

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 272: ANNE CHOW

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, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. Before we dive into this week's amazing conversation, I wanted to share an email from you, one of our listeners. This is from Tabb, who wrote in about our chat with Emma McAdam, a mental health expert. "I don't know how you keep finding these amazing people. I don't have a mentor right now. So, listening to your podcast is like finding a new mentor each week. You have no idea how valuable this is. Sometimes I learn something new and sometimes it just reaffirms that I'm doing things right. Thank you." This also reminds me of our recent chat with Scott Miller, who confirmed exactly what Tab is talking about here. Even when you're in between mentors, there are plenty of people to learn from, even if you don't know them personally. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and feedback about this or any other episode. Please email me at wj@whitneyjohnson.com. I read and respond to every note.

Whitney Johnson: Now, today I'm talking with Anne Chow, CEO of AT&T Business, and is a second-generation American, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrant parents whose outlook on success was tremendously formative for her. She embarked on a career in music and engineering before falling in love with, sales. If you're not sure how all of these S Curves are connected, you are in for a treat. Anne's journey is really fun and inspired, and I know you will love getting to know her. All right, Anne let's start with the crucible moment. What has made you who you are as a leader?

Anne Chow: Yeah. Thanks so much, Whitney. And I appreciate the time today and being with you and your audience. So, I think there are so many different crucible moments, I think, in our life. And if I were to think of two that I'll give you, I'll give you one as, as a child, I am the child of immigrants. And so, as I was growing up, I would tell you that I suffered from cultural, generational language gaps with my parents. And so, I always had this incredible consciousness of not fitting in and not really belonging. I was not really fully Asian and not fully really American. And I remember my dad in his career struggling with this pivot point of really wanting to be an outstanding individual contributor. But society around him and even my mother was pressuring him to pursue the management track, and that really wasn't his thing. And I remember for me, as I listened to this and observed it over the years, what's so stuck with me is that no matter what anyone tells you, even your most closest loved ones, it is so

important to stay true to who you are. And that is a lesson for me that I carried with me through school. Now I will tell you that, and I'm sure we'll get into this conversation a little bit more, because I didn't always follow up, by the way, that you've got to stay true to who you are and what your values are, and only really you know, what your magic is.

Anne Chow: So, for me that that is such an important leadership lesson, I would say that I carried that forward into one of perhaps what is the most pivotal experiences and assignments that I've had in my career. And that was when I had an opportunity to become a true leader of people. So, it was my first what we would call at AT&T in the industry, my first large team assignment, and I was in my twenties. I had responsibility for a group that was hundreds and hundreds of people large. I had people in six different cities across the United States, and I, quite frankly, had no idea what it meant to be a leader for people. And that assignment taught me what it meant, that I had to somehow humanize myself and the whole idea of leadership and prove to every single one of the hundreds of people who had demographics more different than me. There were no two of us were the same. And that to me was a very crucible moment. In fact, that assignment is the one that I feel I really became a true leader of the people.

Whitney Johnson: So, you share this experience about your father and how he really wanted to be an individual contributor. Is there any type of connection you make between that experience, that childhood experience with your dad, and then your first big leadership assignment inside of AT&T? How in your mind do you tie those two together?

Anne Chow: It's really actually a beautiful transition because when I came out of business school, I had a whole series of different job offers and I started as an engineer, but I knew that I wanted to work at this magical intersection of people and technology. I mean, I knew it even back then. I couldn't describe it as eloquently, of course, but I always knew that I wanted that. And so, push came to shove. I decided that AT&T was the best place for me to start coming out of business school. Now, my father had been in the industry and actually in the Bell System back in the heavy, regulated days. And he actually said to me when I started, he said, you know, I don't expect for you to stay with the company for almost 30 years like I did. But if you do decide to stay there over a period of time, I want you to aspire to become a leader and a manager of people. Basically, what he said to me is if you decide to stay there, I want you to aspire to be a division manager, because in my observation if you become a division manager, and so, that's kind of like a general management level, Whitney. So, it was kind of a couple of levels up, but not quite executive level.

Anne Chow: He said, That is where you can really have an impact on the strategy of the business, but yet feel close enough to the front line and have responsibility for enough of the business that you can really make a name for yourself and really impact the business. And that always stuck with me because I never shied away from, I knew I didn't want to be an individual contributor like I knew that all along. In fact, it's why I went for an MBA instead of a Ph.D. because one, I was not smart enough to get a Ph.D. like my dad, but I knew that I wanted to master this crazy art and science of leadership, right? Which was really all about people. So, that's actually how it bridged very explicitly into my corporate career at the very, very beginning. And I think back on it and how prophetic it was. Right. He had no idea how profound his words to me would be and how I would carry them throughout my multi-decade career.

