

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 217: AICHA EVANS

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Before I introduce our guest today, if you haven't already, will you take a moment and leave a review? Five stars, please, on Apple. I often receive emails from you telling me how useful these interviews are. I'm confident others will find them useful, too, but they can't listen to them if they don't know they exist. Your leaving a review of signals to the algorithm gods and other podcast listeners pay attention, and I would personally be very grateful.

Now today our guest is Aicha Evans, the CEO of Zoox, an autonomous vehicle company. She's also the former chief strategy officer at Intel. Raised in Senegal and France, educated in the United States, Aicha is an inspiring leader. She's the leader who is always on the lookout for disruptive, impossible, and worthy problems to solve.

Whitney Johnson: All right, so, Aicha, you were at the cutting edge of AI and machine learning, and there are all sorts of things that are now possible that we thought were unthinkable and now are inevitable. How did you know to get behind this particular technology? What was the calculus that you did in joining Zoox?

Aicha Evans: I've seen what happened from kind of like the normal telephone to landline to what cell phones did. So, then the convergence where PCs, Internet and now what we have as the smartphone, and so I know the normal people, it's just normal, but to us technologists, it sort of gives you a glimpse into what is possible and how quickly it happens and how it impacts society. With AI and machine learning, it's basically the computer is now available to basically deal with the algorithms and provide real-time agency.

And then the calculus I made was quite simple. I was at Intel, life was good. It's a worthy company. I root for them to this day, but I was getting a lot of calls about doing something different and I sort of first had a one on one with myself and said, "I am not going to another big company. It's basically going to be the same thing." And then a few people said, "Well, what would be worthy?" And I said, "Well, I want something that's the beginning of the wave and

this is what we have. And then I want something that has a tremendous impact on society, meaning something that's really worthy."

I wanted the private sector because I have young kids and at the C Suite level in the public company, you have a lot of commitments. So, I'm finding out you have them at the private company too, but to a lesser extent and I have two kids, so I want to be around. And it needed to be a founder that I kind of fell in love with and a team where it just became clear what I could bring to the table.

And with Zoox, we're not a self-driving company or any of these things that everybody talks about. We think of ourselves as basically transforming personal transportation, making it safer, more enjoyable, and cleaner. And we think that the impact on cities is going to be tremendous and not just productivity and convenience, but the layout of cities, how to make access, the environment, of course, and so this role and this technology really ticked all the boxes. AI and robotics and all of the things, the vehicle, EVs, all that is just a tool to make that happen. And so, yeah, I was like, "Game on, let's go do that. If not now and if not this, then what and when?"

Whitney Johnson: We're talking about the calculus. There were a lot of different variables that were included, but one thing that you said I thought was interesting is that because you had been in wireless for a very long time, you were already swimming in this pool. It's not like you had to go and figure out and calculate something that was out over there. You were there. You could see the future, but what was interesting to me is that you said in many ways, in my parlance, thinking about growth curves and the top of your S curve of Learning™, you had done a large company. You wanted to now be in a smaller company, you wanted to have more autonomy, and you wanted to build and create something, and as you said, the beginning of a wave. Plus, it would allow you a lifestyle that would allow you to be there for your children as well. So, all of those different pieces together.

Aicha Evans: That's exactly right. I mean, I'm a big proponent that you have to look at a total life, not just your professional life, your personal life. It's a total life and all of the pieces have to snap to grid. And yeah, a few years ago when we were defining 5G, even though from a launch perspective we were launching LTE type devices, we defined 5G knowing that with the smartphone humans, we're getting on the network, but the machines were coming and the machines were powered by AI in their agency, but their ability to also communicate and be part of the whole fabric was key. And so my wonderful EA, Edith, we've been together for a long time and she's like, "Now I understand what you are saying when you said 'the machines are coming.'" So I'm lucky and I'm blessed to work in this space.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. First of all, "snap to the grid." Never heard that expression before. I love it. But this idea of machines are coming, and I want to explore this from two different standpoints. One is I think most of us, and I include myself in this, have very little awareness of how truly disruptive machine learning and AI are going to be and potentially in a really good way. I'm wondering what are some things, let's talk about AV's, I'm going to use AV's, I like that. That's easier to say than autonomous vehicles. So we know with Av's we won't necessarily need to drive, but what are some downstream effects, some sort of second and third order effects that we have no idea is coming, but is in fact coming because of the work that you're doing?

