

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 358: ROBERT SUTTON

When is the last time a customer service phone menu left you genuinely angry, left you frustrated, disappointed with our modern society? We built these systems to make things easier—layer systems on top of other systems. But who's doing the gardening and the pruning? The upkeep? I think we can all agree that our systems have a tendency to grow out of control. We add and add until you have to press eight, then two, then three, then three again. Then maybe you'll get a customer service rep. Our guest today calls this phenomenon friction. Robert Sutton has taught at Stanford since 1983, in that time covering everything from psychology to business management. He is now out with his eighth book, *The Friction Project*. Bob and his co-writer, Huggy Rao took on this idea of a maddening, frustrating phone menu to nail down where friction comes from and how to treat it. But also, how can friction in our organizations actually be a force for good? I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, I want to jump into your new book that's coming out. It's called *The Friction Project*. And as we all know, friction is a property of physics—the resistance of one surface passing across another. When is a time that you, Bob, created friction without realizing it?

Robert Sutton: There's been so many times I've created friction without realizing it. So, I think that one of the things that happens, I mean, it's just a disease of being an academic, is that I will just get so deep into some obscure idea that I will send, well, 25 Stanford administrators a very long email about how they can get rid of friction. So, I think there's a bit of hypocrisy in there. So, this is a recent incident. There's so many, it goes on and on. But I think that that would be a case of me suffering from my own disease.

Whitney Johnson: Well, the irony of that, of course, is that the opening story in your book is about someone sending a too long email.

Robert Sutton: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: That wasn't you, was it?

Robert Sutton: No, no, it wasn't me. That was an email that was 1,266 words long, with a 7,300-word attachment, inviting all 2000 plus tenure track Stanford faculty members to spend a Saturday brainstorming on zoom. And I thought that was a little bit too extreme. But yes, I think one reason I was able to recognize that disease is because I

do suffer from it myself. And thank goodness I have friends who say, ‘uh, Bob, isn't that kind of hypocritical of you’? In fact, my last book with Huggy Rao, *Scaling Up Excellence*, the reviewer from *The Financial Times*, Andrew Hill in the most loving, possible way, said, ‘for a book that talks about cognitive load, this book sure puts a lot of cognitive load on the reader’. So, I plead guilty to the human flaws that I point out in others.

Whitney Johnson: Well, so. I do think that's funny. One of my, well not one of my favorite quotes, but one of my favorite authors, Brandon Sanderson, said that hypocrisy is just a person who's in the process of changing.

Robert Sutton: As long as they're changing, as long as it doesn't become like, and we've all been through this, and I'm sure I am guilty of this, it becomes like a kabuki dance where it's, oh no, not again. That's the person I try not to be. And I suspect I have been in the past, being an imperfect human being.

Whitney Johnson: There you go. All right, so let's roll back the clock a little bit. What did you want to be when you were a kid? I mean, most kids are behavioral scientists in their own way, but what was your first job? And was there any friction there?

Robert Sutton: Ah, well, my early jobs. Oh, it never occurred to me that I'd be an academic until later on, cause nobody in my family were academics, and I don't understand how I got here. But, I mean, my first job was working, you know, at a Kentucky Fried Chicken competitor cooking chicken in the back. And my second job where I worked my way up from being pizza delivery boy to night manager at a (and I always joke about this to my students, but it's true) at a pizza parlor that was about half a mile from Stanford. So, I delivered a lot of pizzas to Stanford. So, I always joke, I've had two jobs at Stanford. One is delivering pizzas, the other one is being a professor. So, you learn different things delivering pizzas than you do being a professor, probably more about students wandering around the dorms than I do as a professor. So anyway, so those are my first two jobs. Then I taught sailing, I fixed sailboats. Then I eventually, you know, got into graduate school accidentally, sort of. So anyway. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Oh. So good. All right, so you've now written many books, and I'm wondering how did you draw on those experiences to lessen the friction with writing *The Friction Project*?

