

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 253: FRAN KATSLOUDAS

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S-curve of learning in your professional and personal life. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host Whitney Johnson. Today our guest is Fran Katsoudas, twenty-five-year veteran of and the Chief People, Policy, and Purpose officer at Cisco, a technology company that kept the world connected long before the unique challenges of the pandemic. She strives to create a conscious culture which acknowledges that your work self and regular self can't be separated. We must attend to both of them on and offline, and she walks her talk. Please note we had some technical challenges with this episode, so the audio might sound a bit different from what you're used to. You'll still learn so much from this amazing conversation with Fran.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Fran, what I'd like to do to start is I want our listeners to be able to get to know you a bit and you've got this big title, big job, but that's not who you are. And so, I would love for you, I mean it's part of who you are but not all of you. So, I'd love for you to start by just sharing with us a story, an informative story that will give people a sense of who is Fran.

**Fran Katsoudas:** So, it's funny or Whitney. This story came to mind a few days ago, so it was on the brain, but I was 15 years old, and I was the leader of this youth club, and we had worked really hard to raise money. And the goal on the other side of that was a trip to Disneyland. And so, I remember the team had never done this. It was a big deal. We raised more than we ever thought we would, and it was so exciting. We get to Disneyland. We have a beautiful time. But while we are there, we realize that something that I thought we could expense could not be expensed, and it was big. It was a big deal and I remember feeling devastated that I had done something really wrong. And again, all of my peers are just having a great time and the whole bit. And I remember the youth adviser came to me and he said, Listen. In your life, you are always going to try new things and there will be times where it's just you're going to learn and you're going to trip and it's not going to work, but you are always going to be the person who pushes to get to Disneyland. And I remember with that statement, he took the stress away, and that's a bit of how I live. I prefer to go to Disneyland and make mistakes along the way. But do things that we haven't done before. And he gave me that wise counsel and that stayed with me. And I think it's a big part of who I am in all aspects of my life.

**Whitney Johnson:** I love that. And so, he basically said, he validated you in this really meaningful way, right? You are the person who is going to take us to Disneyland. And he also said, and it's not always going to work, and that is completely OK. In fact, that's part of the journey, the ride, the Disneyland ride.

**Fran Katsoudas:** Yeah. And he made me realize that I will always take that path. But in doing so, I have to realize that I have to then be OK with the tripping part of it too because there's going to be more of that when you strive for Disneyland. And so anyway, that's something that has stayed with me.

**Whitney Johnson:** Have you gone back to Disneyland?

**Fran Katsoudas:** Many times. I have with my kids. And when we have gone with the kids, my husband and I always say that we should leave them at home and go ourselves. So yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, speaking of roller coasters, let's talk a little bit about personal disruption. So, one of the grand misperceptions, as I talk to people about disrupting themselves, is that you can only do that by going to a new company. You've now been at Cisco for more than two decades. I'm certainly confident that you have disrupted yourself once or twice within Cisco. Any stories come to mind?

**Fran Katsoudas:** The questions that lead me to the biggest disruptions around me are always asking myself, like what value can I provide the team at this moment? And what I realize is when there's a point where my value to the team is diminished or starts to come down, it's time for me to do something else, and there's a new leader that can take the work to the next level. I sometimes think of myself as more of the builder. And I know that there is a point where I'm not the best leadership style for something. And so sometimes it's those questions. The other side of it, which I absolutely love, are the hard business questions. How do we do something that has never been done before? And that leads me to disruption. And it's funny because my energy and my passion for how I answer questions both personally and from a business perspective, fuel me in driving disruption.

**Whitney Johnson:** So frequently and in general, I have framed it this way is when you feel like you have learned everything you can learn on this particular S-curve of learning. We'll talk more about this in a minute. Then, you know, it's time, where something instinctive in you that says, it's time for me to jump to do something new. You just reframed this in this really magical, powerful way, which is when I feel like my ability to serve my team has reached diminishing returns. Then it is time for me to jump to a new curve. And that is really powerful because that's that servant-leader mentality.