Aicha Evans: Look, transportation is essential in all phases of humanity, right? Whether it was having ships that could all of a sudden go across an ocean or what planes did, right, for the global market. And by the way, we think or I think about the Internet also as a transportation system just happens to be a virtual transportation system of knowledge, basically. How we live, work, what our environment looks like. It's obvious that if we can move people, we can also move goods and services. And I did say services, meaning, think about everything that you go outside of your house for because of physical transportation, you will have the opportunity to basically get the same thing through virtual transportation or through an assistant within a machine within your personal space. So, we think this is going to touch education, this is going to touch economic access, this is going to touch the physical footprint of cities today. A city like San Francisco, basically 30 percent of the real estate footprint is occupied by parking, but this is also a city that has a housing problem and that is concerned about businesses fleeing the city. Well, guess what? Wouldn't it be nice if you recovered 30 percent of your footprint for housing and businesses and productivity? And that's not even going to parks and all of the things that are really important.

Safety. Close to 40,000 Americans lose their lives because of fatal crashes. That's not acceptable. That's going to change. And this is just in the AV space and what it will make available. From a job creation standpoint, too. This is not just a single product. It has an ecosystem. These vehicles need to be serviced. They need to be charged. There needs to be a layer on the network and making sure that wait times are low. So there's a whole class of jobs that are going to be born that basically are going to change the way we work, the way we live, the way we spend our leisure time, and it's going to be remarkable. And it's not just in AV. Medicine, agriculture, retail. We're seeing it today, right? We didn't skip a beat with the pandemic. And so I guarantee you that if we could wake up one of us in the next, let's say, two hundred years to really when it becomes totally ubiquitous, we wouldn't recognize the world we live in.

Whitney Johnson: And that's what you mean when you say "the machines are coming." In a very exciting and thrilling way.

Aicha Evans: Yes, they will help us. They will assist us. And I know there's an element of it that's a little bit scary, but we, I believe in the human spirit. We as an industry will be responsible. The benefits are going to outweigh the potential risk. At the end of the day, when you take a step back and you look at humanity over the last 2,000 years, a lot has happened through technology and I don't think any of us would want to give that back. The exact same thing will happen again.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Oh, you know, the thought that came to my mind, and I'm sure someone said this is that, "Man was not made for machines. Machines were made for man in all the best ways possible."

Aicha Evans: That's exactly right, and don't underestimate the human brain. Let's not sell ourselves short. It is a very difficult thing to replicate and so stuff that is rule-based, stuff that is pattern recognition base, the machines will be very good at, but we've got this thing called intuition and we've got this thing called just the soul that comes with all of the experiences. We don't even know how we come to answers and how we send something. The machines are not going to be able to do that.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Oh, you know, Aicha, when you just said that, it almost made me cry a little bit, like, just that power of the human spirit. It is just, it's so exhilarating, and I think we've really seen that in this past year where it's been such a difficult, difficult year across the globe, and yet there's been such heroics and resilience. And I think this is a little microcosm, right? This past year, a little bit of a microcosm for what we can see in the future because of the technology.

Aicha Evans: That's exactly right. I think the combination of the human spirit and technology make us one of the most adaptable species.

Whitney Johnson: Speaking of being adaptive, let's talk about one of your formative experiences as a child.

Aicha Evans: I was around technology. I was lucky enough in Senegal, in West Africa, because my dad was also around technology. What happened is I ended up growing up in Paris, but with very strong ties to Senegal and even bouncing back and forth a little bit. So, when you do that, you kind of have rings of ecosystems, right? You have your friends in Paris and your life there, and then you have your friends and family also in Senegal. And so I would be in Paris and I would want to stay in touch with my friends in Senegal or vice versa. And back then, I know I'm going to date myself, we were all using landlines and it was quite expensive to make an international call, but, you know I felt my dad could afford it. And so he ended up putting a lock on the rotary phone so that I wouldn't make international calls because I was wrapping up bills basically. And I was like, "Uh huh. How do we deal with that?"

