# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 331: DAVID BURKUS

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you grow your people to grow your organization because organizations don't Disrupt people do. And the building block of that growth. It's you.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, David, I'm really excited to finally have you on the show.

**David Burkus:** Yeah, no, I'm I'm excited to be here. I love all of our impromptu chats. So it's fun to actually do it for the show itself.

**Whitney Johnson:** For the record. Yeah. All right. So the obvious first question I'm going to ask you is what is the best team you have ever worked on?

**David Burkus:** Oh, that's so that's a really fun question. It's interesting. I've got a really weird answer to that. The best team I ever worked on was actually a leaderless team, which is weird to say, given everything that you and I do. But essentially, when I was still in the university, we had one year where our dean surprised us by leaving and it took a year to find the new one. And there was an interim dean. I shouldn't say it was a leaderless team. There was an interim dean who came out of the faculty and because he still had a full teaching load, he just sort of pushed power and decision making to as collaborative as possible. And that ended up being the best team I worked on. We all sort of knew we got to keep this thing running. We all knew what our roles and responsibilities were. We knew that that that interim dean would step in and fight for us if need be. But beyond that, just trusted us to to do the work. And so no surprise, that was the best team I ever worked on. But it is kind of funny because I write this whole book towards leaders, and the best one that I ever worked for was the one who didn't actually want the title at all.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, that is fascinating. So basically what you're writing is a book to people, but there shouldn't be any managers anywhere. I mean, I'm being super facetious, but wait, you left the university?

**David Burkus:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I still. Okay, I still technically teach one class a year as part of the executive doctoral program. But during Covid, a couple things happened. During Covid, you know, I wrote a book in 2016 that was sort of a future of work book. There's actually a chapter in there about manager list teams. Wonder where I got that idea. But there was another one around remote and flexible work arrangements and what have you. And then when Covid hit, that chapter got really popular. That chapter turned into a whole book. Emails started coming in, phone started ringing, and I couldn't juggle both working with organizations to figure out how they do remote and hybrid and teach a full load. The other thing that happened is just about every university outside of, you know, the top 25 that are essentially trust funds that happen to teach classes. Every every every one of them was in a financial hit. And so it became obvious that when you're looking at reducing loads and

layoffs and what have you, I just kind of said, I don't actually need this job. I've got enough things going on here, so please don't get rid of somebody else thinking, I'll stick around, I'll just self-select out and let you keep that full staff. So I haven't been full time for three years now. I've just been teaching that one class, which is conveniently in the summer, which as you know, is the lower time for speaking and traveling and that sort of thing. So it all works out pretty well.

**Whitney Johnson:** So you disrupted yourself?

**David Burkus:** Yeah, in a way. I sort of do that every ten years. Whitney About every ten years I get bored and totally disrupt myself.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, so let's now flip to best team from best team ever to the worst team ever. Please don't ever write that book. But can you tell us about that team? And don't name names if you you know, unless that person's now passed on or something.

**David Burkus:** Yeah. You know, so the I think it's the opposite, right? Interestingly enough, it's a similar scenario. I'm going to try and stay anonymous to protect the guilty. Um, but it was led by a leader who really was afraid to share any of her power. Was afraid. I mean, the moment that it became obvious that I had a personal relationship with somebody that was above her in the organizational chart, things got really weird between her and I. And then no surprise, that happened to the rest of the team in particular. The other thing I noticed was she was extremely sort of. Mean outright. I'm trying to think of a euphemistic way to say. Mean to the other female colleagues on the team, which was a really weird dynamic. That we that we all sort of had to deal with. And as a result we all got because that. Leader was territorial. We all got territorial and protective. And so, you know, I think if I look at both of those, I've never really thought about this until today. Look at both of those examples. Best team, worst team. And the difference is really in the culture that that leader creates. And it reminds me of that. There's that famous quote about from John Maxwell about everything rises and falls on leadership. I don't know that I believe that because I worked for a great team where everything didn't rise on leadership. However, I think everything does fall on it. Right? Right. You may be able to do a successful, leaderless team, but pretty much every team that fell apart, there was a toxic leader running it. So everything certainly falls on bad leadership.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, Well, if I'm not wrong, this is actually your sixth book. And from a conversation, a side conversation we had, you said that this is your best book ever. In our words, we would call this. Now you've got six separate s-curves which try to say that six times. Right? My question for you, David, is what were the challenges in writing this particular book?

**David Burkus:** So mean. Suppose we should to answer that question. We'll back up and go through kind of the S-curve itself because there's a through line that I sort of discovered, right? I you could call it constantly disrupting yourself. I used to joke that it was intellectual ADHD, but my first three books were just about whatever the heck interested me, really. First four books were about just whatever interested me at the time. So there's a book on creativity, although a lot of that book is about how creativity is a team sport. There's a book on the future of work, although a lot of that book is about the future of teams and collaboration. There's a book on networks and a lot of that is on how networks form and what have you. And so it wasn't until probably Book four that I realized the through line was that teams and collaboration piece, right? I'm just doing all of this stuff and connecting the dots later. Right. And so that then I think that created kind of a pressure to perform, right? So I got, I'll be honest. So my, my, the book before Best Team Ever was about remote work. I got approached by the publisher to write that one, right? Because of everything that was happening.