Robert Sutton: Well, boy, you're asking really good questions. So, how did I draw on my experience? So, one of the things, and this is, we talk a lot in the book about what ought to be hard and what ought to be easy. And so, the book isn't just about creating a frictionless world. In fact, that would be horrible. And I kind of hate to say this, but one of the things, that the longer that I've been an author and academic, is that I care much less about how much I get done than the quality of things I get done. And one of the points in the book, which is quite evidence based, is that creativity is a fundamentally inefficient process. It's filled with dead ends. It's filled with failure. It's filled with frustration. Huggy Rao and I had quite a few, polite arguments. It's not like working with another coauthor of mine, Jeff Pfeffer, I wrote two books with. We kind of just scream at each other. There's no other way to communicate with Jeff I can figure out, other than yelling at him. I mean, he yells, too. It's kind of not pretty, and it's not even personal. It's just how he is.

Whitney Johnson: How you communicate.

Robert Sutton: And so the way that I think in this book and maybe it took too long. It took 7 or 8 years, depending on how you count, but two years of real writing. And then one of the key points of friction. And, you know, those of us like, like authors like you, we don't always talk about our literary agent. I have a great literary agent. Her name is Christy Fletcher. She has somebody who works with her named, Sarah Fuentes. They would not let us, if you will, you know how they sell. The way it works for your listeners is that they sell the proposal. They basically have a bid for the proposal. They would not let us for like eight months. We had to revise our proposal over and over and over again. And there was one point where I was so excited and Huggy was so excited. I had a brainstorming session with the famous Adam Grant. I've known Adam long before he was famous and to help us come up with the best title for the book. And Adam and I got so excited, I'm going to swear, I apologize with, about *The Sh*tFixers*. We thought this was the greatest title ever. And then so we wrote this whole proposal about *The Sh*tFixers*. And my literary agent and Sarah Fuentes, who works with her, said, ‘so Bob, uh, so I know you've written two books that have dirty titles, the word a**hole in them. But we don't think *The Sh*tFixers* has anything to do with this book. It's too vague’. And they were right. And then the other thing they said is, since I wrote this book, or two books on *The No*

*A *hole Rule*, essentially that they said that having titles with dirty, that are sort of dirty, are more of a problem than they used to be, which I didn't realize. I thought they'd be less of a problem.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting.

Robert Sutton: But they're actually supposedly more of a problem for getting on the web and everything. So anyhow, the lesson is to go back to friction, is that our argument is not everything should be frictionless. Our argument is things that should be easy—everything from, well, using the technology we use to getting reimbursed for expenses at Stanford University that are legitimate. It should not require 14 rounds of interactions with an administrator, which I've had that experience before. Those kind of ordeals, or dealing with Comcast as a customer is another example. But things that should be easy should be easy. And it isn't having a frictionless life. It's to clear the way for the things that should be difficult, complicated, hard and all that sort of stuff. And I've just given, given up on the notion that I should focus on producing my work as quickly as possible. I would rather do stuff that I'm proud of. And I'm not saying it's perfect, but if you saw the early drafts, at least, it would have been much worse.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. You know, it's interesting. Well, first of all, on Comcast. I loved that you shared an example. I think, if I'm remembering correctly in the book about, you know, how complicated Comcast is. We had a very complicated interaction with them.

Robert Sutton: The Comcast thing that was just disturbing was I had all these problems. It was after my mother passed away and I was dealing with a whole bunch of complexity with her Comcast thing, and it was really bad. Like I went through the phone tree like 20 times and all that sort of stuff, and I never, and they kept screwing things up. And finally I complained online, and I know a board member who I will not name, who saw my complaint. And magically I was sent to the VIP line one ring, everything fixed immediately. And by the way, charges waived that other people would have. So, so that's, if you look at the definition of privilege, which is the absence of inconvenience, that other people suffer from. This to me, well, I thought it was absolutely wonderful, but then it was also a great example for the book. I was not under non-disclosure when I did this with Comcast. So I will use their name or Xfinity, they sometimes call themselves I think. And that to me is part of the problem is they don't have to go through the phone tree. But yes, on the other side, my favorite example—and people always bash government. Two of our favorite examples of friction fixing are in the government—the state of Michigan and the California Department of Motor Vehicles have actually made enormous progress. And to use a name, we'll see how much trouble I get into. I said to, um...Google is suffering from all sorts of internal friction and bureaucracy and red tape problem. And I said to a Google executive just three days ago, if the DMV can do it, you can do it. So that's my motto, right?

Whitney Johnson: If he can do it, you can do it. That's my motto.