And so the base of the rotary phone, you take the handset and then it has a wire. There are these two little clicks on there. That's actually the methodology for dialing. So, when you are actually dialing and moving the rotary, it's counting clicks. So one is one click, two is two clicks and nine is nine clicks. So I would translate the phone number that I was trying to dial into the number of clicks with the appropriate pause, because if you don't have the right pause, then the electronics don't understand, basically that will confuse the one with the two.

And so I learned to hack the phone and dial and call my friends in Paris when I was in Senegal and vice versa. My dad, to this day, he's like, "I cannot believe it." He's heard me tell the story. So, he now knows that's why the bills were still high, but at the time he was like, "I don't understand. It's like we still getting all these bills." Well, that's because your daughter was basically hacking the phone.

But in addition to that, what it really made me realize, I always like math and physics, biology, not so much. That wasn't my cup of tea. But I also like philosophy, the humanities and sort of just deep thinking. And so it really started this symbiosis of STEM and humanities. And if you actually look at some of the French philosophers, they are also some of the best French mathematicians. And I truly believe that there's a reason those two are linked. So what it taught me is that, yes, technology is fun, but it's in service of humanity. And in my case, the humanity problem is I just wanted to stay in touch with my friends with a simple problem. It also made me see the difference when you have technology like in France, for example, when you don't have as much and what it makes possible or what it prevents you from experiencing. And that's been the foundation for how I look at technology. Yes, I'm a technologist, but it's in service of society and humanity, not just in service of happy engineering.

Whitney Johnson: So, how old were you when you were doing this hacking?

Aicha Evans: This was around seven or eight.

Whitney Johnson: What?! You were seven or eight years old?

Aicha Evans: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, I thought you were going to say you were 15 years old.

Aicha Evans: No.

Whitney Johnson: OK, so no wonder your dad had no idea because he probably thought you weren't capable of doing that when you were eight years old.

Aicha Evans: He should have paid more attention and he would have realized that the connective tissue there, but, yes, he didn't realize it much later.

Whitney Johnson: You're like, "Like father, like daughter." What I think is hilarious is the way you've crafted that narrative to be able to say to your dad and everybody else, I'm sure your children love this one, too, "Well, you know, it was in service of humanity that I was hacking the phone so that I could, you know, talk to my friends." I love how you great French philosophers also want to talk to their friends.

Aicha Evans: Exactly.

Whitney Johnson: Hilarious.

Let's fast forward a decade or two. Right now. I am just on this jag around crucible experiences as a leader. So, what has been one for you where your just worldview was disrupted in some way of how you thought about leadership?

Aicha Evans: So, I'm in DC going to school there and I love to cook both Senegalese and French food. So I come into a little bit of money and I decide that I'm going to open a restaurant because I love to cook. So I confused my love of cooking, I thought restaurants were about cooking, turns out, not so much. And so my now husband, but then boyfriend, and I opened this restaurant, [inaudible], just in Adams Morgan, great area in D.C. and there's a lot of demand for it because you have a lot of international people and what have you.

And oh my gosh, that was a crash course in leadership, because guess what? You think about basically the drinks, which is where the money is and the food being delivered to the customer at the table. But the supply chain and the value chain for that goes through, first of all, the waiters and waitresses, you know, the chef and cooks and assistants, but guess what? There's somebody called the dishwasher. And that person is extremely important, because there is

no way, if you're a successful restaurant, there is no way you can carry the right amount of clean dishware and glasses and all that. And so you have these industrial dishwashers that basically there's a dishwasher person who's standing there and who's just turning plates as they arrive.

This is also the person who make the least amount of money in the restaurant. They don't get tips, which we changed eventually. And oh my gosh, I think I went through three or four of them. And when they quit, especially in the middle of a shift, it is literally like lights out.

And that really made me think about leadership. How do you motivate people? How do you make people be part of the team no matter where they are in the value chain? How.. The most important is not your strongest employees. It's actually the weakest link in the chain, and it really gave me a crash course in leadership. And there are lessons that I apply to this day.