**David Burkus:** It was an opportunistic book. But the argument I made to them was we don't need another macro book about remote and we don't need another how to be successful working from home. But there is no book on how teams, specifically your individual team collaborates across distances and across geographies and in a remote environment. So I sold them on the idea of making it teams oriented. What happened after that and what led to this book is as the world started coming back together, I started getting people that were like, Hey, I love that you talk about team culture and collaboration and how to be more effective in this and that and build safety and all of these things. But we're back in the office or we have our headquarters is hybrid, but all of our branch locations are

are back or we never left because we were an essential business. What have you got right? And that became this sort of idea of writing a location agnostic book for them. And so the difficult thing, what was hardest this is a long answer to your question was how do you write that and not repeat yourself, right? If the through line through all of that, all of your past work has been teams, your book was on remote, how do you do that and not repeat yourself? And so that's where I really had to go back to the drawing board, not on the research, because the research doesn't change.

I failed there. I have to repeat myself. But on the application pieces, the case studies that we threw in there, all all of that took a lot more work on the research side than than I thought. But here's the interesting thing, and I'd be curious on your answer to this as well. Once I'd got the research set, it was a much more thorough research process than I've ever had. The writing happened a whole lot faster. This book probably wrote it from start to finish inside of 90 days editing, maybe add another month to that because the research was done. It wasn't right in research as you go, it was do it all and then sit down to write it. And it just kind of flowed, which was really cool. So long answer to your question, but in a way it sort of answers the easiest and the hardest parts. The hardest was doing the research, but once you do it, the rest was kind of easy.

**Whitney Johnson:** So I'm curious. You say hard doing the research. What about. Emotions related to the process is, is is doing research taxing for you?

**David Burkus:** It depends. Doing this is where, you know, it's funny, I make jokes about being a super loud, extroverted person. But the truth is there's certain things I'm very introverted about. So doing the research from afar wasn't that difficult. Honestly, summoning up the courage to reach out to people was the most difficult part for me. Which is weird, right? Like I found the story of Valorie Kondos Field, who was the UCLA women's gymnastics coach for the better part of two decades and Amazing Woman, Amazing story. And it took me probably two weeks to talk myself into emailing her, Right? And then even when I did, I did. Have you ever done this? I did one of those super formal, you know, to to the team of Valorie Kondos, assuming that some administrative assistant. She emailed me back in like 45 seconds. Yeah. Yeah. How's next week? Look, I'd love to chat like it was the most casual thing ever, and yet I. I sort of do that. So doing that outreach for some reason, because these were, these were new stories. This was stuff that I had just learned. It took me a while. I mean, our mutual friend Alan Mulally, it took me a while to sort of formally ask him, hey, I would love to profile you in this book, even though we'd met multiple times at Marshall Goldsmith events. And to be honest with you, I don't know why that was so hard for me, but it was. And I think I think the reason is that when you. A lot of the times in prior books, the stories, the case studies have come from personal relationships first and then and then I wrote about them. So to do it in the opposite just felt like you're studying these amazing people and you feel like there's this distance between you and them because they've got this amazing story, right? And that was weird. You'd think after six books would have been used to that. But no, it's still not.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's fascinating, too, because as you said, you're very gregarious, you're very open. And I suspect that people who meet you are surprised when they realize that there might be a little bit of that. You're not always confident, that you're not always comfortable, that you're not always like, oh, yeah, sure, I'm going to reach out to this this gymnastics coach at UCLA. No problem. But there was this moment of is that okay for me to do that? And a little bit of discomfort.

**David Burkus:** Yeah, I think there's always a little bit of, um, for lack of a better term, imposter syndrome when you're not, when you're the writer and the researcher chronicling it all and not the person sort of doing it right. So that might come into play. I think there's a you can get so fascinated with the story that you start to to feel like that person is is kind of unreachable. I mean, Valorie Kondos Field has a has a massive review. Ted Talk has an amazing story that others have written about Alan's same way. Right. There's a whole amazing, uh, not not novel, but, you know, long form journalism book, American icon based on his life. So you start to feel like there's this power distance. And then I'm like, working out of the basement of my house. Right? Right. And people like it. We have an audience. There's a group of people that buy every book I put out, which I'm super grateful for, by the way, for listening to this. And you're one of those people. Thank you. So there's you know, there's an audience to share this message with, but sometimes it still just doesn't feel like enough because you're not like, doing it. Like if I were the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, maybe it'd be easier to reach out to Alan Mulally. Who knows? Who knows?

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. Well, so I just asked you to be vulnerable with some of the struggles of writing your book, and you said in your book that vulnerability is key to building a strong team, that it signaled by signaling vulnerability. I think you said that that signals interdependence. So thank you for being vulnerable and say more about how signaling vulnerability signals interdependence.

