

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 152: STEW FRIEDMAN

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S Curve of Learning, whether in your professional or personal life - disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, and today our guest is Stew Friedman, an organizational psychologist at Wharton. He's one of the most influential management thinkers in the world, as named by Thinkers 50, one of HR Magazine's most influential thought leaders, and one of America's most influential men who have made life better for working parents according to Working Mother Magazine.

And this is the subject of his latest book, *Parents Who Lead*, which he coauthored with Alyssa Westring, management professor at DePaul University. Because for anyone who has become a parent, you will know that parenting is a very big disruption, but if you will let it, it will help you slingshot into who you want to, and can be.

WHITNEY Welcome, Stew.

STEW It's great to be here. Thanks for having me, Whitney.

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

STEW Brooklyn, Brooklyn, New York is my hometown. And I had a number of different phases I went through growing up. But architect was definitely one of them. I went to Brooklyn Technical High School, and being an architect seemed like a fun way to make a contribution to the world and to create new spaces for people to live. And what I've turned out to be is a kind of social architect as an organizational psychologist. But that was, that was one of my early, early dreams.

WHITNEY How did you segue then from wanting to be an architect into being interested in organizational psychology?

STEW Well I was also interested in psychology and became more so when I was in college. I went to State University of New York in Binghamton and I majored there in psychology and literature. I was doing my own work in therapy, and finding it very useful. So I then, found opportunities to learn about clinical psychology by working in a psychiatric hospital in Vermont, which led me to a

master's program in counseling psychology in upstate New York. And it was there finally that I came to discover that I wanted to be a college professor. So that is what led me ultimately to pursue a PhD because in this counseling psychology master's program, they gave me the opportunity to teach the introductory psych class. And I just thought, wow. This is so much fun.

WHITNEY How old were you when you realized, oh I want to be a college professor and I want to teach around these ideas? How old were you approximately?

STEW 27.

WHITNEY 27. Which I think is interesting because, um, we know a lot of millennials are having this quarter life crisis and you think you know what you want to do when you graduate from college and you sort of had another six years before you discovered what you wanted to do and weren't probably into the workforce until you were in your early 30s then at this point.

STEW Well, Whitney, my first job after college was driving a taxi in New York City. I did that for a year after doing on, you know, sort of holidays and b- and, uh, vacation times during college to earn extra money. Uh, so-

WHITNEY Wait, wait, wait. You drove a taxi? Okay, tell us your best taxi story.

STEW Oh my gosh.

WHITNEY (laughs)

STEW There's so many. I think the one that's most memorable - I had some interesting and famous people in my taxi. The writer Jimmy Breslin, the actor Tony Randall. But the most interesting was when I was working at night, there was a man who was an original Hell's Angel. And he told me his story, which was inspired by us driving past a church and there's Christ on the cross outside the church. You meet a lot of interesting people driving a taxi in New York and you learn a lot about people, of course.

To your point, I like to tell my students this because, you know, undergrads at the Wharton school, they can't believe that one of their professors, when he was their age, was just kind of wandering and searching for what he might do without, you know, massively oppressive career goals and, you know, pressures from all around. Parents, friends the market, to compete and to pursue, you know, economic security. That was not what was happening in 1974 for me and for most of my cohort.

And it's instructive because it helps them as I think you were getting at, to point out that, especially the 20s is a time of experimentation and discovery. I mean, hopefully we never stop doing that, but it's especially true at that life stage. And so yeah, I knew that it was interesting in psychology and I pursued that. I found ways to learn and practice it and to get trained in it. And I continued to evolve.

WHITNEY You have had this journey throughout your career and one of the reasons I wanted you to share that is I think, you know, so many people listening to this will say he's a professor at Wharton, this is one of the best universities in the world. And when they can hear the meandering, the stops and the starts, the fact that you didn't go to one of the best schools undergrad (laughs) in the world. That you have been able to build a very meaningful, full of accomplishment life, I think is very encouraging for people who are listening.