Yes, technology is fantastic and that's where we get our kick from, but it goes through the people and human beings, by and large, wants to be cared for. They want to be valued. And it's not just about compensation, it's about how you treat them, how you allow others to treat them, how do you establish the philosophy of working together and why everybody matters? I mean, that's stayed with me the whole time.

Whitney Johnson: So what did you do with the dishwashers to turn that around?

Aicha Evans: Well, after I lost three in a row and one of them was very punitive. He waited after we took finally one weekend off to go to Boston to see my husband's family, who had, we had not seen for a while. And he enjoyed telling me he was quitting while we were gone. And I was like, "That's not even he's not happy. He's punishing me. So something's up here."

And so, first of all, we had a lot of team meetings. We didn't talk about roles and responsibilities. We talked about the importance of everybody's role within the value chain of delivering our product. We came up with incentive systems where we said, "Hey, we're going to have to share the pool a little bit and some percentages on tips." We did raise how much we made. And you know what? I just spent more time also saying, "How are you? Do you need help? Are we at a point where we need a second person. Let's anyway have another person so you can also take time off." So really talk to the next person, Emmanuel, was his name. And he ended up staying with us until we sold the restaurant and got into what was important to him and implemented that and made sure that people within the team understood that.

Whitney Johnson: So, Emmanuel is one of the most important people in your career?

Aicha Evans: Yes, he is. And you would not imagine that. I wonder actually what he's up to these days. But yes, he, he taught me a ton. He disrupted how I think about leadership and he gave me the blessing of lessons that I applied to this day.

Whitney Johnson: I remember you and I had a conversation a couple of years ago about this thinking about how here you are, you're highly accomplished, you're well regarded in Silicon Valley. Are your children just like everyone else's children and they don't read your press clippings?

Aicha Evans: Ok, they are. They are very normal children. I mean, they go to school, they play too much video games, the son. They play soccer, they're also very blessed. So, at the beginning, they did not read my press clippings, but now they are in the teenage phase. They are reading them. Either somebody say something, they probably have an alert at this point. So, we've had to have conversations about understanding that and sort of there is mommy and then there's Aicha at work, two different people. And, you know, people can be mean these days when it comes to social media and all of that stuff. So I would say that especially this past year or so, they read them, but they now put them in perspective and they don't let that define them.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm, that's interesting. So, you took this question in a very different direction than I was expecting. So, I was thinking about how, and this is me totally projecting on to you, is that people will sometimes say

to me, "Oh, your children must just think you are the most awesome person around." And I'm like, "Well, yeah, but they don't necessarily do what I asked them to do."

Aicha Evans: Oh no. Oh no.

Whitney Johnson: That's where I thought you were going to go, but I thought

Aicha Evans: I can go there. I can go there. My daughter has an expression, "Mommy, You're not queen of the ant hill here." Or my son will say, "Please don't use your work voice." Sometimes I literally throw up right around dinnertime and I have to kind of shut it down and switch over to "mommy." The other thing that's been important, and this is something that my coach, Marshall, helped me a lot with, you know, they observe and sometimes I would be so tired by Friday, 5:00 pm I'm fried basically. And sometimes, like if there's an early game, I'm like, "I'm tired. I don't want to go." And you have to learn game time and be like, "No," because you will get the, "Oh, well, it's kind of funny how when it comes to work, you're never tired, you make every single meeting and blah blah, but when it comes, so we basically are, you know, disposable." And so it's separating the two lives is really key and that's something I continue to work on every single day.

Whitney Johnson: So picking up on two things. So going back to your thing about reading press clippings and also when you are in the public eye, how children, you need to prepare them to be able to manage that. And you're not the queen of the ant hill, best quote ever to your daughter.

And then the thing I want to mostly pick up on, and I hope that everybody is listening and certainly I struggle with this, Aicha. It is so hard, because you get up and you work and work and work. And in fact, I can think of last night, you know, I've got a son in college. It's now late in the day. And the last thing I want to do is have a phone call, but if I don't have the phone call, then I'm saying, "You're disposable."