**David Burkus:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, I mean, here I just thought I was getting a free coaching session with the legendary Whitney Johnson, so no. Um, so yeah, vulnerability is a really interesting thing. There's a whole probably a third of the book is around building psychological safety, which is required for true collaboration and for true interdependence, right? Not only we talk about interdependence kind of on two different levels. As I think about it, there is the base level of just we need to know who's doing what by when and have all of the time. That's the, you know, the charts and the project management tools and all that sort of stuff. But we also need to know we're getting accurate information from people that we're actually hearing what they're struggling with, that we're actually recognizing their requests for help and offering help and what have you. And for that, you need trust. You need psychological safety. And really, I kind of looked at it in the book. We look at it at two ways. The more my thinking is evolved on this, I look at it as a three stage cycle where where vulnerability is one of them. I often call it trust, risk, respect. So it's like A3A cycle that teams go through where you have this base level of trust with someone. I know you, we have some things in common, so I'm going to take the risk and be vulnerable. And in that moment, that's actually the moment that judges whether or not a team can trust each other. Right? Because it's not actually about building trust and encouraging vulnerability. It's about what happens afterwards. Right. It's about how that individual leader or the other people respond. If I admit a failure, if I if I admit that like, hey, I'm this gregarious person, bestselling author, thinkers50, ranked, whatever, and I still struggle to email random people because I feel like they're more important than I am and I'm wasting their time.

If I say that to you and you just shoot it down right now, you could shoot it down in one of two ways. You could just say, Yeah, you probably are not worth their time. That's the worst way. And no, you wouldn't do that. But a lot of times in very well-meaning, you can just go, Oh no, stop. Which actually still invalidates my feelings, right? And in either response, I don't actually feel respected. So that's that third element Trust, risk, respect. In the book we talk about how that cycle needs to happen on a regular basis with teams. And I'm not talking about like it needs to go deal breaking. You don't have to talk about imposter syndrome with your team on the first day. I tell leaders all the time, you don't have to share. Like I never had a date for senior prom, right? And my parents never loved me. We don't need that level of vulnerability right away. Yeah, but we need some level of it because we have to kick start that cycle. And if you're in a leadership role, that usually means you go first because you showing that vulnerable moment and will encourage other people to respond in kind. And that starts that cycle of trust, risk, respect off. And we get super nerdy, by the way, on what's going on, like biochemically in the brain with hormone oxytocin and all that sort of stuff. But I feel like we get it right. It's this trust, risk, respect cycle that we have to keep going through. And if you're in a leadership role, that usually means you go first.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. All right. So now I realize that we started this conversation and I asked you to go vulnerable like immediately. Is there something that I need to do so that you will feel that I'm taking a risk?

**David Burkus:** No. Do you know what the number one thing you did. And by the way, I'm totally used to being like --

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's analyze.

**David Burkus:** I'm totally used to being vulnerability bombed on podcasts. I gave a TEDx talk about why inside a company salaries should be transparent. And so for two years I got on every single podcast, and the first question people asked was, How much did you make last year? You get used to it. So no worries there. The best thing you did actually was you didn't say anything at first. And if you're if you're watching the video, you might be able to see this if you're listening, you didn't get to see what I saw, which was Whitney leaning her head back. Looking off. And processing the information and what I just told her. Right. Which which tells me that that's kind of one of those big signals of active listening. Right. Guess this was more active responding, but didn't jump in to say something, didn't jump in to give advice right away, didn't jump in to try and reassure me or shoot me down or

anything. Just sat with it and received it, which made me feel like I was actually being heard and considered. And then when you ask a follow up question, I knew that follow up question came from what you received, right.

And that you thought of in that moment to continue to ask now so often and you know, this is this may not have worked in our situation, but so often on teams, on work teams, when people get vulnerable, we jump right into giving advice. We jump right into kind of solving their problem or responding. Our mutual friend Michael Bungay Stanier calls it the advice monster, right? It creeps up and we say, Oh, here's what you should do to do that. That's not actually a great way to respond to people's vulnerability, to people's risk. The first thing to do is sit and receive it and then ask those follow up questions that let them know I care about getting this whole story out and letting you process your emotions. We'll do the advice eventually, but we don't need to get to it right away. What matters is that you feel heard and respected, so you actually responded beautifully. You're you're probably a pretty good executive coach. I would imagine you've learned that skill of listening and actively receiving over time.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes. I put the advice monster into the cage and let it come out only occasionally. It's especially found around the dinner table with our children. It's something that's occurring to me as you're talking is you is this notion of the through line of teams. Why do you think teams are so important to you? Or teaming.

**David Burkus:** Yeah. So, you know, I used to joke that, and I'm pretty sure I stole this joke from Adam Grant, but it wouldn't be the first thing we all steal from each other. So that's. That's probably fine. But he always makes this joke and we make this joke as organizational psychologists that what we really study is how to make work, not suck. Right? That that's the goal. How do we create and work is kind of too important to our lives to have it be terrible. Most of us are going to spend the majority of our waking hours doing something that resembles work, possibly working for ourselves, but most often working for someone else. And you know, there's this whole ideas around work life balance or work life integration, but it's sort of a fool's errand, right? Because the different spheres of our lives intersect with each other. They interact with each other. I'll tell you, I'll tell you a super fun story, and then I'll get to the revelation during the pandemic. My wife is a is an E.R. doctor, Right? So we you know, we so suffice to say that I became the principal of Burke Academy because my wife had some more important things to do than all of the Zoom schooling and whatever that we were having to do in the pandemic.