So what I'd love for you to talk about now is your signature idea, total leadership. Give us a quick overview and, um, and then we're going to segue into how that perhaps gave birth to your latest book, *Parents Who Lead*.

STEW So the University of Michigan, uh, as a PhD student, I got into the question of how do we cultivate leaders? How do companies do that? What can we learn from studying companies in terms of how they develop and select their top leadership talent

And I spent a lot of time writing about that, consulting with companies on their talent management systems, and started to get into the early movement at that time, the really explosion of interest in leadership development and corporate America, and was a part of that as a faculty member, as a designer of some of these systems and corporate learning institutes.

As a PhD student, I was also interested in how people continue to learn and grow over time, over the course of their lives, adult socialization and learning and the roles that we inhabit as men and women in our society. That was another area of keen interest. When in 1987, my first child was born, and this was after two miscarriages so we were, my wife and I were very anxious about whether this was going to work. She was a PhD student in clinical psychology so we went to graduate school together.

WHITNEY Hm.

STEW In fact, the reason I went to the University of Michigan was to follow her, to be there because she was there.

So, I decide, uh, to, to become a college professor after realizing that I just love being in the front of the room as a college professor with this, you know, group of 18 freshmen in the intro psych class in September of 1978, '79 rather. And the faculty there said, "Hey, you should, you should get a PhD if you want to do this." So I applied to all different kinds of programs in psychology, clinical and organizational and social psychology. And I, I got into a number of different ones. When I was at the final round of interviews for a clinical psychology program that was the elite program in the area of psychoanalytical psychology, they held a group interview for the 10 or 12 finalists. So we sat and did these touchy feely exercises, the kinds that I now have my students do.

WHITNEY (laughs)

STEW But the most significant thing that happened on that day was when I entered the room, I saw this woman sitting, um, you know, opposite the door and, uh, you know, lightning bolt just kind of went through me. And I didn't spend much time on anything during that day other than thinking about her.

WHITNEY Awe.

STEW Well it's true. And we rode the train back, um, the Long Island Railroad back to Manhattan together, where both our parents were living at the time. And we then corresponded by letter. We wrote letters. Yeah.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

STEW And she got into the University of Michigan and I got into the University of Chicago, on a full ride there in their social and organizational psychology program. Neither of us got into the program that we had been applying for together. And then, when we were, in June, you know, set to go off to our different places for college, we went out on a date and two weeks after that she was coming to Chicago with me for the summer just to hang out where I was starting to work there in one of the social psych labs. And two weeks after that, I proposed to her.

And two weeks after that, I transferred to the University of Michigan to be with her. So, that's how I got to the University of Michigan's organizational psychology program, about which I knew

nothing, but where I had an incredibly fruitful, enriching, life-transforming experience both professionally and personally.

WHITNEY Okay. So, all right. We need to pause for-

STEW (laughs)

WHITNEY ... just a nanosecond.

STEW Okay.

WHITNEY First of all, love at first sight.

STEW Yes.

WHITNEY So, such a charming story. So thank you for sharing that.

STEW Love it. Thank you.

WHITNEY Second of all, you followed your wife.

STEW Oh yeah.

WHITNEY And this is 19-

STEW '80.

WHITNEY ... '80. 1980, people. Listen to that.

STEW Yeah.

WHITNEY This is 40 years ago.

STEW Please do listen.

WHITNEY You did that, no one did that.

STEW Well, no.

WHITNEY People barely still do that.

STEW What?

WHITNEY People barely still do that, where it's the spouse, the husband following the wife. So, what was the calculus there?

STEW You've got to know what's important. You follow your heart. That's, that's the story of my career. And that's, that's one of the things that we're going to get to in terms of what I've learned how to help people to discover and how they can be more conscious, deliberate and mindful about knowing what's in their heart and following it. That's really my story and I think what, what I've been trying to help people to discover in their own lives and careers. And it, it makes all the difference. It makes all the difference. And once again, here I was, I was feeling something very intensely. And I didn't ignore it.