Whitney Johnson: And you know what I love about that Anne is that his aspiration was to be an individual contributor because that's where he thought he was going to make his highest contribution. And then he sees his daughter get an engineering degree. And many parents would have said, well, I want her to do exactly what I did. And instead, he said, No, these are your gifts, these are your talents. And so, here's what I would encourage you to aspire to do. And I think that's lovely.

Anne Chow: Absolutely. I'm blessed and so fortunate that both of my parents instilled the values, discipline, and foundation in me and that they're both still on this, this earth today. So, shout out to my parents.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Shout out to your parents. All right. So, you've now been at AT&T for several decades and you've disrupted yourself a lot. You jumped to a lot of new S Curves. Would you share with us one or two jumps that you have made through the course of your career there that appeared to other people to be a step back?

Anne Chow: So, I've got two stories that I absolutely want to share with you and the audience. So, the first one, absolutely, even as I talk about it now, I remember back again when I was in my twenties. I felt like this was a step back. Okay. So, at AT&T, we've got this role called the chief of staff and most executives have them. The role itself varies, as you would imagine, between the two individuals, the chief of staff and the particular executive. And when I was trying to think this is the, this was the fourth assignment that I had in my career. So, it was pretty, it was pretty early on. I had an executive who pursued me significantly. So, she actually came to ask for me to be her chief of staff, not once, not twice, because I turned her down once and twice, but three times. And the first time she came to ask me and of course, I was flattered. I was a big fan of hers. I had watched her from afar and it was a her. So, she was one of the few women executives at the time. But I thought to myself, and this is, this actually sounds awful, but I was very cocky right when I was young like that. And I thought to myself, I am an Ivy League-educated engineer. I do not know what a chief of staff is. And I did not go to school and work my you know what off for my parents to pursue the American dream to become a chief of staff.

Anne Chow: So, I had this indignation about me, this, this really awful hubris around. It was a step back, right? Like, hey, I've done three robust jobs. And if the company doesn't think that those robust jobs were enough to prove to them that I was promotable, then why in the world would I go take a step back and be this chief of staff? Right. I didn't want to go pick up somebody's laundry. I didn't want to go get their coffee. The third time she came to me, I actually thought to myself, You know, I need to sit down with her in earnest and talk about this. Right? And I at that point voiced my concerns. So, I said, Hey, Pat, I, I'm concerned that this job is going to be 80% administrative and 20% strategic. And I want it to be and I'm not naive enough to think that a chief of staff job is not going to be heavily administrative. But I want it to be the other way around. I want it to be 80% strategic and 20% administrative. And so, that was perhaps one of the most courageous conversations I've had early on because I was doing this with an executive who I turned down but, you know, A-plus for her to still keep coming after me.

Anne Chow: And so, I felt like it was a little bit of destiny. So, we had this conversation and she said to me, you know, Anne I understand that, and you have my commitment to work with you towards that. But one of the things that you will need to understand is when you come into the role, and one of the reasons why I want you in the role is that the administrative stuff is broken. So, in the beginning, you need to realize that it is 80/20, 80% administrative. You know, you've got to show that you can get your arms around that, and then we'll work it. And that's in fact what I did. I went and did that role, and it was a critical crucible moment, as you say because from her, I learned so many incredible lessons. I mean, one, she was at the time, the second, the second female leader that I had had, the first one being my first boss who was incredibly strong. I learned about politics. I learned about organizational dynamics. I learned about communication, executive decision-making. There were things that I learned in that role that I have no doubt catapulted me forward in ways that profoundly impacted my career. So, that is one crucible experience that absolutely was a step back because you put chief of staff on your resume, Whitney. It Doesn't help you get a job on the outside at all.

Whitney Johnson: What's interesting about that is that goes to so, again, back to your father's advice and counsel to you. It was that role that became a tutorial for you to do much of the leadership work that you've done.

Anne Chow: You're so right. Because at that point, the largest group or set of people that I was responsible for were two. Right. So, you couldn't really say that I had learned what leadership was in terms of managing a large team or being able to connect with an organization. Right. And having sole responsibility for a group of people. And you're right, that role. I had one direct report, but I saw what leadership actually was. Right, because I saw her with a multi-hundred-person organization and how she operated and how she led. And I developed even more conviction that that's what I wanted for myself in my career, was to be a leader like that in that definition of leader. So, the second story is one where, you know, I've already shared with you in the group that I, I started very much as an engineer, very technical, and I was in fact very introverted at the time. I've already shared that I had a little bit of hubris, a little bit of hubris from my education and who I thought I was. And early in my career during this period of time, I had several mentors, including the, the woman and shout out here to Pat Trainer just want to give her a shout out. She shapes me to this day. That woman who I was the chief of staff to told me, you know, and if you really want to aspire to upper management, you've got to go be in sales. Now you're talking to an engineer with an MBA who, you know, second-generation Asian American. Honestly, I couldn't even spell sales. My parents did not raise me to be in sales.