That became my job because her job was to save people's lives. But what we did in order to try and keep that virus out of our own home was this crazy, elaborate disinfection ritual. And if you have any friends who work in health care, you know what I'm talking about, right? Dedicated car that goes to and from the hospital. Nobody else drives in that car. That car goes into the garage. Then there's a hamper for clothes in the garage. There's Lysol wipes and disinfectant. And you come into the house, you go right to the shower for like a year. My kids didn't understand why they couldn't say hi to mommy right when she got home. Right. Because she goes right to the shower and what have you. Why were we doing that? Well, we were doing that to try and keep what was infecting the outside world and what she was treating from infecting our home. Now, it didn't work. We all got Covid. We've had Covid like 3 or 4 times now. Right? Our booster shots are basically just getting Covid again because that's what life is when you're married to an E.R. doctor. Right. Why do I say all of that? Because everyone's job is the same way.

We could talk about work life balance. We can talk about all of those sort of things. But if you have a toxic experience at work that's going to infect your life, that's going to infect your family, your friends, every other sphere of your life. So it's too important to leave it to suck. The further realization and this kind of happened mid-pandemic for me is that everyone's experience of work isn't shaped by quote unquote, company culture. It's not shaped by perks and the, you know, kombucha in the break room or free dry cleaning or whatever it's shaped by the team or teams that they're on. Right? If you think about your experience of work, you immediately start thinking about what it's like to work with specific people. Both the examples I shared with you at the top about best and worst, they weren't about the organization, the university as a whole. It was my department. It was the teams that I was collaborating with. And that's everyone's story, whether we like it or not. So work is too important to our lives to let it suck. And teams are the primary influence on whether or not we're having a positive experience at work.

**Whitney Johnson:** Were you on a lot of teams as a kid?

**David Burkus:** Yeah, I wasn't very good at most of them. You know, did what most kids do. You try every single sport until you find the one you're good at. Ironically, the one that I was good at was in martial arts, which is a team sport, but a solo sport, right? Like you train as a team, you compete as an individual. I really don't know how to psychoanalyze all of that. Um, but yeah, yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** I've got to say, that metaphor about your wife and the doc, I'm hoping that you're using that in every single keynote speech you're doing, because that is a good one.

**David Burkus:** Oh, well, thank you. Now, I don't know that I will, but I'm going to have to. I'm gonna have to try and do it. I'm going to have to.

**Whitney Johnson:** Think about it. Think about it.

**David Burkus:** I do. I mean, I do share it a lot of times on shows and things like that, because it was that that sort of revelation. And by the way, it wasn't a revelation until I was sitting in a spare bedroom in a fever sweat because we had all got Covid, right? That our whole our whole thing didn't work. And then I realized, wait a minute, this is the same thing I'm fighting against, too. Yeah, it's not a deadly virus, but it is.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's really powerful. David So, so think about that, incorporating that into your speaking. Let's now move to something more specific, which is the dreaded meeting. What are we as managers? And I want to use managers not only within work but also in the home environment because we do have meetings at home. What are we doing wrong and how can we make it right?

**David Burkus:** Yeah. Um, I think I would say the biggest thing around I'm not going to do basics like every meeting should have an agenda and what have you, because for two reasons. One, everybody's heard that, but two, ironically, that's actually a very cultural construct, right? Like there's a lot of there's a lot of cultures where running a formal agenda and being time linear is seen as a negative. Right? So I don't know that I believe all of that. I would say the number one thing we do and I noticed this most when we were all doing virtual meetings and spending way too much time on Zoom is that we call meetings for things that aren't really collaborative. In other words, we call a meeting. Let's say we call a 90 minute meeting of our team and we spend 75 of those minutes presenting information at everyone. Right? And this is why you have those memes like, Oh, this whole meeting could have been an email. The irony of memes like that, by the way, is that when you get the long email, you think, Can't you just call me and we can talk through it, right? So so we're not satisfied in any of those capacities, but we're presenting information at people, right? We're calling the meeting just to bring everyone up to speed. That's something that can be done asynchronously. The real value of getting people together is to tap into their different brains, to tap into their different ideas, their different possible solutions to actually collaborate. Now, that said, there's one type of meeting that is more of a report out meeting that I think happens best synchronously, and that in the book we call that the huddle.

But that's a flash meeting. That's a 90 to 100 and 20s per person. Quick update. What am I working on this week? What did I complete? Where do I need help? And I work with some teams that do that asynchronously. So it could be asynchronous too, but I think there's real power in doing that. That's different than the boss or someone from outside the team presenting for 45 minutes on a slide deck that you could have just sent out ahead of time. And I think that's what drains most people. I was in a conversation yesterday with a with a reporter and he was asking me, what questions would you ask if you were doing a survey about people's preferences for flexibility, work from home versus work in the office, etcetera? And I would ask them, I said I would ask them what percentage of time they spend collaborating versus doing solo work versus just listening to someone else in a meeting. And I think for the majority of people, that third one is the majority of their time and that's why they actually hate going to those meetings. They love collaborating, they love talking with people, changing ideas, brainstorming solutions. It's the 45 minutes of listening to someone else's PowerPoint that you have to suffer through to get to that. That's what most people hate about meetings.