That's the piece that kind of leads to tragic outcomes. When you feel something that tells you, this is right, and then you think about it (laughs) a little bit and you realize, yeah this is right. It's not what I planned, it's not what other people might want for me, but this is right. And then you figure out a way to make that work. That's what happened when I discovered I want to be a college professor. It's what happened when I met my wife and realized, I have to leave Chicago and go to Michigan. And it's what happened then seven years later when our first child was born and I held him for the first time and realized my world has changed. I have to now devote myself to caring for him and ensuring that the world will be a safe one for him to grow up in. How am I going to do that?

WHITNEY Hm.

STEW And I began asking that question, Whitney, of everyone I could get my hands on, starting with the obstetrician who, you know, did the birth. I turned to her and said, "Kathy, what am I going to do now? I've got to take care of him." And she said, "Stew, you're an idiot. You should've thought about that before you, you know, went about this business."

WHITNEY (laughing)

STEW And yes, I'm an idiot. Uh, and I-

WHITNEY As all, as all are we, as we are all, I can't (laughs) even say that. As are we all. There we go. (laughs)

STEW We are all. And-

WHITNEY Yes.

STEW ... the key is to tap into your ignorance and to ask questions that help you to discover new ways of pursuing the things that matter most to you. So I went back into my Wharton classroom a little while after that, again obsessed with this question - what are we going to do to make sure that the world is a safe one, not just for the next generation of talent, but for the next generation? Full stop.

And I posed this question to my Wharton MBA students. And some of them were quite angry because this was a different topic than they had prepared for class that day.

WHITNEY They were angry? They were angry?

STEW Oh yeah. Oh yeah. And quite resentful. Like why are we talking about children here? This is a business school. How is this relevant?

WHITNEY Huh.

STEW And professor, nobody really cares about your family, so what? But then there were others in the room, men and women, who were leaning forward, raising their hands, speaking up saying, "I'm so glad you're bringing this up, professor, because nobody's talking about this and I'm thinking about it all the time. What are we going to do?" And in response to my question, what are you going to do as future business leaders to cultivate an environment in which the next generation can flourish?

One of them said to me, "Well you're the professor. You tell us." And of course I didn't know. I was just asking the dumb questions, which is what I have made a 40 year career out of doing. Asking questions that are, well dumb and often annoying.

That led me to realize that, that the training I had and the access I had to discovering new practical knowledge about how individuals, organizations in our society can help to cultivate the next generation. I started to go after that question in a big, big way.

WHITNEY All right. So, you've now written this book called *Parents Who Lead*, and I'm going to ask you in just a minute to share some of, you know, four or five takeaways that people can act on immediately. Of course, they also need to go buy your book. One of the questions I have for you is, were you reluctant to write this book?

STEW The short answer is yes, I was quite reluctant. Once I realized that I could do something to make a difference and create new knowledge in the area of work and life integration, I founded the work/life integration project at the Wharton school. That was 1991. We were dedicated to finding out how people felt about their lives and their careers and what we could learn about how to help bring them together in a way that created a kind of harmony among them.

At the same time, I was also asked to start the leadership development program at the Wharton school. So I'm doing both of those things at the same time and practicing the ideas that were emanating from our research, including and especially our field research which took us into organizations, companies throughout the United States where we were learning that the people who were good at this, who were good at leading their lives from the perspective of their whole lives and successful in all the different parts of their lives, not just work, they did three things that differentiated them.

They followed these three principles. To be real, clarifying what matters most to you, your values, your vision of the world you're trying to create, the better tomorrow you're trying to take people to.

They are whole. They know how to be whole, which means to recognize and respect the fact that you've got not just work, not just family, not just friends and community, not just your private self, your mind, body and spirit, but all four of these different parts matter to some degree. And they affect each other. They don't, they don't go away. They're all there. So being whole, recognizing, respecting the whole person.

And finally, to be innovative. The people who are really good at this, they not only know who's important and what's important and they strive continually to understand better what is important to them because it changes over time, and who is important to them and why they're important to their future, and that of course changes all the time. And they learn how to talk to those people to discover what the people around them actually need and want from them, not what they imagine they need and what from them. Because it's always different. And then they're continually experimenting with new, new ways of getting things done. They're innovative. So be real, be whole, be innovative. Those are the three pieces that we found were crucial.

