Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 174: BUSTER BENSON

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. Here, we discuss strategies and advice on how to climb the S-Curve of learning in your career and in your life, which means disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be.

Think for a minute about the last disagreement you had with someone. How did it go? Was it productive? Did you get your point across? Did you leave feeling hurt? Chances are it didn't go as well as you had hoped. Instead, one or both of you may have gotten angry, even hurt. Joining us today is Buster Benson, a former product manager at both Slack and Twitter, platforms we use and love. He's here today, though, to talk about his book. Why are we yelling? The Art of Productive Disagreement. And you guessed it, it's about how to find a productive way to disagree with each other. This book not only got our attention, but Seth Godin said that its life changing. Read it three times and then give a copy to anyone you care about. We've all been there. We're clipping through an S-curve. Things are going well, but then we hit a snag. Resources are allocated elsewhere. Team members don't gel. We all approach our work with our own lens or biases. So how do you navigate this? How do you disagree productively? How do you get the buy-in you need to climb your current s-curve? And how are your biases impeding those around you from climbing their curves? That's what we're going to unpack today.

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Buster was born in Irvine, California, a creative in a family of practical thinkers. He even got his degree in creative writing. But after college, he landed smack dab in the middle of the dot com boom. Finding an unlikely home in the tech world. This is how he explained it to me.

Buster:
In the early days of the Internet, you know, they were talking 96, 97, 98, nobody knew how to build Web sites. And I happened to be right down the street from Amazon at the time. And everyone at Amazon was a liberal arts major. Everyone was a philosophy, you know, major or graduate or a writer. And it was this creative spirit like we have to use ambiguity and plot and story to tell the story of the Internet and to build experiences that feel human because it was very threatening at first. And so there was a short period time where the generalists were really encouraged to, you know, join this movement. And then later on, it became clear that, oh, there's actual competencies here we can train people in like engineering and product management and design and all these things, sales. But by then, I was I was familiar enough with these concepts to really integrate them and to like them first before, I was very much against trying to be that sort of black and white about things.

Whitney:
You had this world where it was like bits and bytes and zeros and ones and people were just like, I don't know what to do with this. This is scary to me and you needed people who could translate into a language and tell stories and communicate. And so your skill set became very important to, to demystify and to what I said at the very beginning, actually, is to help people jump to that s-curve of using the Internet and translate it into a language that they could understand and they needed a liberal arts majors to do that.

Buster:
Yeah, yeah. There weren't the, the computer science people that we have now. At that point in time, a lot of us were, you know, either really low-level engineers like engineering, electrical engineering or, you know, building computers versus building websites with HTML and CSX and all these things that were very, very new. And it was it was an interesting time because we did get a formative moment there where, you know a lot of this was, you know, this could be there's a whole story here, which is there's this idealism that was also present. Early days of the Internet that the Web 2.0 movement and sort of like everyone is gonna be connected and all these things that were probably, you know, brought in with this migration of liberal arts degree people. And, yeah, we sort of sort of got to see that blend and that mix and sort of how it unfolded over time.

Whitney:
Yeah. That was the dream. And I think certainly this notion of people being connected right now when we're in the middle of the corona virus. And so this need to be connected, while there has to be this social distancing physically, I think it will, some of the dream of what the Internet can do, we will start to see play out.

Buster:
Absolutely. This dialogue between different kinds of connection and between what how, how much connection is healthy and what other ways it can also cause problems. And a lot of this was in the gray area that we were blind to early on in the Internet. And now we're starting to come to terms with it, integrate it and understand it better and hopefully get, you know, grow as a result.

Whitney:
Can you tell us what a product manager does? You did this slack and Twitter and just kind of talk us through your career at a very high level as a as a prelude to talking about why in this book that you've written.

Buster:

You have a team. You have designers, engineers, salespeople, analytics people, and everyone you need to build a product. And you're sort of, you know, trying to facilitate the, the lower level functioning of a team that needs to happen in order to produce features to produce new results. And so this was what really drew me in was you get to basically be a generalist and a lot of ways and ultimately be accountable to the results that happen. And so I was just starting my career at Twitter and working on analytics and trying to both make the business case for why it's important to have analytics and then validating it with customers and then working with engineers and designers to actually find what's the viable path for building it quickly, fast enough to see results, and all that kinds of stuff. So, you get to sort of oversee all of the stuff and also be able to bring in really, really strong people in very specific disciplines to, to flesh it out and make it real.