**Whitney Johnson:** Do you have any suggestions on how to tap into people's brains on the collaboration, a hack that you would like to share?

**David Burkus:** Yeah. Yeah. So, I mean, number one, I think especially if you're doing a hybrid meeting or a remote meeting, that presenting information that can be done ahead of time. You know, you built the slide deck, great record yourself, talking over it and send it out. Right. And you may have to enforce that. People actually watch it, but it'll be worth it for it. The second thing I would do is, yes, I would build I usually build light agendas when I meet with the teams that I'm on. So not a big formal, you know, from 10 to 1005, we're going to do a win sharing or whatever, but I'll usually have the topics we need to go through and then I'll have a question for each one, you know, so the topic item might be like marketing in Q3, but the big question is what are we going to do to get the same number of impressions with a smaller budget because of a recession? Right. Or whatever. The that's just an example I thought of just now. But the idea is there's a reason I'm bringing this agenda item up and it's usually because there's a question that we as a team need to resolve. So I will just put that right in the agenda right off the bat. And that not only focuses people's attention on the issue that matters, the one we need to actually collaborate about. But the other thing is it gives us a gauge for whether or not we had a successful meeting. If at the end of the meeting we got that question answered, then we know we had a successful meeting and if we didn't, then we can go, okay, what went wrong that derailed that conversation?

**Whitney Johnson:** As you're speaking, I have a wondering if. We? Talk at people in meetings of presenting information, of just listening, listening, listening. Because we're. We either don't know how to or we're actually afraid to really engage around an idea or content.

**David Burkus:** I think it's a little bit of both. I think there's also there's kind of a distrust, right? There's a there's a distrust that if I don't if I'm not able from a lot of leaders, I'm not I'm not painting with a broad brush here and saying every leader. But there's a distrust that if I don't have you in the room and I'm looking at you as I'm giving you this update, I have no way to trust that you're going to get this information right, which is kind of dumb in a world of technology where I can send out a video and track every single person that watched it. Right, Right. And by the way, you shouldn't need to do that on your team either. You should just have trust to the level where, you know, people are going to show up prepared for the meeting and accountability if they don't. Right. But there's tools to kind of solve that. But I think that's number one, right? Then I think there's what you're getting at, which is in order to really build psychological safety on a team, as a leader, you need to be comfortable modeling how to respond properly when people disagree with you. Right? We talked about how to model when people are vulnerable, but sometimes the biggest interpersonal risk people take on a team in that trust. Risk. Respect is saying, you know, I don't agree. I think we should actually go this route instead. And that can be very threatening to a lot of leaders. Right. I'm the boss. I was promoted because my ideas were most brilliant when I was an individual contributor. And now you're threatening the thing that I see as the reason I was promoted.

But that's actually the wrong response, right? You want to treat conflict as collaboration, as people saying, I care so much about this project and I see the world differently. So I have no choice in this moment but to speak up and say, Hey, we might be headed in the wrong direction. I just want to speak up and kind of voice that. And when you do that, it's okay to push back on the idea. I teach a lot of leaders push back on the assumptions behind the idea, right? So it's not that'll never work because we don't have the budget. It's okay. That's an interesting idea. And thank you for sharing your differing perspective. I'm a little curious on on your numbers, like what do you think that would cost compared to what we're doing right. Or some other question that you can ask that shows that I heard you like you demonstrated beautifully earlier. And then I'm going to ask a follow up question. But that follow up question isn't like, here's why you're wrong. It's okay, Let's explore this because we have a different opinion, which usually means we have different assumptions underneath that. And that's where we can start to collaborate and find out what's actually true. So so I think it's what you said, but I think the majority is that distrust in those two forms. One, if you're not in the meeting with me, don't trust that you receive the information. And two, I have I don't know how to respond when people speak up and disagree, I take it too personally. I'm not willing to let people take that risk. And that, by the way, is a much more dangerous one of the two.

**Whitney Johnson:** I have two things coming to mind, which might be a complete red herring, but I'm going to say them out loud anyway. I was thinking about. This idea of conflict is collaboration if you let it be. I love that. I just finished reading Ed Catmull's Creativity Inc for the second time, and he talked about how Steve Jobs would be incredibly aggressive with people because it was almost an echolocation tool like his. His form of being aggressive or his aggression was a way to just assess where people were, which I thought was and how they how

they stood and what they thought and could he engage with them over the long term. That was interesting to me. The other thing which is more personal is this weekend I was with a group of of colleagues and having a conversation with someone and I said a group of people. And I said something. And one of the people said to me, Well, I don't agree with you on that. And I remember at first feeling a little bit like, Oh, they don't agree with me, like taking it back, feeling a little bit vulnerable when when she said that. And then I stopped myself and thought, oh, isn't that interesting how we're actually most of us aren't very good at that. Having someone say, I don't agree, and also saying to myself. Her saying to me, I don't agree with you on that means that she actually feels safe with me like a person in most instances. So Steve Jobs may be the exception and he was an outlier in many, many regards. But in most cases, I think that if someone says, I don't agree with you, they're actually saying, I actually feel safe enough to say that I don't agree with you. Thoughts?