After writing an article for the Harvard Business Review in 1998 called "Work and Life" and then writing a book called *Work and Family*, Stew was becoming known as a scholar in this field, getting a great deal of attention as a male scholar from Wharton writing about work life balance.

His work eventually led to a position at Ford Motor Company where he worked for 2 ½ years to help change the culture and grow high potentials as leaders in all areas of their lives. After successfully running his Total Leadership program at Ford, Stew goes to Wharton and continued teaching the material. But there were a few failed starts before the course took off with the executive MBA students.

WHITNEY So you said you had a number of failures before the course took off.

STEW Yeah.

WHITNEY For many people, they would have said, well it didn't work. Let's move on. So, what happened? Can you share one of the lessons around the failure? What happened, what did you learn, why did you persevere?

STEW Well, those are all different questions and they were all important ones. Let me start at the last one, Whitney.

WHITNEY Okay.

STEW I think is the most important because that gets to motivation, right? Why did I persist in the face of failure? Because I believe that I had something here that was really valuable and that was a distinctive contribution that I could make. I had seen it work.

I'd seen what happened at Ford when we'd told people these are, you know, mid-career high potentials from all over the world, who were in our initial program, you know, the initial pilots. I had seen them joyously undertake the task of creating value for their families.

Fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers and spouses. And for their communities, their friends, their, you know, religious, political, social groups and for themselves personally. Their mental health, their physical health, their spiritual growth. As well as for our business. When we told people this is what you have to do in this program. Figure out, we'll help you, your peers will help you, things that you can do based on a better understanding of who you are, what your values are and what the vision of the world is that you're trying to create. Where you've come from, this will tell a story or two or three about your history and how, you know, your history has shaped your values.

Describe a day 15 years from now and what that day looks like and what you're doing and why and the impact that you're having. Sharing all this content, connecting with the key people in your life by identifying them, talking to them, undertaking dialog to discover what they really expect of you. And then experiment into pursuing these four-way wins. When we ask people to do that, they went nuts. They were so into it because we were saying, this is not just about your helping our business, our company. This is about helping you and your family and your community.

And the motivation level for engagement in this work was super high because it was about their lives, not just about their business lives. And that's what I've come to believe that leadership is about. Not just your business. It's about your life. So, that's, that, that motivation, I, I knew that I had something valuable here and I, and I believe that our students would benefit from it.

And that requires seeing reality as it is now and then envisioning a better future and showing people around you how they ought to come with you to that better place.

WHITNEY I want to know why you were reluctant to write this book.

STEW Okay. So I built up the total leadership program, built up Wharton, a lot of other universities use it. Companies using it. And wherever I went with this, people would say to me, you know, I'm having so much fun doing this. And so is my husband.

WHITNEY Ah.

STEW And so is my, you know, how do I do this with my partner?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

STEW I said, well just do the exercises together.

And they said, no, no, no you got, we need some guidance here on how to, how to work this as a team, as a, you know, as a partnership. Well just, you know, figure it out. Follow, follow the appendix, which teaches you how to be a good peer coach and, you know, figure it out.

Then a few years ago, my editor at the Harvard Business Press, says, "Hey we want another book from you for working parents." And I'm approaching my 65th birthday and I'm like, ugh, another book. I don't know if I can do this.

Well, okay. I, okay, if you let me have a coauthor who can help me, who is herself a millennial mom, you know, with two kids under 10, you know, tenured professor at DePaul University who I've been working with as a research colleague for 15 years, can I have Alyssa Westring as my research partner? Yes, okay, okay. But how about if we figure out how to design a version of the total leadership program that is specifically for working parents? And we run that in the lab for a while. That's a great idea. Okay, do that. So we, that's what we did.

But I still wasn't sure if I was going to do this entirely because it's just so much, as you know, to put a book together. Then, as I'm approaching my 65th birthday, my kids are asking me, "So what do you want, dad?" Now I have three, three children - late 20s, early 30s. And I don't need anything material.

