

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 338: MATT ABRAHAMS

Isn't it frustrating when you just can't say what you want to say? You have all the words ready in your head, you've practiced what you're going to say, but you... just... can't?

It's frustrating in part because it seems like we're failing at the basics. Communication? Saying words out loud? Didn't we figure that out around the same time we figured out farming, and the wheel? So why are we sweating and stuttering in a conference room in 2023?

Matt Abrahams has an idea. His new book, *Think Faster Talk Smarter*, speaks for itself. And his podcast, *Think Fast Talk Smart* – naturally – is dedicated to figuring out why our minds go blank and our feet start pacing.

So let's talk about talking well.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So the thing that I've been wondering about is that we know that human beings are wired to be social creatures. So why do we have so much trouble communicating with each other?

Matt Abrahams: We want to do it well and I think that's the fundamental challenge. We want to be right; we want to come off well and because of that, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves. Paired with that, we have an inherent -- many of us who study this believe that anxiety is part of who we are as humans when it comes to speaking. We want to do well. We don't want to risk embarrassing ourselves, reducing our status in front of others. So while we're social, we also have this desire to do it really well.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm. You just said something really powerful. We believe that anxiety is part of who we are when we're speaking. Can you unpack that, please?

Matt Abrahams: Sure. So and I mean that in two ways. We believe -- those of us who study it believe it's part of our evolution, that that being very conscious of our relative status to other people is something that we have to be concerned with. And then we as people, not academics, who study this, believe that speaking in front of others in high stakes situations includes anxiety. Very few of us go into those situations being excited about them. And one of the

things that I like to help people with in my coaching and in my teaching is how to reframe those situations as opportunities rather than challenges and threats. So when you're in a Q&A situation and somebody asks you a question, many of us are not saying, "Oh, great, I have a question." We're thinking, "Oh no, somebody is trying to challenge me. I have to defend myself. I have to make sure that I come across well here" instead of saying this is an opportunity to connect, to expand, to extend what we've talked about. So I really think many of us fundamentally believe speaking, planned or spontaneous is something that involves anxiety.

Whitney Johnson: So a very simple shift that we can make is when we have that opportunity to speak instead of thinking, I'm anxious about this, I'm excited that I have an opportunity to connect.

Matt Abrahams: Absolutely. And there are two things that you said there that are really important. One is to see it as an opportunity, and the other is to reframe that anxiety as excitement. One of my friends and a professor at Harvard's Business School, Allison Woods Brooks, did a really foundational and fundamental study on how we see anxiety and how we can translate that or transform that into excitement. So it's not just that we see the situation as an opportunity. We can actually reframe the physiological feelings that we have as excitement. So when you pair those two together, you can actually do much better in your communication.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So let's take a little step back and I want to ask you a question, which is when is the last time you totally flubbed it while talking? It could be something small or something huge. And how did you recover?

Matt Abrahams: Oh, my goodness. Whitney, this happens so regularly that it's actually hard for me to pick. So often, I have two teenage kids and often I will flub up whatever I'm trying to do in terms of helping them or trying to accomplish my goal of getting them to do something that I think they need to do. Recently I was in front of a group of people teaching and I totally thought I was supposed to be teaching one bit of content and in fact I was supposed to be teaching another. And they were related, but not close enough for me to wing it and get back on track. And I literally stopped and said, with that as a foundation, now we can go build this. And so I put on the I put the car in park, I readjusted the map, and then we started the trip again. And really that's part of what I advise people do to do in these situations where you make a mistake rather than saying, "Oh my goodness, I blew it, I can't believe it. I just made a mistake or I'm so nervous." Just adjust and adapt. Go with it. Because if I signal that I'm nervous or I just made a mistake, I now break down that wall that I have with the audience and they're now observing everything I'm doing or everything I'm doing that reflects some of the things I just said, like, "Oh, he made a mistake. Let's watch for every other mistakes he makes." Or he said he's nervous now I want to see all the things he does to confirm he's nervous and that takes them away from paying attention to my message. So the advice is collect yourself, adjust and move forward.