**Fran Katsoudas:** Yes, sometimes I think that when we frame that way, making it a little less about ourselves and more about the team, I think it's freeing in so many ways. I think it allows, at least for me. It allows me to be a lot more honest about where I am at any given moment. And I'm a big believer that pausing to ask those questions, in some cases it'll lead to disruption, and, in other cases, I think it leads to really honest discussion about how something is going. And so, in all cases, I think it can be really helpful.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. So, either there's there may be a physical movement, which is what you were alluding to initially, but then there's also potentially that internal movement of, oh, maybe I need to change.

**Fran Katsoudas:** That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

**Whitney Johnson:** Any quick story that comes to mind for you and that illustrates either of these within Cisco?

**Fran Katsoudas:** Yeah, so, you know, I'm going to tell you one and it's going to make you laugh because it involves you. And I'll talk about my career a little bit, but I was listening yesterday to your podcast with Jennifer Moss. And the podcast was about burnout. And the key takeaway, and I will tell you that it kind of punched me just a little bit in the gut was you can't address burnout through self-care. And candidly, Whitney, I have been doing this for a little bit where I've been saying to my team, team, please go look, take a walk in the middle of the day, like do whatever you need to do. But when you do that, you don't address the system, right? And so, as I was listening to your podcast, I started asking myself questions about that and I've already had a meeting with the team today where I said, oh my gosh, like this is a discussion we need to have. And I just feel like being open to that, I think leads to a lot of great breakthroughs. For me, when I look at my career, one of the biggest moves that I made was into the people area. And the question I was asking myself at that moment was really about impact and where could I have the biggest impact? And I remember that this transition was from the outside looking in probably a really strange move. I didn't have people experience.

**Fran Katsoudas:** I also had a funny situation where my leader was telling me that if I didn't move, I would get a promotion to the next level, which I had worked so hard for. And it's those questions. And it was the clarity around making decisions. At that point, I was always thinking, hey, learning is my currency, and so I will make career decisions based on learning. And that led me to pass on the promotion in the organization that I was in and to move into H.R. And I just think there's something about the questions and then knowing what you're going to lean on, that can guide in some of these disruptive moves. I was part of the services organization, and I was leading an organization at the time. It's kind of funny now that I look back on it, that was one-part analytics. It was running the customer SAT program. It was a team of project managers around the globe, and I had gotten to a point that even though I had been working in many different organizations, I felt like I was at a point where I was not as big of a value to my team as I could be. And I didn't know a lot about the HR organization at the time, and I realized that there was an integration opportunity between people and business and that I wanted to be a part of it.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, everybody who's listening, you will notice who's familiar with our framework of disruption. You noticed that Fran did a huge step back in order to grow here she was on this one path, this one S-curve. Could have gotten a promotion, but she stepped back off that to go into the people function. And I suspect there's a lot that you learned in that role that has been helpful to you. Your title. It's very interesting because up until a few months ago you were the Chief People Officer. So, EVP and Chief People Officer, and now your title is chief people... fill in the blank. Go ahead.

**Fran Katsoudas:** Policy and purpose.

**Whitney Johnson:** Tell us about that. That seems like a very deliberate change.

**Fran Katsoudas:** It is. So, I will start off with the mechanics of it and then I'll talk about what it really is. So, the organization consists of people in communities, which is really our HR organization. We pivoted toward people in communities because of the way that we look at our impact. We have policy, which is basically our government affairs organization in addition to this really cool team called Country Digital Acceleration. And that is about how we help governments around the globe digitize in service of their people. Talk more about that. And then this last element, purpose. And one of the bets Whitney that I will make is that I do think so many of us will have purpose in our title as we move forward. And Cisco's purpose is to power an inclusive future for all. And so, what our organization does is we operationalize how we do that. And what that means at Cisco is we operationalize the fact that we have this amazing technology that securely connects and we're going to use that technology in a way to provide people with access for their own health, for education, for jobs, we're going to work hard to fight the digital divide from an inclusion perspective, we're going to focus on social justice and making sure that within Cisco and outside of Cisco, we do our part to ensure that everyone has a seat at the table. When we look at future, we're going to focus on sustainability and how we build a regenerative planet. And so, what this means is that this organization will help through our partners and our customers around the globe to really build that purpose and hopefully have this amazing system of goodness that is created based on what we do.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, Fran, I love that a system of goodness that is so good. And I love that you said we have this technology that securely connects people and there's something that makes there's a sense of safety in that, and I think that's really beautiful. So, a system of goodness and safely connecting people. So, let's talk about purpose for a second. What role do you feel like purpose is playing in the private sector today? And what will that look like going forward?

