

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 372: MICHAEL BUNGAY STANIER

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Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you build high performing people and teams because organizations don't Disrupt people do. And the fundamental unit of that disruption -- it's you.

Today, we wanted to bring back a conversation I had with Michael Bungay Stanier back in 2018, where we explored what it really means to be a coach. His self-published book, *The Coaching Habit*, had only been out for two years and it had already sold 300,000 copies. Bringing the philosophy of coaching into our lives can be one of the most personally disruptive and rewarding projects we can take on. It changes and strengthens how we support others in our lives and the support we receive in return. Michael breaks this down in such an accessible way that we felt a re-air was more than worth it.

I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: Michael. Why don't tell me what your name is, I just called you by your name and what you do for a living.

Michael Bungay Stanier: My name is Michael Bungay Stanier. Bungay Stanier is actually my surname because when I got married, I took my wife's name, and we combined them together. So, it is the hardest name in the world to pronounce, apparently, because sometimes I get called Michael Banging Spaniel, is a particular low point. But Michael Bungay Stanier is my full name. I am the CEO of Box of Crayons, so Box of Crayons is a training company with a very specific focus, which is we give busy managers the practical tools so they can coach in ten minutes or less. That's all we do. I have a background in the world of innovation and change and coaching and organizational development, and I've written five books. The most recent is called *The Coaching Habit*, and

that's been the most, kind of best salary of all of those five books. It's had a, it's had a real, really surprising and delightful kind of burst of life to it.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, let's talk about that really quickly. And how many books have you sold of *The Coaching Habit*, which is an excellent book. Everyone must read.

Michael Bungay Stanier: It. Thank you. It's, closing in on about 300,000 copies now [at date of this re air, over 1 million copies of *The Coaching Habit* have been sold].

Whitney Johnson: Congratulations. And it's self-published.

Michael Bungay Stanier: It's self-published. I know, it was just kind of a great story of, like, three years trying to pitch it and throwing myself against the wall of traditional publishers and getting turned down and finally going away and saying, shaking my fist at the gods and going, I'm just going to do it myself. And self-publishing it and having it take off. So, it's kind of particularly sweet that it's doing so well.

Whitney Johnson: Why did people not want to publish the book? What was the common refrain in terms of, yeah, this is good, but what was the but?

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, it varied a little bit. So, some of the initial attempts was this is not a good book. This is not a good idea, Michael. And that's not unfair because, you know, I went through various iterations of trying to write this book before I got it to the place where I'm like, this is actually a good book now. So, some of it was like, oh, we just don't like it. And then it got to a point where I was talking to a publisher who published my previous book called *Do More Great Work*, and it had done well for them. It sold 100,000 copies or close to it. And so, on the one hand, they kind of wanted to work with me because, you know, I'd been a success for them in the past, and I wanted to work with them for the same reason, but they couldn't quite figure out how to fit it into their portfolio, although they probably weren't as explicit about that as they might have been. And in the end, it was like, I think they're like, we don't really publish business books, and this is a business book. And it just took us a long time to get to that honest place of it's not a fit for what we're actually strategically trying to do.

Whitney Johnson: You went back to your first publisher or not the first publisher, but the *Do More Great Work* publisher, but they were a business publisher, right? I mean...

Michael Bungay Stanier: They, they've they have dabbled in the world of business books. But I think what's strategically, what's happening for them is they're getting more focused about where they publish and who they publish. And I just wasn't quite a fit. It just took us a long time to figure that out. And in fact, it took me to say, here's the book, I've got it now, and this is the book I'm going to write. So, you can either choose to publish it with me or not. And they said, no. And I, you know, I wept a little bit, cursed them a little bit, and then went, right, well, I'm going to self-publish it. But the good news is self-publishing is easier than it's ever been. The bad news is it's really easy to do a really kind of so-so job at self-publishing. So, my commitment was I'm going to self-publish this as a professional. So, I was like, so, what would a professional do? Well, they would hire a great designer and they would hire a brilliant editor, and they would be rigorous around the editing process, and they would plan a marketing campaign, and they would execute as best they could on a marketing campaign, and they would lean into other people for support around distribution and ISBN numbers and all the other stuff that I don't really care about, but is really important. And so, I built a team, and I tried to build the best team I could, and I did build the best team because they were awesome, and they all really performed brilliantly. And I was good as kind of a direction setter, and I wrote the book and all of that sort of stuff. And so, this plan, which I had actually just worked, you know, most plans, you know, they're, you know that saying, "the way to make God laugh is to tell her your plans". Well, I mean, I had a plan and I expected it fully to not work as the plan because they never do. But this actually worked exactly the way it worked and better. So, it's pretty exciting.