Aicha Evans: It happened last week. I was in a big meeting. I was in the middle of presenting and I got a text message saying, "You know, Dad is late and I'm going to be late for school." And that was maybe five seconds of "What do I do?" And then I said, "Hey, excuse me. The team is going to have to carry on, because I need to drop, drop off my daughter at school." And those are the moments they, they remember. And it's not easy, but it's something that we just have to persevere.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, exactly. Well said, because we're not going to do it perfectly. But if our children can see us trying, they will forgive us. They want to forgive us.

All right. Let's do a little rapid fire. You have some quotes that I love and I'd like to go through these. First quote is, "Are we trying to make the team better or you better?" Just riff on that for a second.

Aicha Evans: Trying to make the team better. Back to Emmanuel and the dishwasher. This wasn't about Emmanuel per say. This was about the entire team being better. And I think from a leadership standpoint, this is a key lesson. It's not just about having the title as a leader, but it's about behaving as a leader.

And especially in Zoox, it's a single product. All 1000 plus of us, well close to 1200 and hiring, all working on one product. So, if you build a vehicle, but the sensors and AI are not correct and the software is not correct, it doesn't work. So, I tell them, all the time, "We all get an A or we all get an F. Nothing in between." It's always about making the team better and little secret, if you focus on making the team better, it also makes you a better.

Whitney Johnson: Newsflash.

All right. So, I think this goes to your next quote, which is, "The collective output is your job."

Aicha Evans: That's exactly right. We're here for a worthy output. In our case, we're united by our mission. We want to have thousands of robot taxis in the US and globally, literally changing people's lives, making everything safer, and that's our job. So, every time you're doing something, that's the question, "Am I contributing to that? Am I making that happen?"

Otherwise, "That's OK. Which is not for you, and we own that. That's OK. We'll even help you find a place that's better suited. Maybe there are some places where the collective output is not important. It's the individual output. Then go ahead."

A lot of people confuse what I call the area under the curve, which is an integral and the sum. The sum of selfish individual output does not necessarily end up giving you the best collective output because the best collective output from the mathematical standpoint is the area under the curve. And how you find the area under the curve is, by the way, we have this term in math, which is you make the limit, the spaces between the rectangle, you make zero, as opposed to just adding the rectangle. If you add the rectangles, you get an output, but it's not the best collective output because you didn't deal with the gaps between the rectangles.

Whitney Johnson: Ah. Wow. So, I want to just play with that for two seconds, because, as you know, I like to think about the S curve of learning™. You start the launch point, you move into to the sweet spot, you move to the high end. You're going to be oriented for growth as a team if you're optimizing everybody's curves. What you're saying is for a team's curve, you've got all these different people, the way that you're going to get the best output is if there are no gaps between the people.

Aicha Evans: Correct. So it's not, "Oh, I did my part. Those people are late." It's, "Hey, we have a problem over there. How do we help?" Which, by the way, that's also a better environment. That's... Then people pull together. Your ability to minimize the gaps will determine your success if you're doing something big, highly integrated and disruptive.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. You said that if someone has decided that the collective output is not their job, you will help them find a different S curve.

Aicha Evans: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: You actually do that?

Aicha Evans: Yes. I mean, I don't do it on a continuous basis, but if it's really, really an issue, I use things like, "What phase are we in? What got you here won't get you there. And that's not a bad thing. That's just different."

So, yeah, for example, I've been, I've had situations including at Zoot, where I'm like, "Let's talk about this, right? You're not happy. We're not happy." And it usually starts with, "How do you think you're doing?" Because too many managers and leaders walk into that conversation with "Well, this is wrong with you. This is..." Before we get there, "How do you think it's going?"

Whitney Johnson: Hmm.

Aicha Evans: "What is important to you? Is that available here? And and it's just a mismatch. We don't need to be acrimonious about it or anything like that." And then it's like, "Yeah, it's OK. You know, go find your..."

Whitney Johnson: "... your bliss elsewhere."

Aicha Evans: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. OK, so, "Don't be a brat." What's that quote?