Anne Chow: They to this day don't really quite understand what business of business sales actually is in terms of being an honorable profession. And I was like, I never aspired to be a salesperson. I, of course, had a very explicit bias, interestingly enough, about a salesperson was your stereotypical negative stereotype of a used car salesperson. And so, I had numerous people tell me, Look if you look at the executives in this company, they all have been in B2B sales. So, I acknowledge that as a fact. So, I started interviewing to try to get into sales. And Whitney, I was rejected once. I was rejected twice over the course of three years. I was rejected five times over the course of three years before I could find somebody who would take the risk on me to get into sales. And I will admit that after about the third time I realized that, you know, I had a switch flip in my head, that I no longer was pursuing sales because somebody or some bodies told me that I should I wanted to at that point prove that I could because the confident, cocky person in me was like, Wait a second, who are they to tell me that I can't get in? And Whitney, one of the, one of my memories from back then was I actually had a very senior person in the company, an officer in the company tell me that I would never, ever get into sales. After that meeting, I will tell you, I shed a little bit of tears. Then I became super angry and then I became super determined to prove him. And all the interviewers and the hiring managers who had rejected me, I was determined to prove them wrong.

Anne Chow: So, it took me three years to finally find somebody to allow me into sales. And that was such a pivotal experience. And it's so ironic because when I look back now at my over three-decade career, I've actually now spent over half of it in business-to-business sales. And if you were to talk to people who knew me, you know, in the latter part of my career, they would absolutely identify me as a sales leader. So, that move to sales for me was one that was fraught with so much peril, so much confidence destruction, quite frankly, so much humility. I had to eat a lot of crow, and with every rejection, I felt like a failure. But then I realized I was only a failure if I gave up. That experience over that 30-year period taught me there is learning in every experience and there's actually no such thing as failure. There is only success and learning. And with every rejection I learn something because I didn't get the job for a reason, right? There was a reason why I didn't get the job. Either there was somebody better qualified, I was lacking a particular skill. And so, I put, especially with the latter rejections, I put a lot of diligence into understanding and studying who ultimately got the job and what they had that I didn't have. So, I actually do not believe in failure. I think there are only two outcomes. There's success and learning. And that also has guided me through my life.

Whitney Johnson: Talk to us about when you got that first call of, okay Anne, you're in sales.

Anne Chow: It was both science and serendipity if you will. Like to kind of contrast the two. So, the science of it was. Yes, absolutely right. I'll give you two examples of two of the rejections. One was, Anne how can you possibly go lead a group of salespeople if you hadn't led a group of people? Right. Salespeople are a different breed of kind of people. You've not even demonstrated that you have leadership of people capabilities. So, what did I do? I went into that large team job that I mentioned earlier to go really prove and develop my people leadership skills. So, I knocked that barrier down. Another rejection was, Anne how can you possibly be in sales if you've never had a customer-facing assignment? Right. Totally true statement. I had not had a customer-facing job and so, I went to get a customer-facing job in customer service, ironically. And I that's one of the tongue-in-cheek things I think is so funny, is that I needed customer experience to go be in sales, but I didn't need customer experience to go be in customer service. So, I went to what I call I went to go be in the boot camp of what I call, the boot camp assignment of my career, which was to go do customer service seven by 24. You are on. And so, I knocked that barrier down. So, that's those are two examples of the science of getting that big break.

Anne Chow: But the serendipity of the big break was, I did finally find a leader who also happened to be a female who took a chance on me. She knew I hadn't been in sales, but she had seen enough of me in my prior roles. And I remember talking to her about it while we were on a joint panel years later about the decision that she made. And she said, Look, you were smart, you had great collaboration skills, you were able to communicate. And so, her view was it wasn't really that much of a risk. And she had enough confidence in me that she knew that she could coach and support me in the skills that I didn't have in terms of the art of selling or the science of selling because I had never done it. But she saw enough of the raw foundation that she was willing to take that risk, and she really viewed that it wasn't really that much of a risk. She also felt that because I had been on a mission to be in sales, she also felt that and saw that I would have a high degree of intrinsic self-motivation to be successful no matter what. And she's right. She's right, right. And I just I look back on it and my goodness, I mean, I did I fell in love with the profession of sales.

Whitney Johnson: So, you went out, you got the experience you needed of managing people. You got a customer-facing opportunity and role, and you had a sponsor who was willing to take chance on you. As you said, to her, it wasn't that big of a risk, but to many people, it would have looked like one.

Anne Chow: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: When you got that kind of pushback consistently, many people would have left and gotten a role at another company. What was going on in your mind? What was the calculus that you were doing?

