leader. That goes, I'm in service to the other, I'm trying to give them power and control and confidence and competence and autonomy and self-sufficiency. And to do that, I get to suffer a little bit. I get to sit in that moment of, "Oh, I want to jump in. Oh, I want to save them. Oh, I want to control this conversation." But I'm willing to step away from that.

WHITNEY I love that Michael. I just want to stop for two seconds and just have us, actually, I think I'm feeling this need for us to both take a deep breath. So let's take a deep breath on the count of three, one, two, three. That just felt like the right thing to do.

MICHAEL Thank you, yeah.

WHITNEY I also want to put a pin in that idea of when we are empowering someone else, we are giving up some of our own power and the way you said that was just so beautiful and so important and impactful for me. Like I could just feel it in my body and I just wanted to make sure that we're calling that out for everybody who's listening. So...

MICHAEL Oh, thank you. You know, it's, it's, since I'm going to come back to that, that second point, in just a moment, but you know, one of the things that's happened in my world over the last six months as I've stepped away from being CEO at Box of Crayons, the training company. I found it and handed it over to Shannon to be the new CEO. So I'm just a living this experience of empowerment. Empowerment.

WHITNEY Yes.

MICHAEL Flows, stripping away of every sense of identity I've had for the last 20 years, which is the guy who did Box of Crayons. And there's a great, it's a great lesson to me to go, "Oh wait, there's still more that I have to shed before, before..." I've moved on and she has fully stepped into this role that she's doing so well at. But it's a, it's an interesting experience to go, "Oh no, this isn't theory. This is practice for me at the moment."

WHITNEY (laughs). I love it. Okay, so you, there were, there was a second observation-

MICHAEL It wasn't a second observation. I just wanted to connect it to, your insight was effectively you get to see them as humans rather than objects. And that is, I mean, that's where I want to put a pin in it and go, here's what's profound about that. Because when the advice monster is in full swing, you've lost sight of that. You're, you're, you're working the process, you're self-centered, you're reacting to what's coming at you. And for me, the, the, the, the thinker around this is

Martin Buber and his concept of I-it and I-thou. And he says, "Look, there are two types of relationships in the world. I-it is when you see them as an object. I-thou is, when you connect to them as a human, as a person, as an individual in all the richness and complexity and the messiness and the empathy and the vulnerability of that." And our organizational life always takes us to I-it because it is about productivity and efficiency and getting things done.

And that is a loss of humanity, you know, throughout, through your organization, in your team, from you, the people who you manage and lead. And you influence. And this ability to say, my willingness to stay curious is not just in service of getting a better idea. It's in service of bringing your humanity and your empathy and your vulnerability through the way that you lead so that your connection with that other person is human rather than transactional. So, I love that you pointed to that because there's a profound truth, I think that sits in this place.

WHITNEY Yeah. I wanna come back to that in a couple of minutes. This idea of, of the vulnerability piece. So, what I would love to do right now is, um, ah, we kind of touched on this, but I want to, I want to just call it out a little bit. You how do you stay curious a little longer, any one or two quick techniques?

MICHAEL Yeah. So the deep work I think is this piece around taming your advice monster and going, alright, I'm noticing that it's harder than I thought to stay curious because you know, in theory it's easy cause it asks you a question.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL But I think there's a way of going if you, if you work through a process to kind of get to grips a little bit with your advice monster, that gives you a foundation where you're more likely to be less reactive. After that you get to go, well look, the, the building blocks for behavior change are habits and you know, there's so much good stuff out there in the world about habits. Charles Duhigg kind of the definitive book, *The Power of Habit*. BJ Fogg finally has a new book out, which is you know, a New York times best bestseller, it just came out a couple of weeks ago. It's fantastic. And it allows us to kind of codify some of his insights.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL That have being so influential to so many people.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL James Clear, *Atomic Habits*, Leo Babuta at zenhabits.net. I mean, there's a lot of wisdom out there in terms of this. I feel like I stand on the shoulders of giants when I say, "Look, I articulate something called the new habit formula." And it's just me taking other people's wisdom and kind of tying it up in a new bow. Three steps to it when this happens instead of/I will. Those are the three steps. When this happens, that's when you identify that moment, that trigger as

Charles Duhigg would say, that pushes you into an old way of behaving. In this context your advice monster is going for it. **Instead of** - that's when you identified the old behavior that you don't want to do anymore. So tell people what to do. **I will** - And that's when you identify the new habit, the new behavior that you want to take place and using BJ's insight, you want that to be a fast action. Less than a minute. And of course what's great about asking questions is it will take you less than a minute.