So I said, all right, how about this? How about if you tell me what you would like me to do. Just write on a page or so. How would you like me to spend the rest of my productive life? What would, what would you want me to be doing and how by my doing whatever it is that you say, how would that make your life better?

WHITNEY Wow.

STEW So that was the assignment. Yes -The professor gave his children and spouse an assignment for

WHITNEY For your birthday present.

STEW Yes.

WHITNEY Yes.

STEW And, and be willing to talk to me for a hour about what you wrote.

WHITNEY Uh-huh (affirmative).

STEW I have those brief pieces in front of me, as I always do. They're on my desk. And that was a profound set of conversations for me, as you can imagine, which I highly recommend. So there's one best practice tip, people. Ask, ask (laughs) for your next birthday for, you know, the people you love most to, to do something like that. And what was cool about it was that they had to tell me why what they wanted me to do was good for them.

They couldn't just say, "Oh dad, just you be you." They couldn't, you know, just do what you want, have fun, travel. How is that going to help you? They had to articulate that. And that was, that was an important part of the dilemma for them as, as, you know, (laughs) gift givers. And one of the themes that came out of that was, "Don't stop quite yet, dad." And "Can you do something that's going to help children more directly?"

So that's, all that led to, okay let's do this book, *Parents Who Lead*.

WHITNEY So was there, in addition to those findings, was there anything that your children or your wife said to you that really surprised you? That you said, “Huh - I didn't expect that.”

STEW I was taken aback by the way that they saw the legacy that I was creating beyond them.

They saw that, you know, this body of work that I put together over the course of decades now was something that, that was significant in their eyes. And that was, that was deeply moving. It's not something that I, you know, had thought about in quite the same way.

WHITNEY Hm.

STEW And, and highly motivating.

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW Uh, so that, that-

WHITNEY How lovely.

STEW ... propelled me forward.

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW So what Alyssa and I did then was to create a version of the Total Leadership course that was for and about working parents in their parenting partnerships, which come in many forms of course. And so we had individuals write their core values and their leadership vision. That day in the life 15 years from now. And then with their partner in parenting, they did the same. And then they talked about those and we give them guidance on how to talk about those, especially when those leadership visions and those values don't line up. And then we help them develop and define and articulate a collective leadership vision, which is the foundation for everything.

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW And it builds from there.

WHITNEY One of the things that you suggest in the book, and I think in these leadership, parenting leadership labs, is to describe your ideal day. And one of the questions is, how do you relate to one another, your children and other important people 15 years from now? So we have children who are 19 and 23 respectively. And so I thought, well how, what's that going to look like? I thought, well I want us to be in touch a few times a week, whether it's texting or calling each other. And so then the question became, well are we in touch a few times a week right now, texting and calling each other? And the answer was yes.

But then there were all these other questions of, well what, what do I hope for my children? I thought, well I hope for our son to be married and have a few children and, and to have finished school and be gainfully employed. And our daughter, for her to have the PhD that she wants and to have written a book and to be happy and possibly married and having a few children. And my husband and I enjoying one another and it turns out that I want my husband and I to be doing the same thing that we've been doing, um, which is the work that we love and that we get to talk about and to focus on that.

So that was, that was the exercise that I did. The other thing that I wanted to just share with you quickly is I ask the question, so what, what should we be doing as a family? And our oldest son

said, and he said this a couple times, but I hadn't really taken it seriously until I was asking the question in the context of your book. And he said, "I want to travel. I want us to travel as a family."

STEW Ah.

WHITNEY And he said that a few times and we really, I'm like, yeah, yeah that's nice. We'll do it, you know, next year kind of thing.

STEW Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY And so I said, well what if we went to Cuba? And he's like, "That would be awesome." And so now I'm like, okay I asked the question. Am I going to answer the question with an affirmative or a just put that off? And so the gauntlet has been thrown down and I wanted to just tell you, thank you for asking those questions. It's been interesting and helpful and I would encourage other, every, everybody else who's listening as a very first step is just to ask your question, that question what should we be doing as a family.