Whitney:

But then you discover this problem and you hit on this meta skill that we all need. You talk about this in your book. What's the one meta skill that we all need to acquire?

Buster:

It's the art of productive disagreement. And I can sort of tease it apart a little bit because we all understand what disagreement is. We understand that it's you know, when we butt heads with somebody that thinks something differently than we do and we are pretty confident that the other person is wrong. And so we perform this sort of ritual, the social ritual of disagreement. I like to take a step back from that and think of it as this is the tool, we use to integrate differences in the world so we can think about any time we run into someone that has some, a different mindset, a different perspective. There aren't that many tools in the world that you can use to actually figure out what is right, what is wrong, and pick the pieces out that are useful to you and share the pieces from yourself that that will be useful to them. It doesn't have to be an argument. Doesn't have to be disagreement. It could be sharing. It could be a conversation and dialogue. And the reason I think it's a meta skill is because, this is so important to today's environment where we are growing very quickly, we are like,

The technology is advancing very quickly. The world is changing very quickly. And we're going to inevitably run into all kinds of problems. And we need to have a skill that's about not just pushing the problems away and ignoring them, but actually figuring out how do we solve this together and how do we work together to understand the world better, understand each other better. And in that sense, it can, it's a one skill that can be applied to almost every single domain that we have as humans. Whether it's at families and relationships or whether it's parenting or whether it's at work or whether it's with politics. All these different domains have the exact same problem. And this is the skill we need to develop in ourselves to, to, to sort of make progress.

Whitney:

All right, we know that one, it's a meta skill that we all need the ability to productively disagree. So why are we yelling at each other? What are one or two reasons why we do that?

Buster:

So, we have these two default voices in our heads that sort of tell us how to disagree with people. One of them is the voice of power, which is the voice that says, you know, I'm right to shut up. You know you're wrong, end of discussion. And it sort of lines up the power dynamics and whoever has more power can win. And this is, you know, a tactic that is not only used by humans, but all, you know, creatures and that in the world. The second voice is the voice of reason, which is let's appeal to some higher truth, higher power, higher understanding or system for resolving this dispute.

And that could be a legal system or could be a scientific method, or it could be just a company's sort of policy and customs and culture. And that's what has worked really well also for thousands of years, because when you're all in the same group, you can appeal to this higher power and resolve it. The problem now is that both of those things are failing for different reasons. And when we have two options and they both don't work, we think, OK, well, we're out of options. I'm just going to speak louder, or I'm just going to flip a table and leave or I'm just going to shut it out and never talk about it or think about it again. And the solution to this is to ask ourselves, like, what are we missing? What is another strategy? What is another sort of realm of discussion and debate that we can invent for ourselves to get out of this mess that we're both in.

Whitney:
So, you had that appealing to the higher power and then you had the, you know, asymmetrical power sort of relationship. And then you said something that it was really light touch, which is this idea of people historically we're all in the same group. And so that power dynamic worked, or we could appeal to the same value system so it could resolve it. And you're saying now we don't necessarily have that and so that's why those tools don't work in the way that they did previously. Is that correct?

Buster:
Absolutely. Yeah. I and you can you can tie it back to any time we talk to someone that just you know, you said here's the evidence I like. Well, I don't believe the source of this evidence. That's that's a hint that your voice of reason isn't gonna work.

Whitney:
Yeah. It's so interesting because just yesterday I was talking to one of my colleagues and we were we were wrangling over our newsletter actually that went out today. And it was really uncomfortable for both of us. And fortunately, we have a long enough relationship that and enough mutual respect that we could get through it, but it was uncomfortable. So, I was thinking of you as I was preparing for this podcast and that conversation, like, oh, yeah, we need to we need to disagree productively. But you talk a little bit in the book about the gifts of disagreement. Can you share with us some of those gifts? I think that's a really interesting, counter-intuitive idea.