Robert Sutton: You can do it.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So how do we uncover friction in our organizations? What's a thing that, a question you can ask, something that you can look for and say, oh yeah there's friction.

Robert Sutton: Well, I mean there's, the deeper you can go the better. So, I mean so some of the deep, I'll do the deep stuff and the shallow stuff. I'll go backwards. Some of the deep stuff that we do and, and you know about this and a lot of your audience will know to, is essentially to follow people on their journeys, through their systems. And that can be following... Once we had our students follow JetBlue passengers from the time that they got out of the car to the time they got on the plane, and from the time they got off the plane to the time that they got out of the airport. And the interesting thing about that, by the way, I don't even think this is in the book.

Whitney Johnson: It's not in the book.

Robert Sutton: And we're working with a woman named, Bonny Simi at that point, amazing woman. And so, what our students discovered was the worst part of the experience, and we probably all know this, was at the luggage carousel.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, yeah.

Robert Sutton: Terrible. I mean, and this is when they were redesigning Kennedy Airport for JetBlue. So it was actually relevant. They could have some power over it. And the executives all said the same thing when our students presented it to them. Oh, we never check luggage. So, they literally never had the experience. And so apparently they did some things with concierges to try to help it. And if you look at research on human experience, this is from Danny Kahneman, the Nobel Prize winner. There's this thing called the Peak-End Rule that the thing we remember best about an experience is the best and the worst, and the way it ends. So, endings are really important. And so, the worst part of the experience was at the ending. So that was something they needed to work on—the memory of how much friction there was in the experience. So that's a more in-depth sort of journey mapping.

Whitney Johnson: Yep, absolutely. So that's your in depth, which I love. And actually you remind me because just last night at midnight, I got off a plane in Roanoke, Virginia. A small terminal—there are six gates. We waited for our luggage for 25 minutes. So, I'm living, in the last 24 hours, that experience of what you had just described. Okay, what's your high-level sort of hack?

Robert Sutton: The thing that we do, you know, since you and I do this in working with, with companies. It's like, what's to give them sort of a taste of it. And we've done this thing called the subtraction game with at least 200 companies. It says 100 in the books, but we've just, we've been doing it for years. Essentially we ask them to identify things that are frustrating, that are in the way that are driving them crazy. And then the great thing about this exercise is we have done it—I did it like with the top management team at Bloom Energy, it was like eight people. And then I've done it with, you know, a thousand people in an audience, turn to your neighbor. So, it's eminently scalable.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Sutton: And then you sort of have them pick what would be sort of a crazy one and what would be a sensible one. So just as an example, in one company, I did the crazy one, which was not very nice, was let's get rid of HR. Which is everybody hates HR and they don't deserve it because everybody needs them. It's like, let's get rid of oxygen. And then the sensible one was, that I remember it was the general counsel, the top lawyer. So, he said, I'm counting. He said we have something like 83 different family leave policies in all the different countries we're in. 83. Maybe we can cut some? Two weeks later, he wrote me that he'd gotten rid of eight of them. So that's something. So, to us that's a subtraction game. And sometimes people just, you know, come up with lame complaints. But you know, I have had this situation where with a large software company that a senior executive said, you know, I think I can change my staff meetings to every two weeks. I'm going to try an experiment for the next two months and see what works. And he did it on the spot. So that was kind of cool.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Sutton: So that would be that would be an example of the subtraction game, which is sort of quick and easy and, and fun. And sometimes it's just fun and sometimes it actually does do some good. And the whole point, and we can talk about this, is that, and this is one of the main points of the book, and I stole it from my friend Leidy Klotz, wrote *Subtract*, is that we human beings are wired to solve problems by adding things. That's the bad news. That's why we have all this complexity, blah blah blah. But when you get people to think about subtraction, to think as like editors-in-chief, we put, then we human beings were capable of doing that. You just have to nudge us and remind us and keep reminding us and keep reminding ourselves.

Whitney Johnson: I love that double entendre. And just so you know, after reading your book, I was like, we're going to do that at our next offsite. We're going to do some subtraction, our next company offsite. So, thank you for the coaching. Okay, so we talked about physics of friction at the top. And friction comes from speed, movement, like we said of one object along the surface of another. So, on our teams what are the prices that we pay, sometimes pay for speed?