**Fran Katsoudas:** Yeah. So, I think that if we go back a little bit, a lot of companies focused on doing good. And what they did, Whitney is that they would dedicate a team or a set of resources, dollars to positively impact a community or positively give to a cause. What was interesting about that is it always sat on the periphery. The next evolution was that our people care so much more about that. And so, in the second chapter, what you see is that talent is making decisions based on the extent to which companies are doing this and based on the extent to which it's real for a company, it's not a donation. It's much, much bigger. What we're moving towards from a purpose perspective is that purpose has to be embedded in your day-to-day business. And when it is, I think that companies will leverage, as we do at Cisco, whether it's your, your technology, your IP, your people to drive your purpose in your every move. And so it no longer is the elective that sits on the side, but it's truly embedded. And so, for us, a beautiful example of that

is we have a product set called Silicon One, and this product now is so much more energy-efficient or drives energy efficiency for our customers that will save them a tremendous amount. It's also a lot smaller, and so there's less packaging and shipping. That's how we intersect our purpose with our product innovation. And so, our goal is to do that across everything that we're doing. And that's what we see starting to happen in the marketplace is that companies are making purpose who they are, not something on the side.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. So, the image that came to my mind is it's not a hat that you put on, it's what animates you. It's the animating force of you as an individual and as an organization.

**Fran Katsoudas:** Yeah, because you take the hat off and on, right? And if we do this right, it's just who we are.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, it's the system of goodness. I'm never going to forget that. All right. You said that all workers want to do their best. It's our job to facilitate that. And so, you are rethinking how we work, which includes things like hybrid work and you're certainly in the vanguard of that. It's a term hybrid work that I had never even thought of, conceived up two years ago. And yet here we are doing hybrid work. Talk about that a bit.

**Fran Katsoudas:** Yeah, something that's so interesting is that if we were having this conversation nine months ago, we would define hybrid as the discussion about where we get to sit, when we do our work. Are we sitting in our homes? Are we sitting at Starbucks? Are we sitting in the office? I think what we know now is that it's so much more. So, to me, hybrid is really inclusion. Because what we're talking about is a company being inclusive of many different ways to work, and a company seeing their people, seeing their preferences, and doing everything that we can to allow our people to shine. And that's not just from a strength perspective in how we connect them to the right work, but also now how we understand a little bit more what works set up. It is best for every employee in every team. And so at Cisco right now, our approach is that every team is deciding how they want to work for the next 90 days, and in 90 days they'll have another conversation. They'll talk about what worked, what didn't work, what they want to try over the next 90 days, and we'll go again. And so, we're embedding a lot of learning. We're trying to be really thoughtful. We know that all work is different and that plays a role in how you work as well. And then based on where you are in your life every single day probably drives a different set of challenges and opportunities, and we want to be open to that.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, one of the things I just heard you say is that, and I think this is interesting because there's this theme developing of inside and outside. Is you said 90 days ago, was the external, it was the physical, where do you work? And do you work in the office, or at home, or somewhere else? And now you're saying it's what's going on inside of you? And are you going to make it possible for each person to work in the best way possible? Different, possible. But you know what I mean.

**Fran Katsoudas:** Right, yep.

**Whitney Johnson:** Very interesting. Tell us a little bit about, you've got this interesting global hybrid work index. What did you discover with that?

**Fran Katsoudas:** So, the first thing that we learned is that we're able to look at over 60 million meetings per month and that's on the WebEx platform. And there's just a wow and thinking about how many meetings we're talking about when we talk to the people in those meetings. Sixty-four percent tell us that choice in how they work is going to be a huge factor in where they decide to go. And so, there's some validation, I think, there from a choice perspective. The other thing that I'm still processing through, and we want to learn a lot more about is that when we look at those 60 million meetings, we can see that in 48 percent of the meetings or I should say, forty-eight percent of the people in those meetings, they don't say a word in the meeting. And so, you can take a subset of those meetings and you can say, OK, they're an all-hands meeting that that makes sense, but I don't think it makes up the whole number. And so, what is it about meetings? Are we having too many meetings? Why is almost half of the participants, why are they quiet? And so, I think there's a lot more that we can learn here, but we're really excited about this index. And I think the intersection between the meetings that we're having and well-being, there's just a lot for us to uncover.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. And when you said that, that 48 percent, it makes me think of Susan Cain's work, right? A true introvert. Is it? How are we making it possible for the 50 percent of our people who are introverts to participate? And so, some interesting opportunity there isn't there?