**David Burkus:** Yeah, I know. It's funny that you bring up that example, so I do. Probably the majority of my work is speaking to larger groups, but I do some advisement where I'm presenting my research and information to like just the senior leadership team because by the way, if the senior leadership team doesn't work well as a team, then there's not a lot of hope for the whole organization. Right. And one of the things I'll do, usually I get a call with the or the CEO to plan ahead of time. And one of the questions I always ask was, when was the last time somebody on your team disagreed with you in front of the rest of the team, not disagreed with you privately? That's still a little bit of safety. But felt what I'm asking is when was the last time they felt safe enough to go? You know what, Whitney, I, I just got to speak up here because I don't think you're wrong here. And that really does actually mean that they feel safe. Now, if they can't think of one, that's a huge problem. And then if they do, I'll ask, how did you respond? So I'll flip it to you. Whitney okay. After you got over the initial shock and then realized they felt safe, how did you respond when the conversation went forward?

**Whitney Johnson:** So I think the I think two things. One is. Um, the conversation continued, so there wasn't really an opportunity to respond, but I think verbally. But I did respond in the sense of like, Oh, I need to work on this because when you run your own company, sometimes people don't disagree with you as much. But the other thing I think is I responded in the sense that I did not take offense. So I went on to have a number of really robust conversations with this individual. It's actually Charlene Lee. So for anybody who's listening, she's been on our podcast before, so and we had these wonderful conversations after that. So what that meant is, okay, great, I feel safe with her as well. And and and the relationship is in fact stronger. So I think that's that's a great question. Yeah. Anything else on that? Before I jump to my next question.

**David Burkus:** Well, the number one thing I'm looking for and since now I know it's Charlene who's awesome and another in the how many mutual friends have we dropped names on this show?

**Whitney Johnson:** I think we have a lot of mutual friends. Yes, we do.

**David Burkus:** We do. The thing that I tell --

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, sorry. And by the way, I'm going to interrupt because now that there are mutual friends for everybody who's listening to this podcast because they've gotten to hear them speak, they're collectively all of our friends. So please.

**David Burkus:** You've got the disruption advisor and you're going to do the Disruption Collective, which is all of the folks that listen to this podcast is one, one big community. Like I love it. I love it.

**Whitney Johnson:** What were you going to say?

**David Burkus:** So what I what I was going to say is, so I'm asking them questions about how did you respond? And the number one thing I'm looking for is not that they push back on the idea, but also that they thanked them for the contribution. Right. Hey, thanks so much for speaking up on that, because clearly we're seeing something from a different from two different perspectives, which means I don't know enough about your perspective. Tell me more. Right. But that little thank you, that little appreciation. Right. Because again, ideas are personal. Right? This comes actually from years ago in the in the book I wrote on on creativity ideas. The joke always used to make then is that ideas are like ugly babies. Right? You have a new baby, you want to show it off into the world.

But you know, every baby is beautiful. Yes, I understand the token, but but some, you know, look like they're going to make beautiful toddlers. Right. And so how we respond to somebody's ugly baby has a huge they might take offense, right? In reality, every baby is ugly so you shouldn't do that. But like it's personal and ideas are kind of the same way. An idea is not a fully formed human, an idea, an I disagree. Here's why. See it. Usually that person hasn't fully thought out everything about their new proposed plan. So pushing back on all of those details isn't going to work. Right. But recognizing that like, yeah, okay, there's something there and it needs time to grow and nurture and develop and that keeps them from taking it personally. That keeps them from saying like, you just called my my baby ugly. That's what we don't want to do in those moments when people disagree with us. But it's hard because when they disagree, we're thinking they're calling our baby ugly. Right? And now we have this this dueling. I don't know where I'm going.

**Whitney Johnson:** Going ugly baby contest.

**David Burkus:** Right? Yeah. No, it's it's I have dug myself into a very, very deep hole around this idea. But the point is that people take it personally. We get proprietary over ideas. And what the biggest thing I learned from Creativity Inc haven't read the expanded edition yet, but I'm excited about it, is how not personal Catmull and Lasseter and the whole team, the Brain Trust and the whole team at Pixar took their ideas right. My idea is my contribution, but it's not really my property. It's not really personal. It's just something that I contributed. And if it turns out not to be the contribution we needed, that's fine because we still got to the best idea through my contribution. But don't need to win when have that mentality and think unfortunately too many leaders just dive into I need to win this argument now to assert my leadership, to assert my dominance, my expertise, what have you. And it's just not the right mentality.

**Whitney Johnson:** Because in fact, your contribution is a beautiful baby.

**David Burkus:** Yeah, Yeah. Because every baby is beautiful. Some just need time to develop into beautiful toddlers. So we're going to get so many mad emails. Whitney. I'm sorry.

**Whitney Johnson:** We won't. Because everybody agrees. Well, I shouldn't say everybody. Don't use words like everybody. Many people will agree with what we're saying.