Buster:
Yes. So, we know that oftentimes the way out of a really harsh disagreement is to find a common ground, right. We know that this is this is the solution. But we don't know how to do that, and we don't know what that is actually going to produce for us. After we do that, what's going to happen? Because what we really want going in is alignment. We want to be right. We want there to be certainty about who is who is correct, what path to take forward. And I think that is one of the fruits of disagreements or the gift of disagreement, but there are many others. And so, by highlighting them, by thinking about them and actually valuing them as, as output of a disagreement and saying that this is productive because it led to insights about the world, like neither of us got dumber. You know, this conversation, we actually learn something about the world. That's great. That's, that's a fruit of disagreement, even if we continue to disagree on some point. Another one is connection. So if we can come away from a conversation with a little bit more trust, a little bit more goodwill for one another, a little bit more understanding and caring for the other person, other people, then that's a huge benefit because that's going to be the foundation upon your what's your next conversation can happen.

And the higher can get that goodwill level, the more likely you are to eventually find some kind of sort of mutual understanding around this. And the third one is enjoyment, which I think is the most neglected one, which is like going into a conversation and coming out, being like, this is fun.

Whitney:
Why? I yeah, I. You're losing me on that one, Buster. Why is it fun?

Buster:
It can be fun. So if you think back to some of the, you know, some of your best friends and your closest family members, where you went into a conversation and you came away thinking like, wow, I actually enjoyed that, even though it was really hard. You know, we have these moments in our lives where that happens sometimes but they're pure accidents. That can happen more often if you actually approached these disagreements and quickly find a way to see it together as this adventure you could go on, something where I can test ideas against you. You can show me my blind spots. I could show you your blind spots. It's exciting. It's exhilarating. And that you can find that joy. You know, it's, it's, it's tough, but you can do it.

Whitney:

All right. You've got me thinking I need to disagree with more people. So but what's fascinating about that is I think this goes into now what I want to ask you next. Two or three suggestions on ways that we can disagree productively. And I notice that the very first thing that you talk about is when anxiety sparks. And so talk about that, because as you cause I can feel myself when you talk about that disagreement, I can feel my anxiety rising and we're not even disagreeing. And so talk to us about a couple of ways that you can disagree productively and, and so that people who are listening are like, OK, this is helpful. I've got some I've got some tools now.

Buster:

So people in business contexts are probably familiar with the idea of a retro or a postmortem or something whenever something goes wrong. One of the things that I accidentally stumbled upon early on was just writing down a disagreement journal, sort of retro and teasing apart, you know, whatever the disagreement was about what went wrong and places where I felt threatened, places where, you know, in hindsight, you know, you can you can be a lot more cool headed about it after the fact when you're just writing to yourself. And this is this was incredibly powerful tool, because in the moment, it's really hard to stop yourself and sort of lean back and be like, okay, we're having a disagreement, how do you, like, make this productive? But if you do it after the fact, it sort of trains those muscles in your brain to be more perceptive of the areas where you tend to go off the rails. And so I encourage people to do this. Even if you don't have to write a long journal entry about it, you could go on a walk and talk to yourself or you could just think about it. But either way, don't just say, oh, that was a terrible argument. I shouldn't have had that. That was bad idea. I actually go back and think about what could have improved that. What? Because it's going to pop up again and in some form. Yeah. So what can you do next time to, to navigate a little bit better. Keep building the muscle memory, your brain memory to notice when your blood pressure is up so that you can start to see this as an opportunity to find something new about them or about the world or about the topic you're talking about or about yourself.

Whitney:

One other thing that I'm recalling from your book that I thought was fascinating is that one that anxiety sparked. You said that that's a signal or an indicator to you of something that you value. Can you just talk about that briefly?

Buster:

Yeah. Cognitive dissonance is when you like your world view, sort of hits something that sounds bad. Like it's almost like hitting the wrong key on the piano, right? It sounds bad. We have two ways to react to this. One of them is to push it away, which is our default. We actually don't like dissonance. We don't like anxiety. We don't like that. And so we push it away and hope it doesn't come back to us. The other one is to sort of see reframe it, this anxiety or this cognitive dissonance as the signposts to something that's important to you. Because the more it's causing you anxiety, the more there. If you trace it all the way back down to your belief system, you'll find something that was threatened. And you can actually use that as the core nugget of what to talk about if you can pull it out early on in the conversation, you said, hey, this is a really important value of mine or it's an unexamined value of my mine, like I don't know if it's, you know, something I should hold on to. How, how do you see it? And using that as a way to pivot the conversation from whatever the actual initiator of the provocation was to something that's revealing of your own values, and that can turn into a much more rich conversation.