Whitney Johnson: That's interesting. Something that you just said: So don't necessarily call out, "Oh, by the way, I've been I've been delivering the wrong lecture."

Matt Abrahams: Yeah, I don't know. I mean, certainly I can imagine circumstances where, you know, you're driving a bus and you took the bus down the wrong road. You're going to have to say, look, we went down the wrong road. But I think in much of our communication, we can adjust and redirect in a way that doesn't call attention to what we've just done, which then draws everybody's attention to how I'm doing it rather than what I'm saying.

Whitney Johnson: And that's really powerful because when you're speaking, when you're delivering a message, it's about the audience being the hero and you being the guide. And so, as you said, and we know that in managing "I am sorry" is an important phrase but use that judiciously because the goal is to communicate something. And how do you make sure that the attention stays on the people that you're talking to?

Matt Abrahams: Yeah, I would go one step further in distinguishing between apologizing and when you make a mistake. So when I am teaching different content, that's different than if I offend you in some way, in my mind at least. And if I offend you, if I put you in a predicament that is off putting or uncomfortable, then absolutely I need to recognize it and apologize. But if I'm delivering content as I was and the audience didn't know anything different, they didn't know just adjust and redirect. So I am certainly not saying we should never apologize. We should, especially if somebody is offended or we've put somebody in an awkward position. But if you're directing the content and you can adjust and adapt without calling attention to it, I absolutely recommend that path.

Whitney Johnson: So good. All right. So you've written a new book. You titled this book Think Faster, Talk Smarter. Why did you decide you wanted to write a sequel to Think Fast, Talk Smart?

Matt Abrahams: Well, so Think Faster, Talk Smarter is really a result of a lot of learning that I did both for the podcast I host "Think Fast, Talk Smart", and from the work that I've done at Stanford's Graduate School of Business several years ago, the deans came to me and said, "We have a problem. Our students, who are amazingly bright, very talented, are struggling with answering cold calls from professors" and I don't know, Whitney, if you remember the evil mean professor says, "What do you think?" And you have to respond in the moment. And our students, who knew the answer, were choking. They just couldn't get the answer out or they weren't satisfied with their answers. And they said, "Can you help?" And that's what really initiated my interest in how can we help people speak better in the moment? A lot of communication training, if you take it, is about planned communication. I have a presentation next week, a meeting I'm facilitating the week after you sit down, plan it out, maybe even practice, create slides. But most of our communication in our personal lives and in our professional lives is spontaneous. It happens in the moment. Somebody asks you a question, they ask you for feedback. You're in the situation where you have to make small talk. And so I got really interested in that, did a deep dive in terms of looking academically at how to give advice. And then I crafted a methodology, and that methodology is one most Stanford MBA students go through, and I ended up offering it to coaching clients and put it out there in video form. And there's a big appetite. So the motivation was to really help people in this circumstance. When you're speaking in the moment where there isn't a lot of guidance out there currently.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So was that Think Fast, Talk Smart? So what's the difference between Think Faster, Talk Smarter?

Matt Abrahams: So Think Fast, Talk Smart is the name of the podcast, and the podcast is one that covers communication concepts. And then the book is Think Faster, Talk Smarter. Clearly, I'm not creative enough to come up with new names. My original book was called Speaking Up Without Freaking Out, which is all about public speaking anxiety and how to manage that.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, you know what? So I'm going to reframe this question so that we can go back into edit. So you're like, what is she talking about? All right.

Matt Abrahams: Well, it was fine. I tried to -- I tried without correcting because sometimes these things don't get edited. So that's an example of what I was talking about. A mistake was made and rather than calling it out, you just go with it because nothing good thought would come out of calling it out.

Whitney Johnson: So maybe we should actually leave this in the podcast because it's more interesting that way. All right. So now that we're clear, so you have a book called Think Faster, Talk Smarter. Your podcast is Think Fast, Talk Smart.

Matt Abrahams: Correct, and the previous book was called Speaking Up Without Freaking Out.

Whitney Johnson: Got it. Okay. So speaking of podcasting, how has that changed your view on speaking publicly? So mean you go out, you're being spontaneous, but in podcasting it's not immediately broadcast. So how has the training of being a podcaster informed your public speaking?