Robert Sutton: Ooh. So, this is something that especially the last three weeks we've been really obsessed with it. It's certainly a point in the book, but there's a, and the way that I think about it to sort of back up on the metaphor, this is one I've been using lately, and it kind of helps me is that the cars that win Formula One or NASCAR races are the

ones that don't just hit pedal to the metal the whole time. They know when the right time to hit the brakes are, and they also know when to go in for a pit stop. And I don't think that's the worst analogy for what the great, best leaders do. And those are the ones who finish the race, and those are the ones who win the race, are the ones who do that at the right time. So, we're not saying that slow is always good. So, certainly I would start out one of the differences is how reversible or irreversible the decision is. That to me would be the headline, especially for important decisions. So, and it depends on the company. If, and this is stolen directly from Jeff Bezos, he talks about one-way doors versus two-way doors. If you've got a company and it's your only product, then that's a one-way door for you, if you're doing a startup. But if you're Amazon, well, another product, they might as well throw it in the marketplace. It's not going to kill him. So, what's reversible depends. So that's one. And it's, you know, whether or not you sell your company. That's an irreversible decision for the most part. They don't they don't give it give it back to you. So that's one.

Robert Sutton: Another time when speed is actually not a great idea is when you really need to form deep, trusting relationships. So, the example we use in the book is from the Supremes, *You Can't Hurry Love*. And yes, there's research on flash teams, and we all know the example of instant trust. But if you look at the evidence, the best startup teams, the best teams who, who put on new plays, the famous example, he just died, unfortunately, was Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger worked together for, I think, 60 years. So, this idea of prior joint experience is important. And then to throw in one more and then I'll stop. One of the things which isn't in the book, but I got obsessed with is this research on savoring. There's really cool academic research that shows that, you know, there's all this stuff on coping, there's all the terrible stuff in life, and we all have to cope with, you know, the setbacks and tragedies that happen in our life. But the savoring research is the opposite, that we would have better mental health if we slowed down and enjoyed the wonderful things in life, like the the walk in nature, the beautiful sunset. So, to me, that's another reason we might want to get people to slow down. And you can create better customer experiences and employee experiences by designing that in your process, is figuring out when people should sort of slow down and savor the good things in life, too.

Whitney Johnson: You know, it's interesting. So, one of the things I hear you saying is a good leader knows when and how to slow things down. And so, one of the things that they'll do is, we sometimes in our company do marking the moment or savoring.

Robert Sutton: Ooh!

Whitney Johnson: Do you know what I did? We just got back from vacation, and I noticed a tendency of mine, which is after vacation is over, and people ask me how it was, I'll be like, it was good. And then I move on. So, I made a conscious effort every single day to write down what I enjoyed about that vacation. I now have a list so that if you asked me what I enjoyed about the vacation, I have a record where I'm savoring. And so, I think that's a good example because as you said or alluded to, is then our brain encodes those happy, savoring moments.

Robert Sutton: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: And then we are able, we're reducing friction from the system because we're happier.

Robert Sutton: Yeah. Well, so yes, it's reducing friction. But sometimes it could be adding friction to slow things down. And the example we use in the book, and thanks to the *Wall Street Journal*, this just got fact checked last week.

Whitney Johnson: Yep.

Robert Sutton: You know, we put in the book about six months ago. So, this really is fact checked. So, the largest supermarket chain in the Netherlands, Holland is called Jumbo Supermarkets. And there's also movement in the Netherlands, a battle against loneliness among the elderly. And they experimented with slow lanes or chat lanes where especially older, lonely customers would, would spend time, more time chatting with customers. And, you know, when you get in line and that line that the person in front of you is going to be there a long time. And to me, this sounded like a crazy idea, but it is savoring for a few minutes. And that's, the fact checking just last week, that they have they now has the end of at the end of 2023, they had it in 125 stores. They scaled it to 125 stores.

Whitney Johnson: Wow!

Robert Sutton: So that's built in...

Whitney Johnson: Friction

Robert Sutton: You know, savor it.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Sutton: But also that's one of, we know this in life, is that the key things is customers. When they get in that lane, they know they're in a slow lane. They're picking the slow lane.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly.

Robert Sutton: They're not stuck in it like you waiting for your luggage.