And then my suggestion is yeah, one habit at a time. So they didn't try and go, "I'm going to be curious, curious with everybody in every conversation from now on." Cause that just sets you up for failure. It's like pick a person, pick a context, pick a question and work that habit. You know when I have my one-to-one meeting with Whitney on Thursdays and she starts complaining about things and I and this is part two and I jump in and start telling her what to do.

Instead of that, I will ask her, "Hey Whitney, what's the real challenge here for you?" You know, take an outside work. You know, when my kid comes home from school and starts talking about how bad life is, instead of picking up the phone to call her teacher, I will ask, "You know, what do you want?" You know, it's pick a question. There are seven in *The Coaching Habit*, but you can pick any question you want. The more important pieces. Pick the person, pick the context, the repeating context. The one that keeps your advice much like coming up going, I'm here, I'm about to dominate this conversation and go... Try, practice. Because it is through, you know, James Clear and *Atomic Habits*. He goes, know there's all this debate about, how long does it take to build a habit? But that's a misguided question cause it's not about how many days, it's how many repetitions.

So the way you get better at this is you put on the reps and you ask questions and you ask questions and you ask questions and you see which ones work and which ones don't work so well and which ones worked better or differently than you could ever have guessed. And through that you get better at this.

WHITNEY So you mentioned the seven questions. Can you just talk us through, I know that we've talked about this before, but for the purposes of kind of creating this compact little gift for our listeners.

MICHAEL Sure.

WHITNEY Can you walk us through the seven questions very quickly?

MICHAEL Sure, I can indeed, I'm going to put them into some combinations. I'm going to mix them up a little bit for people.

WHITNEY All right.

MICHAEL In the book, they're like one through seven, but clearly in the book it's like you don't have to ask them in a particular order or a type. Which question serves you

best? So let me give you the bookends combination, first of all, which is how do you start a conversation? How do you finish a conversation? The best bookends opening question is “What's on your mind?” You know, it's like you'll see it in Facebook if you happen to be a Facebook user. Yeah. Which is, statistically likely, but it's, it has that proper liberty of not, of being open but not too open. It says, tell me the thing that you're excited about or anxious about or worried about and it's a really good way to get into and more interesting question, a conversation faster.

The pairing of that is the learning question. Question number seven in the book, which is, “What was most useful or most valuable here for you?” “What was the most useful and most valuable here for you?” If as a parent or a manager or a leader, you embrace the idea that part of your job is to teach people. You have to understand how people learn and they don't learn when you tell them stuff. They just, they just don't. It just goes in one ear and out the other, you know, there's, because you've be on the receiving end of advice that you have promptly forgotten or ignored? They don't even really learn when they do something. They learn when there's a moment to reflect on the learning and that's what this does. What was most useful and most valuable for you here it's them to extract the value from the conversation and also gives you feedback, so you get smarter about what works and what doesn't work in the conversation.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative). So good. So good. Let's do, let's do one more combination.

MICHAEL Perfect. So this is the focus combination and it starts with an insight that what you think is the real challenge probably isn't the real challenge. And in most of our lives, organizational and beyond, we spend way too much time trying to solve the wrong problem because we think the first challenge is the real challenge. And it just rarely is. So, here's how the focus combination works and this is a script like in terms of when are you going, how do I do this? It's like learn the script. The scripts are relatively easy. It's like maybe 15 words involved in these scripts. You can do this. You start off with the focus question: What's the real challenge here for you?