Anne Chow: When I started with AT&T, I knew that while I was starting technical, I didn't want to stay purely technical. One of the aspirations that I had, and I never articulated to anybody honestly at that time, I probably didn't articulate it for probably ten years externally, if you will. But I knew it in my head and I knew it in my heart, and I wanted to be one of the first. There were not many women. There were not any or many women of color who were in key strategic decision-making roles. They were not in the higher levels of management. They were not in the critical positions of running PnLs, being in strategy, being out front of clients. Right. There were I'll, I'll lean into some stereotypes here. Right? There were a lot of ethnic minorities in technology. There were some in certain corporate functions. Right. You saw a lot of women in human resources and whatnot. But I wanted to blaze trails. I wanted to prove that who I was, was not a disadvantage, but was an advantage. And so, I would have never thought of leaving the company after those rejections because that would have been giving up. Right. I wanted to prove that I could do it. And in my view, leaving the company would have, gosh, this is going to show the competitor in me. What would have given satisfaction, or at least I thought so in my young brain to those people who rejected me that they won, and I lost. And that was, that was unacceptable to me. Right. I wanted to prove them wrong. Especially, that one senior executive who told me that I would never, ever get into sales. Right. He literally said that. Right. And I said to him, well, look, you know, such and just got into sales at the same point in the career as I'm talking about such, and such person got into sales at the same point of career that I'm talking about. And he actually said to me, Do you really think you're as good as them? And I said, Yes, I do. Thank you for your time.

Whitney Johnson: So, Anne I have this mini hypothesis or mini isn't the right word. This nascent hypothesis is a better way to describe it. Is the other day we administered our, our S Curve Insight tool to a group of executives who have a tenure of longer than five years in this organization. It's financial services. And one of the things that came up is they not only have a long tenure, but they also had scored really high on resilience. And one of the thoughts that came to me, and I want to just test this on you as I'm hearing you tell your story is, is I wonder if sometimes or it's possible that people when you can stay in an organization for an extended period of time, does it take more resilience to stay than it does to change jobs? Because when you have a setback, you've got to work within the constraints that you have. You're not a shiny new object within your organization. You could be somewhere else. But if you can stay within that organization and manage through all of the constraints that you have and figure out how to collaborate and get along with people, that's going to build resilience. And so, I just had this wondering if, if an ability to navigate in an organization for an extended period of time actually builds that resilience muscle. What's your thought when I say that?

Anne Chow: So, my, my thought is, yes, I actually think it's both right. I don't think it's one or the other. I think it has a lot to do with how you're wired. So, I would agree with your comment in organizations that are extremely large and complex, no doubt. Right. When I think about resilience. Right. Resilience is this incredible characteristics of passion and perseverance and grit. Grit and just this ability to keep moving forward and to keep getting stronger. Right. Despite efforts or barriers, challenges, or difficulties. And I think that that characteristic of resilience is something that is absolutely common in great leaders. Great leaders don't give up. They just keep going. I think that can be in one company or one organization because it does take an incredible amount of resilience to, hey, if you make a mistake. Right. And I've had these moments in my career where I thought I blew it. Right. You know, I bombed in front of the chairman. Right? I bombed in a critical presentation, and I thought I was going to get fired. Right. And it took resilience to say, you know what, I'm going to pick myself back up. And I know I blew it. I know I blew it.

Anne Chow: But I'm going to prove that that does not define who I am. It was a moment, and I will learn from that moment, and I will move on, right? Versus, Hey, you know what, I blew it. I'm just cashing out and I'm going to go start fresh somewhere else, right? I don't at all want to discount, though, the resilience and the courage that's

required to switch companies and switch jobs a lot. That doesn't necessarily characterize my career, you know, I hop around a lot, but within a one giant company that was ever-changing. But there are many who have led incredible careers and who had defined their careers by hopping different organizations in different companies. Right. And that takes an incredible amount of resilience because you're constantly renewing yourself. You're constantly starting over in terms of your network, in terms of your knowledge, in terms of your contribution. You can't fall back on the "comfort" of your reputation because when you start in a brand new company, you don't have one. Right? So, so, I think that resilience is required in both scenarios. I would say in my, in my opinion, there's not one that's greater than another. It's really situationally dependent.

Whitney Johnson: When have you had a really strong performer on your team top of their, their S Curve of learning what has been one of your defter managerial moments when you said okay, I know they're at their peak, but you found a win-win for them, for your team, for AT&T. Does something come to mind?

Anne Chow: This is one of the greatest nuances in the art of leadership. Many think that, hey, if I've got top performers, they don't need me, they're self-motivated. They can keep going, right? They don't really need a lot of support. And they, they fuel the engine of the organization. Right. They're the ones who set the pace, the tone, and represent a big part of the underlying culture of an organization. What I think a lot of managers miss. Right. And this is the shift of how to evolve from a manager to a leader. Is your top performers need care and feeding just like anybody else in your team. But what they need is different. And what your job is, is to figure out what it is that motivates them. What is it that inspires them? Do they want to be recognized in front of their peers in a fabulous, incredible trip? I'll tell you a story about that in a moment. Do they want to be selected for special projects that give them even more visibility beyond the visibility of being a high performer in their job? Or are they satisfied with performing at the top of the game? Because their job, while they're great at it and they love it, is really a means to enable other aspects of their life that are happening outside of the workplace.