Whitney Johnson: How many people were on your team of launching this book?

Michael Bungay Stanier: Yeah, so I had a let's call it the production team. So, I had, Peter, my designer, I had Catherine, my editor, I had Judy, my proof editor. I had Jessie from Page Two, who was kind of this essential hub

of this team. Page Two is a consulting company that help people publish self-publishing books. They're kind of this interesting, cutting-edge publishing company. So, Jesse is a kind of coordinator, project manager, strategic thinking partner. You could say that I had Rob and Steve, who are the two major partners around distribution in Canada and the US. And then I had Cara, who's also on the Page Two team for Box of Crayons. I had Shannon, whose job was to execute on the marketing, which was following up and trying to get the book into people's hands. And we had a researcher who found people like journalists and podcasters that we were going to reach out to. I had a researcher who did some research that fed into the book itself.

Whitney Johnson: You had a plan, you had a strategy, you executed against it. And were highly, highly, highly successful. I mean, how, what percentage of books sell more than 300,000 copies? Probably less than half a percent.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Yeah, certainly. At most. I mean, it's, I mean, this is a, Whitney another conversation because I know you and I both had conversations with people who go, I'm going to write a book. And I don't know what you say, but I say, are you sure? Because writing a book is hard and it's miserable and it's lonely and it's almost never successful. I mean, the statistics I've heard, and they feel right to me is 93% of books published sell less than 1000 copies. And when you think of how much work goes into writing a book, that's a lot of work for not very much impact.

Whitney Johnson: So, you don't have to go buy the book, as you were saying. All right. So, Michael, we launched right in. Let's back up for just a moment. You have, roamed the entire British Empire. It would be fascinating to hear your origins, and some of the globe hopping that you've done throughout your life.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, I'm Australian by birth. I grew up in Canberra. If you're looking for a Trivial Pursuit, leg up. Canberra is the little-known national capital of Australia. So, I grew up very happy in Canberra. Awesome parents, good brothers, went to high school there, went to university there, did a BA in literature, which is what I really loved. Struggled through a law degree there and in fact finished my law degree, being sued by one of my law school lecturers for defamation, which kind of put the nail in any, any coffin that might have been about me becoming a lawyer. But what did you do?

Whitney Johnson: Wait, what did you do? What happened?

Michael Bungay Stanier: One of the lecturers was talking about a piece of evidentiary law and the point of law. He, the story he was using to illustrate that legal point was a woman being raped. And there was no particular reason why that story needed to be used to illustrate that point of law. So myself and a few other people kind of made, wanted to make the point that could you come up with a better story because this is distressing to a bunch of people. And the way that all played out was, we went and talked to a dean and the law school about it, and the lecturer decided that there was a defamatory act. And so, it all blew up. And so, what happened for me is actually, I left because I won a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford. And there was this moment I'm sitting in a college, the Middle Common Room at Hertford College at Oxford, and I'm reading the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, and there's a little paragraph about this, me being sued by this lecturer back in, in Australia. And what happened after a year is he dropped the lawsuit. And by that time, we'd all dispersed, and the moment had passed. It was a really, it was a key moment for me in some ways, because for me that felt like an abuse of power by the lecturer. And it felt like a stepping away from your duty by the law school because the law school did nothing about it. They just kind of backed away and went, let's hope this all goes away because it's too hard for us to deal with. And I think that was a dereliction of their duty to mediate or deal with that or address it.

Whitney Johnson: So how do you live your life differently because of that experience that you had in law school?

Michael Bungay Stanier: Well, I am quite driven by fairness as a value, as a, you know, as in a sense of justice in this world. And so, part of what I would hope that my work serves is people who are underserved and people who are not at the top of the power structure. And so, I mean, I mean, this is a bit contradictory. And it's, maybe it's a bit privileged because, look, I am a six-foot three straight, white, overeducated male. So, I have all the

privileges, I have all the benefits of all of that. But there is some part of me that's wired to try and disrupt rather than to be part of the governing structure. You know, my company is called Box of Crayons. And that's...

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, I want to drill down on this a minute because I don't think anybody. So, you just said you're by all accounts privileged top of the power structure. And yet there's something deep inside of you that feels a sense of justice, which is why you're in law school. You realize that you're going up against the power and it could harm you in some way. And you did it anyway. What, was there something that happened for you as a child, or in your experience, that made you feel that way, that you were willing to risk life and limb? And I use that, you know, a little bit tongue in cheek, but not entirely certainly emotional life and limb. What happened? Is it something you learned from your parents? What happened in your life that, something that has become a core value for you?