That question is written in a, in a deliberate way. So let me break that down. It's not what's the challenge here? Which is an okay question, but it's a bit vague. And honestly if you've already asked what's on your mind, you're going to get a restatement of that. What's the real challenge here? Is a better question because now you're saying there's more than one thing going on here. So what do you think the real challenge is? But the magic happens when you add the phrase for you at the end of it. What's the real challenge here for you? And when you do that, the spotlight shifts from the challenge to the person wrestling with the challenge and it becomes a more powerful, more personal, more insightful conversation.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MICHAEL But don't be seduced into thinking their first answer's the real answer. So that after you go and what's the real challenge here for you? And they give you an answer and you nod your head and look interested, you go, "Great. What else? What else is a challenge for you?" And then you go, "Great, what else is a challenge here for you?" And then you can lean a little closer and speak a little softer cause it makes it sound even more profound. You go, "So what's the real challenge here for you?" And what you will find most of the time is that the conversation has deepened. It's softened, it's become more personal. And you've got closer to figuring out what's really going on here. What's the real thing that needs to be solved? So there you got four of the seven questions from *The Coaching Habit*, put into combinations to show here are scripts you can use that you can add pretty quickly and easily to every conversation, not just at work but in life. They help if you'd be more coach like.

WHITNEY Those are so good. They are so good. And everybody who's listening, I've used them. They work, they're fantastic.

So foggy fires-

MICHAEL Yes.

WHITNEY I love that word. And can you explain what they are? Very briefly. And then there was one that I thought was, really stood out to me. It was coaching the ghosts.

MICHAEL Uh-

WHITNEY So explain what a fogger fire is and talk about what coaching the ghost is.

MICHAEL So one of the ways that the new book, *The Advice Trap* double clicks on something in *The Coaching Habit* is this idea of focus and the focus question. So we just talked about that. Then what's the real challenge here for you?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

MICHAEL And the insight I'm bringing to *The Advice Trap* is if you can get really good at figuring out what the real challenge is, if you can redefine your role not as the person who comes up with answers, but the person who makes sure we're working on the real thing, your value goes up immensely in your organization because you're that person that goes, "I get us to the heart of what really needs to be solved." And that's valued by everybody you lead. By your peers, by your bosses, that's you establishing what it really means to be strategic. So this is a powerful place to be. This is a powerful skill to master, in my experience there are six fogger fires that help get in the way of getting clear. So this is the slightly tenuous metaphors, like if we're trying to get clear the fog, the mist is in our way. How do you clear the mist?

WHITNEY I think it's great. I think it is very-I love it.

MICHAEL So, uh, in the book I talk about six of the fogger fires. So I'll go through them really quickly. I'll give you the kind of the soundbite and then we can get into coaching the ghost. So twirling is the first one. And I love this one because it's a pun. I love a good pun. So twirling or too early, too early, too early. Twirly, twirly so that's when you go, that's when you think that the first challenge that shows up is the real challenge. And you leap into solve the problem too quickly, too early.

Then there's coaching the ghost and that's when you, focused on the wrong thing or the wrong person in the conversation. And we'll come back to this one. Uh, the third fogger fire is settling. And that's when you're in a conversation with somebody, I'm sure people have, have had this experience, and in your heart of hearts you're like, I don't, I don't think this is the real challenge. But then you're like, but you know what? The real challenge is a bit scary for me. And it'd probably just be easier if we just have this conversation. It sounds like a group coaching conversation. They look like they're getting some value out of it. So you know what, I'll avoid, I'll avoid the discomfort of pushing and we'll just settle on the, on the current topic that we're working on.

The fourth fogger fire is popcorning. So that's when you say, "Hey Whitney, what's on your mind?" And Whitney goes, "Oh my goodness, well there's project day that's going off the rails. That's a nightmare. And project B, well, you know, Liz on project B, she's terrible to work with and she's taking all my time and Oh, my car broke down on the way into work and my child is just burned down the neighbor's house. And, and, and, and..." And it just kind of, and you're like, you're feeling immediately overwhelmed and anxious and hyperventilating a bit. You're like, "How do I, where do I even start with that?"

Um, the fifth one, and I find this happens with people who, as, as more often as they become more senior in organizations, this is big picturing. So you go, "Hey, what's on your mind?" And they go, "Wow. You know, it's complicated being a leader today. What we're, you know, the shift in China and the change in government in Iran and the microeconomics and the macro economics and the, and I don't know if you saw that article in HBR about the thingy and the research around that, you know?" And you're like, you're kind of having an interesting high level conversation, but you're like, "I'm not sure what we're talking about. I'm not sure what the real thing is." Cause they're talking about us and we and trends rather than this is the challenge for you. And then the the sixth one is yearning. So yearning is when you go, "What's on your mind?" And they just start telling you a story and it's an endless story and it just keeps them going and part of you is going, "Okay, I'm doing my best to do active listening here. I'm nodding, encouraging the talk. But where is this conversation going? It has been going for 15 minutes and I have no, we haven't even left home yet. I'm not even sure what the problem is here." And it's like you're going to, uh, disrupt the story to find out what the real challenge is. So that's kind of the headlines of the six fogger fires.