**Fran Katsoudas:** One of the things that we have in our technology platform is an option where you can basically say that a person can't speak twice before everyone has had a chance to speak once. And I get the sense, Whitney, that in many meetings, we don't turn that on. And I love Susan's work. I think there's wisdom in us thinking about all of the different types of styles and experiences and comfort levels putting yourself out there, but I think it's a perfect example of what we need to learn.

**Whitney Johnson:** You've got all this amazing data and resources and capacity to think about hybrid work, both sort of physically and emotionally if you will. For a leader or an entrepreneur in a small business. Do you have one or two suggestions or tips that you would provide to them on how to approach this?

**Fran Katsoudas:** Yeah, the nice thing about what we're talking about is these are not challenging things. I think we just need to build new muscle. And so, as we were asking our leaders to facilitate the hybrid work conversation with their teams, it was almost a little bit embarrassing. At least I'll share for myself. There were questions I should have been asking the team all along that I didn't, and so if you're a team leader in a smaller company, bringing your team together and asking the question, are you a morning person or a night person? How do you work best? Are you OK with being interrupted? If I see that you're in a meeting, should I not ping you until you get out of the meeting? Whitney, I will always say just ping me, and if I can, I'll respond. If not, I'll get right back to you. But we asked ourselves some basic questions. You know when we're in the office, should we be together, or does it not matter? And so, I would say invest in those conversations across the company, across the teams, you're going to learn something, even if you don't change a thing about the way in which you work, understanding how your peers are at their best will make us better. So that's one thing that I think we can absolutely do. The other thing that I would say is. For all of us, understanding work is going to be so important in this environment, and it's going to be freeing because if we have a better understanding of the work we do and the best way to do that work, I think we're going to be so much more effective in this new world as well. And I think in doing so, it will allow for more flexibility and choice. And so those are two basic conversations that I think we can have.

**Whitney Johnson:** As you've ingested this idea of hybrid work. What are one or two changes that you have made?

**Fran Katsoudas:** At the very beginning of the pandemic, I really struggled with sleeping. I think the intensity of the situation, the intensity of how do we do this? How do we keep our people safe? What's the latest and greatest? Like when can we come back like it was a time like, what are the benefits? How do we help our parents with kids at home? So, I wasn't sleeping. And so, on a very personal note, I had to relearn and improve how to sleep because I was going to find myself in a really tough place if I didn't. And I think I ran pretty crazy for about four months. And so, hybrid for me is really being deliberate about how I spend my time being deliberate with if I come into the office, what's the purpose around that? Who am I going to work with? I'm not going to come in to do a video conference. I'm not going to come in to do email. So, hybrid has made me a lot more thoughtful. And then with that thoughtfulness being focused on, how am I doing? Something that hybrid has afforded me is that now I actually twice a week in the middle of the day will work out, and I could never do that when I was in the office. And when I'm back in the office, I'm trying to figure out how to do this. But I think I'm doing my best to take very seriously the opportunity to rethink my work while also ensuring that I take care of myself. I think for many of my peers across Cisco, we found ourselves working additional hours as we moved into hybrid. And so, I think all of us are trying to figure out like, how do we do this right?

**Whitney Johnson:** What are the indicators that a leader is leading well?

**Fran Katsoudas:** We've invested a lot over the years in our teams, and the last time that we talked, we talked about how technology can make us so much smarter. And it's funny because you want to find the balance of the extent to which you inspect and the extent to which you empower. The path that we've taken over the years is around empowerment. And so, the way that that looks is that, as an example, there are weekly rituals that we have at Cisco. So we ask our employees on a weekly basis via tech to check in with their leaders. And in their check-in, they share the priorities for the week, they share what they loved, they share what they loathed, and then they tell us the extent

to which they feel like they're playing to their strengths and the value that they're providing. The other thing that they do is they share with their leaders; this is what I need from you. That ritual, I think, is a really important one. I do that most weeks, and our CEO, Chuck Robbins, is amazing at responding to my check-in. I think what happens for our leaders is that after a while, you can kind of tell when something's a big deal for someone and you kind of have that, that radar where, hey, you know what? Fran said she's loathed this three times now.

