

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 300: TOM PETERS

Welcome to the 300th episode of the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. Since our first episode was released on September 21, 2016, with Michelle McKenna on disrupting the NFL, we have been having conversations with brilliant people from around the world in order to provide you, our listener, with strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. And we're celebrating 300 episodes because of you, because you are here. The heart and soul of engagement is listening, and you are listening. It's the basis of respect, kindness, thoughtfulness, true collaboration, and true partnership. And it's an individual skill that you can develop. I know you will find value in listening to this special episode and delightful conversation with my dear friend and high priest of management thinking, Tom Peters. For over 40 years, Tom has been simplifying management concepts and espousing the virtue that what truly matters most is people. A blinding flash of the obvious, maybe. Since writing his first book *In Search of Excellence*, which he coauthored in 1982, Tom has delivered over 2500 speeches in 67 countries to over 5 million people, and his books have sold over 10 million copies worldwide. On this episode, Tom and I talk about what he's learned through the years and his latest book, *A Compact Guide to Excellence*. He's boiled down his message, reduced it to its essence, and made it so that you can consume it over a cup of hot chocolate. Enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** You've written a new book. It's called *Tom Peters Compact Guide to Excellence*. It's co-authored with Nancye Green. And it is really, truly a work of art. Why did you decide to write this book?

**Tom Peters:** It's my 20th book. I'm addicted. At least the last ten have been my last book. So that's my smart aleck response. Two things, A: I have written, until this, 19 books. I would love you to buy all 19 so that I can have the royalties 19 times over. But the real truth is I've said exactly the same thing 19 times in a row. Put people first. Et cetera, etc. And this is just one more time. And until my last or next, the last breath, I'm going to keep at it. And

that's really, really the driving force. Then what happened this time, which was completely unexpected and has been a major life joy, is I did get connected with my co-author, who should really be the primary author, Nancye Green. Who, is on everybody's list of top 100 designers in the world. And in addition to being a great designer, she has things on her CV, like she was chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Parsons School. She's an amazing person, and I have been yelling and screaming about design for probably 15 or 20 years, but I didn't really know what I meant until this came along. The book is the design, the big Kirkus Reviews, people who looked at it early on, and we got a review that said pretty good material, and its objet d'art. And I think that makes a difference because it was to simplify the message, to boil it down. You can indeed read it cover to cover over a single cup of coffee. But my hope is that people will pick two or three of these quite extraordinary commentaries and spend days on them.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, that's what we're about to do. So, I picked out a number of the commentaries that I would love to go through with you, and if you have your book in front of you, we're going to do a little bit of story time if you'll go to page 245. One of the things that I thought was really powerful is your piece about listening. And so, if you would. So, actually, 246, and what I would love for you to do is just read some of this out loud and then talk about it for a moment.

**Tom Peters:** Sure. Listening is the ultimate mark of respect. Listening is the heart and soul of engagement. Listening is the heart and soul of kindness. Listening is the heart and soul of thoughtfulness. Listening is the basis for true collaboration. Listening is the basis for true partnership. Listening is a developable individual skill, etc. I can keep going if you would like.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, actually, so, just for our listeners, there's about ten more of these. And what I would love for you to do, Tom, is talk for a moment about when you discovered how important this was.

**Tom Peters:** Wow. The annoying thing to be working with you, Whitney, is you ask such good questions. I really hate to give a dry answer, but to a significant extent, it is a dry answer. I did not have an epiphany where I listened to somebody in my life turned upside down. I happened to have, though I don't have it hanging on the wall. Praise the Lord. A Ph.D. in organizational psychology. And I spent years studying this stuff and listening and engagement. I'm trained as an engineer. I kind of look at these things intellectually. I mean, I totally believe it emotionally. But listening works, and you can demonstrate it in a 100 or 1000 hardnosed pieces of research. So, it's a, it's a fact. It's a research-driven fact. Given my background, I always like to start sentences with it's a research-driven fact. Number two is I watched a good friend's, this was 15 years ago, relationship really fall apart. And it was hardly an intellectual breakthrough. But somehow, for some reason, it struck me. It was the, it was the lack of disposition toward listening. I'm an interrupter, but this was interrupting on a before you've gotten the first three words of the sentence out of your mouth. And there's another quote that's in there to Mark Twain, quote, which I love, "Never miss a good chance to shut up." Oh, and the other one here, Whitney, I love this. This was not a breakthrough thing, but I loved it. And this was, I use Twitter a lot, as you know, and got into a listening discussion. And a woman who's in a managerial position said, well, my secret is, before I go into every meeting with a pen, I write on my hand as big letters as I can LISTEN. And I love that. I thought that was fantastic.