Speaker 3: Yeah, exactly. And I just think that's so lovely. Okay. So, Bob, I want you to, I'm going to ask you to indulge me for a second. I'm going to give you some thoughts and then you can respond to them.

Robert Sutton: I love this stuff!

Whitney Johnson: So, in our work we use the S curve. And you're familiar with it. It's the adoption curve. But we've reimagined it as a way to think about what does individual growth and change look and feel like. What does it feel like?

Robert Sutton: Ooh.

Whitney Johnson: So, as I was thinking about your work, there are three parts of the curve. There's that launch point where it's really uncomfortable and awkward.

Robert Sutton: Right.

Whitney Johnson: Hit a tipping point, you get in the sweet spot and you get to mastery where it's very easy, but you're a little bit bored. So, you have to start over again. And so, as I was thinking about this, if I'm a leader and I have a person at the launch point, what friction do I want to introduce and what friction do I want to remove. So, for example, I can help make it easier to be at the launch point if I normalize the fact that creativity is just messy. So, it's okay. And I help shield you from people saying do more faster and give you that space to mess up. I also want to make it harder for you, or I want to impose friction by not letting them go too fast.

Robert Sutton: Right, right.

Whitney Johnson: If you're going too fast, you might try to cut corners. You might make premature decisions. All sorts of things can go wrong. So that's your launch point. I'll do the sweet spot, mastery, and then you can reflect.

Robert Sutton: Boy this is...keep going.

Whitney Johnson: So, what's happening in the sweet spot? Well, you're going fast. It looks fast. It feels fast. It's great. But one of the things, and I think this is good to bring back to the formula one racers. You want to impose friction when people are going fast because you're doing so well. You want to say yes to everything, and you can't. You need to have some guardrails and saying, no, you can't say yes to everything. You're also going fast because you're navigating and shielding for the people. So, they've just got to the right place. And then mastery, I was thinking about you, you're gonna make it easier because when you get to the top of a curve, people are ready to do something new. And in organizations, sometimes we don't want them to do something new because we want them to do what

they've always been doing. So, you want to remove friction by letting them do something new. You might want to impose friction, and I was thinking about your Navy Seal example, of saying, I know that you are the best in the world, but I need you right now to be a part of the team and to contribute. So, I'm going to impose that friction of having you be just part of the team and not do what everybody else is doing. And these are ways by either removing, making it easier, or making it harder, which is going to allow people to make progress along the curve no matter where they are. What are your thoughts? I know I'm totally throwing this at you.

Robert Sutton: Yeah. I mean there's really, I'll start with the mastery part.

Whitney Johnson: Ok.

Robert Sutton: So, and then I'll see if I can remember enough to work backwards. But my first reaction to the mastery part is that people who are really skilled at something, and this is one of the many ideas I've stolen from the great organizational theorist, George Carlin.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, well done. Comics are theorist for sure.

Robert Sutton: So he used this notion of *vuja de*, which is the opposite of *deja vu* and *vuja de* is when you kind of imagine when the same old experience is brand new. And I actually thought, I raced sailboats for years, and I actually thought that my skipper, Jeff Miller invented this, but he stole from George Carlin. I eventually found out. And the two places we would race would in the ocean, at Santa Cruz and then we'd also race kind of near the Golden Gate Bridge. And there, when it's on a summer day, they have a very similar weather pattern, and almost the same sort of wind shifts. And Jeff used to always say, we're going to have the *vuja de* mentality, Jeff's a very skilled championship sailor. And we're going to just keep pretending that the same old thing is brand new. And, and then that big shift, which is always, you know, below the hill, it's actually not going to be there. It's going to be somewhere else. And that's this idea about remaining heedful and mindful.

Whitney Johnson: I love it! *Vuja de*!

Robert Sutton: And so, that's slowing down.

Whitney Johnson: Yep.

Robert Sutton: And then the other thing I'm thinking, and I can't use the, I'm using the auto industry, the auto racing analogy again, and this is pretty literal. When you're going really, really fast. And I've been there. It's almost like a manic episode. Everything's so great. It's just so fast and everything's just so easy. But there's a point where you got to kind of remember to stop and recharge so you can keep going and don't go crazy. And a friend of mine, maybe you've even interviewed her, Tsedal Neeley, she teaches at Harvard Business School. She wrote the *Remote Work Revolution*. So, I was talking to her about a remote team that I was working with was going so fast and going so fast, and they were doing pretty well, but they couldn't bring themselves to stop and reflect about their mission, their charter. They were not very good at reflecting.