Whitney:

Which goes back to what you said earlier about one of the gifts of disagreement is if it's analyzed and, and uncovered in a way, a mutually respectful way, it can actually deepen and strengthen the relationship.

Buster:

Absolutely. Mm hmm.

Whitney:

Before you go on to the next one or two suggestions, I realize that there was this thread that we didn't quite pull, and that is how did being a product manager lead you to think about this so deeply? Or was it the product management? Was it something else?

Buster:
Oh, yeah, it was definitely that that that role. And part of it was that I have a natural, I think, interest in tough human interactions. And so maybe it's part of the cause and the effect. But product management is a role where you don't get to be right. And when things go well, you don't you don't get to take credit. It always goes to the people that do the work. But when things go wrong, you do take responsibility. And this is sort of changes the incentive structure for, for a conversation where, like, you're really just trying to prevent it from going really poorly. By doing this over and over again over the years, you start to see like, OK, well, it's important to make sure that each person comes away from this conversation or this project feeling like they succeeded at what they were going after. And it's a, it's a empathic sort of situation where you can see it from that level. And luckily, it's also a safe environment because a company is an organization that has goals and norms that you can always appeal to if things don't go well. So, it's a sort of a training wheels realm for disagreement. It was only after I had cultivated that skill and then realizing that I can apply it to other ones, which were basically the same thing but without the training wheels, a lot harder,

Whitney:
Higher stakes situations.

Buster:
Exactly.

Whitney:
Interesting. Okay. So give us two other suggestions.

Buster:
One of them I love to do is walk into a room like whether it's a meeting room or a family room or whatever it is, a town square, and take a pulse of the goodwill that's there. Just like blatantly there, because you can use that as a guide for if you will need it. So a question I can ask is like, how welcome are new ideas? How welcome are new people to this room? And use that to say, well, if it's all really, really high, that's a great time to tackle any disagreements that you have, because that's the right environment for it. If it's really, really low, you know that that's going to be tough to have a conversation about something really threatening here. And so you should shift focus to building goodwill that room. So whether it's offering, you know, changing the topic to a less threatening one or sort of building sort of bonding experiences, building relationships, that's the kind of thing you should do when, when the goodwill is really low.

Whitney:
You said you take the pulse, is there something you do or is it just instinct?

Buster:
Some people can do it just innately. And I think one thing, if you if it doesn't come innately, you can, because we do think a lot about people and problems and not the room itself as a player. So I would ask, like, could I bring someone else into this room that, you know, was relevant to the conversation here? And if the answer is no, because either, you know, there's norms or there's structures or there's disagreements or like you know resentment in there, then that's a sign that the goodwill is low. Same with ideas. Can I say anything that's on my mind about this or do I have to wrap it in evidence or do I have to wait for the right moment and present it to the right person threat time and the right sort of caveats and all that stuff. And both of those questions can sort of help you understand like, OK, well, if it's going to be hard to introduce new ideas, new people, that means that good will is low. And the great thing about goodwill is that unlike people and problems, we can't really change people. We can change the goodwill in a room that we can change that just by saying, like, no bringing some lightness to the room, bringing some sort of camaraderie and report to the room like all those kinds of things can, can quickly change it a lot faster than you could ever change someone's mind.

Whitney:
So you were giving us a suggestion. You said, so one way to, to productively disagree was you walk into a room, you take the pulse, go ahead and continue the dot.