STEW Yeah. And when you ask that question in the context of what parenting means to you, like why did you become a parent, how does, how does being a parent fit with the other parts of your life that matter to you?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

STEW And where are the connections and how do they benefit each other? How does your work benefit from your being a parent, and vice versa? Your community, who you are as a person, your own health. It enriches your understanding as to why you're doing what you're doing and what you might do differently. So it's delightful to know, Whitney, that you use the vision exercise as a launching point for perhaps reaffirming what it is that you're doing now with a greater sense of purpose and perspective.

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW And that, and that it led you to have conversations including and especially with your family, about what matters most to them and to you collectively. What we help people to do, and this is maybe we can get to the, you know, the key things that people can take away just from this conversation, this is what I would also recommend people do just as you have illustrated - talk to your children.

First identify, what do you think is important to them?

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW Write it down. Get on the same page with your partner in parenting because you probably have different perspectives. And they probably need different things from you. And then figure out the best way to talk to each one of them. No matter what their age. So you have to have age appropriate conversations with your kids. And you discover them in a fresh way. You have much more meaningful conversations because you're approaching them using leadership skills, like listening to discover the truth. Not micromanaging. You're not being that jerk boss that you sometimes tend to default to as a parent, just do what I say. I'm your parent, got it?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

STEW You wouldn't treat an employee that way. I mean if, and if you did, you'd know you were going to, you know, demotivate them. So, here's what I think is important to you, junior. Do I have it right? What am I missing? What's important to you? Or if it's a four year old, what's a good mommy do? Or if it's a 23 year old, hey how do you see our future together? What's important to you?

And you do that not just with your kids though. That's, that's where it begins in *Parents Who Lead*. You also do it with your colleagues at work, your boss. What's important to you? Here's what's important to me in the context of my life and how it relates to what we do together.

WHITNEY Hm.

STEW It's not just a, a balance issue of, I need this and you have to give it to me. And if not, I'm going to the, you know, to the company next door. It's, here is what I need that's going to make me a more effective and engaged employee or can we try this for a month or so? You know, let's say it's you need to be at home on Wednesday afternoon for important family reason or personal reason.

You say to your boss, hey I'd like to try for the next month or so being at home on Wednesday afternoons. And I think that you're going to see an improvement in my performance and engagement in our work together over the course of that work. Is that something that we could try?

So Whitney, if you were my boss, what would you say?

WHITNEY I would say that's, well first of all, I would think to myself, I'm so glad that he didn't just tell me why he wants to do it.

STEW Exactly.

WHITNEY (laughs) I would think, and this goes back to the exercise that you did with your children on your birthday, is that they're, they're saying, here's what I'd like and here's why I think it could be useful to you as my boss.

STEW Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY And it's not an ultimatum. It's something I would like us to try. I would like us to do an experiment.

STEW Yep.

WHITNEY I would like us to see what happens over the course of a month.

STEW Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY And then we'll revisit it. And so it's appealing to me as a boss, my sense of fairness, my sense of oh they're looking out for me-

STEW Yeah.

WHITNEY ... so it's also about me. So there's that, it's a very, very powerful framing. I love it.

STEW It's, it's leadership right?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

STEW It's, it's saying, here's what I think is going to make our world better. Can we try it together? And let's then look at what's working and what's not and if not, well if it's not working we'll adjust.

WHITNEY Hm.

STEW You're bringing others along with you to a better tomorrow but it's not just about your business life. It's your whole life.

And so you have conversations with people who matter. And of course these conversations, just like yours with your son, generates new insight about what you can do now. So there are - we catalog six different kinds of experiments that families do together to pursue what we call a family four-way wins that is, changes that are going to be good for you and your partner and your kids, as well as your respective careers and your community and yourselves personally. And they, they had so much fun doing this.