**Whitney Johnson:** I think the reason I wanted you to mention or talk about that is because, as you know, and I know in a lot of the 360s that we will do in coaching is that we will find that one of the things that people want leaders to work on is to listen more. To be willing to be not. And sometimes we think of listening as just, well, I heard what you said, but what you're really saying is I need you to ingest what I said to you, and I need to feel like you heard what I said to you. And even more powerful would be if I feel like you are going to do something different because of what I said to you. And it's so, it's so powerful, and yet we struggle to do it. And I, I think part of it I recently interviewed Annie Duke and she, the poker player, and she cited some research that says the smarter we are, the less likely we are to change our minds. And so, oftentimes what happens is people who get into positions of prominence are pretty smart, and so, there's less likely to change their minds. So, sort of what got them there, as Marshall likes to Marshall Goldsmith likes to say, is that "what got you here is not going to get you there because what's going to get you there is your ability to listen and be willing to respond to the people that you're talking to."

**Tom Peters:** There was an interesting piece of research. And these were, again, hard-nosed psychological researchers. They sat in on a meeting, and you were one of the attendees. And I happen to be, since I'm going to say a bad thing, I happen to be the boss. And afterwards, they and they recorded everything, every mark, and so on.

Afterwards, they asked the boss how many times he had been interrupted and how many times he had interrupted someone. And he said he was being generous. He said, Well, I've got to admit it. I did interrupt a couple of times, and I don't know. I was interrupted seven, eight, nine times, something like that. And you know what the next sentence out of my mouth is going to be? It was a 180 flip. He had, in fact, interrupted ten times and been interrupted once or twice at the most. And again, very unsurprising. But yeah, no, I mean, I'm glad you started our conversation with this. There is literally, literally nothing more important in anything, home, work, wherever.

**Whitney Johnson:** And to go back to one of the things you said in the very beginning of the conversation is that listening is the heart and soul of engagement. So, that flip that you were talking about is 80% engagement. Listening can lead to that engagement.

**Tom Peters:** Yeah, there's just there's absolutely. Well, and the other one. And back in a way to Marshall's point about IQ or indirectly IQ. I try my best to be a good listener, comma, but I still spend half my listening time working on my response. And that, in a way, is the toughest part of it. Toughest part of all. I beat myself up. I pound on my forehead. I do whatever. But when you start saying something because of the kind of mind I suspect both of us have, I'm working on the response instead of actually listening to what you're saying. And that to me, in a way, personally, that's the most dangerous part of all.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, before we wrap on this piece, then one potential word of advice to our listeners would be one way to listen is to allow a person to say something. And then say and just say to them. You know what, I'm not going to respond immediately because I want to really listen to what you're saying and I'm going to take a beat and I'm going to think about it, and I'm going to respond. And if we let people know in advance that we're going to do that, then that gives us the space. And we don't feel pressured that we need to respond immediately. But it also lets them know, here's exactly what's happening, and then that person could really feel like you are listening to them because there's going to be more pauses, which we don't tend to like, but that's going to lead to a greater understanding and in-depth conversation.