**Fran Katsoudas:** I'm going to try to help her with this, and I always joke there's people that always load things and then, you know, it's not that meaningful. And then there's some that they never loathe. And when they do, you better get involved, right? And so, I share this because one of the things you have to make sure of is that your people are paying attention to their employees. And so, one of the stats that we see at Cisco is if someone checks in, are their leaders reading the check-in? And thank goodness, our stats in this are usually in the high 90s, and I think we don't talk about leader attention enough. And so, you want to have some very foundational things that you're doing to just make sure, especially while we're not together, that these connections are happening. And then you recognize that technology can play a huge role. And so, the last time we talked, we talked about a network visualizer that shows the beauty of how our teams come together. And what I love about the visualizer is that it shows that there are people in our organization that are connecting teams, and it's not because it's their role.

**Fran Katsoudas:** It's because it's their strength and their passion, and you can use those people. And so, as an example, when I have a big change project, those are the people that I go to to really push the communication through. And so, what we can look at is how are our leaders connecting? How can we support them? I will tell you that the analytics that we had there have now been pushed into the WebEx platform, and so there's some really powerful things that you can now see within WebEx. And so, some of that is who do I spend my time with? As leaders understanding that perhaps you're spending most of your time with a subset of your team, maybe will guide your time, or maybe it won't, and you just have to explain why you're doing it. And so those are some of the things Whitney that we're doing. I think your question is a hard one. I don't think we have a perfect example. Of how to do it, but I think all of these elements come together to give us insight into how our leaders and their people are doing.

**Whitney Johnson:** I actually think you answered that question really well because you said two things that really stood out for me. Number one is just being able to measure leader attention. Are we paying attention to the people who work for us? That, to me, is a hugely important metric. And then the second one where you said is if you've got, I was actually just on a coaching call with someone who said, I'm trying to figure out how to manage and navigate some change. And I said to them instinctively, maybe I because I knew how I was going to talk to you. I said, look for the two or three people, thinking about the diffusion curve, that can help influence, who can help wield influence, and that you've got the technology to show you who those people are. It's not just a matter of sussing out or intuiting who they are.

**Fran Katsoudas:** That's right. And I think through the technology, we've also been able to do some really fun myth-busting like we know that new employees can build their network very, very quickly. You don't have to be at a company for three, four, five years to build that. It can happen right away. We can also see that regardless of greater level, you can be an amazing connector. And so, we learn a lot. I think the technology is helpful and we'll just keep using it to empower.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you're this technology company, a system for good. You said the tech that that securely connects, so you've got networks and routers. This is your DNA. And I'm just wondering, how does this inform how you think about your people, policy, and purpose function because it's in your DNA, and I just think it has to come through in some way.

**Fran Katsoudas:** So, at the heart of what you're doing from a routing and a switching perspective is you're sharing information and you're driving connection, right? And I think for us, what's been so beautiful is this realization that at this day and age, we can see there are a lot of people that are not connected. In the U.S. today, there are 18 million people that don't have good access, bandwidth, Wi-Fi. And so just imagine for a moment how that impacts your ability to study, or to work, or to catch up with people that perhaps you grew up with. And so for us, this realization of the power of information and connection and understanding against the backdrop of a pandemic, how important that it is really marries what we do with a huge opportunity that we see around the globe. And I think we need that. I think what happens is it makes our people really proud and understanding the role that we play. I think

there's also something, sounds kind of funny, but there's something when you are the foundation. Where I think you recognize there's a responsibility that you have to make sure that things work, that you're safe. We're really proud of the fact that we don't monetize our customers' data. We work hard to protect it. And so I think there's something in that, that translates to responsibility for me.