**David Burkus:** Well, Whitney, as my friend, you know that I have a penchant for saying things in the room that everybody's thinking but nobody wants to say because it wouldn't be polite. So I just I just did that right there on on your show collectively, too.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. There you go. All right. Let's do a little bit of a palate cleanser. What are you doing after this call? What is your day look like today?

**David Burkus:** I'm going I'm going to play pickleball with my wife, actually. Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well done, you.

**David Burkus:** So part of my S-curve of disruption. I spent 17 years practicing a really esoteric martial art called Brazilian jiu jitsu. Again, team sport. Because you train as a team. And by the way, you need a lot of trust and vulnerability because it's a full contact sport. Um, but about a year ago, she walked on to the courts at our gym to just sort of try a lesson. Got She's one of those people that's like super addicted to it. And so now that's the kind of the way we spend day days. Our schedule is such that if I'm working from home and she's not working at the hospital that day and the kids are at school or this week at camp, right. It makes way more sense to do a day date. And usually that means over pickleball. So I still get a lot to learn. One of the things I actually told her a couple months into playing was that I enjoyed it, not because I think the sport is amazing, but because it's it's great to suck at something. Again. When you do a martial art for 17 years, you're usually not the one that sucks at it, right? Um, and so pickleball is the same way. I'm, I was, I'm getting better, but I was terrible at it compared to people who'd been doing it for a long time. And it was kind of fun to be bad at something.

**Whitney Johnson:** Again, it's so funny because I was going to ask you, what is an S curve that you have jumped to recently and how does it feel? And what I think I just heard you say is pickleball and it's good to practice sucking at something.

**David Burkus:** Yeah, we have a we have a couple different mantras in our house. Um, I call them mantras because when I was growing up, my dad called them dad isms and they were usually corny and lame and I'm trying not to be that. But one of the mantras, if you ask both of my kids to to fill in the blank, um, it's the mantra is anything worth doing? And they'll know that the response is is worth being bad at at first. Right now the idea is you get better, right? But if it's worth doing, you're going to be bad at it and you're going to be bad at it at first. And it's worth going through that in order to get better. And so right now that that's mine, pickleball is my thing. I'm bad. I'm like mediocre now I'm on that that I feel like if you think about the S curve, I feel like I'm accelerating fast. But, you know, I'm also a little worried about that because it means I might level off and not be that great when I finally level off.

**Whitney Johnson:** You don't want to level off too soon. Right.

**Speaker3:** Exactly.

**Whitney Johnson:** I would I would encourage you to show the curve to your children because children find it very useful, like, oh, you want to quit pickleball? Oh, you want to quit soccer? Oh, you want to quit gymnastics? Oh, you want to quit? Whatever. Right now, you're right. You're really bad at this. But that just means you're at the launch point of the curve. You may be bad at it, but you don't know yet. You don't have enough data. You may also hit the sweet spot. So, yeah.

**Speaker3:** I like it. We we actually show there's a chart that a friend of mine drew one time and I should continue it because it's just the, the exponential curve, but we show it as two, right? In other words, there's a green line going up and yeah, it levels off. So really I should just draw the rest of the curve. But I also usually show a line going down when we talk about habits, right? Like, look, I realize and my kids are 11 and nine, so it's habits like remembering to put on deodorant, right? They're not big habits. But the idea is you look at those two lines, one is moving up exponentially, one's moving down. The thing I try and tell them is, look, I get that it's hard to jump from the negative line to the positive line by doing the positive habits. But I promise you this it will never be easier than it is right now to build that habit. So we already showed them that curve. I'm just going to add the S curve to it. I love it.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's so good. It will never be easier than it is right now. So good. All right. So we're starting to starting to move to the wrap up. Talk to me about fiction for just a minute. I remember a conversation that you and I had.

**David Burkus:** I knew you were going to ask me this, Whitney.

**Whitney Johnson:** Did you really know I was going to ask?

**David Burkus:** I remember our conversation at the British Airways lounge, but no, keep keep going.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, we were in the British Airways lounge. I think it was after Thinkers 50 four years ago. No. Yeah. Four years ago. Four years ago, you were your ebullient, gregarious self. And you started talking to me about the fact that when you were growing up, you wanted to write fiction. So talk to me about where you are on the S curve of writing a novel.

**David Burkus:** Yeah, well, that writing. See, I knew you were going to ask because it's your challenge. I don't know that I've yet fully embraced it as mine. So the back story here for those listening. So I was an undergrad English major. I studied organizational psychology and a master's in a doctoral program, but I went to university. I went to undergrad thinking I was going to be a writer because when you're 17 years old and you think writer, that's all you think, right? You've got you've got writer means fiction. Journalist means like nonfiction or textbooks. But those are super boring. And so, you know, I went in thinking, okay, am I going to be Jack Kerouac

or James Patterson? Right? My grand existential crisis is like, do I am I poor but brilliant, or do I sell out and write churn out all of these thriller novels? And I chose the third Path, which is I found narrative nonfiction. I found your sort of early Gladwell pieces, your science writers probably the most. It's funny, if you pin me in a corner and say, like the book that affected your career the most, I usually say something from Roger Martin because I respect him the heck out of him.