Buster:
Yeah. If it's high, then that's an opportunity to say, like, hey, I've been meaning to bring something up, whatever it happens to be, if there's a disagreement. And if it's low, it's a good opportunity to say like, I've been really meaning to connect with you sort of individually, you know, aside from this topic that we're discussing and do that instead. So it's sort of like this fork in the road, where you can decide to go towards the topic or towards the relationship. And the third one, I like to suggest is, so a lot of times people are - it's hard to notice in the moment when you're when you're entering an argument. But then once you even if you do, it's hard to then quickly come up with something relevant to say. So, the thing I think people should do when they realize that their blood pressure has spiked or that they've been triggered in some way, is have in their back pocket or on their hand or in their head, a couple big open questions that they can ask, a stalling tactics in a way. So it could be like, OK, tell me more about this or why is this important to you or what am I not seeing about how you are presenting this? Or how, what would, I'm feeling a little defensive, like, can you reframe that a bit?

But really open ones that don't require you to have any information or evidence or preparation. It's just a way to give them an open space to talk a little bit more. Give yourself a chance to calm down a little bit and sort of reorient yourself. And it also invites them to have a more open discussion. They're no longer about, hey, here's, here's my point. Here's what I'm trying to do. Say yes or no. It's like, well, tell me what, what why is this important to you? Where did you build this belief system? Who are your you know, who do you look up to that has this sort of position? Has it been useful to you? All these really open questions that ask them to reveal a bit about themselves as well. So it's it has a double function of buying you a little bit of time to reorient and giving them a chance to veer off of the battle mindset.

Whitney:
I love that question, I'm feeling a bit defensive, can you tell me more? Because it opens your, your being, you're giving them something. You're saying, I'm feeling vulnerable. I'm feeling uncomfortable. Can you tell me more? Do you use that question a lot?

Buster:
Yeah. Yeah, I do. I do. Because it's, it's hard to think of things that are, make, that make me vulnerable. Or anyone vulnerable that don't become really easy to misuse if it's a little bit too, you know, threatening in that environment where they will just turn around and hit you with it. This is an easy one where it's not, you know. OK, well, I'm feeling defensive. OK well, that's OK. What they want to do is reframe their position so that you aren't defensive because they actually want to make a point. So, this is, this is good. It's another opportunity for them to, to take another shot at it.

Whitney:
Yeah, you're saying I can't hear you right now. Shield just one up. Right? Protector shield, so do you want to hear you, so can we circle back. Interesting. I know I'm putting you on the spot a little bit, but I think I think you can handle it. Is, I'm talking talk about the S-curve? We used to ask curve of learning. It's basically reimagining that s-curve that you, you tend to use in product and project management. But look at it from an individual standpoint, this mental model that helps us understand psychologically the experience that we're having whenever we take on a new project or a new role as like you're at the launch point of that s curve when you're first starting and then you get to the sweet spot where you know enough but not too much. And then you get to the high end of that s curve and you probably know too much. And it's time for you to jump to the bottom of a new s-curve. And so one of the things I thought could be really interesting for our listeners who are constantly thinking, OK, where am I on the s-curve of what do I do, is for you to share one cognitive bias to which people who are starting something brand new tend to be maybe vulnerable, is not the right word, but need to be aware of when you're starting something brand new. And we'll sort of take each of those in turn. So, someone who's at the launch point, what do they need to be aware of from a biased perspective? And then someone who is managing someone or working with someone at the launch point. What bias do they need to be aware of? What are your thoughts?

Buster:
Yeah, this is really an interesting question and it really applies to bias, because each when I when I did the cognitive bias cheat sheet and sort of developed this idea of honest bias, it was all about trying to understand what jobs are these biases doing for us. And in truth, what they're really doing is assisting us at each of these stages. In the three stages that I highlight are information overload, making sense of things and leaping into action. And so you can think about, you know, when you're just at the beginning of the S curve, you're basically an information overload mode, you don't know anything yet. And so everything is going to feel intimidating. You're not going to know what to trust, what not to trust and you have a whole host of biases that are about filtering this information. Some of them, I mean, obviously helpful because this is the only way we can filter information. But some of them are also having they have side effects as well. So one of them is authority bias. Right. So we tend to trust information that comes from trusted sources and scrutinize it less. And that's oftentimes a very helpful thing when your teacher or your source of truth is correct about things.