Whitney Johnson: Yep.

Robert Sutton: They were just going so fast. And there were some signs they were starting to crack. And you've probably seen this, a little, people are getting sick. They're fighting a little bit more and, but nothing bad. But you see the early symptoms and talking to Tsedal about it. And there's some variation of this in the book and, and I encourage them to just stop and to examine their charter and to have a conversation, a little bit of a team reset. So that's a pause. And they said they were too busy, and they were doing too well or something. And Tsedal was that sort of like you're racing down the desert, you're going 100 miles an hour and you're the, you know, the gas indicator is on empty and you see the only gas station for 50 miles, and you don't stop because you don't have time to stop. And I thought that was...

Whitney Johnson: That's a great example of a fast, of imposing constraints when you're going fast. Okay. So, I want to talk about jargon monoxide. I love that so much. Tell us what it is. And then I want to just share some thoughts.

Robert Sutton: Oh okay. Just where it came from. Since I believe in giving people credit.

Whitney Johnson: Which you do a lovely job.

Robert Sutton: Even though some people seem some people things seem to think I invented the term jargon monoxide. But where I first heard it, Polly LaBarre, who doesn't seem to be in the management business anymore, she was a writer in the early days of *Fast Company*, consultant.

Whitney Johnson: I remember her.

Robert Sutton: Great, wonderful person. So, I had her as a class guest probably 15 years ago, and she started out with this rant about jargon monoxide. I stole the phrase from her, and I've been using it ever since. But what that means is essentially language that's convoluted, hollow, or incomprehensible to us. It's language that isn't very, the reason it causes friction, or it also could be very much sort of in-group stuff. And we even have four kinds. We have Convoluted Crap. That's where it's so complicated, needlessly complicated, Meaningless Bullsh*t. That's just stuff that means nothing, In- Group Lingo is sometimes useful. Something like when the doctor says, stat MI, that's more efficient. But people in the outgroup can't understand what's going on. And then jargon, The Jargon Mishmash Syndrome is when a word used to mean something. But it means so many things to so many different people they can't communicate. And I've been getting in some trouble for this. But the word we nominate in the book is agile, which used to mean something, but I don't know what it means anymore, but that's sort of our take. And there are things you can do to avoid and get rid of it. It's not like we're helpless victims. But it is something that does cause friction and is also a symptom of friction, too.

Whitney Johnson: It'll be interesting to me to see, you know, as this book takes on its own life, of like, what are the pieces that stick over time and really make an impact. And I do think this piece about language, at least for me, that was very meaningful.

Robert Sutton: Oh, good. Well, thanks for, and it is funny because mostly people have been asking about, have not asked us about it. And I keep forgetting to talk about it because it's a chapter that's later in the book. I think, you know, you've done books. That's kind of funny how that happens with the life of a book and what people pick up.

Whitney Johnson: Lots of questions from the first chapter and chapter eight-there's nothing.

Robert Sutton: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So, as we're starting to wrap up, um, I would love to hear, for people who are feeling very inspired, they're at the launch point of the S curve of being a friction fixer. Besides purchasing your book, you've got this help pyramid. Maybe you can refer people to one or two things that you would suggest people do to just get started today? Right now.

Robert Sutton: Well, our perspective and the top of the health pyramid is doing organizational or local change. Actually doing change.

Whitney Johnson: Yep.

Robert Sutton: And our perspective is that everybody has what's called, we call a cone of friction. Whether you're the front-line person at the DMV or you're the I don't know, you're the CEO of Amazon, you have a cone of friction. So just being aware of your cone of friction. But there are other things that you can do as a friction fixer, that are short of changing the organization or team that you're in. And two things that come to mind that I think are important are related to the cone of friction. One is, and there was this woman early on, you know, sometimes people say stuff so good, you can just steal it and put it in your book. And, and I remember this executive. She said, my job is part organizational design and part therapy. And I thought that was just beautiful because there's all these things in life that are difficult and complicated. And we, we just kind of have to get through them. And as long as