**Tom Peters:** Yeah, I don't know whether you made that one up on the spot or whether you've used that, but I think what you said is brilliant. One other thing I've got to say, because I always like to give a plug for Susan Cain's book, *Quiet*. Introverts tend to be better listeners than extroverts. Full stop. And as Ms. Cain's book said, which really is so tragic. Extroverts are seen as more intelligent, more physically attractive. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And it's just, I remember when I read the book, and I said this to her before. I said, and I will not use inappropriate language. I said, Susan, you called me a blank 100 times in that book, and I don't appreciate it. And it was just like being slapped around because it was, it was so true, so accurate.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. Let's go to the next quote. I love for you to go to page 221. This one I'm going to read so that you can think about formulating your response while I read it. So, this is from Robert Altman, and it's under the heading of *Whoever Tries the Most Stuff and Makes the Most Mistakes, Wins*. And here's what Robert Altman, who is a film director, said, "We normally shoot a few takes, even if the first one was terrific because what I'm really hoping for is a mistake. I think that most of the really great moments in my films were not planned. They were things that occurred, and we thought, Wow, look at that. That's something we want to keep. That's where you hit the truth button with the audience." Thoughts.

**Tom Peters:** Well, it's not very brilliant, but my whole innovation story, I always say, is W.T.T.M.S.W.-whoever tries the most stuff wins. Or the expanded version, which is whoever tries the most stuff and screws the most stuff up, the fastest wins. So, the whole idea of mistakes being, post hoc the basis for. And I think I think it's true. I'm trying to think if translating it into the, into the world of writing. Well, I'm not sure I'm not going to go there. I'm getting distracted for one reason.

**Whitney Johnson:** Why?

**Tom Peters:** Because also in the book is my one of my top three favorite quotes of all, which happens to be Altman. You may remember he said, "The role of the director is to create a space where actors and actresses can become more than they have ever been before, more than they have ever dreamed of being." I have read that 723 times, and it brings tears every single time. It's just it's so lovely.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, these quotes, you love them. Is there an experience that brought these quotes to life for you? What's interesting about that is a director's job is to help the actor see themselves in a way that they hadn't seen themselves before. And yet what's interesting if you connect those two quotes is that he's looking for them to make a mistake. And it is in that mistake that they reveal, potentially their best self. And so, that's interesting.

**Tom Peters:** I think that's a wonderful translation. I will stand here in applause. I think it's, it's yeah, yeah, he is giving them permission to try any damn thing that comes to mind at some level. And the odds are that there will be a pleasant surprise.

**Whitney Johnson:** Any experience that comes to mind for you around that.

**Tom Peters:** I mean, God only knows. I've got a list of mistakes that we could spend the next 5 hours on.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, but, but that's. That's the beauty, share a mistake. Something that you're like, okay, yeah. This. This sort of revealed that for me.

**Tom Peters:** Yeah. I guess you could call it a mistake. I tend to be very, very, very focused on what I'm doing. And. Don't believe in days off. One of my neighbors here is a woman by the name of Rebecca Eaton, and she brought Downton Abbey to the US, among many other things. And she got to know me a little bit. I don't know what we were talking about, but she said to me some months ago, she said, I got a question for you. And I said, okay, Rebecca. She said, Have you ever taken a day off? And I said, Not that, not that I can remember. But to your point, on those occasions where I really have taken a day off mentally, the pleasant surprises have come one after another. I mean, you know, to the this is being far too personal. I don't know. Some days off.

**Whitney Johnson:** No, it's awesome. Go, go, go. Tell us, first of all, you name dropped Rebecca Eaton. So, we're all like, wow, you know Rebecca Eaton, but continue.

**Tom Peters:** But you know what it triggered. What I triggered was I was visiting a friend, Alan Webber, who was the co-founder of Fast Company and is now the mayor of Santa Fe, I think. At any rate, I was visiting Alan and his wife and we got to talking about some of this stuff. And at some point, I said, Well, my mother drove me to an extraordinary degree from the age of five. She looked at me with this grin. She did not know me very well. She said, No, Tom. I suspect it was more like three. And it was really, it was. It was, oh, my God. It really, it really is true. It's and, and not always with great outcomes. It would be nice to take a deep breath every now and then, but it is not in my, in my genes to do that. And then as I said to somebody and then on top of that, for God's sakes, I was raised as a Presbyterian, and we're never allowed to have a bad day, by definition.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I know we're kind of going all over the place. But one thing I think is interesting, as you said, that you don't take a day off. And yet I remember the last time we had you on the podcast, which was back in 2018, you said that you had taken a year off and just to read because you felt like you had you needed to educate yourself. And while that's not taking, it's not doing nothing. I would argue that that is a step back. You did take a break, and you took time off to recharge and to regenerate. So, I want to I know you're like, yes, I never take a break and, you know, probably a workaholic.