Michael Bungay Stanier: It's such a good question, and I wish I had an awesome story I could point you to or tell you about, but honestly, it just has felt a part of the wiring that I've always had. I mean, I've, I'm getting a little better at not throwing myself on landmines because, you know, often I get blown up and I don't make that much difference in the world.

Whitney Johnson: So, at the very beginning, you said what it is your company does. Can you say that one more time?

Michael Bungay Stanier: Yeah. We teach ten-minute coaching so managers can build stronger teams and get better results. So, it's all about...

Whitney Johnson: How long did it take you to figure out how to describe what you do?

Michael Bungay Stanier: Oh well, so Box of Crayons has just had its 15th birthday, and we've had this tagline in some version for probably about five years. But we've had the courage to say that's what we do for about a year and a half.

Whitney Johnson: Fantastic. Okay, so you go into a company, and you say, we're going to help you coach your people or teach you how to coach so you can get better results with your team. What are three things that you say to people at the outset?

Michael Bungay Stanier: Well, the starting point is probably having that conversation with the organization to make them to see whether this is going to be useful for them or not. And part of the place where we start is just to say, look, almost certainly you already know about coaching and why coaching is a useful thing for your managers to be doing, because it's probably going to help your engagement, which means you have the good people stick around and it's probably going to help you with your productivity, which means you focus on the stuff that makes a difference. And that's good for your company, and it's good for your the people as well. And we say, and if you're like most people, you've been a bit frustrated by your attempts to make your, your managers be more coach like because everybody gets it intellectually. But it's pretty hard to shift your behavior because the behavior change that we're talking about, Whitney for us comes down to this. Can you stay curious a little bit longer? Can you rush to action and advice, giving just a little bit more slowly? And most people are advice giving maniacs. You know, they've been they've been practically...

Whitney Johnson: Guilty as charged. Absolutely.

Michael Bungay Stanier: I know. I wish, I wish I could claim to have, you know, purified myself of advice giving, but I so have not. And in fact, most people don't even realize how wired they are to leap to solutions and leap to action and lead to advice giving. And of course, there's a place for that. I'm not saying never give anybody advice ever again. I am saying that it is a massively overdeveloped muscle, and staying curious a little bit longer is an undeveloped muscle. And so, that's the starting point, which is really the starting point is let me, this is a great question and you're getting me excited.

Whitney Johnson: Yep. Go.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, the first thing to say to managers, because, you know, managers are sitting in a room with us and they're like, I don't know why I'm here. There's another crazy HR initiative. And really, we're saying to them, look, first of all, we're not going to turn you into a coach, because actually most managers don't want to be a coach. They just want to do the best they can by their team and by themselves and get home and see their family. We're going to help you be more coach like, which is just be curious a little bit longer, rush to action and advice just a little bit more slowly. The second is we're going to show you how you can do this in ten minutes or less, because we know that the biggest reason you're like, this is why I don't coach.

Michael Bungay Stanier: I don't have time for this stuff. So, if you can't do it in ten minutes or less, you don't have time to coach. Thirdly, we go, look, this is not about adding to what you already do. This is about transforming what you currently do, because we know you don't have any room to add anything to what you're already doing because you're already crazy busy. And fourthly, we say normally when coaching gets talked about, they talk about how good this is going to be for the people who are about to be coached. And that's true. It is good for them. And they talk about how good this is for the organization because of an increase in engagement and productivity. And that's also true. But to the poor Joe Slow manager, they go and we're sorry about that. But you just have to work harder. Here's more obligation for you. And the fourth point we make to them is we can make your life better by being more coachlike, because we can show you how to work less hard but have more impact. So, what we're doing, Whitney is trying to be really manager centric in this kind of teaching around coaching, to say we're starting from the point of, we've got to make this good for you and remove the barriers you have to being more coach like, okay.

Whitney Johnson: So, let's do this right now. Let's do it live. Let's have a simulation.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Okay, I love it.

Whitney Johnson: So, I am a manager and I have got a person on my team who is at the top of their learning curve, the top of their S curve, and they want to go do something new and they've plateaued. They're going to start getting complacent or bored or some combination or they're going to leave. So, I need, I know I need to let them move, but I really don't want to. And so, I'm this manager and I'm trying to deal with this. Let's role play and have you coach me through this.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, I'd start off with the kick start question, which is the first question we talk about in the book. I go, so Whitney, what's on your mind?

Whitney Johnson: You know, I've got this. I've got this guy so talented; he's starting to plateau. He really wants to do something different. He feels like he's plateauing. I feel like he's doing a fantastic job, and I don't want to lose him because of the productivity of my team. It is going to drop. I'm worried that we're going to hit our numbers. And yet if I don't let him try something new inside of our organization, I'm afraid he's going to leave. So, I'm kind of concerned about talent retention right now.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Got it. So, what's happening is you've got a bunch of things going on, you're throwing out. Some of them are challenges, some of them are kind of potential solutions. And what's happening to the person on the other side of this conversation normally is they're like, all right, what do I know about talent retention? What tips can I give you? What advice can I give you? What's you know, what solutions can I offer up right away? And I can feel all that coming up. And I know a bit about that myself.