they're not going to kill us or kill somebody else, sometimes you just have to go through the vortex. So, I thought that was so, and you described this as the early parts of the S curve, of sort of normalizing the pain in the conflict?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Sutton: And saying, we're going to get it together. And then the other thing is, if you can help other people, if you have more system knowledge and a different attitude to be kind of a navigator or a trail guide, throughout complex systems. And I think we, all of us who have worked in bureaucracies know this. There's people, in the book, we call them gunk people. There are people, if you go to them and ask them to do something to help you, they will make it as complicated as possible. They will take it out of your hide. They will cite rules that maybe don't even exist. My colleague Katy DeCelles, who I'm actually sharing my office right now. She describes these people as workplace vigilantes. The people just want to make you suffer as much as possible. Don't be one of those people. The best people I know are the people who, they don't cheat, but they say yes. And they also try to find you the path through the organization. They're sort of like trail guides through complex bureaucracy. See this person, do that before you do this. Don't talk to that person. They're going to be a gunk person. So...

Whitney Johnson: So, what's the opposite. There was the gunk person and the...

Robert Sutton: The grease person.

Whitney Johnson: A grease person, right.

Robert Sutton: Somebody who clears the path and shows you the best way to go. So that's the distinction that we try to make. And by the way, there are sometimes, having people say no, no, no, no, are correct. It's like, I want the surgeon who operates on me or the pilot who flies my plane to err on the side of being more, rather than less cautious and to not take off if the thing seems like it's broken, for example.

Whitney Johnson: Right. Exactly. There was a quote in the book, and I don't remember who said it, but you probably will be able to attribute it is, I own this place, and this place owns me.

Robert Sutton: Yeah. I'm not even sure where I stole that from. It's, you know, it's, I know I stole it from someone, but to me, that's what we're talking about. Accountability.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Sutton: And I mean, we haven't talked about, you know, another one of my heroes, Amy Edmondson, Psychological Safety. Playing right, kind of wrong. That's, in places where there's psychological safety and where things actually get done. That's the kind of culture that I want to take care of. Now, sometimes those places are annoying. And Amy makes this clear. Like psychological safety is not about being nice. It's being in a situation where I feel obligated and safe to call other people out and they feel obligated and safe to call me out.

Whitney Johnson: So good.

Robert Sutton: Or to support me or to do what, it isn't just about calling people out.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I love that. You have a responsibility to the organization, and you feel safe enough to say something. Okay, before I go to my final two questions, is there anything that you want me to ask you that I have not asked you?

Robert Sutton: I think that that we've talked. Oh, just the one thing is, can we talk about love just for a second?

Whitney Johnson: Yes! Let's talk about love.

Robert Sutton: So, one of the concepts that, you know, I don't think I can do a whole book on this, but towards the end of the book. So, it's, it's kind of like in the discussion section part. So, I talked I talked to this amazing guy is,

and the book was almost done. I was literally, thank goodness he gave me material for the last chapter, Todd Park. So. Todd Park.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, Athenahealth.

Robert Sutton: Athenahealth. Founded Athenahealth, sold for a fortune, then went into the Obama administration, is famous for fixing the Obamacare website. Not by himself but leading the effort. Now he and his brother Ed have a have a startup. It's a pretty big startup. It's in 13 states. It's called Devoted Health. And the concept is, essentially sort of, one stop shopping for people like me over 65 to navigate the complexity of the US health care system. Okay. And it's very complex, very fragmented, a lot of friction. And the concept that Ed has is there's one person you can call who will guide you through the way and get you all your... That's the concept, he told me. And so, he started out talking about love and it's like, huh? Athenahealth care? You're a software guy. You're talking about love. Love! So, the concept, though was, that figuring out what the logistics should be. What was sort of the guiding design principle. One of them was you're on the phone as a devoted health employee and you treat the man or the woman on the other end of the phone as if they are your mother or father. It's someone you love. What experience would you want for them? And he'll be the first to say it's not quite there yet, but at least from what I can tell, reading the reviews, it's better. It might be better than anybody else. And there's academic research by the amazing late, Sigal Barsade on 'Companionate Love' and so that's something, that if I would sort of dig into more, this idea, and you need both of them. Like love without logistics is terrible. It's just constantly telling people how wonderful they are with sort of not delivering the goods. And logistics without love is sometimes just extracting as much value out of people as possible without caring about the ethics or their well-being or whatever. So, you kind of need both of them.