Aicha Evans: We have a lot of highly educated folks. We, I think, sometimes forget how blessed we are in the grand scheme of things. I mean, I've seen poverty. I've seen a lack of basic resources and amenities, and I think that especially in the valley, sometimes we take ourselves a little bit too seriously, and frankly, we are brats. It's like "Me. Me. Me. Me. Me." And or, you know, "What's wrong with me and how come somebody doesn't care about me?" I mean, it even happens in the field of diversity and inclusion. I mean, I've got so many majority people trying to tell me how I'm supposed to feel and what the problem is. I'm like, "You're being brats. Insulting brats, by the way,

about something that's quite personal to me." And so I think that's a very destructive behavior. It's destructive for the team. It's actually destructive for the person, because they become a prisoner of what I call their ambition or their want and needs, which again drives the individual output as opposed to the rest. And frankly, it's not a fun environment to be in. And I want to be very clear. I've had to often look at myself in the mirror and say, "Don't be a brat."

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Aicha Evans: I mean, the pandemic I had to remind myself, "Yes, it's nice that... In the grand scheme of things, I have good wifi, good computer, enough space that you can carry four Zoom meetings in the house. The two kids, the husband and me. But at the end of the day, everybody's going through this. And if everybody's going through this, I'm going through this in very good circumstances. So grow up, don't be a brat. Take your chill pill, use tools."

Sometimes I will turn off my video and just kind of walk around a little bit or what have you, but I think it's very important for all of us to self-police ourselves...

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Aicha Evans: ... when it comes to that topic,

Whitney Johnson: Is there something that you look for a telltale sign when you're hiring that you say, "Definitely. I can hire this person." So, they've got all the credentials, right. You've got lots of credentials up the wazoo in Silicon Valley. Is there a telltale sign, where you say, "Yep. That person, I can hire them," or "Definitely don't hire that person"? Something that you look for?

Aicha Evans: The ability to listen and be succinct. If you can't tell me what's wrong with you, that's probably a problem, because if everybody, everything is right with you, I'm like, "Huh. You're done learning." We always leave five to ten minutes for the person to ask a question. It tells us how inquisitive... Some stuff about AV we've solve some stuff we haven't solved and some stuff we don't even know that we have to solve it yet. And being inquisitive, which is one of our values, so our values, are we're mission driven, we're inquisitive, we trust each other, and we're one Zoox. And so if you're not inquisitive, that's going to be a problem.

First of all, it's a problem because even if you get orders to go do X, Y, Z, if you doesn't, don't think it makes sense through questions, you can flip it and Zoox wins. And also, if you're stuck or you're looking for more creative ideas, even in like the quantitative modeling of safety, which is really important, because at the end of the day, these vehicles are multiton vehicles with more manual controls that are driving, amongst other human drivers, right? And they have to react real-time to what is happening around them. So, being inquisitive. So, if we have an interview and I leave five to ten minutes and I say, or we say, "Oh, you know, your turn now to ask us questions," and you're not enthusiastic about it and you don't ask us questions, that's probably a "no."

Whitney Johnson: I heard you mention this idea around the vehicles and the design that initially when people were designing them, there was a paradigm in place that was designing them in a way that they did not need to be designed. Can you talk more about that?

Aicha Evans: Well. I am really proud of Zoox. 2014, since inception, seven years ago, it was all around sustainability and all around riders and all around transportation in cities. And so when you're designing this vehicle where or what this team did prior to even getting here and hopefully we're building on that is we fully design it around riders. And we truly also say we all agree with AV that AI is going to do the driving via sensors and compute. From the first principle standpoint, it then makes sense to architect and design the vehicle to make it easier and safer for AI through sensors and computers to drive.

In a dispassionate way, if you start looking at a passenger car today, it is architected and designed for a human to drive it. There's a steering wheel. There's a windshield, where the mirrors are. Even the fact that the seating arrangements are such that the passengers in the back are behind you so they don't distract you. There are brakes and pedals and so on and so forth.

That's not what AI need to drive. What AI need to drive is a wonderful, very redundant sensor architecture that basically gives it 360 viewpoint, but from many different angles. Also, computers like symmetry, and also sensors do better, higher up. So, when you start looking at our vehicle from that standpoint, you understand the four sensors at each corner. Each one gives you 270 degrees field of view, but at any given point in time, three pods are looking at something which means we can see behind things. That's very important if you're driving in cities.