Anne Chow: And they are perfectly fine with living in their location, being a top performer, making great levels of compensation, and they don't really aspire to more in the workplace, they aspire to more in life, and they're perfectly fine being at the top of that curve. They're not looking to jump an S Curve at work. They're looking to jump an S Curve outside in the rest of their life. Right. And the work is an enabler to that. And no two people are the same. I'll tell you this, this quick story about recognition. So, we at AT&T business, we have this Pinnacle Award that's called Diamond Club, and it represents the top less than 2% of our sales organization and top less than 0.5% of non-sales roles. It is truly the pinnacle of recognition and attainment, and some people strive to win Diamond Club throughout their career, and I'm not ashamed to say that I was one of those people throughout my sales career that never actually won Diamond Club or it's what it was called back in the day when I was rising up through sales. So, Diamond Club is a really big deal. Well, you could imagine through COVID over the last couple of years, we were unable to gather our people together to celebrate right in this way. And so, we were unable to have this event for a while.

Anne Chow: And what we made a decision over the last two periods to actually do it in a very controlled way, taking into account pandemic protocols. But we've had to make a decision. And this last Diamond Club that I just, that I just did, we were unable to include our global team members outside of the US, just given the state of the pandemic at the time, the variations of the spread, we were unable to include all of our members across the world. Right. Which really, honestly, it broke my heart. But what we offered them was the winners of Diamond Club that lived outside the US. We offered them a recognition award instead of the trip or the ability to defer their attendance to next year. And I wanted to give them choice. Right. And this is actually the idea of one of the winners because sometimes it's not about the money. Right. But giving them the choice of I'll take the cash option in lieu of being able to attend the trip. But there were some people who actually said, I don't want the cash option. I want to be there with my peers, with the executives being recognized for and celebrating the success together because the experience is more motivating to me than the money.

Whitney Johnson: So, Anne you have co-authored a book titled A Leader's Guide to Unconscious Bias. And I love the statement that you made in the book. You said "everyone has biases. If you are to say, I don't have a bias, you'd be saying your brain doesn't function properly." So, tell us more.

Anne Chow: You know, the opening line in the book, Whitney, and thank you for the props on the book is to be human is to have bias. And for us with this book, this book was all about demystifying and normalizing this topic of bias. Now the whole side. So, there's a whole bunch of neuroscience behind bias. But the bottom line is, is that we as humans, the way our brain operates, we take in an 11 million bits of information in every second. But our brain only has the ability to process like 40 of them. So, the way that we get, by the way, that we function as humans is we naturally, right. Our brain chooses to organize things. Right. And that's where bias comes in, right? It is the natural human condition of just keeping an order and trying to make order of the chaos of what we're hearing, what we're seeing, what we're smelling right, what we're sensing, and keeping it organized. Now, bias in and of itself is not a bad thing, right? Bias can be a positive. It can be negative; it can be neutral. And ultimately, there are two types of bias that which is conscious. Right, that we're aware. Aware of our biases, that which is unconscious, which is also called implicit bias. Now conscious biases, we all have them. They show up in our food preferences, right? Or vacation preferences, our reading preferences, our media preferences. Right. And these are biases that we have that are somewhat taught. They're learned, but they are shaped by our life experiences. Our biases are shaped by where we grew up, the media that we listen to or read or consume. They are shaped by who we hang out with, who we call our friends, you know, and our biases are continually evolving. One example that I use, Whitney, is just kind of like a very harmless one.

Anne Chow: But, but I use it because this is a demonstration of bias, right? That when we were growing up as, as, as kids, the only time we ever ate eggs was for breakfast. So, I had this very conscious bias that eggs were only for breakfast. I then get to college, and I discover the 2 a.m. omelet and I realize that, oh my gosh, eggs are delicious, actually, all the time. I had this bias that eggs could only be eaten for breakfast, and so I shunned the eggs whenever they showed up on the menu outside of breakfast time. But then I realized that no, eggs are actually delicious any time of the day. Right? So, biases are not simply around gender or around ethnicity, race, culture, religion, politics. Biases exist in every facet of who we are, and it is totally, totally normal. The danger of bias, however, sits in implicit bias, unconscious bias. And this is what this is why we wrote the book. And unconscious bias can impact the way we think. It can impact our emotions and shape our emotions. It shapes our words, and very dangerously it can shape our actions. And it can keep us, and it does keep us from realizing our fullest potential and becoming our best selves. And that is really what the book is all about, is really about. And enablement to help leaders become more conscious about their bias, reframe their biases, and also help their teams and organizations and cultures create a much more high-performing environment. Because you are working to move your unconscious bias to conscious, conscious, your consciousness, so, then you can address them and move forward. So, that's, that's what the book is all about and the impetus behind it.