Matt Abrahams: So I have the pleasure in my podcast of talking all about communication, so I have a double benefit when it comes to my communication. One, I get to hear from industry leading experts on communication. So I have benefited tremendously from everything from how to manage my anxiety to how to negotiate better, how to be creative and more free in my responses. So I've learned a lot content wise in terms of the act of being a podcast host, I have learned how to become a much better listener. You, Whitney, are a fantastic listener and the work that you do. And I've also learned the value -- I've always known paraphrasing is important, but I have seen paraphrasing just tremendously benefit, not just me, to make sure I heard what I thought I heard, it helps the guest because it helps them focus. And I have received lots of feedback from those who listen to my podcast that the paraphrasing is very helpful. So it has fundamentally changed me in so many ways in terms of what I've learned from my guests and in terms of what I've learned from doing the actual hosting.

Whitney Johnson: So, by learning to listen better as a podcast host, are you finding it's helping you listen better when you're on stage speaking?

Matt Abrahams: Absolutely. And it's not just when I'm on stage. It's just in any interaction. I am better at listening. You know, when you listen to paraphrase, you listen very differently than when you just listen to understand. So most of us are very poor listeners anyway. We listen just enough to get the gist of what somebody says, and then we begin to formulate our thoughts and judge and evaluate what they've said. But when you really listen, to paraphrase, you're really trying to figure out not just what's the core essence of what the person is saying, but why might they be saying it in the way that they are? So you listen for nuance. You listen for details. I recently saw this video about somebody talking about improvisation. And as part of it, he talked about how somebody advised him to listen until you sweat. And I thought that was just a great way to demonstrate the type of listening that you have to do when you paraphrase.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, that is so good. You know what? That's a title of an article.

Matt Abrahams: There you go.

Whitney Johnson: Listen Until You Sweat. You should write that.

Matt Abrahams: Well, it's not my idea, but it's definitely a concept that I really get and have seen the benefit of.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. Speaking of sweating, when you are feeling anxious and haven't quite moved to that place of feeling excited, you're doing the pacing, the dreaded two step. You're wringing your hands, you're shrugging. What are some things that you do? Give us a little bit of a tutorial right now of what you do to manage that for everyone who's listening, including me?

Matt Abrahams: Sure, absolutely. So the first thing to realize is the vast majority of people feel nervous in high stakes situations, be they spontaneous or planned. So it's not unusual to feel nervous. Many of us feel like we're alone. We're the only ones who are experiencing this or the ones experiencing it to this degree. So first, just normalizing it I think helps many people feel a little better when it comes to managing anxiety. And I use that term very carefully. I don't believe you can ever overcome all communication anxiety, nor do I think you would want to. Anxiety can actually help you focus. It gives you energy. But in order to approach it, we have to take a two-pronged approach. We have to deal both with symptoms and sources. Symptoms are the things that we physiologically experience. I sweat and turn red when I get nervous. Whitney, what happens to you when you get nervous?

Whitney Johnson: I don't sweat a ton. I think I start to blush a little bit when I get nervous, and I repeat myself.

Matt Abrahams: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Very, very common. So we can manage those symptoms. In a moment, I'll give you some suggestions. But there's also the other side, which is sources, the things that actually initiate and exacerbate our anxiety. So we have to take a two-pronged approach. We have to address both. So two tips for managing sources. There are many. The first is deep belly breathing. Deep breathing slows down your autonomic nervous system. And what's so critical in deep breathing is not the inhale. It's the exhale. You want your exhale to be twice as long as your inhale. The magic happens during the exhalation, and you don't have to do that. Many of them, 2 or 3 deep yoga or tai chi like breaths where you really feel your lower abdomen is all it takes to slow down your heart rate, your rapid breathing to help the shakiness dissipate. Now, for those of us that blush and perspire Whitney, you and I are in that camp. That's because your core body temperature is going up, your heart's beating faster, your body is tensing up, so you're pushing more blood through tighter tubes. It's like when you exercise and when most of us exercise, we perspire and blush. So we need to cool ourselves down. The single best way to cool ourselves down. And I do this every time before I speak. Before you and I started this conversation, I did this. Hold something cold in the palms of your hand when you hold something cold in the palms of your hand, it reduces your core body temperature. Look, you've got you've got a bottle of water there, too, just like a cold compress on your forehead or the back of your neck.