So, there is that vector, and then when you see the vehicle in terms of the customer experience, it's for the rider. If you ever step into that vehicle and think about driving, we actually failed. It's a living room on wheels, so now the seating arrangement makes sense. It's communal. And by the way, if you want to ride alone, that's OK, too. If you think about the little screen on the side that tells you your route, that allows you to control your temperature, your music, it's your little space right there. Right. If you think about the sliding doors and how that's welcoming and you step in, then you sit down, you buckle up, you do have to push start from a safety standpoint and just from the journey starting and oh, by the way, then when it's done, it drops you off. It's already ready to pick up the next person to think about the efficiency of movement, congestions and so on.

And so, yes, the design philosophy was totally in service of the final product and what it will look like, as opposed to what we think is not very effective, which is taking a passenger car that was designed for humans to drive it, you know, slap a bunch of sensors and compute onto it and say, "OK, now go drive yourself."

Whitney Johnson: Oh, so interesting.

When someone comes to you to complain about someone else, what do you do? You have to tell this story.

Aicha Evans: I listen and I ask a few questions. I'm like, "OK, first of all, baseline, do you believe that this person is waking up in the morning coming to work and say, (excuse my language), 'I'm going to be an A-H or I'm going to do a bad job.' If that's what you truly believe, that's a different set of conversations?"

"Oh, of course. No, I don't believe that."

"OK, good. Do you think that there's some merit in what they have to say or not say?"

Whitney Johnson: Hmm.

Aicha Evans: "Well..." I get different answers for that.

"Do you need, do you have a common objective that you're working on?"

So then I say, "Okay, go back. Talk to the person, because if you haven't talked to the person about how you're feeling about them, you don't get to tell me. Second of all, try to find sort of, 'This is what we're working on together. This is my viewpoint, this is the other viewpoint. This is where there are pros and cons and it's common. This is where we agree to disagree.' And if the agree to disagree, leads to a consequential impact on the company, then you both come back to me and then we have the conversation together. And then we decide. But no, you don't get to just come blah, blah, blah."

This is one of the most destructive things in companies and also in relationships, because then the trust gets eroded. And so I'm like, "You know, this is not a social club. We're here to do a job and to accomplish our mission. So, you don't get to escalate on people. And if you're going to escalate on people, you need to escalate with them and say, 'I'm formally escalating on you and this is why.' Even better, you get extra credit for this. You say, 'Look, we truly disagree and we need to have a conversation about it.' And then we go from there."

Whitney Johnson: How often do they come back?

Aicha Evans: You know what? Not that often. For two reasons.

First of all, the majority of the people really that's powerful for them. So they try then to live their life that way. And then I would say there's a good 10 to 15 percent that think they can play a game of cat and mouse with me. And they just avoid coming back and then it depends I mean, look, I don't claim to be able to operate in a perfect world. If it's not too disruptive, it's kind of like, you know, I have a list, right, always. And then it becomes number 50 on my list and maybe I'll get to it or not, but at least I know it's not disruptive. But at any point in time, I'm probably dealing with the top 10. I'm not Mother Teresa with infinite bandwidth. If it's disruptive. Yeah, I play cat and mouse with them and most likely they will find themselves out of the corporation at some point.

Whitney Johnson: What problems do you most love to solve?

Aicha Evans: The ones when somebody says it cannot be done. That just gets my juices flowing and by the way, it's not a good thing or a bad thing, it's just different. I mean, I've had instances in my career, long conversations with Marshall, where somebody offers me a big job or a big project that is really high visibility, you know, all of that good stuff, but at the end of the day, I have a one-on-one with myself and I'm like, "This is very much a steady state project." Meaning you have to kind of exploit the recipe that's already in place. Do not ever put Aicha Evans in charge of something like that. She will mess it up. It's just not my personality which ties back to cooking, right? But if it's disruptive and if somebody says it's impossible, but it's worthy, it gets my juices flowing. Even in the recursive micromoments, I always say, "What problem are we trying to solve and is it worthy? Because if we are working on the problem statement, and we agree that it's important, by golly, amongst all of us, we will come up with a way to start solving it." Or I'll say, "Oh, well, it's too complex. OK, let's break it down. Let's break it down to the simplest unit of problem statement and then we'll go up from there."