But it can also be a way to sneak in information or thoughts that are not correct. Or, you know, maybe they were once correct and they're no longer correct. Another one is self-relevant effect, which is this idea that you're only going to pick out the information that sort of feels like familiar to you. And you're gonna neglect information that's a little bit unfamiliar. When you're on a learning curve process, that you need the unfamiliar information, so you sort of have to fight that a little bit. Another one is bizarreness effect, which is, you know, look for things that are weird because they stand out more. And oftentimes you often need a foundation like, so a lot of the classes are boring because most of the beginning information is really foundational. I think being able to push back on this a little bit. So, like, okay, well, I want to seek out unfamiliar information. I want to seek out information that comes from sources that are trustworthy, that I don't yet understand, that don't fully trust yet, but might be known, important to know and also things that aren't relevant to me yet, but might become relevant or might be relevant to this problem space.

Whitney:
What about someone who is working with someone who is in that brand-new space? What does that person need to watch out for?

Buster:
Yeah. Well, you have the flip side of the authority bias there, right? So you're oftentimes you expect to be the authority on it. You're going to say things with more certainty than perhaps you, you have. So you don't want you want to be very sensitive to the idea that, like everything you say is going to be soaked up by them when it could lead to incorrect mental models.

Whitney:
So one thing I'll add there that I think is interesting is, is this idea is, I think one of the real values of having people who are on the launch point of that s-curve is they ask questions like, well, why do we do it like this? That's of huge value to any organization, to any ecosystem. And so if you've got this authority bias going, then you're not going to listen to those new ideas because they don't know what they're talking about because they're brand new. So that makes sense to me and so then we quash, you know, sort of the value of that person being new is lost to you. And at that point, it's sort of the only thing that they can bring that's a value because they're figuring everything else out. But those, those eyes, those fresh eyes can be incredibly valuable. So anything else on that before we go to sweet spot?

Buster
One last thing is the curse of knowledge, I think, which applies here, which is like you may know everything so well that you can't explain it. And you may not even remember what it was like to not know these things. And so going through and making sure that you're actually, talking about this and helping them from a beginners sort of mindset and not just, you know, speaking from the expert position that already understands the entire map. Because it can be overwhelming to a beginner.

Whitney:
Ok. Let's do sweet spot. What are some quick thoughts there on the biases?

Buster:

So in the sweet spot, you're in the flow you've got you understand how it all fits together. You're like you're being stretched a little bit and growing, but also you feel like you have your footing.

And this is a this basically means that you've sort of made sense of what's going on. So you've generated a narrative. And this is an interesting point, because we oftentimes are in this phase and we forget which parts of the narrative were there because you actually found them and which parts you sort of made those connections yourself, or it evolved over time to tell the story better. And so we do a lot of confabulation, which is one of the biases where we connect the dots in a story and then we forget which connections were supplied by us with generalizations or stereotypes or generalities. And we tend to gloss over it because of all of the same kind of thing. Another one is Luzira Correlations. There's oftentimes this idea that like, oh, we tried that didn't work, you know. So don't try it again or this, we did this and it changed this metric. Or, you know, anything that's left about talking about the past and the cause and effect kind of way. So easy to sneak into the culture and the narrative of a product or a project that can cause harm.

Whitney:

So that tendency to stop asking questions starts to creep in.

Buster:

Yeah, because you always want to build a bunch of knowledge on top of each other. And, you know, feel like you're not going anywhere if you continuing to, like, doubt the foundation. But at the same time, the foundation is always changing, too. So it's important to go both ways.

Whitney:

So anything for the person who's, you know, managing someone or working alongside someone in the sweet spot? Any advice there from a bias standpoint?

Buster:

You know, anyone that's sort of overseeing this is potentially a great person to point out blind spots and, you know, a lot of organizations. This this concept that Kim Scott made so popular is ruinous empathy, where you just want to give them full power to make their own mistakes and just go with it and trust it. But at the same time, there's value in sort, of course correcting where it's appropriate. And, we have to do that, even if it comes across as a little bit micromanaging sometimes or if it comes across a little bit, sort of distracting from what they're doing. Because, you know, the team this isn't a bunch of solo people working in solo lanes. We have to use our each other as mirrors to point out the blind spots that we see the help course correct. That's, that's the heart of the entire topic, I think that most organizations have to sort of deal with.