**Tom Peters:** No. No. No. It's a very fair comment. Yeah. I mean, I what I felt was particularly relative to the technology stuff, that I'm never going to be able to get the equivalent of a Stanford Ph.D. in computer science, but that I really just had to spend some serious time taking a look at what was going on in the world of technology where I felt I had fallen hopelessly behind and not in terms of using the computer, but more of the kinds of things we're now talking about, and that is the impact of social media on the planet, etc.

**Whitney Johnson:** Jumping to the next comment, if you go to page 112. If you can just read those two pages and then I have a question for you.

**Tom Peters:** Okay. Boards 50% women within 36 months. Executive teams. 50%. Women within 36 months. Quit screwing around.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, here's my question. I think that pretty much any decent human being who will read this, they will say, yes, Tom, you are right. And yet they don't do it. So, what do you have an experience where you were having a conversation with a CEO or a board chair, and they had this aha. Of like, okay, I know I'm saying that this is a good idea, but I'm still not doing it. And I've just had this moment of, Oh, this is why I'm not doing it, or Oh, yes, I am going to change. And they did. Anything come to mind?

**Tom Peters:** Well, I wish I could give you an example of how I flipped the board of General Motors or something. Something like that. I, my bias these days, and this is a slightly different answer, and then I'll weave back to what you asked. Is, the guru class. I hate that term. *The Economist* was the one who started it. They take the blame. I think and I certainly put myself absolutely amongst the guiltiest of the guilty. Spend about 80% of their time, maybe even more, on the Fortune 500 or the UK equivalent, the FTSE 100. And yet the reality is the Fortune 500 only employs 8% of us. And I am an absolute frothing champion of SMEs. The small and medium-sized enterprises. And the reason I'm using that as an example is I have found with all of these issues, I've got a much better shot when I'm talking to Joe Jones, who is heading up a 250-person company or an 80-person company. Then when you're sitting down, as I once remember, sitting down in the Ford Motor Company boardroom, eating, drinking tea out of china that probably came straight from Buckingham Palace. I won't say it's a waste of time, but almost. So, I've had a lot of responses when I've gotten into this with people, with organizations that are of reasonable scale. I don't know what term you want to use. I mean, I just it also gives me a chance to go off on my hobby horse of SMEs. SMEs employ all of us. They create well over 100% of new jobs. By almost by definition, their innovation record, relatively speaking, is off the charts. And so, that gives me yet another chance to whip myself on the back, for why haven't I been there? And as I said, I, not you, Whitney, but the guru class is bad news that way. You would really think that we didn't think that more than the Fortune 100 existed. I sometimes say.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. And that, of course, actually goes back to the theory of disruption, right? Where you want to play, where no one else is playing. And as you said, you've really got a chance to effect change. And so, your call to people who are thought leaders, consultants, coaches, etc., if you really want to effect change in the world, don't go for the marquee names. Go for people where you actually can make more of a difference, is what I hear you saying.