Whitney Johnson: So, that's your advice. That's, what did you call it?

Michael Bungay Stanier: I call it the advice monster.

Whitney Johnson: The advice monster. Okay. So, the advice monster wants to come out, but you're not going to be an advice monster. What are you going to do?

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, I'm going to ask what I would call the focus question. Because at the moment we've got this kind of scattering of stuff going on. And truth be told, I don't really know what the problem is yet. So I'm going to ask you, so Whitney, what's the real challenge here for you?

Whitney Johnson: I'm worried about hitting my numbers if I let this person do something now.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Got it. So, there's that concern about hitting your numbers. Get that? What else? What else is a challenge here for you?

Whitney Johnson: I feel a little bit almost betrayed in a way, because, you know, I've. I've gone out on the line for this person. I've really developed them. I've given them all these opportunities, and now they want to leave. And it feels to me like they're abandoning me. And I feel a little bit like sort of this mix of sadness and betrayal and abandonment and, you know, just kind of this combination.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Anger?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, anger, a combination of things. Yeah, I hear that.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Let me ask you one other time. What else is a challenge here for you?

Whitney Johnson: I think that's it. Yeah, I think that's it. Those are the main things.

Michael Bungay Stanier: That's great. So, what's already happened? If we kind of pull back in a little metacommentary here is already the conversation has shifted because it shifted away from talking about that person to now talking about you. Right. And part of the magic around that was I just asked, what's the real challenge here for you? And with the for you? The spotlight swings from the problem to the person dealing with the problem. So immediately becomes more personal, a little more vulnerable. And people will have heard that because now we're talking about what you're up against rather than that person and what they're doing the way that question is constructed. And remember, I just asked it effectively three times. I said, what's the real challenge here for you and what else and what else? I'm not asking, what's the challenge? I asked, what's the real challenge? And that that helped you focus. And then I went, what's the real challenge for you? And that made it more personal. And of course, there was that moment when I asked it the third time, and there was that silence, you know, so I don't know what three seconds of silence, four seconds of silence as you kind of sat there and tried to figure out what was going on and what that often does to the person on the other side of the conversation is make them extremely anxious.

Michael Bungay Stanier: You know, they're like, oh my God, it's silence. And I'm not. Should I fill the silence? Is the question a bad question? What should I do? And they often will jump in and fix it and fill the silence. But I know that that's just part of the thinking process, and my job is to hold the space as best I can so that you can work through whatever your question is. And in fact, the third time you went, there is nothing. There is no else. And I'm like, that's cool. That's not a failure. That just means we've explored this a little bit a bit further, so we can just lean into this one more time. So, it's like, okay, so you've talked about worried about hitting your numbers. You've talked about a sense of betrayal. Let me ask you kind of to really focus our conversation out of all of that. Now what feels like the real challenge here for you?

Whitney Johnson: I think the real challenge is so, so my feeling is of kind of sadness or anger. You know, I can, I'll have to figure out how to deal with that. That's kind of my thing. I think the bigger issue from a business standpoint is how I'm trying to make sure that I, I've got to manage up to my own boss and my, my boss and my boss's boss are looking at me saying, all right, you've got to deliver, you've got this plan. And if you if you lose your ringer, you know your best player, then how are you able to deliver on that plan? And so, what I'm trying to figure out is, okay, I really think this person is terrific and I want them to stay. And I and more importantly, I want them to be happy. So, I want them to jump to do something new. But how do I manage letting them jump and at the same time be able to do accomplish what I have committed to do with my boss and my boss's boss? So how do I figure that out?

Michael Bungay Stanier: So that's beautiful. And can you see how we're just not really talking about that other person at all now? Now it's about.

Whitney Johnson: Correct.

Michael Bungay Stanier: And so, if I'd been off, my instinct was of course oh great talent management issue. I'm going to tell you a whole bunch of advice around that. And now what will have been happening is I would have been busy solving the wrong problem. And honestly, my advice probably wouldn't have been that useful for you anyway, so I'd have been offering slightly crappy advice to solve the wrong problem, which would mean that I've just been wasting everybody's time as part of this conversation. But now you've got to this point of real clarity about I've got to let them go. I've got to manage my feelings around that. But, you know, there's part of me is betrayed, but part of me is happy because they've got potential, and I've got to hit my targets. I've got to manage my own boss around that.