But actually it was a used copy of Best American Science writing, because the fact that people could write about complex science things in a way that employed storytelling hadn't occurred to me as a 19 year old. So then I went through that whole pivot and decided to do what I what I do now. And it was all led from that. But what I shared with Whitney was that I've always thought it'd be funny to kind of just bring a little mostly for the community, like the Disrupt Yourself Collective, etcetera, or the Circus Circus. If we want to name whatever the community of people Me is, just kind of release like a novella or a fun sort of short story. Et-cetera on all of it. And there's a, there's a kind of a faith and spirituality writer Rob Bell, who writes mostly theology books but wrote this random. It's actually a hilarious book called Millionaires Cojones, which is about a motivational speaker. And it's one of the funniest novels I've ever read. And I told you I'd always wanted to write something like that. And four years later, Whitney, I'm still at the very bottom of that's curve.

**Whitney Johnson:** You still always want to write a novel?

**David Burkus:** I still always want to do it. And I will. I will tell you, I it's not that I haven't worked on it. I bought a book, bought and read a book called The Story Grid by Shawn Coyne, which is a actually ruins movies for you because it basically tells you, here's your genre, here's the sequence of events that happen in that genre. And now all you need to do is plug in to all of that. So I've got that. What I don't have is the idea like the, Hey, there should be a fiction book about this type of person or what have you. What I don't have is that idea. So I'm still waiting on that. But yeah, I did. I took a few steps, but we have not hit that exponential part yet. We're not there yet.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. Well, and, and and part of part of growth is deciding which curve you're going to be on at which time. And right now you're on the best team ever growth curve.

**David Burkus:** Yeah, well, it's sort of like, you know, this is a similar conversation we had two weeks ago when we were together in Nashville around what you've built around you and admire the heck out of it and what Disruption Advisors has become and all of that. And I said, I don't know if you remember. I said, like, I'd love to. I said that. And I think I said, Now pick your brain on how to build something like that. However, my kids are 11 and nine and I'm not going to jump on that curve yet. Right? So maybe the novel one, I'm waiting for that too. Like my priority is to do the best I can to help make people's work lives better and talk best team ever and build a better team culture with organizations. But my other priority is cutting out at 430 and playing Legend of Zelda with my 11 year old. Right. And when they're gone, then maybe we'll think about both building the business and actually coming up with the idea for the novel. I'm going to give myself some slack here. The novella, because it's shorter.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, I love that. I love that you're playing Legends of Zelda with your children and and and what I love about that is that the world has changed because 30 years ago, people did not do that. They did not say they did not say I am going to do this. They were vocal about it. Um, and that means our world has changed in a good way.

**David Burkus:** Yeah. Yeah. No. And ours was sort of changing. My wife and I have been very deliberate about building a life that we want with family and each other at the center of it. Part of the reason she's an E.R. doctor versus any other kind of practice is it's actually it's a crazy rush when you're there, but it's actually the most compartmental. You're just shift work. There's no on call. You don't get suddenly called in. You have your schedule and your schedule works. And what I do is very much the same so that we're able to do that. I think most people, though, think more and more people. The pandemic was that revelation, right? Like we used to put work 40, 50 hours right in the center of our week, central to our lives, five days a week, eight hours a day. And then Covid kind of threw it into a blender for a lot of people. And they had to rebuild a schedule that worked for them. And this is actually, by the way, we could do a whole other like 60 Minutes talk about this. This is the core of the

return to office debate. It's not actually about where you're working. It's about the fact that I built a life I like where work is still important, but it's not dominating that those middle hours and don't want to go back to that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Oh, I love that I built a life like. All right, David, what was useful to you in this conversation?

**David Burkus:** Truthfully, we had a really wide ranging conversation. Thank you, number one, for not just going like, all right, there's three parts in the book and there's three, and let's just go through them all. And I think part of that was your plan, which I love and appreciate. And part of that was your experiment with vulnerability that happened right off the bat, like we tapped into. I hope I have no idea. You'll have to leave a review in iTunes or Spotify for Whitney and tell us a case. I feel like a lot of people just eavesdropped into two friends catching up after a couple of years than they did like a formal media interview, and that made it super fun for me and took us in some directions and provoked some of the thinking that I'm going to have to chew on for multiple weeks to kind of think through. Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. All right. So any final thoughts that you'd like to share?

**David Burkus:** Yeah. So like I said, there's three points in the book. I'm not going to review them all and what have you. There's a final thought in the very last conclusion of the book. That is one that I do actually have in every speech that I give, which is the the one sentence summary of the entire book and kind of my philosophy on making work not suck, which is this People want to do work that matters and they want to work for leaders who make them feel like they matter. And that's it. If you can nail those two things, you'll be a leader worth following, maybe even to a different organization. If you choose your own curve one day and move off. But people want to do work that matters and work for leaders who tell them they matter. If you can master those two things, you're going to build a great team.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. David, this was absolutely delightful. And I'm glad that you're going to go play pickleball after we wrap up. Thanks again.

**David Burkus:** Well, thank you so much for having me.

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Thank you again to David Burkus 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.