Whitney Johnson: So good. OK, just for our listeners, it's Marshall Goldsmith that Aicha is referring to, the master coach, when you said Marshall.

So, basically break it down. Simple problems like the one, the two, the three, the four on your rotary phone. It all comes back to dialing four numbers.

I find myself in coaching conversations, this isn't coaching, but I like to ask it anyway, is what was most useful for you in this conversation? I was asking you lots of questions, but you also were having this opportunity to connect some ideas and process, and so in this time that we spent together, what was useful for you? What did you think about what idea popped into your brain?

Aicha Evans: I learned a lot about myself. You know, what we're trying to do is hard. So, connecting the fact that the weakest link and the gap is probably the most dangerous thing for the outcome. The fact that I can't deal with every single, maybe not very good apple. Well, what am I doing and what do I own in enabling others to go deal with that? Because it might be number 50 on my list, but it might be number 10 or number five on their list. How do I equip them and how do I create kind of the snowplow effect? So, that kind of jumped to mind.

Whitney Johnson: Good. And now you said it out loud, so you'll remember it.

Final thoughts for us today, to wrap up.

Aicha Evans: I just hope that we all believe in the human spirit. I feel like a lot that's going on in the world, whether it's social media, whether it's politics, whether it's diversity and inclusion, whether it's the pandemic. We are very resilient species and leadership and solving things happen through conversation, not through stating opinions. And I just hope that we remember that and go back to solving things through conversation.

And something really magical happens because when you rely on conversations to solve issues, you also develop intimacy. It's hard to be a meanie to somebody who you have an intimate conversation with. And I think then we will find our zones of rightful compromise, our zones of managing rhythm and cadence of things, not everything has to be solved overnight. And our zones of what unites us is way stronger than what divides us.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. Solving problems through conversations. So beautifully said, Aicha, thanks for being with us.

Aicha Evans: I truly appreciate it. Thank you for taking the time. And it is so good to see you. Thank you.

Six takeaways.

Number one. Optimism. That's what I felt. Talking about the future and technology in the same sentence can be a little scary, but hearing Aicha's vision of the future, it gets me excited. We as human beings are resilient and technology is going to make us even more resilient, more adaptable. The robots are coming and that's a good thing.

Number two. The dishwasher. Understanding the importance of everyone's role in the value chain. It's really compelling and something that I'm thinking about with our company. If you want to do more work on this, go back and listen to our episode with Ben Shewry, the restaurateur in Australia Episode 185 and former basketball player Zaza Pachulia in Episode 183.

Number three. Family. I love these quotes, "You're not the queen of the ant hill" and "don't use your work voice." I wrote about this in a recent newsletter and I said, half-jokingly, "If I were being paid to be a parent, I feel like it would frequently have been fired." I don't think our children actually feel this way, as my daughter would say teasingly, "Mom, you are solidly above average." But I was recently facilitating a coaching session with a group of C Suite executives, and nearly every single one of them said something similar. "I need to be more present with the people I love."

Number four. Teamwork. The area under the S curve. I love when we know something intuitively and then we're able to explain it logically to turn the abstract into the concrete. From a mathematical standpoint, as Aicha explained, individual output does not necessarily give you the best collective output. It's not just adding rectangles under the curve together. It's about limiting the space between the rectangles, dealing with the gaps. That's what an A-team does.

Number five. When two people come in to complain, ask the question, "Are they jerk?" If they are, well, that's one conversation, but usually they're not. So then you want to ask, "Well, is there merit to the disagreement? And if yes, then find a common goal and sort it out, because if you truly disagree, that could lead to a breakthrough." But don't escalate on people, solve problems through conversations.

Number six. I loved hearing about the design process at Zook. We just did a LinkedIn live with Scott Miller, who's the former CMO of Franklin Covey, and he runs the largest leadership podcast in the world, and he said, "Be customer obsessed." He went so far as to say, "Don't know what your target number is for the next quarter, know your customers target number." Which reminded me of Zook. If you step into the vehicle and think about driving, we failed.

Thanks again to Aicha Evans for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening and giving reviews. And thank you to our team, Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe and Steve Ludwig.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.