**Whitney Johnson:** In our work, we use the S-curve of Learning Insight tool to understand a worker's perception of where they are in their growth, and you would describe it as where they are in their career journey because that's going to predict their behavior. So where do I perceive there's a growth opportunity for me? So my question for you is when you were at the top of an S-curve, you love Cisco. You even love your manager. You need a new challenge. Give us an example of what a conversation has looked like to be able to navigate moving to a new curve, getting a new challenge.

**Fran Katsoudas:** Sometimes, the thing that I recognize is that I will be, let's say, moving through the S-curve and I will work really, really, really hard to either reframe where we are to get back to that place or to jump. And so an example of that would be there was a point where I was doing a ton of work in engineering and I remember. We saw a lot of opportunities at that moment, it felt like there was a lot of great work that we could do that would just continue to kind of ride out, and it was good, but it was incremental. And I remember telling myself, come in as a consultant and look at this work with a fresh pair of eyes. And given that I have the tenure that I do at Cisco, being fresh and constantly looking at things as if it was your first day sometimes creates the opportunity to jump to the next S-curve or creates the challenge that keeps me motivated as we continue to navigate through. And so in that case, those questions and looking at the world through the eyes of a consultant allowed me then to recognize there was a much bigger opportunity for us and that we had to work with the engineering leadership team to prepare for this new model and body of work and innovation velocity. And so it's a little bit of both. But what I've learned is it doesn't always mean you change. Sometimes it's your mindset shift that allows you to show up in your best way throughout the rest of that process or curve.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. So basically, it wasn't a conversation that you had with someone else. It was a conversation with yourself where you said, this is a summit, not the summit. We're going to reframe this and continue to climb that mountain.

**Fran Katsoudas:** That's right. And then once I had that, I knew exactly how to have that conversation and how to bring others along so that that we could finish what we started as we were getting to the point that maybe wasn't as exciting.

**Whitney Johnson:** You were working very hard to create a conscious culture, one that is concerned with the well-being of your people. What are some specific things that you're doing?

**Fran Katsoudas:** So, I think we're focusing on both. How do we impact the day-to-day? Because that's where you see real change. In addition to how do we do some nice investments or reminders for our people? And so in the investment reminder side of the house, we started doing something called Day for Me about a year and a half ago. And it was something that an employee suggested, which is, hey, it would be really great if we could all take a day off. And the funny thing is, our people have paid time off, so it wasn't about give us more time off, it was could we all take time off? And what this employee was getting at was it'd be nice to have a day where we don't have to worry about coming back to a mountain of email. Be great if we didn't have to worry about the conversations we missed. And it's a bit of an aha for us around how there's some really important work that Cisco and other companies have to do to reestablish paid time off. Because I think all of us are struggling with our people checking in while they're supposed to be checking out. And so, you know, Day for Me, is a really good example where we tell our people, just take the day off, we're all going to do it. The email is not going to pile up and just take care of yourself, whatever that looks like for you.

**Fran Katsoudas:** And then on the more day-to-day or week-by-week approach in our company check-ins, which we were doing weekly for the first six months of the pandemic. And now we do one or two a month, we actually have a mental health practitioner who joins us, and she talks to our team about anything that's top of mind. But Whitney what I really love about this is that in the same meeting that you're talking about your company strategy, in the same meeting that you're answering questions about our big bets, you're talking about someone being stressed out or not

knowing how to help their child with stress. So, you know, our families have gone through a lot, and having these in the same conversation makes me feel like we're seeing our people were making it real. We're not pretending like there's a work Fran and home Fran. There's just Fran, right? And so that's something that I'm really proud of. We worked hard to increase a lot of the mental health offerings that we provide, trying to help our people when they're ready for support, to get support very quickly because a lot of times that doesn't happen today, given just the demand that's out there. And so that that's those are a few examples of how we're approaching it.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Fran, you got all this data from 60 million meetings. Is there any way that the data can help you understand, it's time to give people another day off?

**Fran Katsoudas:** Our people now tell us when they need one, so that's good too. And we have been looking at employee well-being now. So yes, there's also markers that tell us how our people are doing, what the data has shown us that we didn't, we should have known, but we didn't know, was that the well-being of people leaders is lower than our individual contributors. And I think part of the reason for that is, I think our team leaders, I think they're caregivers now in every aspect of their life. And it's hard for them. And so that's a baseline now that we're able to watch out for. And so we try to do them on a pretty regular basis, typically once a quarter. But there are moments where our people were will ask for one or there are moments where the data says have one. And so we do our best to listen to that as well.