Everything from generating quality time which was a huge issue for so many people, doing things together that involved their direct human to human interaction that was going to enrich them, enrich their world in some way. That often involved setting aside digital devices, uh, and, and seeing what, what they discovered from doing that about their roles as parents and family members, as well as bosses and colleagues, uh, to practicing shared values.

WHITNEY Hm.

STEW From simple things. One family did what they called a hike and pick experiment where they decided each weekend they were going to spend an hour walking around their neighborhood cleaning it up because the dad in this family was a, he worked for the Bureau of Land Management. He wanted to teach his kids the value of caring for the earth and the, your environment. And so they did it together and then they talked about it.

Simple things like that. Or big things, like the, the family that had a child with a serious medical disorder, a rare disease, who, you know, the parents were reluctant to talk about it at work. But the mom in particular brought this interest in her life forward, uh, to her boss who kind of knew about it but was afraid to talk about it. And together they, they did a fundraiser as a, as stimulated by their work and looking at their values and their vision and where they wanted to go together to fund research for this disease.

There's all kinds of ways in which, if you think about the impact that you can have that is about not just reacting to the day to day demands surrounding you, which is the hardest thing to get, you know, step up, breathe for a minute and look to see, well what can you do? That's what we help people to do and that's where I would encourage people to start. It's just take a breath. Start with what you care about most.

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW What are your values based on where you've come from? What's that vision of the world you're trying to create? You can do that. Anybody can do that.

WHITNEY So do you have one more tip for us?

STEW Have conversations with the people who are in your life about what they see when they look at you. I call this taking the leadership leap, putting yourself-

WHITNEY Ah.

STEW ... inside someone's heart and mind as best you can. Looking through their eyes at you. And before you do that, and, and try to have a couple such conversations with not just your family members, but a, people at work and people in your life beyond work and your community.

And when you do that, start with, here's what I think is important to you. A, B, C and D. Do I have it right? Which gives them something specific to respond to, it tells them that you have

thought about it in advance. I would suggest starting that conversation with something like, Whitney, you're one of the most important people in my world and I want to strengthen our relationship going forward. Can we spend a few minutes talking about how we can do that?

And naturally, you are going to feel good. Unless I'm somebody you are trying to get rid of.

WHITNEY (laughs)

STEW In which case-

WHITNEY Right.

STEW ... it's probably good for me to know that anyway, right?

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW So, you engage your stakeholders as a leader does by saying, look our future together matters. I've thought about what you care about. Let me see if I've got it right. And what you'll discover, and this is perhaps where we can leave it, what you'll discover is that you have more love and support surrounding you than you think you do. This is one of the things that we see in our research all the time.

“Wow, I was scared to ask people what they actually need and expect of me. But I came out of those conversations realizing that people want to support me. And I have new ideas for things that I can do differently that are going to help me to support them and to pursue the things that matter most to me.” So in our research, what we find is that as a result of these kinds of experiments intended to pursue four-way wins, people end up shifting some of their attention away from work and they perform better at work.

Because they're more focused, they're more energetic, they're wasting less time on the things that don't matter. And they're just distracted by you know, the, the rest of their lives because they're taking care of them.

WHITNEY That's so interesting. So I want to just make sure I understand 'cause it seems like there are a couple of different threads there. So one is that if I have that conversation with you, and I come to you, Stew, and I say, you know, I, I want to better understand what I think is important to you. And then, because you're an important person in my life. So here are the things that I think are important to you. Do I have that right? Um, is, is that first of all how the conversation goes?

STEW That's what I like to recommend. Most people don't want to do that. They want to just say, so Whitney, what do you care about?

WHITNEY Right.

STEW And what you're likely to do when you do that is, oh Stew, you're perfect just the way you are. Please don't ever change.

WHITNEY (laughs) Yeah. Right.

STEW Or some, or some other garbage. (laughs)

WHITNEY Right. Some other anodyne sort of statement.

STEW Right.

WHITNEY So, so when I say that, then you're going to tell me, yes Whitney that you've got that right or, you know, I actually feel, you know, this, I value XY or Z. Once you say that to me, what do I do with that information?