Whitney:

So is the bias then at that point that you just are doing a good job so you don't want to bother? Like what's, what's the blind spot? You know that from as you're thinking about this cognitive bias, what what's baked into that when you're not willing to course correct?

Buster:

Yeah, it's conflict avoidance. We want people to move fast. Oftentimes they're not moving fast enough. So when they're moving fast, we like, go, go, go. But you can also move too fast. So you have to sort of think of it from both sides.

Whitney:

Ok. Let's do high end.

Buster:
This is a big one, because I think this is when the biases really cement. Because whatever got you there, you know, is now a necessary brick in the story of what must be done going forward. So there's a lot of things around sunk cost fallacy. There's a lot things are, so sunk cost fallacy is like, you know, we've already started doing this. I started this project, or this is my initiative. We have to keep going even if, you know, it's no longer the best thing for the business or the highest priority. There's Dunning Kruger effect, which we all, many people know is the idea that like, oh assumes, I'm an expert, expert in one thing and now an expert in all things. So don't, that's a very tempting position to, to adopt when you suddenly was like everyone's like, oh, you're so, so smart and such a master at this topic. What do you think about this other thing? And oftentimes you're not the right person to speak to that. And then there's all these things around survivorship bias, which is I see this in a lot of organizations, too. Which is whatever is successful is now a template for everything to start. Right? When, in fact, you, you, you are blind to the fact that many things started that might have had that template that failed, even though some of them succeeded. And we lose that understanding of this isn't just a recipe for success. It could have been one in 10 that made it through, and we just never saw them.

Whitney:
Ok, so for the person who is managing that person who's at the top of the s-curve. Any quick thoughts there.

Buster:
Yeah. So this is, so this is an interesting one because I think that this is where so biases are oftentimes about protecting our insecurities and anxieties or fears.

Whitney:
That was a money shot. You said biases are often a way of seeing the world that protect us from our insecurities.

Buster:
Yeah, right? Isn't this true? Like, the more we have to protect, the stronger the biases have to become in order to protect us. The sort of way we think the power corrupts is because the more you have to lose, the more you have to protect it. And the scarier it is to lose it. So it makes sense to do that.

Whitney:
Power corrupts. But I never thought of it in that way. Is that when you have more power, you have more to lose and therefore you get corrupted because you're so busy protecting it. That's where the corruption comes in.

Buster:
You're willing to, to do anything to, to, to keep it because it's such an important part of your identity at that point. If you're managing this person, you're working with this person, this is where the art of productive disagreement does come into play really powerfully. Because you have to approach this person, especially if they have significant power or significant reputation, you know, a little bit differently than you would with someone that's in a beginner's mind. Has nothing to lose, is willing to, like, just absorb all your information. It's a little bit more tricky to do that. That's where like, taking the pulse of the goodwill is really important, because if, if you notice that something has triggered defenses or has triggered insecurities, you have to really work on the relationship part again, and get that report back before you can continue going forward.

Whitney:
Which goes back to the post the room. So for all of our listeners, will include in the show notes like all of these little on bullet points that Buster shared with us and then linked to his cheat sheet so that you have that. And then obviously you've got the book that you're going to either buy or when, which I think will be really interesting and, and very helpful for you. So, Buster, I noticed that you are now a free agent. Are you going into companies and consulting them on these productive disagreements and on like doing audits around their biases, like what are you doing? What are people asking you to come in and do for them? Because I have to imagine or they're probably all trying to hire you as a product manager. But what are you doing these days?

Buster:

Yeah. I'm testing the waters on a lot of these different potential paths. I don't know what I want to do next. I think that's I'm taking a pause to sort of collect myself a little bit. But yeah, I've been doing talks and workshops at various companies and trying to help them. I mean, almost every single company go to it's like what is the what is the willful blindness of this company? What are the things to talk about here, and I can be the person that could be like, okay, well, tell me a little bit more. You know, you can you can wrap it in as many caveats as you want, but, you know, is it that, you know, the company is struggling with this new pressure to make more revenue? Or is it the company doesn't want to address this market? Or whatever it happens to be, but it's fascinating.

Whitney:

Which bias have you found is one of the, the most challenging for you?