Whitney Johnson: Yep.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, if managing your own boss is the kind of where you want to start now, what's the real challenge for you in that.

Whitney Johnson: Ah. Got it. Yeah. All right. Yeah. So, the real. Oh sorry. Go ahead.

Michael Bungay Stanier: As to the people listening in to our conversation, what you've noticed so far is I've used a grand total of three questions in this conversation. I asked, what's on your mind? I've asked, what's the real challenge here for you? I've asked, and what else? And that's it. I've just used those in combination, but it's helping us in a pretty efficient way. Like less than three minutes so far. Shift the conversation and get into a juicy conversation.

Whitney Johnson: And I love that question. And what else, that's like emblazoned in my brain and what else. So okay, so let's finish playing this out. So, the real issue is how do I get buy in and sell this to my boss and etc. So, what would you say to me next?

Michael Bungay Stanier: Well, it sounds like you've got clear on what the real challenge is. Is that, does that feel true? Does it feel like you got clear on that?

Whitney Johnson: It does. Absolutely.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, my bet is that you've got some ideas on how to do that. So, what's your first idea on how you would actually do that.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So great question. I think my first idea on how to do that is to be able to frame this conversation. And be able to talk, sit down and talk to my boss and say, look, you know, we're playing a long game here. We want to. Yeah, this is where the retention piece would come in and we're playing a long game. We know that we want to have the best talent at our company. We also know that, you know, the best talent is going to need new challenges. And so, one of the things we've got to figure out is this person needs to move. And we think this is going to help the organization over the long term. It may not help me, but it will help the overall company. So here are some solutions and things that I'm thinking through, how we can fill in that gap in the near term. I wanted to run them by you and get your thoughts on how we would do that, and also suggest to you that there are 2 or 3 people that I think are kind of raw and up and coming talent, and I'd love to see them developed and get your thoughts on this game plan. And how we would do that.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, this is awesome. So again, what most people would have done when you go, I think we figured out what the real challenge is. It's about managing expectations of your boss. They'd want to jump in going so, let me give you some ideas around how you do that. But because one of our principles, we have three principles around coaching Whitney it's: be lazy, be curious, be often. Being curious we've talked about because that's about can you stay curious a little bit longer? Being often is about recognizing that any interaction

with somebody can be a bit more coach like, because it's just about can you be curious a bit more? But being lazy is what you're seeing. Me role model here, which is who's doing all the work in this conversation? It's not me. What content have I added to this conversation at the moment? Not a bit. Now, that's not because I don't have content, because I do have ideas, but I am self-managing myself and my need to add value in a conversation by going if I can get Whitney to do this work herself. A- she owns her own ideas, so she owns the insight, she owns the ideas. It means it's much more likely she'll actually do it. B- she's going to have better ideas because she actually knows what's going on. She knows her boss. She knows the person; she knows the raw talent. She's actually going to have some smart ideas around that. C- her brain is changing. She is actually becoming more confident and more confident and more self-assured and more autonomous because she's doing this work rather than being told what to do. And I am still keeping my ears out for a potentially a place where I could add value.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, you know, Whitney we could carry on this conversation, I could go, I love that first idea about what to do, what else could you do? And Whitney would come up with some other things that she could do because honestly, she's thinking about it and she's figuring it out. And what I might do at the end is I might go, look, I love all of those ideas. I'm right behind you. Let me suggest one other thing that you might do. You might also do this. And now I'm giving her that support. I'm offering up my own idea. I'm not doing the normal boss thing, because as soon as a boss offers up an idea, it sucks the oxygen out of the room, because everybody knows that your boss's idea and I'm making air quote signs here. Your boss's idea is, in fact, an order. I mean, everybody knows that. It's like, let's not kid ourselves. And if you're the boss, don't think that your ideas aren't being interpreted. They're telling me what to do because they are. So, what I'm doing is I'm resisting as long as possible to share my ideas so that it's just one other idea. And we've got all of Whitney's good ideas out of her brain. So in like four minutes, we've gone from talking about this guy leaving to actually shifting the topic completely, getting clear on the real thing, which is I've got to manage my boss's expectation, generating your own ideas on that, me adding a little bit at the end, doing it in four minutes. I barely did anything other than use four questions or three questions and you go away going. That was an amazing conversation.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly. So, let's go to the very last question that you're going to ask me, because I know what it is.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Perfect.

Whitney Johnson: Our conversations now wrapping up, what are you going to say to me?

Michael Bungay Stanier: And I know that my job as a manager or a leader or a colleague is to help my people learn, and they don't really learn when you tell them stuff and they don't learn when they do stuff, they learn when they have a moment to reflect. So, what I'd say is like, so Whitney, that was great. I love that we've had this, figured this out in five minutes or less. But before you go, what was most useful or most valuable for you from this conversation?