**Whitney Johnson:** When you look at the past 24 months, where have you been surprised on the upside?

**Fran Katsoudas:** So first, just the fact that we're talking about putting people first is beautiful. I think for so many companies, when we stepped into the pandemic, companies were trying to keep their people safe, and I think employees felt that. And I don't believe that's going to go away. I think for many, many companies, putting people first is now just how they run. So, I think that has been beautiful for me personally. I traveled a ton beforehand, like probably 50 to 60 percent of my time if I'm being honest. And being able to be home with my family and being able to see like my husband and kids all day long was a blessing and a really beautiful moment. And my hope is that. Just as we've been talking, I find a better way and being here some of the time and being in the office part of the time and traveling, which I do love, by the way, I think this choice is hopefully something that that comes out of the pandemic. That's really positive. And the only other thing that I would say is that. I think we're making technology work harder for us right now. And if more and more technology pivots to inclusion, if more and more technology pivots to well-being, and so, you know, as an example in our people insights, you can see how many meetings you took outside of your desired meeting time. And it's just a way to remind everyone of, hey, this is how you said you want to work, and this is how you're spending your time. If the technology keeps making us better that way, I think that's a win that's come out of this, too.

**Whitney Johnson:** What was useful to you in this conversation?

**Fran Katsoudas:** The nice thing about these opportunities is that this is not the conversation that you have on a day-to-day basis, and I think it just makes you pause and be a little bit more self-aware, as funny as that sounds. And so, I would say that Disneyland. It was nice to think about that again because that's permission for me to continue to try things. The other thing that I would say that we talked about together is that the tech and seeing, you know, your wristband and knowing that we're all on this journey together. And the number of people that I see with rings, or wristbands, or new practices that they're trying, I think makes us recognize that we're not alone in this because something that's fascinating is that I sit in this office by myself all day long. And the good news is I'm talking to people, of course, and I see you, by the way, in your beautiful office with your beautiful flowers. But I think knowing that we're on the journey and that we're all trying to do the best for ourselves, and for our family, and extended friends, there's something really beautiful in that too.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thanks for making the time to chat with me, and I know our listeners are going to love hearing from you.

**Fran Katsoudas:** That's awesome. Thanks, Whitney.

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Four key takeaways from my conversation with Fran. Number one, create a system of goodness. Many companies focus on doing good in the world. They allocate a team or a budget to create impact. But as Fran notes, if that project is on the periphery, it will never make its way into your company's DNA. Purpose has to be embedded in your day-to-day business, she says, and data shows this matters more than ever to your team. The system of goodness at Cisco is not only about employee well-being, but affects everything across the company, including the very products it creates.

Number two. Find the connectors. Fran says, keep an eye out for people who are passionate about connecting teams together, even if that's not their job. People can be amazing connectors, regardless of their title or level, and data shows that new employees, people on the launch point of their S-curve can build social capital much faster than you think. Oh, and make sure your leaders are paying attention to their teams. Tech can help with this. Which brings us to the next takeaway.

Number three, make technology work harder for us. We often lament the burden of tech during the pandemic, but as Fran says, we can pivot these tools for inclusion. The freelancer from Kansas can have a seat at the same table as an executive in the New York boardroom. The hybrid work model is also a powerful tool for physical and mental well-being if used correctly.

Number four. Look at the world as a new employee or consultant. I asked Fran about a time she was ready to jump to a new S-curve, and instead, she told us about when all she really needed was to Disrupt her mindset. When facing a challenge, try to leave your insider knowledge at the door. What would you see if you walked into the room for the first time? You were at the launch point. How would your perception be different if you were a hired gun instead of the VP?

In terms of other podcasts to listen to, if you haven't already, you'll want to listen to Chris Dancy Episode 230 on technology and well-being, Jennifer Moss Episode 238; and for more on leading teams listen to Ed Catmull Episode 201, Scott O'Neal Episode 219, and Aisha Evans Episode 217. Thank you again to Fran Katsoudas for joining us. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman; audio engineer and editor, Whitney Jobe; and production assistant, Cassidy Simpson.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.