Your palms are thermoregulators for your body. So if you've ever held a warm cup of coffee or tea in the morning to warm you up, we're just doing that in reverse. It will reduce the blushing and reduce the sweating. There are lots of hacks like that that you can use, so there are things we can do to manage symptoms. Let me give an example quickly of a source. One of the things that makes many of us nervous is we have that goal that we want to achieve, and we want to do it well. So the students I teach want to get a good grade. The entrepreneurs I coach want to get funding. The

leaders that you work with, that I work with want support for their programs. So we have this goal that we want to achieve. And what makes us nervous is the potential of not achieving it. So what's making us nervous is a potential negative future outcome and the way to short circuit that. Is to become present. Oriented By definition, if I'm in the present moment, I'm not worried about a future consequence. So anything that gets you present oriented could help doing something physical. Some exercise, for example, walk around the block. Actors will shake themselves out before they go on stage to do that. Very good. You can listen to a song or a playlist. Many athletes do that before they do. Their events start at 100 and count backwards by 17 you. To do that, you have to get present oriented. So bottom line is this most people are nervous. You are not strange for being nervous. Second, manage symptoms. Third, manage sources.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So given that talking about speaking is actually making me a little bit anxious, let's do a deep breath right now together. So will you guide me through it?

Matt Abrahams: Absolutely. So first, sit up straight. You want to give your lungs their full capacity? We want to breathe through the nose. We're going to do a three-count inhalation, and then we're going to a six count out. So I'll start us and do some counting along the way. So let's go. We'll take a deep breath in one, two. I'm feeling my pants feel a little tighter because I'm just standing my belly. Three we hold it and now we exhale. Six, five, four, three, two, one. And if you do that just 2 or 3 times, you feel the benefit. In fact, right now I feel just much looser. And when you're on a virtual call, it's super easy to do this if you know you're coming next or you think you might come next, put yourself on mute, look at the camera, take a deep breath. Nobody knows what you're doing and then you're ready to go.

Whitney Johnson: So good. Yeah. I feel calmer, too. All right. So something you said in the book, you talk about maximizing mediocrity, which I loved. Can you say more about that?

Matt Abrahams: Absolutely. So as I mentioned earlier, many of us, when we communicate, we want to do it right. We want to do it as well as we possibly can. And I'm here to tell you, as somebody who's been doing this work for three decades now, there is no right way to communicate. There are certainly better ways and worse ways, but there is no one right way. Yet we feel this intense pressure to do it well and to do it right, which means that as we are communicating, we are judging and evaluating what we are saying. As we are saying it, our brains in some senses are like computers, a CPU. The more programs or apps you run, the less efficient your CPU is. All of your programs run more slowly the more you're running. If any of you have ever had multiple tabs open on a browser, you notice that the performance is slower because you have all those tabs open.

Whitney Johnson: Never, never ever.

Matt Abrahams: No. Yeah, yeah. I'm not going to show you what mine looks like. My kids tease me all the time because I have so many open. Your brain is essentially the same way. So if I'm doing multiple tasks simultaneously, each task is done less well because I just have less bandwidth for each thing. So if I'm communicating and at the same time judging, am I doing this right? Or worse, if I've memorized and I'm comparing what I'm saying to what I memorized, I'm most likely going to do this more poorly because I've just got limited bandwidth. So I tell my students on the first day of class, I get up in front of them and I say, Part of the goal of this class is to strive for mediocrity and Whitney let me tell you, these they're dumbfounded. Their jaws dropped. These are students for whom they have

never had advice like that. They're always told, do your best, work hard, achieve. But then I explained what I just explained here, and they understand that if they are constantly focused on judging and evaluating, then they're not able to do what they want to do as well as they can. So the whole saying is this Strive for mediocrity so you can achieve greatness if you give yourself permission just to get the communication task done. Somebody asks a question, all I have to do is answer it. You ask me for feedback, I give feedback. If I take the pressure off and just do it, that famous Nike slogan, then I actually free up bandwidth to do it really, really well. So striving for mediocrity helps you perform at your best.