WHITNEY Okay. So let's go to, I mean, they're all good and everybody has to read the book. I mean, and it such a good book.

MICHAEL (laughs). Thank you.

WHITNEY I'd love to just double click on coaching the ghost very quickly and then we'll, and then we'll just keep going so that we can-

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY ... we can get all your interestingness

MICHAEL So, so, we, I go to Whitney, "Whitney, what's, what's on your mind?" And Whitney, "Uh, I'm having a nightmare with Simon at the moment." And I go, "Ah, Simon." Exactly. "So tell me more. What's going on with Simon?" And Whitney goes, "Ah Simon blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Simon Simon, blah, blah, blah." I'm like, "Ah, that's terrible. What else about Simon?" She's like, "Oh, Simon, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah..." And go on. And we have this animated 45-minute conversation about Simon and we're all feeling better about ourselves because of how much superior we are to Simon. But it's been an utter failure as a coaching conversation because honestly who cares about Simon? What I'm interested in is Whitney's challenge with Simon. So if I go not. "Tell me more about Simon." But I go, "Okay. Whitney, what's the real challenge here for you around Simon and his behavior?"

Now I'm being the spotlight from Simon back to, to Whitney and going, I've got, you've got to coach the person that you're in conversation with, whether that conversation is in person or on the phone or by a text or via email. It doesn't matter. You've got to engage with that person. And the "for you" in this question really helps with that cause it keeps pinning it down to the person. What's the challenge here, Whitney for you around managing Simon. And you know, coaching the ghost it doesn't have to be just another person. It can be a situation.

You know, it can be like, "Here's my project. Project B, blah blah, blah, blah, blah blah. What else should about project be? Blah blah, blah." Like that's not an interesting conversation. And in the end in the end it's just actually perpetuating the drama triangle around victims and persecutors and rescuers, it's not healthy.

If I go, "What's the challenge here for you Whitney around project B?" Then we're dismantling coaching the ghost.

WHITNEY Now one of the things you said that really caught my attention, I don't remember if it was on coaching the ghost or in another section of the book, but you said that when you start allowing, um, that conversation to unfold around the ghost or the project.

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY You start to become an actor in that play, in your ability to coach has you have just completely, you've become completely ineffectual, as a-

MICHAEL Right.

WHITNEY ... coach because you've stepped in as an actor in that play-

MICHAEL Yeah.

WHITNEY ... and so that was really interesting and intriguing to me. And that's a challenge.

MICHAEL I mean I think you are probably still adding some, you know, you're being helpful in some ways as a coach and now, you know, it's not unhelpful to be uh, somebody to listen to, you know, cause sometimes what people want is, "I don't want you to coach me. I just want you to listen to me bitch and moan for five minutes about the thing" And that can be a really powerful, valuable leadership piece. As long as you go, "Right, you have five minutes, just complain, I'm not going to act, I'm not going to react. I'm not going to do anything other than just nod my head and go, 'Exactly, Oh I know. Oh I know. Oh I know.'" That's helpful. But it's not coaching and as soon as you become part of the drama, your influence on another person is diminished.

So there is about going, how do you keep checking that? And you know, one of the things that's not in the book Whitney, but it might be just useful to share with people is around a strategy for how you help do that? And it's a strategy for how you build stronger working relationships with people in general. And the language I have for it is social contracting. And I learned about this from people like Peter Block and Ed Schein who are kind of giants in this field or in my eyes. And the way Peter puts it as he says, "Look, social contracting is when you have a conversation about how you're going to work together, not what you're going to work on."

And as soon as you come together, whether this is somebody on your team, or somebody in your organization or you know, a vendor or somebody outside your organization you might be working with. The temptation always is to talk about the work that needs to be done because it's there, it's big, it's obvious. It's the obvious thing to talk about. Well, what you are invited to do in social contracting is like, before we get into the minutia of that, let's talk about how best we work together. And what's powerful about this is you start with a conversation about how's this relationship going to flourish? Not how are we going to get some stuff done? Comes back a little bit to the I-it, I-thou conversation we were talking about before.