Whitney Johnson: What a great definition. And it's also really useful to hear the neuroscience behind it. So, you know where I'm about to go, Ann, which is tell us about a time that you confronted or you made an unconscious bias conscious and, and how you confronted that. What did you do?

Anne Chow: So, I've already told you the stories about my, my storied sales career if you will. Right. And, and there was a leader back early on in my career who, he had a military background. And one of the things that he used to do and I found him to be he was one of the most inspirational sales leaders that I had ever encountered in my career. And one of the things that he did when he was in a big audience was, he used to say, ladies and gentlemen, to all the women and men in the room. Right. And I found it to be incredibly classy and very ingratiating. I found it to be very I loved it. Right. I felt more connected with him when he used that in his very powerful, booming voice. So, it was a habit that I picked up. And so, I started doing that early on in my career, right? If I was in front of a big audience, I might say, ladies and gentlemen, welcome back from the break. I'm really excited now to talk to you about this. Right. And I felt like it was a beautiful way to further humanize my connection with an audience. Fast forward a couple of years. I am in a seminar about generational diversity and the speaker throws up this stat on the screen that says 25% of Gen Z. We'll question their gender identity in their lifetime.

Anne Chow: Now, I am a mom. I have two Gen Z daughters and I look at that stat. And I think to myself. Oh, my gosh. When I stand in front of an audience and I say, ladies and gentlemen, I am showing my unconscious bias that there are two gender identities. I was actually horrified with myself, Whitney, at that moment. And I thought to myself, I cannot use that language any more in the way that I was, either in the written word or in the oral word. And so, I immediately said to myself, I'm going to address this. I am going to do a couple of things. I'm going to whatever I say because I still love the way it sounds. Right. I say, ladies and gentlemen and all people. Women and men and

all people. I have broadened it to ensure that I include all gender identities when I'm using that salutation. I thought to myself, Oh my gosh, how long have I been doing this? And I have missed this trend. I have missed what is happening with the youth. And one of my greatest passions is to enable next-generation leaders to authentically bring themselves forward and to be the best that they can be. I pride myself on being a leader that really works to role model diversity, equity, and inclusion for all people.

Whitney Johnson: Such a compelling story and thank you for sharing that. And I think it goes to something else that I've been wondering about with you is that you have over 30,000 people in your organization. And I'm wondering, this idea of communication and how you're addressing people or what are one or two things that you do so that your vision for your organization gets communicated to the one? And, and how do you know when it's working?

Anne Chow: Yeah, it's such a great question. And I have one of the questions with you that I get all the time, as you might imagine, is, Hey, Anne, what are the characteristics of great leaders, right? What is it that you look like, you look for in leaders when you're hiring them when you're choosing to promote somebody, and communications is absolutely one of them? So, for me, this communication is paramount. So, great leaders use all the tools at their avail. They don't assume that everybody's going to read the blast email. They don't assume that everybody is going to go to the website and look at the message. They don't assume that everybody is going to show up at the town hall. Right. They use all of the tools to attempt to connect with people where the person wants to be met. A quick aside and story about this, when this really became very evident to me was, I had a role, one of my assignments in one of my assignments, I realized that, hey, the demographic of my organization skewed very young in terms of age. And in fact, I was at that point it was a big aha. I was like twice the age of many of my employees, right? And I learned and realized that that group of employees, the, my team would rather be recognized on Twitter than on any internal site. And that actually is when I started to get onto Twitter was for that reason, believe it or not. And then I realized, you know what, my goodness, the world continues to change here. Right? And as a leader, you've got to communicate to people, especially when you have a large, diverse team in numerous different ways. You cannot assume it's one size fits all. You can't assume it's two size fits all.

Anne Chow: You have to use every tool at your avail. And the great thing is, is in today's technology-enabled world, you have many, many, many different choices, and so you need to use them. Then what I would also say is consistency is very important, right? I can't show up different on Twitter than I do on LinkedIn, than I do on my town hall, than I do in my email. Right. My voice is my voice. And so, I can't be inconsistent in what I'm communicating into how I'm communicating, because then my authenticity would be challenged and there would be a lack of trust. And I think that you know, that it's working when you start really feeling connections with people and when they start repeating back the vision or the imperative, right? You get feedback immediately. One of the, one of the tips that I would give leaders out there, and I've actually done this since the very beginning of my, my leadership career, ever since I had a team, was I create this anonymous mailbox, if you will, so that at any time, if you are uncomfortable giving feedback directly and being attributed to that feedback, you have an outlet with which to get to me, get your thoughts to me, your complaints, your issues if you are just not comfortable surfacing them yourselves. And that's something that I've always done to ensure that there is a direct line from every single one of my people. To me that that is unfiltered. When I write something or I publish something or I commit to doing a town hall about a topic, my view is if it can positively impact one person. It's worth it. Anything more than one person is gravy.