**Tom Peters:** Yeah. Well, and the other thing is you can come up with persuasive examples that almost make people laugh, but one I've used. I don't think it was in this book, but it was in my prior two books is a company, Connecticut company called Basement Systems, Inc. And what they do is take people's basements. They dry out all the mold, they turn them into a rec room, they turn them into a second bedroom or a third bedroom or what have you. And by basement renovation, they've created a well over \$100 million company. And I just love stuff like that. Just something like that, that if you said it straight, people would think you are out of your mind or what have you. But turning it into something very, very special.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, will you go to page 125, and while you're going there, I'm going to read a quote. So, it's from you. And I was going to ask you for advice as a small business owner. So, I'm going to read to everyone who's listening to the advice that you gave to me and all your readers. The CEO's first commandment. "CEO job number one is setting and micro nourishing one day, one hour, one minute at a time. An effective, people truly first, innovate or die, excellence or bust, corporate culture." So, a reminder to me and all the team leaders and business owners out there is micro nourishing, one day, one minute, one hour at a time. So, for our last well, almost last question as we wrap up, if you can go to page 125. Tell us about this quote and then read for us this quote as we wrap up, because I think this is beautiful.

**Tom Peters:** There's a there's a lovely book written by David James Brown called *Boys in the Boat The Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*. It is about crew, and crew racing. The story is, I mean, you wouldn't take forever, but 1936 was when Hitler was in power. So, the Olympics were in Berlin, which was the most God-awful mess known to humankind. And among other things, this crew won the Eights, that eight-oared boats. And for those who don't know that part of it, which to me was really cool. I went to Cornell as an undergraduate, and rowing was everything at Cornell, and I had no idea they even had boats on the West Coast. And this was boys from Washington. At any rate, the focus in this quote, which I, it's one of my top two. I'm going to read you the other one afterwards. The focus of this quote is the boat builder, George Yeoman Pocock. And here's

Mr. Brown. "He said, For him, the craft of building a boat was like a religion. You had to give yourself up to it spiritually. You had to surrender yourself absolutely to it. And when you were done and walked away, you had to feel that you had left a little piece of yourself behind in it. A bit of your heart." I'm going to just read a second one because it's on the prior page, which I love, which is the same thing. This was a Thomas Merton quote, "The peculiar grace of a shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it."

**Tom Peters:** And as I see it, those two quotes are one and the same. And it has a little bit to do with this book of mine that we're talking about for reasons that were more pragmatic than spiritual. I got excited about the power of design 20-odd years ago, and the biggest of the design companies is called IDEO. And it turned out 100 years ago, the guy who started IDEO, David Kelley, was the head of David Kelley Design, which was two blocks away from my office in Palo Alto. So, much, much more than. So, I started talking about design. I believed in design. Passionately. I'm not artistic, and with quotes like this, I finally figured out what it means. That it is spiritual and, this may be stretching it. And it's a conversation I think you and I would love to have that would be even longer. Some form of something like that spirituality is as true in a business process as it is when you're designing a widget. Because a business process, what is it? It is a roadmap as to how your fellow human beings will work with one another in attempting to achieve something, achieve something, presumably of value. And that's that has blood in its veins. But. You know, I'm not a, well, I'm not a terribly religious person in terms of my church attendance, but the quotes you didn't read and that I'm so strong on and get so many comments on. I said, "The highest achievement that you can make is to be a leader, and your entire life will be judged not by your profitability or growth or what have you, but by the quality and the assistance that you have given to others in helping them grow."

**Tom Peters:** It was funny, Whitney. I don't know that I had written that before or not, but I was in Mumbai, and sitting ten feet away from me was a four-star general in the Indian army. I think he ran the Indian army, which is the biggest in the world, amazingly enough. And this comment, something about hiring developing came up and so on. He said, If I'm looking at Whitney Johnson and Tom Peters as my two finalist candidates for a general's promotion. The only thing I pay attention to is I go back and carefully find the people who have worked for Whitney or Tom and seen the degree to which they grew parenthesis or did not. The degree to which they grew as a function of that 18 months or two years when Whitney or Tom was their boss. And I started weeping in front of an audience of 1,000 people. And I just I love that. That's the judgment. There's only. I scream at people about that one. I'm a screamer. I said there's only one frigging judgment. And the one frigging judgment is the people who work with you. The degree to which they grow because they were around you. That's the freaking point. Parentheses. The good news is there's a ton of data, which is it's also a fabulous way to make money and grow your business. But that's not the point.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, as we wrap up, what was useful for you today in this conversation?