WHITNEY Yeah. Yeah,

MICHAEL And the social contracting conversation. You, you, you ask some awkward questions, which is like, Hey, when you've worked with somebody like me before and it's worked really well, what happened? What did you do? What did they do? When you've worked with somebody like me before and it's kind of gone off the rails because it always does. What happened? What did you do? What did they do? When it's gone off the rails before and you've successfully rescued that? What happened? What did you do? What did they do? How do you feel going about the amount of power and control you have over this relationship?" You can see they're circling back to that piece around the advice monsters as well, earlier on.

"When this breaks, because it will break. Cause every working relationship has a moment where it breaks a little bit. What's the unilateral action you take? You, do you lash out, do you run away? Do you go dark? You know what, how do you, how do you manage that? And when that happens, how should we address that?" And what you're doing is your defining ways to, to effectively notice when things are not working well and agree some strategies for fixing them. And in my experience, what's amazing about this as a process is whatever the answers are almost don't matter. What happens is you've given both of you permission to make this a conversation that can happen again in the future. And I think the social contract is such a powerful way to build more resilient relationships.

WHITNEY Have you used this, I, I know that you're focused on teaching now, but have you used, for example, this social contract with people that you've coached or with your coach?

MICHAEL Oh, I do. I do. I personally do it with everybody I work with. So with my team, I have a social contract with Shannon, the new CEO at Box of Crayons. I have a social contract with Ainslie, who's helping me with the book launch and all the book stuff at the moment. I have it with, um, you know, I had fewer coaching clients at the moment, but that was a standard part of every coaching conversation. I guess try and make this a standard way of the way that I work. In some ways. I'm not, I'm not quite done this as explicitly, but my wife and I have a form of social contracting, which is like, we just, we now know it's taken us 30 years. We got there eventually.

WHITNEY (laugh).

MICHAEL We're mostly there. We now know it's just like, Oh, we're doing that thing again. This is the thing we need to, to, this is what happens when it goes off the rails. Cause you know, everything goes off the rails a bit. Here's how we repair that.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative). So good. All right. Just a few more questions. You talk toward the end of the book. You use these two words, you say, be generous.

MICHAEL Yes.

WHITNEY You talk about generous silence, generous transparency and generous appreciation. Thoughts?

MICHAEL Yeah. What, what did you like about that? I mean, what's, what struck a chord for you when, when you read those three parts?

WHITNEY I'm going to tell you, but I also want to know what you think too.

MICHAEL Yes.

WHITNEY So, one thing that really struck me, um, this is page 181. The first way to go deep is to become generous with silence. And then, um, you talk about three different stages and then one of them is stage three of this kind of silences. You find yourself able to offer generous silence where you welcome the silence as a place of comfort and warmth. It's like a well-worn sofa hugging you and that's just beautiful. It actually brings me to tears.

MICHAEL Yeah, thank you. It certainly put shivers up and down my spine. Maybe it's the way you read it or something, but I'm like, "That wasn't bad. That's nice, isn't it?" You're like, "There's this space where we can coexist." I think for this, this piece around generosity, you know, we, we hear often because Brené Brown has been such a brilliant champion of it, the power of vulnerability. I think there's a, there's some connection somehow between generosity and vulnerability, which is generosity is the proactive sharing of vulnerability. You know, there's one thing just to go, I'm willing to be vulnerable, but if you're like, let me bring my vulnerability into this world and offer it as a gift, then you're willing to create the vulnerability around silence. It's like I don't need to fill the space. I don't need to be the person with the answer. I'm willing to hold that place of comfort and discomfort and ambiguity all at once with the silence and vulnerability around, be generous with your vulnerability, which is like, here I am, a messy, wounded, confused, flourishing, interesting, creative human being. We're all of that. This is the, you know, to bring your full humanity to a conversation is a rare gift.

But everybody listening has had that moment where somebody has shown up in a way where you're like, "That was, that was, that was a moving moment." Cause there's a, there's a moment of connection around that. So, you know, I'm making this out of the bit of the moment because I hadn't really seen the path until you pointed it to me. But I do think there's a way that generosity is the active expression of vulnerability.