Whitney Johnson: You said you were trained as an engineer, but before that, you studied at Juilliard in high school. And so, tell us what instrument you play. And if you could just reflect for a moment on how does being a musician and to a lesser extent an engineer, because you've talked about that. But how do those two disciplines inform your leadership?

Anne Chow: Yeah. I love this question because I would say that this is probably one of the most bizarre if I could be so bold as to say, parts of my background. Right. This is, this is an attribute of my background that people find most curious. So, I love that you are, you are teasing this out of me. So which instrument did I play? I studied classical piano at the Juilliard Pre-College, and so, I got into in Manhattan for those of you who are not, not familiar with Juilliard. So, I went to the pre-college division of Juilliard from age ten through 17. And so, I went to Juilliard every weekend while I went to regular school during the week. And so, I did that for seven years. And, and it was very much a formative experience. So, I want to.

Whitney Johnson: Pause for a second for everybody who's listening, if you don't know what that means is she was really, really, good. Okay, keep going Anne.

Anne Chow: And Whitney, the keyword and that was, was, was so should I bump into anybody on the street or an event? Don't ask me to play because I literally have not played since high school. So, I want to touch on the engineering piece of this first because I want to tie it to a critical attribute in my humble opinion of leadership. So, being an engineer has instilled in me an innate curiosity for everything. Curiosity is another attribute, I think, of great leaders. Why? Curious people are not afraid to ask questions. Curious people are always thinking about why? What for? Could it be done better? How does this work right now? I confess Whitney, that I had direct report of mine tell me once, years ago that I had an insatiable level of curiosity and I needed to cool it. And I took that feedback to heart, and I realized that I need to make sure that I understand the context for which I'm asking questions. Because when I let that inner engineering, me come out as a leader of an organization, it can often cause a lot of thrashing that I did not realize was happening simply because I wanted to learn more. So, I've had to be a little bit more purposeful in my curiosity ever since I got that feedback, which I so appreciate.

Anne Chow: So, being an engineer has been core to my leadership style and I wouldn't have traded it for the world. And that, that is why I think it directly goes to how I think about everything actually, right, that there's always an answer. It just may not be evident and there is always a way, right? And there's always a way to do something better. So, I never feel like I'm done. The musician in me has always reinforced the fact that it is both. I'll touch on a phrase that I used earlier. There's always serendipity in science. There's always an art and science to everything. So, there is never anything that is in the business world or in your life in general that is truly black or white. There are many different nuances. There's never one crisp, clear answer or way. It's not just about the what you do, but it's about the how you do it in the why you do it. So, the musician in me has always, therefore, enabled me to think more softly or more nuanced, wise, more stylistically about leadership and leadership traits. You know, I think about music, and I think about the role of a conductor as a leader of, of a group or an organization.

Anne Chow: So, that's the analogy I would make. What is the job of a conductor? Well, the job of a conductor is to bring out the best in the entire orchestra, the entire ensemble. When you then deconstruct an orchestra, an ensemble, you have sections, right? You have the woodwind section, you have the string section, you have the percussion section. And yes, you have first chair, second chair. You have people who are better than others. But, you know, the power of the orchestra is in the collective right, and the orchestra is only as good as the collective whole. And if there is a weak link and somebody makes a mistake, it can mess up the whole piece or the whole passage for everyone. Right. And for the audience who you can liken to your customers. Right. And what I think is so powerful about this orchestra and conductor analogy to leadership is this. Is when you think about a given piece of music right. Whitney, you could look at a piece of music. I could look at a piece of music. Our team would look at the piece of music and we'd all be looking at the piece of music. But if we were all to perform it, whether we were in the orchestra or the conductor, it would come out differently, right? It would come out differently because the ensemble of people and, and the ensemble of talent, No two will be the same.

Anne Chow: And so, there becomes the beauty of diverse teams and the role of the leader. The role of the conductor is to bring out the talent of every individual, but also the strength of every section, but also the strength of the entire orchestra. And here is, I think, one of the most powerful aspects of this analogy to leadership and music, and that is that when you think about a conductor, he or she or they, their back is to the audience. You don't see them, right. You don't see them. And they are focused on their team, their people, the organization. And their job is to enable, bring out the best, and support their people. And at the end of the performance, the conductor turns around, takes a bow, and recognizes the entire team, the entire orchestra. And he or she or they step aside and say it was them who just gave you this beautiful, unbelievable, emotionally, technically outstanding performance. And I think that the correlation between music and leadership are absolutely profound. And that has what has carried me actually and has shaped the unique leader that I am today.

Whitney Johnson: You yourself are about to conduct a new orchestra, jump to a new S Curve. You've just announced your retirement and you've come up with a fun name to describe that, which I will allow you to do. Tell us about what you're going to do.