Whitney Johnson: Well, love plus logistics. I think it's worth exploring.

Robert Sutton: Me too, I think. I think there's a whole...

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Well, good. And that'll be good because it'll be, you know, a nice offset to your books with the swear words in it. You can just go to, that can be sort of your compensatory title.

Robert Sutton: I like that.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So, Bob, final, penultimate question is, what in this conversation has been useful for you? And it might be something you said or something I said, but I want you to think a little bit meta as you observe, was there something that you thought of or had an aha that was unexpected for you?

Robert Sutton: Well, the aha, as with most aha's, they are simple when you look back on them. But your comments about the S curve were really interesting because I think that's something that we could have done more of in the book and I would want to do more in the future, is to figure out where people are on the journey, as opposed, because we tend to think like, is it creative or not? But there are there are things in life where there are predictable parts of the journey. And so, I, that's one thing that you've got me, you've got me sort of thinking about is, how would you apply this to careers or the life cycle of an organization or something like that.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, fun. Okay, and final thoughts, capstone thoughts for the conversation.

Robert Sutton: If I would, oh you want a summary, that to me the summary of the whole, you know, this is like eight years. Gee, if we, all of us and I certainly am guilty of not doing this, could sort of stop and sometimes think of ourselves as, gee, how can I be a trustee of others time who, given the actions I make, large or small, what am I doing to intentionally or unintentionally make things easier or harder for people? And is it the sort of right mix of things? So, I guess that's, you know, this is, you teach this stuff all the time and coach people all the time. And this is very much about self-awareness.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Robert Sutton: And I think that's hard for all of us. And you asked me sort of at the beginning, sort of like, when have I done something that, you know, unwittingly imposed friction on people. My overly long emails are something that I'm still working on.

Whitney Johnson: So, there you go. I love how you brought it back to this idea of what can you do differently and how you can disrupt yourself, and I do. I really love that chapter in the book of this idea of we are the trustee of another person's time. And how do we how do we impose and, and also remove friction appropriately.

Robert Sutton: Yeah. Yeah, and it is what, just to go back to that, thinking about that once doesn't help. It's, you know, one of the points, it's like mowing the lawn. It's something that good leaders do with discipline over and over again. It's not like they have the one-day movement and today is subtraction day and then they never think about it again. That's not the answer.

Whitney Johnson: You have to keep adding subtraction.

Robert Sutton: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. Bob, thank you so much for joining us.

Robert Sutton: Whitney, it's been really fun. I loved your questions. You're so thoughtful. Thank you so much.

Whitney Johnson: It's human to solve problems by adding things. Band aid on a cut, duct taping your car's bumper. Building a bridge over a river. We're creators, builders, so it's no surprise that we try to solve the issues of our old systems with new systems. But sometimes it's not about adding but subtracting. It's rather unintuitive that the solution would be removing something when our society is built around buying the new thing or trying a new program. When we're analyzing systems, though, we have to be editors, not writers. Our job is to take a look at what's already there instead of jumping to a Band-Aid immediately. Otherwise, we may just add more friction when we're trying to diagnose it. Another big takeaway for me is this idea of good friction, especially when it comes to taking care of ourselves. It's what Bob said about the F1 drivers. You have to know when to come in for a pit stop and when. We haven't had the experience of coming in for a pit stop, it can feel like bad friction-phone menu friction moving slowly when you want to run. But it's not a question of slow or fast. It's a question of how full is your gas tank? And how good are the treads on your tires? Impose good friction or you're going to blow out a tire and then you won't be moving at all.

I'll leave you with my favorite quote from Bob, "if the DMV can do it, you can too". For more on translating friction into change, there's my talk with Jen Goldman-Wetzler, [episode 158](#). For some practical tips on finding the friction in your organization, finding where it's getting in the way of purpose. There's [episode 253](#) with Fran Katsoudas, and on this idea that executives are too isolated from their own systems and products. There's my recent episode with Scott K Edinger, [episode 350](#). Thank you again to Bob Sutton 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 Etta King, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino. And again, a reminder we'll be moving the show to Friday starting next week.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.