WHITNEY I think that this part of the book, it's very special and I don't know if, um, so it'll be interesting to see how people respond to it as you move this out into the world. But I, I, I really very much responded to it. Okay, so after listening to this podcast, if people want to further engage with you, what's the best next step? Um, you know, we're gonna make two copies of Michael's books available to our newsletter subscribers. In fact, they're going to be signed,

MICHAEL That's right.

WHITNEY ... submitted to us beforehand. Um, but, um, in addition to the book, if people want to be able to engage with you online in some way, what's the best way to do that?

MICHAEL Well, probably the, if you, if there's one place to go to, um, and immediately I want to give you two places. Um, theadvicetrap.com is the place where the book is. It'll also take you kind of in the same geography as mbs.works, which is the kind of the new brand and I'm kind of showing up in the world now that I'm no longer CEO of Box of Crayons, I have to find a new identity. So, mbs.works and that will then points your towards, you know, Instagram or LinkedIn or social media or other places that you can find me through if you want to do that. But yeah, theadvicetrap.com, there's, I think there's a nice cornucopia of stuff for people. There's a questionnaire that you can get, there's a facilitated video process where I take you through into kind of getting a little deeper into your, into your advice minster. There's access to a program called “The Year of Living Brilliantly,” which Whitney's part of, which is like 52 different amazing ,diverse teachers, each one sending you a new little video lesson every week. So you just get exposure to some of the best people I know. There's a lot of kind of richness there. So look there and kind of drink your fill.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative). So lots of options. Okay. Two more questions as we wrap up. You talk about, um, you become a great coach by being willing to be coached.

MICHAEL Yup.

WHITNEY Um, you said in the book that you've been coached for 20 years. What's a lesson for you? Actually, I just lied, three more questions. (laughs). What's a lesson for you, been a really valuable lesson for you from being coached that just really stands out in your mind?

MICHAEL You know, I've learned a lot and you know, part of what, I took it as a mental lesson, which is the value I've had in coaching has been in the longevity of it, not in the brief moments of it. Cause then sometimes I have a call with Ernest who's been my coach for the last 13 or 14 years. And its “meh,” I'm like, I'm telling him stuff, which is helping me as best it can, but it doesn't shake my world. And then there are moments where he's like, this is absolutely an insight that makes me go, kind of rocks me back on my heels a little bit and goes, wow. So a commitment to the process really helps. And um, then there's something about being clear about, this is kind of social contracting, which is how best to work with me. So with Ernest I'm like, "Here's my, here's one of my, my blind spots is around money. Like I'm not clear on it. I'm a bit weirded out by it. I'm not driven by it. So I need you to help me make good financial choices leading Box of Crayons to get smarter around that." And then there's a kind of...And by the way Ernest, I am really slippery as a person being coached because I know a whole bunch about coaching and I'm smart and I'm fast and I can make it sound

like I'm having a profound coaching moment when I'm not. So here's how you've got to make sure that we don't collude in me not getting the coaching that I want." So there's, that was a social contracting moment with Ernest.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay. What a great lesson. Okay. So I'm at the, uh, so to date, to date, I make it sound like we've been talking for two days.

MICHAEL (laughs).

WHITNEY In the last hour that we've been on the line together. We've been chatting with each other, having processed this information. What's been one of the most useful things for you about this conversation?

MICHAEL So, um, there's something wonderful for me to have you as a friend and a colleague and somebody who is a leader in this space reflect the value of this book to me. Because this is, this is, this book is brand new. You know, you're one of the very first people I've spoken to about it, so it hasn't, it's not yet in the world. So I don't really, you know, I'm like a little tender around this book.

WHITNEY Yeah.

MICHAEL So for you to kinda go, "Look, I've read it, I've been moved by parts of it. I've been provoked by parts of it." Then that means just that is just a very um, generous act, you know, that feels like an act of a friend. So I've really appreciated that.

WHITNEY Excellent. Okay, very last thing. Do you have a copy of the book in front of you?

MICHAEL I do.

WHITNEY You've dedicated this book to Peter Block. Will you just read a portion of this and share with us why, who Peter Block is and why you've dedicated the book to him?

MICHAEL Yeah. So do you want me to read the introduction?

WHITNEY Yes.