Whitney Johnson: So good. So you just talked about your MBA students. What is an activity that you do at the beginning of the course to help them break the ice?

Matt Abrahams: One of the very first activities I do with my MBA students and in other courses I teach or co-teach, is to do a game called Shout the Wrong Name. I first learned this from a co-teacher of mine. His name is Adam Tobin. He's a fantastic improviser, just really sharp lecturer at Stanford, and he taught me this game and it serves an amazing purpose. So the game is simple. Everybody stands up. You don't even have to stand. You can do it seated and for 15 seconds you point at things around you, not people. You point at things around you. And the only challenge is to say out loud the name of the object, but you can't say what it really is. So if I point at a window, I don't say window. I might say door, or I might say yellow, or I might say hungry. I just say some words. That is not what it is. And the amazing thing is Whitney is that my students really struggle with this. And I think anybody who does this really struggles with this. And one of the things I do is I invite people to think about why this is so hard. And invariably somebody will say that it was hard because I wasn't doing it wrong enough. And when I get that comment, it's gold. Because I paused and I say, Tell me more.

Matt Abrahams: What do you mean? The only rule was not to call it what it is. And yet you're saying you weren't wrong enough. I had one student I kid you not who was pointing at a chair, and nothing was coming out of his mouth for like 30s. This was interesting. I went up to him, I said, what's going on? He said, I'm not wrong enough. I said, "Tell me more." He said, "Well, I was going to call the chair a cat, but a cat has four legs, and a chair has four legs and sometimes a cat sits on a chair." Do you see all of this stuff going on in his head when the only task was to point at it and say cat? That's all he had to do and then move on. We bring with us all of this baggage, all of this judgment and this activity, as simple and silly as it is, brings into awareness, this judging and evaluating that we do. So I start with this activity and then I move into the strive for mediocrity because they're related, and the students get it and they understand it better by seeing that connection of actually literally hearing what they're doing to themselves before they speak in a completely inconsequential activity. So imagine what they do when it has consequences, right?

Whitney Johnson: Right. I mean that very simple thing of when people ask you, you're in a group, go around the room, introduce yourself. Super stressful.

Matt Abrahams: Yeah, I don't like that activity. In fact, I never do it. When I want people to introduce themselves, I have them pair up and then I have them introduce somebody else. It's so much easier. But when you do have to introduce yourself, I think it's really important not to start with, "Hi, my name is..." because that's what everybody does. When I introduce myself, I like to start with some kind of provocative statement. So when it's my turn, I say I'm somebody who's really passionate about communication. My name is Matt Abrahams. I write books, host a podcast

and teach at Stanford. That's how I introduce myself. I start with a provocative statement because that gets people's attention and it allows me to convey an emotion, because when I say I'm passionate about communication, that communicates something to you beyond the words versus, "Hi, my name is..." that's devoid of emotion, that's devoid of some connecting opportunity.

Whitney Johnson: You are making me cry right now.

Matt Abrahams: I am sorry. That wasn't my intent.

Whitney Johnson: It's cries -- you're peeling back the onion. See, I did read your book. Thank you. If you would. Everybody, you'll have to read the book if you want to know exactly what we're talking about. But it was just really powerful for me because when you said that, I thought, okay, so what would I say? Yeah, what would you say? I would say I am Whitney No, I would say I. And deeply committed to helping change and growth. Feel safe.

Matt Abrahams: That's right. And the way you said that says so much more about yourself than just saying your name. I hear your passion. I hear your concern. I hear your expertise in the word choice that you made. And you did all that without having to say your name first. Right.

Whitney Johnson: And it just feels so much more comfortable. Oh, Matt, that is beautiful.

Matt Abrahams: Oh, thank you. I invite everybody to try it, and it's empowering.