**Tom Peters:** I loved it from the outset. And I loved that you focus so intently on the listening thing. Which like you, as far as I can tell from our conversation, we would both put at the top of pretty much any list of these sorts of things. So, what was useful Whitney is I have incredible respect for the work you do. And what was useful was having you show me what you thought was significant in this work that I've done. And that's I've got my page, pages that I've checked marked, if you will. I can't imagine having a reader who I would rather have read my book than you. And I mean that quite honestly. And your reaction and seeing what's there and what isn't there is I was going to say it's joyous. It's just, and it's just a lovely conversation, Whitney. I have such infinite respect for the way you think, as well as what ends up being on the written page or what have you. So, this is just, it's a treat.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, thank you. For our listeners, about four or three or four years ago, I was speaking in, I think it was Columbia. Tom was speaking in Columbia as well, and my daughter Miranda happened to be with us, and he was gracious enough. You were gracious enough to go to dinner with us. And I think that that was one of the most wonderful, lovely moments of my life to see how my daughter, who's now 22, so she was 18 or 19 at the time. How by you listening, by you paying attention to her, by you seeing her, she really felt seen. And you could see the blossoming that took place in that short conversation because there was an adult that was really focused on her, and it was you. And so, I just want to express my gratitude to you for that and for the fact that you said listening is important, and I got to see you do that firsthand. So, thank you. And with that, Tom, I will give you the final word as we wrap up.

**Tom Peters:** I'm so deeply appreciative of that last comment. I will take a final word to say one thing that given the surroundings in which we find ourselves. There is hatred and despair at a level that may have never been seen before. I don't know. And I don't have a solution. That would be the stupidest thing in the world. But the Gallup research says only 20% of people are connected to their work. And unless you were born with a silver spoon, you are going to spend more of your waking adult hours at work than anything else. And my bias is, if we could flip the 20 engaged 80 not to 80 engaged 20 not. If we could flip that, then people would be a lot less receptive to some of the extreme things that are going on around us. And per this conversation with me. I think the way you and I have said it, we spent this hour on it. The way to engage people is to listen to them, is to listen to them, to really listen to them, to hear who they are. That's my message.

**Whitney Johnson:** Tom, thank you. An absolute treat, and I wish you the best. It is a beautifully designed book. I hope that everyone will go out and buy it, and every single page has a nugget on it. Again, thank you for your wonderfulness.

**Tom Peters:** Well, thank you so much for inviting me. And it is good to see you. And it was also good to hear that Miranda is taking over the world, which she should.

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What a guy. My two major takeaways are this. Number one, listen. Listen with your mind, with your heart. And if you don't have something to say, immediately say, I want to take in what you said, I'm processing, and then respond. Something that I do in my coaching and want to do more with my family is reflective listening. This is what I heard you say. Frequently. Almost always, they have then something to add. When we talk about an ecosystem where people can grow and flourish. Conducive, connected, resilient and nurturing, which I go into detail in our latest LinkedIn course. We're talking about this idea of is the environment conducive for you to grow? When we listen to what people need to do to do their work, that's conducive. People feel connected when we pay attention to them when we listen to them. We bounce back quickly, we're resilient. When someone bears witness to our loss, when they listen, and we feel nurtured, when people listen to what we aspire to do in life, in our work, and then they help us do it.

Which goes to my second big takeaway. This is the story that Tom shared about the general in India, and I'm going to quote him paraphrasing "The highest achievement that you can make as a leader and in your entire life will be judged not by profit, but by the quality and assistance you've given to help others grow." Did people grow because of you? Were you willing to push them on to new S Curves? Were you willing to give them feedback that would allow them to course correct? Did they feel cared for? Did they feel seen? That's your legacy.

As for further listening, we recommend Susan Cain Episode 269. Russ Wheeler, CEO of BBQ Guy's. He's a terrific leader, a great example of the kind of small and medium-sized businesses that Tom talked about. That's episode 270 and then our prior interview with Tom. Episode 53. Thank you again to Tom Peters for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening to this 300th episode. Thank you to our producer, Justin Levier, audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.