MICHAEL So the book is dedicated to Peter Block. More than 10 years ago. He was kind enough to write a blurb for my first book, *Get Unstuck and Get Going*. Most blurbs tend to be a little shallow and fair enough they're meant to help sell a book with some razzle-dazzle. Peter's was different. He wrote, there was a quiet political message in this book. The coaching is available to all of us and it's not a profession but a way of being with each other. That observation has become [inaudible 01:03:42] for the work that I do and the work we do at Box of Crayons. We want to democratize coaching because the capacity to stay curious longer can lift us all. Peter first pointed out this calling to me and for that I am

grateful so I'm not sure what to add on that. I mean I came across his work and just felt struck by the books he write the, you know, the answer to to the answer to, Oh I forgot to name it. The answer to how is yes. And then he's most famous for his book called *Flawless Consulting*, which is a really practical way of being a great consultant. But really he champions the phrase I once heard him use, which is, "Giving people the responsibility of their own freedom."

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MICHAEL And I love that cause it's a call for you to show up as an adult in your own life, to take responsibility for the choices you make, to make the choices that you need to make. And I think that's just a profound piece of work.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MICHAEL And part of what I love about Peter is he is this slightly irascible spiky dude who doesn't suffer fools gladly. And so for me to, to know that my book had meant something to him just meant a lot because you know, he doesn't, he doesn't write a blurb for every book that gets sent his way I'm sure.

WHITNEY Yeah. Any final thoughts, Michael?

MICHAEL I would, I mean Whitney and I have covered a lot because Whitney is a brilliant interviewer. So I'd say just for the people who are listening, take that, that learning question and go, you can't take all of this onboard. There's a lot we've covered. So, take a moment, journal or capture somewhere and go, out of everything we talked about what was most useful and most valuable here for you and make that the thing that you remember and you act on and you move forth with.

WHITNEY Great advice.

WHITNEY Michael Bungay Stanier. Thank you for being with us.

MICHAEL Whitney Johnson, It is always a pleasure.

Every conversation I have with Michael, he's walking his talk. You heard it happen in the middle of the episode - I catch him coaching me. It's so refreshing to see people who walk their talk and are willing to demonstrate in numerous ways that the things they are teaching work. When you have the chance to have conversations with or observe people who do that naturally, try to pay attention. I learn so much about how I can be a better coach when I have the opportunity to talk to Michael.

Some things I'm unpacking - at the core of all behavior change is figuring out ways to break those unthinking patterns of behavior. Rewiring our habits. And that is hard to do. You first need the self-awareness to realize you're doing something without thinking, and then need to dismantle what you're doing and rewire yourself for a new

behavior. In the case of Michael's book, the new behavior is quieting that advice monster to stay curious a little bit longer.

I also loved the idea of hard change. That beneath the surface of every behavior, there are prizes and punishments, and when we can suss those out, we can move toward changing the behavior.

So, what was the most valuable or useful thing in this interview for you? Take the time to reflect and write it down and get curious about your answer. Asking that question at the end of coaching calls and other conversations I'm having with my team. It's one of the best tools I've come across to help clients continue to be curious about what they are learning and continue growing on their way up their S curve of learning.

Thank you for helping people continue to find the Disrupt Yourself podcast by generously your favorite episodes and takeaways on social media and taking the time to leave 5-Star Ratings and Reviews on Apple Podcasts. As a thank you, we want to shout out one of our reviews each week, and this week's review is from Joe Mueller:

Subscribe and listen if you want:

- Relevant guests and topics for professionals desiring to learn, grow and improve;*
- Good questions and follow-up questions to thoroughly explore topics and the knowledge of the guests;*
- A host who is humble, authentic and genuine...In the few episodes I've listened to, Whitney was very transparent with challenges she faces with herself and people she assists. Her authenticity includes revealing challenges with her father in an interview with Jim Ferrell, nervousness during an interview with Simon Sinek and humility to learn from Claire Diaz-Ortiz.*

The podcast is the result of a team devoted to sharing with the audience valuable and actionable information. Going back to listen to past shows and looking forward to future shows.

Thank you so much Joe! And thank you for the reminder that you can go back and listen to some of our past shows and for calling out the podcast team.

Thank you again to Michael Bungay Stanier for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Ruddy, 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.