Whitney Johnson: Yes. Yes. Amazing. Okay. One other quick tip I would love to hear from you is so you're at a networking event and we've gotten out of practice of being in networking events because of Covid. And there's a really graceful way for you and I to have a conversation, but then you're going to move on because there, you know, are 50 other people that you really want to be able to connect with. What's that graceful thing that you do.

Matt Abrahams: To exit the conversation? So I learned this wonderful technique from one of my guests who's now become a friend. Her name is Rachel Greenwald. She is an academic, but also a professional matchmaker. So talk about somebody who's qualified to talk about how to do small talk and chit chat. She has a technique that I love, and I use it all the time. It is a technique she calls the white flag. And when she first said that, I said, "You mean you surrender? That's how you get out of small talk?" She said, "No. In auto racing before the last lap, they'll wave a white flag that signals to everybody the race is soon ending." And her technique, and I love it and I use it, I just used it yesterday, is to signal that you're leaving, but then have one more question or have a little bit more interaction. Most of us exit small talk or these professional networking situations by referring to biology. I need to get some food. I need to get a drink. I need to go to the bathroom.

Whitney Johnson: The bathroom.

Matt Abrahams: Right, exactly. Instead, what you do and what I did yesterday is I said, "I've really enjoyed this conversation. I need to go because there's somebody over there I'd like to talk to. But before I leave, I want to learn a little bit more about your recent trip to Hong Kong." The person shared with me a little bit more about their trip. At

the end, I said, "That's great. I'm definitely going to look into traveling there. Thank you so much." And then I left and I felt good about it. I didn't feel like I was cutting or severing a conversation. The person I was talking to seemed plenty happy to end when we ended. So I love this notion of signaling that you're going to leave before you leave. A little gratitude helps, I think, and then ask a question, bring up a point, have a little bit more interaction and then move on. It works so beautifully.

Whitney Johnson: The white flag, so good. All right. So you have made it, I think, your life's work of helping people talk better. Why does this matter to you so much?

Matt Abrahams: I really appreciate that question. Thank you. Because I spent a lot of time thinking about this. So there are a couple things. One, I believe we as a society, as a world, work better when we hear multiple opinions and viewpoints. And I have seen in my own life, in my own experience and that of others, that anxiety, that concern for fear of not doing it well gets in the way of people being willing to share their points of view. So I very much want to encourage people to share their ideas, their beliefs, their feelings, and so we have to get more comfortable doing that. So that's part of my motivation. The other part is I worked in high tech for a decade, and I saw how some people with the best ideas, the most creative and what I thought potentially profitable ideas were not able to communicate those points of view as effectively as they could. And they, the company, lost out. They lost out. Everybody lost. And so it's not always the person with the best idea who gets things done. It's the person who can communicate that idea the best. And so I really have been motivated to help people in my teaching. I work with many non-native speakers, and I see the potential and value of their insight. And I just want to help people communicate their points of view. And it's motivated me throughout my life and throughout my career. So it started by helping with anxiety and then it moved on to help people just more clearly and concisely communicate their points.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting. So it started by helping people just feel calmer.

Matt Abrahams: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: But then it's in service of innovation. It's in service of helping people. What did you say?

Matt Abrahams: So it's about innovation, connection. It really helps people.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Matt Abrahams: And so, you know, I believe communication is the foundation for empathy, for leadership, for relationships. It's the tool through which we make those things happen. And we need to build that skill. And it is a skill that you can build, hone and develop.

Whitney Johnson: I remembered the word when you said that. Civility.

Matt Abrahams: Yeah, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: By being able to express what you're thinking and feeling, it can help lead to more civil discourse. And so it creates a better society as well.

Matt Abrahams: Absolutely. I believe that.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So in the interest of building positivity, what is one aspect you undeniably love about your speaking style and voice?