Buster:

Yeah, that's a good question. They all are. I mean, I think one of the things I've arrived at is that biases are just part of what we're made out of. There's no way to untangle them from, from you. So, I have to you have to do things that filter information and overvalue some things that undervalue others. You have to connect the dots and jump to conclusions. And you have to act before you have all the information all the time. All these things are just, you know, if I'm not doing it myself, I'm surrounding myself with products and apps and channels and TV's and, and, and content that does it for me. And so, there's just no way out of this maze. Right. So, I think the important thing to the bias that really highlights this for me is bias blind spot. It's sort of this meta bias, which is that we tend to forget that we're biased. And one of the weird paradoxes of the cognitive bias cheat sheet, I thought, was by giving people this really sort of beautiful structured map of all biases. I think it gave a little bit of a false sense of security that they were now less biased.

Buster:

It's sort of sort of fed that bias blind spot a little bit more, because if you know the names of things, maybe you no longer are susceptible to them. And this applies to me as well as anyone else. But just continuing to be open minded and realizing that anything you do is going to be biased. You have to always be looking for damage that you've caused in the world on accident and repair that stuff when you see it and be as open to that as possible. Someone's gonna bring it to you, you have to be like great, thank you for you for showing that to me so I can go fix it. Versus like, oh, wait, I'm not biased, you know, or I'm not as biased. You know, whatever it is, that could be the defense to that.

Whitney:

Yeah, interesting. So where can people find you?

Buster:

Yes, I'm on Twitter @Buster and at BusterBenson.com, which is, you know, 20 years of blogging and all kinds of weird projects. And those are probably the two best places you could probably find the book on either one of those.

Whitney:

Ok, great. Any final thoughts as we wrap up?

Buster:

Yeah. So, one thing I've really been thinking about recently is that, you know, why is it so important that we practice the skill? Like, why do we have to think about this as a skill and not just as an interesting idea? And I think it's because, you know, now that we're going through, like the presidential debates again and we have stopped expecting productive disagreements from our leaders, from that might be their government leaders, could be our company leaders. We, we see debates as sports. Right.

We see them as like who won, who got the best zinger in there, that kind of thing, which is not at all like what a productive debate looks like and the way that we can start to chip away at that, I think is by experiencing it at a personal level with the people in our lives, then we can build a familiarity with it. This is what a productive disagreement is so that we can then, begin to expect it from people out there in the world. That could be our, the people we manage, it could be our leaders at the company, it could be our, our local representatives or national representatives. But like whoever it is, we should be expecting this of people, and we can only do that once we understand it ourselves.

Whitney:
Wise words. Buster Benson, thank you so much for being with us.

Buster:
Thank you, it was a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much.

We enter into every interaction with a bias. It's human nature. We have cognitive dissonance for a reason, to protect ourselves. We don't always need it, but we can learn from it. In fact, we can psych out our threat system to our advantage by digging into this meta skill, of productive disagreement. We can have better interactions while getting what we want more often.

Taking Buster's advice, some homework. Let's all give the disagreement journal a try. The next time you have a disagreement, really look at what happened during the conflict in the safety of hindsight and critique your disagreement skills. What could you have done differently? Chances are the conflict came about because of cognitive dissonance. Recognize the dissonances as something to pay attention to. When you're stuck feeling yourself getting flushed or tense, take a step back and ask some open-ended questions to diffuse the situation. Be curious about the other person and their interest in this topic. Ask something like, you really find this interesting and important. Tell me why.

Finally, I was intrigued by the idea of taking the temperature of a room or group before introducing new ideas. A lot of times it's easy to want to bulldoze into a conversation without gauging interest beforehand. Not only can that potentially kill a good idea, it can push people away. If you're on the newsletter, which you can sign up for at WhitneyJohnson.com/newsletter, we're doing a giveaway. Buster has kindly agreed to make a few signed copies available.

Again, the book is called Why Are We Yelling: The Art of Productive Disagreement? And keep us posted on how you're able to disagree productively. How is this helping you on your s-curve and the s-curves of those around you?

Thank you again to Buster Benson for being our guest. Thank you to our team, Virginia Kivligand, Whitney Jobe, Melissa Rutty, Sarah Duran and Jennifer Brotherson.

I'm Whitney Johnson, and this is Disrupt Yourself.