STEW Well, that's a great question. Uh, the main thing you do is hear it.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

STEW Uh, uh, and demonstrate that you hear it by, by asking more questions. So tell me more about why that matters to you.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

STEW How does that help, how by my doing whatever it is that matters to you, how does that help you?

Can you give me an example of how that helps you? So I show you by listening and really trying to understand that I care about what it is that you want from me. And that builds trust. So you should come out of that conversation feeling more trusting because you're thinking, oh Stew, he kind of gets me in a way that he didn't before. And that's, and so I'm much more likely to, to listen to him, to follow his directives and to, to try to support him. Leaders build trust around them. If they're smart, it's our most precious asset. And one of the best ways to do it is to demonstrate to other people that you actually care about them.

WHITNEY Yeah. And care about them in, okay, interesting. All right. So where can people find you?

STEW Well, I'm on [LinkedIn](#) and [totalleadership.org](#) is a website that has all kinds of information, free resources, chapters from books, videos, exercises, uh, links to my radio show and podcast called [Work and Life](#). And there's a page there that has all kinds of cool stuff about parents who lead. Or you can just go directly to [parentswholead.net](#) and that's the best place to go.

WHITNEY Yeah. Excellent. All right. So very last question for you. Two last questions. First is, as a consequence of having done this research and written this book, what is one thing that you are doing differently because of this work that you've done over the last couple of years on this book?

STEW I am trying to listen with greater intent and purpose to the people in my family. I often get asked, you know, so do you actually do this stuff, professor? And of course, I don't know if this is true about you Whitney, but, I teach to learn.

WHITNEY Yeah.

STEW And so I'm, I'm always learning new things. When I, when I focus my attention on trying to help other people by asking them annoying questions, what I'm also doing, and I think this speaks to my long standing interest in psychology, is trying to figure out my own life, which remains quite a mystery, quite a puzzle to me. So I'm, I'm really trying to listen more and to become a little less of a selfish jerk, uh, that I have been my whole life. And, and to try to be still and, and to, to take in, uh, the needs and interests of the people around me

WHITNEY Hm.

STEW ... in a, in a way that is perhaps more skilled and, and little more intentional.

WHITNEY Listen more. That's so good.

STEW Yeah.

WHITNEY Any final thoughts?

STEW Just thanks to you, Whitney for a delightful conversation and your genuine interest in hearing my story and what this work is about and synthesizing it in a way that I think is really helpful. And so I'm just grateful to you for the time.

WHITNEY Well thank you. It's been a pleasure.

I'm so grateful Stew has devoted his life to this work. We work hard to support our families financially, but if we don't deliberately take time to connect and lead at home, we are missing the opportunity of a lifetime. Literally.

I loved the idea of the conversation - "Here's what I think is important to you, do I have that right? Tell me more." Questions like that, conversations like that help us feel like we are really engaging. They help our family members feel like they are an important person in our lives. Which they obviously are, but what a paradigm shift to use our leadership skills at home. There is a lot in Stew's work about these reciprocal dialogues and how we are saying to the person "you are important."

What part of the conversation was impactful for you? For me, because of the ages of my children, I was struck by the birthday conversation Stew had with his children that ultimately led to writing this book. To ask your children - who are as vested in your happiness as you are in theirs - "How would you like me to spend the rest of my productive life? What would you want me to be doing and how by my doing whatever it is that you are suggesting, would that make your life better?" And then being willing to talk about it together. Time well spent. And to my children David and Miranda - did you hear that? Now you know what I want for my birthday this year.

Now to see if I can model what Stew just suggested. I think (our team thinks) that the content that we are providing in the Disrupt Yourself podcast valuable to you. Do I have that right? One person that recently answered this question with a review on Apple Podcasts. Their handle is FALALALA1125. Here's what they said.

This conversation is a powerful reminder that none of us is here to stay. (Tom Rath episode) It is an important tap on the shoulder for all. I'd never thought about setting a personal deadline for making the contribution I want to see in the world. This podcast has opened my eyes and willingness to do so!

Thank you! Thank you again to Stew Friedman 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.