Whitney Johnson: I love that question so much. But I'm going to pretend like I'm in the role. I think the thing that was most valuable for me is realizing that I can solve this problem, that I need to think through how to frame this with my boss, because it is a manageable sort of strategic conversation that I can have that will actually make me look good, because I'll show that I'm thinking strategically, but also that there's some element of this person wanting to jump to a new S-curve that makes me feel kind of sad. And even though I'm happy for them, I do feel like they're leaving me. And I think that that was an important thing for me to realize so that I can manage it and deal with it because it is manageable. But it's something to be aware of because it can kind of muck things up a little bit if I don't manage it. So that's an important insight for me.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Beautiful. And so, a few things to comment on are kind of that meta level. Again. The first is if I, if I'm trying to really strengthen the relationship, what I would then do is I would share what was most useful for me out of that conversation as the coach, as the coach. So, it felt like an exchange of information and exchange of insight and vulnerabilities. What I would celebrate is insight about what worked for you. And that's great because I'm seeing you learn, but also, I'm getting feedback. So, I'm like, oh, next time I'm going to try and do this again, because it's obviously this worked for Whitney. And I might think to myself, oh, you know, I was kind of feeling all sort of awkward when she went into that I'm feeling sad and betrayed and I'm like, oh, I don't

know how to deal with that. But actually, that, just that recognition and that speaking those feelings was helpful for her. So, the feedback for me is, Michael, deal with your own discomfort, because when people bring that up, it's often a useful part of the process for them. So, I'm getting feedback and learning from myself.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So super fascinating. Thank you for letting me put you on the spot. I suspect that people listening are going to find this super helpful, and I love how our two worlds are colliding, because obviously, one of the conversations that I want people to have is, okay, if you're going to have people stay at your company, you've got to allow them to jump to a new S-curve. But it's really, really hard to do. And so, I wanted to do this of having you help people think through, like, what can that conversation look like as you're trying to coach someone through? So, I have two more questions on that. So yeah, I was the manager. Are you in that particular instance, were you being a coach from the outside, or were you potentially even being my boss? Who were you?

Michael Bungay Stanier: I'm just a person you're talking to.

Whitney Johnson: Okay.

Michael Bungay Stanier: For me, a big part of what this is about is let's not over fetishize the coach.

Whitney Johnson: Got it.

Michael Bungay Stanier: You know, Peter Block, who I mentioned before, one of my heroes when he wrote a blurb for my first book. And this is such a great moment for me. He went, look, coaching is not a profession, but it's a way of being with each other.

Whitney Johnson: I love that.

Michael Bungay Stanier: I do too. I didn't even know I believed that, but when he wrote that, I was like, oh my God, that's what I think I believe. And so, a big part of the driver for, for me and for *Box of Crayons* is how do we make being more coach like something accessible to everybody?

Whitney Johnson: It's a way of being with each other. And you know what else is so interesting about your process is that I just interviewed Donald Miller, who wrote *Storybrand*, and I was thinking the way *The Coaching Habit* coaches or this way of being is you're allowing the person that you're talking to be the hero and you're being the guide. And I think that this desire that we have to over advise guilty, guilty, guilty please, everybody who's listening that I've given way too much advice to please forgive me and know that I'll probably do it again. And so, you'll need to forgive me again. But it's this idea of I'm allowing and you're allowing the person that we're talking to this way of being to be the hero in their own story. And we for a moment have this privileged position of being their guide and they're being vulnerable enough to share, share what's happening with them and what they're trying to figure out with us, and asking us to give them a safe space to think through that.

Michael Bungay Stanier: And the thing to say, just to reassure people, is that you do get to share your advice and your ideas. You just wait. You're just waiting a little bit longer to decide what's actually most useful for you to share, and to allow them to do as much of the journey themselves. Because the more they walk the path themselves, the better they are for it. And the second thing is to say that you're the guide, and I love that you're using that language, Whitney, because it means that when you see the person walking for the edge of the cliff, you are allowed to intervene. You are allowed to say, yeah, don't do that, because that would be terrible, because, you know, if you, if in our coaching conversation and you go on. So, I'm going to go into my manager and I'm going to resign because that will show him for doing this and that I might be going, well, let's talk that through. Let's imagine what and, you know, we'd find a way to kind of come up with a conclusion that that's not such a great idea after all. So, it's not about giving up control. It's not about not having your people's back. It's about can you slow down the rush to action and advice. It's not never give action, never move to advice. It's uh, or vice versa. Never give advice, never move to action. It's about can you slow it down? You know you still maintain control, but you're giving up the in the moment control to increase engagement whilst still controlling the arc of the conversation.