Matt Abrahams: My speaking style and my voice, yes. Wow. I've never been asked that question before. What do I love? So if you literally mean my voice, people tell me that I have a nice voice and I always -- my father has an amazing voice. My father has a deep, resonant voice. And so when people say, I have a nice voice, I'm like, "No, my dad's got a great voice. My voice isn't so great." I think one thing that I bring to my communication that I that I am proud of is the fact that I bring the audience in to what I do. I believe so much in this notion of engagement. We have to engage, and the virtual world has taught us this. When we when we the pandemic, put us all virtual, the big thing that made a difference was can you engage so people actually pay attention? I believe the most precious commodity we have in the world today is attention. We have to get people's attention and more importantly, sustain that attention. And I do take great pride in working very hard to engage people. And I do it by asking questions, by using analogies, by varying my voice, by using what I call time traveling language, where I ask people to imagine or what if. So I take them into the future. So I work hard to engage, and that's something I am proud of.

Whitney Johnson: All right, so what's an S-curve that you've jumped to recently that has nothing to do with speaking out loud?

Matt Abrahams: So I'll tell you something very directly. So my wife and I are very interested in finding a shared activity that we can do with our older teenage kids. And we thought about golf, but I've played golf before and I'm absolutely awful at it and don't enjoy it because everybody else goes straight and I go off to the side and never see anybody. So we actually recently took up archery as a family. There's an archery range near us and I am thoroughly enjoying the sport. It is relaxing to me because you really have to focus. It has the right amount, the right blend of difficulty and focus required that it's almost meditative for me and I'm loving it because it's a way of connecting with my kids and my family. So that's something new that I've taken on that I that I'm really, really enjoying. And it has so much to teach me. There's so much that can translate to communication that comes from this type of focus and really paying attention to how you're breathing, your body posture, what's going on in your mind. It's great.

Whitney Johnson: And your children get to see you as a beginner, which is really nice for them.

Matt Abrahams: My children see me as a beginner a lot. We have lots of conversations about social media and I don't know anything. So that's not, that's not new for them.

Whitney Johnson: There's a question that you suggest that people ask, and so I'm going to -- turnabout is fair play. Is there anything that I should have asked you and I haven't?

Matt Abrahams: Oh, thank you. That is my favorite interview question. I would have loved for you to ask me, "When it comes to spontaneous speaking, what are things we can do to better prepare our messages to be received?"

Whitney Johnson: Okay, So I will ask that now. When it comes to spontaneous speaking, what are some things that we can do to prepare so that our messages will be better received?

Matt Abrahams: What a wonderful question. Thank you for asking that.

Whitney Johnson: You're welcome.

Matt Abrahams: So we've so when it comes to spontaneous speaking in particular, that is speaking in the moment. We've already talked about some mindset changes. So I believe it really boils down to two major steps. One is mindset. You have to manage anxiety. You have to remind yourself that it's not about being perfect, it's not perfection. It's connection that gets you through these situations. You have to listen well. We've touched on all of these, but when it actually comes to communicating your message, I believe so strongly in structure. Structure is a way to actually help yourself by giving yourself a map or a recipe. Now, it's counterintuitive. That structure actually helps you with spontaneity. But just like an athlete or a musician who does certain drills that then translate into the actual game, or you play chords that you then put into your jazz music when you play in the moment. Having structures to rely on can help. And I'll give you a real quick example. Many people are familiar with this. If you've ever pitched anything, an idea, a product, your point of view, you might have used this three-step structure. You start by identifying a problem. What's the issue? What's the challenge? You then talk about your perspective or solution to that, and then you talk about the potential benefits that come from enacting your solution and resolving the problem. So problem, solution benefit is a logical connection of ideas. So a structure is not a list. Lists don't work well, bullet points don't work, bullets kill, don't use bullet points, use a logical structure. And that's what helps you get through spontaneous in the moment communication. And in the book, I talk about lots of different structures for different types of communication situations.

Whitney Johnson: So problem, solution, benefit. And so if you have that in your brain when someone asks you, "Hey, what do you think about X, Y or Z", you rely on that structure. And I know you said there are others, but that's one of them.

Matt Abrahams: Absolutely. So imagine you're getting into an elevator with your boss and your boss says, "What are you working on and how can I help you?" Perfect in the moment time where you have to describe things and you could just list and ramble or you could say, I'm tackling this problem. My team's working on this problem. Here's the solution we're providing. We'd love for you to give input and maybe put some budget behind it. So all of a sudden you articulately, concisely got through a very challenging moment by relying on the structure. But you had to have the right mindset. This is an opportunity here to share. I take a deep breath so I'm not anxious. So all the mindset pieces feed into the ability to use the structure well.