Anne Chow: So, Whitney, the truth of the matter is, I don't have all of the answers, but I'll share for the audience here in case you didn't see it and I've posted it on LinkedIn and other places. Is I have announced my intention to retire from AT&T. It is after a 32-plus-year career, 17 assignments, 26 bosses, amazing experiences enabling and supporting my clients and my partners and being in every part of global business serving all industries. And I just knew it was time. But if you were to look at what I've written about it, I actually call it my reirement. Why did I call it that and why am I calling it that? I think that this actually ties, Whitney this just occurred to me right now, that we have a bias about retirement, don't we? Right. I can't tell you the number of people who have said to me, you're too young to retire or surely you can't be done. You're not retiring for real, are you? Right. And, you know, I chuckle to myself and say I absolutely am retiring from AT&T, but I am not retiring from life. Right. I'm not retiring from life. And I think that this word retirement needs to be reframed. Right. We have this bias in society against retirement. Right. Or this idea that success and impact look in a particular way.

Anne Chow: And I. For me. And that's why I called it reirement. Because that really is what it is. I don't intend to exit the world. I don't intend to exit my life. What I hope to do, and this is how I knew from me it was the right time. First of all, three decades of doing anything at a certain pace is a long time. I have always been about impact. And I have always committed to myself that I want to. I believe that I was put on this earth to have a unique impact. I believe that each one of us is given a life that is unique, and our life is a gift and that we must have gratitude for that life and know that our life evolves in terms of where these journeys take us. And I just felt, and I knew that I had an opportunity at this moment in time to close this chapter of my amazing, wonderful career with this amazing, wonderful company. And seek to increase and amplify my impact in other ways. And so, that is going to be my mission after I transition from my, from my current role as CEO of AT&T Business over the next couple of months. I'm hoping to expand my board portfolio. I'm currently the lead director at Franklin Covey and continue to be very committed and excited about everything that our organization is doing.

Anne Chow: But I'd like to expand my board portfolio and diversify my leadership impact, and I've got a couple of irons in the fire. I'll leave that little bit hanging out for a little bit of suspense. And I'm looking forward to what, what the future holds. The and I closed one of my comments this way, which is with every ending, there's a new beginning. And I'm in the process now of honoring this ending and closing this chapter and really starting to think about laying the groundwork for the next one. Am I a little bit scared? Yeah. Is this bittersweet? Absolutely. I've been at AT&T longer than I've been married, longer than I've been a mom, longer than my formal education. And of course, it's bittersweet. But what is wonderful about it all is that through technology, relationships will always endure. And I have no doubts that the people that I've encountered that have encountered me that are meaningful will continue to stay connected. Right. Because the most powerful thing we learned during this pandemic is that the most powerful thing in life and what feels us is the human connection. And my hope is that in my next chapter, in my reirement that I have an opportunity to impact business, to impact society, to impact humanity in new and profound ways.

Whitney Johnson: Where can people find you, Anne?

Anne Chow: They can find me on Twitter @TheAnneChow, or they can connect with me or follow me on also on LinkedIn. And so, I intend to be, continue to be very active on the various platforms, to stay connected with my community and connected with whomever would like to stay in touch with me and join me on this journey of reirement. And Whitney, I love that you said it because it is so true. I'm looking to increase my impact and that is all about aspiration. And I am excited and a little scared again to jump this S Curve, to start a new one. But I know it's the right thing and it is truly all about aspiration and impact. So, thank you for helping me find my words and, and for your support.

Whitney Johnson: Anne thank you.

Anne is such an amazing storyteller, and I think it's pretty clear how she uses stories to be an effective leader. I really enjoyed talking with her. Here are takeaways for you. Number one, if you don't ask, the answer is always no. Anne's story of constant rejection from sales is inspiring when viewed through her framework. There's no such thing as failure. There's success, and there's learning. When faced with a setback, instead of retreating, she asked

questions, Why didn't I get this job? What am I missing? The answers made her realize that the gap between the S Curve she was on and the one she wanted to be on was too wide. She then went to work to bridge that gap.

Number two. Bias isn't inherently bad and said it here and she even starts her book with it. If you say you don't have bias, you're saying your brain isn't working. Bias helps us compartmentalize and organize our thoughts. But it's the unconscious bias, the things lurking underneath that guide our actions. These are the biases that we need to unearth, acknowledge, and learn more about. If you want to study more about how to jump to new S Curves within your organization like Anne did, listen to Daryl Rigby, [Episode 176](#). To rethink your biases around failure, listen to our solo episode. Give Failure its Due, [Episode 200](#). For more on biases generally, listen to General Stanley McChrystal, [Episode 245](#). And if you enjoyed this podcast, share it with a colleague or two, and be sure to subscribe in your favorite podcast app and leave a quick review. It may not seem like much, but those small actions are huge in helping others find these insights. Thank you again to Anne Chow for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. Thanks 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.