Whitney Johnson: Right. Love it. How did you decide and how did you discover this process and that you that you had a gift in it, a passion for becoming a coach? How did this come about?

Michael Bungay Stanier: Well, it kind of taps into a little bit around what we where we started this conversation, which is I got annoyed by the way coaching was becoming an elite experience. You know, you're like you either have to be a senior person in an organization, or you typically have to be a fairly wealthy, middle-class person to get a coach. And I was like, how do I democratize coaching? How do I, you know, make coaching not a profession, but a way of being with each other? That's the kind of the base motivation there, which is, look, I think coaching can spread. So how do I do that? So, then part of it's around how do you make coaching accessible. And that kind of connects a bit to where we were before around. So, what are all the assumptions people have around coaching? That might not be true. And then we might be able to strip away so that they see that coaching is really simple. I mean, stay curious a little bit longer.

Whitney Johnson: But Michael, did you grow up thinking you were going to be a coach? Like when was the moment that you discovered. And I know that you said coaching is a way of being, but in your particular instance, you do make a living. You know, you put food on your table as a coach. At what point in time did you sort of say, this is what I'm going to do, like, this is who I'm going to be. This is how I'm going to put food on the table.

Whitney Johnson: Well, I figured out that I was good at listening as a teenager because I would be the person in the car with my friend at 2 a.m. listening to them talk about their angsty teenage life, and I'd be listening more than I'd be sharing. And I remember even as a 16-year-old going, well, I love that I can do this, but I wish I knew what I was doing. Is this good? Should I be doing something else? What do I do when somebody's talking like this? And so, at university, both in Australia originally and then in England, I joined and was trained for kind of youth suicide hotlines. So, I did some basic counseling training. And that's kind of more around this process of, you know, being able to listen and being able to take a conversation a little deeper through questioning. But what I did when I moved to the States and I moved to Boston from London, is I actually hired my first coach because I was like, I should try this out because it looks like something's happening here. Whilst I wouldn't have said it was a brilliant coaching relationship, it showed me that there was something here that I wanted to pursue and so I did. I was trained as a coach and I built a coaching practice, but actually then I dismantled my coaching practice because for me, the greatest fulfillment I get in the work I do is actually not by coaching people directly myself, but it's about being a teacher around how to be more coach like. So now I don't I don't actually coach anybody.

Whitney Johnson: So, you disrupted yourself.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Yeah. And part of it's that quest to the language I use is to do more great work. So, what's the work that has most impact and the work that has most meaning for you? And I'm like, you know what? There are lots of brilliant people who love coaching and can be great direct, 1 to 1 coaches. I'm pretty good, but I wouldn't have said that I was totally brilliant at this. But I can write a book like nobody else can write, and I can design a program like nobody else can design. So let me put my highest skills to their best use.

Whitney Johnson: Any major along this way, over the let's call it the last ten years. Any major failure or hiccup that perhaps in the moment certainly gave you a lot of sadness, maybe even a little bit of shame, because shame is one of those creepy crawly things that we all struggle with. That as you've dealt through it and walked through it, it's turned out to become formative in many ways for you.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Yeah. So, the first thing I would say is I am lucky to be wired around being very resilient around failure, because often when stuff goes wrong, like, you know, being sued by a law lecturer for defamation or being banned from my high school graduation for something. Part of where I go is...I know all these juicy stories.

Whitney Johnson: Can you just say really quickly what you were banned from high school graduation for? Sorry, I have to ask because everybody listening is going to want to know what it is. So, you have to tell us.

Speaker6: We'd been told as a, as a graduating class, we weren't allowed to do anything because our headmaster's retirement year and the class beforehand had caused havoc. I mean, they brought in a flock of sheep into the middle of the school. They wrote rude words in weed killer. So, like three, six weeks after they'd left, you know, various leaders appeared on the on the fields. They filled all the locks up with glue. I mean, they kind of actually cost the school a lot of money. So, we were like, you're not allowed to do anything at all. And of course you've heard about my relationship with power. So I go, well, let's see what we can do then. And all we did, and it was very benign, was we went in, and we filled the chapel with helium balloons. So, it's like, I know it's like the most benign thing, but we just wanted to make a distinct point that we'd been in, and we'd done something, and we snuck past the security guards and all this. Anyway, it turns out we hadn't successfully snuck past all the security guards, so a bunch of us were hauled off and banned from our high school graduation. Another moment of misuse of power, in my opinion, by the school. So, you know, there's another thing that...