Whitney Johnson: PSB. It occurs to me too, when you just talked about how you introduce yourself that's similar, right? You say, "What problem do I solve?"

Matt Abrahams: And yeah, absolutely. There are structures for introductions, there are structures for tributes and toasts, structures for giving feedback. They're there to help. And whenever you have to speak spontaneously, there are two fundamental things you have to do. It's about what you say and how you say it. The structure tells you how you'll say it so you can focus all your bandwidth on what I'm saying. In essence, it becomes a recipe, right? I know the recipe. I know the steps. I just have to put the content into it.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. All right. So people – okay, so they can read your book. You said you have online courses that people can take. Where would they go for that?

Matt Abrahams: Absolutely. So the best place to go to find anything about me is mattabrahams.com. There's lots of resources, lots of videos. I teach online courses through Stanford's continuing studies program. I co-teach a course specifically on how to bring improvisation into your communication. And I'm a big user of LinkedIn, so anybody on LinkedIn can jump in and certainly explore the podcast, Think Fast, Talk Smart, where there are lots of opportunities to engage not just with me, but with our big community.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So Matt, what was useful for you in this conversation?

Matt Abrahams: Well, quite selfishly, it was just useful to reconnect with you. You and I have a lot in common, including places we've lived nearby. We've been neighbors without knowing it. And I really appreciate how you have a very nice conversational tone and something I'm taking away from this is to really challenge myself in the work I do as a podcast host, but also in other areas of my life to be more conversational. I tend to be a little more directive and you do such a nice job of being conversational. So I've seen the value of that in our conversation and I'm going to try to mimic it in my own.

Whitney Johnson: Lovely. All right. Any final thoughts?

Matt Abrahams: Well, first, thank you so much for the time. Thank you for being such a gracious host. And my final thought to everybody is communication is something that matters and it's something that you can work on and improve. Take those first steps. Like anything, it takes repetition, reflection and feedback to be successful. But once you start down this path, you'll see you'll see the rewards. So I encourage everybody to take the time to focus on their communication and work to get better.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you. Matt Abrahams, for joining us.

Matt Abrahams: Thank you so much. It's not always the person with the best idea who gets things done. It's the person who can communicate that idea the best.

Matt talked about this pervasive notion that we are both strange and uniquely strange – a one-two combo that can delete everything you were about to say to your boss, or your parents. It's a feeling of being alone in your aloneness, to describe it in a roundabout way. And the fear is that opening our mouths will reveal us to be... whatever it is we think we are.

So we camouflage like a chameleon. We keep constructive criticism to ourselves, or we let a coworker take the big presentation. We erode our sense of self in order to satisfy this part of us that is so scared of exile. But we're all scared of being kicked out! We're all terrified of saying the wrong thing. So what if we use that empathy as a foundation to talk better?

No one makes fun of us like ourselves when we stumble on our words. No audience member would talk to you the same way you talk to yourself when you flub a speech.

So maybe the key from today's conversation is really, learning how to talk to yourself. Try to remember all the different, awful, hurtful things you might have called yourself after you screwed up. Now imagine you're watching someone else say those things to a younger version of yourself. Don't you feel angry already? Don't you want to step in, and speak up? And it doesn't matter if you stumble or stammer – you're going to tell that bully to stop, because in that moment you believe in something more than social camouflage. It's what's behind the words that gives us the strength to get across our message.

For more on the less-serious side of getting your point across, there's my talk with Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, about incorporating a couple jokes into the way you communicate, as well. That's **episode 201**. On the preparation side of thinking fast and talking smart, there's **episode 249** with Dan Roam, all about crafting the perfect pitch. And of course, you can't miss my talk with Morra Aarons-Mele, host of the Anxious Achiever podcast on LinkedIn. I spoke with Morra in **episode 314**. Thank you again to Matt and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

Thank you to our producer Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Ange Harris, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson,

and this has been Disrupt Yourself.