Whitney Johnson: Wow, what an amazing thread and theme that you have. And I still, I still believe that there is some incident in your life that's kind of fueling the sense of social justice.

Michael Bungay Stanier: I have to figure that out.

Whitney Johnson: It's a fascinating question because it seems there's, this runs so deep within you and it's so powerful and so, so much a guiding principle for you. So. All right. So okay. You don't get to deflect. I still want you to answer the question. So last ten years.

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, one of the great successes that we've had at Box of Crayons and one of the hardest things that Box of Crayons is my wife was my business partner for six years, I think, at Box of Crayons. She retired a year ago, at the end of 2016, and we had so many rough starts. It's so hard to work with the person you're married to because you know a part of why you love them and why they're so brilliant for you is they also can push all your buttons like nobody else. And partly working with somebody actually uncovers new lines of power that need to be dealt with and addressed. And we, it took us like four false starts before we finally got into the groove of working together. And we worked brilliantly for five years. Really, without her work, we would have never have kind of got over a couple of humps, which are part of the, you know, the S-curve. You know, we hit plateaus. And her coming in was part of what allowed us to get back onto the next S-curve, which is fantastic. But the last year was really hard because, we were growing fast. We'd kind of gone beyond both of our capacities to manage this, and we didn't do a great job at managing that, both kind of as stewards of Box of Crayons, but also as two people in a long-term relationship. Learning from that and processing that is, is still going for us. So, that was hard.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, so, what's one thing because it's still fairly new, so you probably haven't made all the meaning out of it that you will over time. Is there one thing that you've already sort of said, okay, I learned that, and we learned that. And so, what's one thing that comes to mind?

Michael Bungay Stanier: So, one piece is around to understand as a leader, when it's time to kind of ensure to put the money on your bet, you know, you got to make the call. And what, what has happened to us is we kind of got a little bit stuck around my vision, which was around growth, and her vision, which is around, let's keep it at this size because it's working just fine.

Whitney Johnson: Oh wow. So, there's natural tension of growth versus stability played out in the personalities of your marriage. Fascinating.

Michael Bungay Stanier: And that is that is actually how we play out as personalities. She's more wired to say no. And I'm more wired to say yes. Yeah. I'm like, let's try it. Why not? Let's go for it. She's like, why don't we not try it and do the thing that we know works? And that can be...

Whitney Johnson: Which is why you're a good match.

Michael Bungay Stanier: Yeah, it's a really healthy thing most of the time. And occasionally it's kind of messy and I would have said that in retrospect, what I would want to do is make a cleaner, bolder decision and say, I'm

making this decision, this is the implications and now let's figure out how we manage that, as opposed to kind of smudged it and gone, yeah, we'll try we'll try and figure out a middle way here. And there is no middle way.

Whitney Johnson: Fascinating. So, you can only be at the low end of the S curve so long where you're iterating. And at some point, you have to make a decision, lock and load and decide to scale, scale that decision. Fascinating. That's a good lesson. That's a really good lesson. And your and your marriage is still intact. So that's even better. Yay!

Michael Bungay Stanier: In two weeks' time, we celebrate the 25th anniversary of our first date. So that's awesome.

Whitney Johnson: Congratulations. Yay! That's so wonderful. I think that there is something when you're able to work through those things and you have this laboratory, it's an amazing, amazing growth opportunity for a marriage. But as for us as individuals. Michael, this has been so fun. It went in lots of unexpected directions, but an absolute delight. I really appreciate your taking the time to be interviewed, and I know our listeners are going to love hearing what you have to say.

Michael Bungay Stanier: It was so good. Thank you, Whitney.

I resonated with what Michael said about getting into coaching because he was annoyed it was becoming this experience for the elite. Coaching cannot be reserved for the ivory tower. We've said it before on this show and we will say it again, everyone needs a coach. *The Coaching Habit* is a guidebook to democratizing this movement, written by the guy who used to listen to his friend's problem at 2 a.m. in high school. Coaching is for everyone. If, after today's episode, you're a little more coaching curious than you were before, the first step is laying down that foundation of education. After all, if you don't believe in what you're saying, if you haven't seen it in action, your clients won't believe you either. At Disruption Advisors, our Smart Growth Certification provides the resources, training, and common language you need to support yourself in your own coaching habit. Visit [the Disruption advisors.com/certification](https://www.disruptionadvisors.com/certification) to learn more and register for an upcoming [informational webinar](#). For more Michael Bungay Stanier, there's [episode 151](#) on learning to tame the advice monster on the underlying motivations behind becoming a coach. There's [episode 308](#) with Carole Kaufman, and for a dose of why we coach, I'd point you to [episode 323](#) with Shirzad Chamine. Thank you again to Michael Bungay Stanier 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.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.