

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 304: MBALI MASEKO

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide 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. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. Growing up in Soweto, South Africa, to parents who lived through apartheid with very modest means, the odds were not in Mbali Maseko's favor. However, through her father's support, her mother's love, and her brother's encouragement, Mbali developed grit, determination, and an incredible sense of purpose. Today she is the Head of Wellbeing at Sasol, South Africa, a global chemicals and energy company with over 30,000 employees, where she sees herself as sitting in the middle of the organization. Her unique, empathetic perspective allows her to understand what people at all levels of the organization value and then connect them to the operational strategy. In this episode, I take Mbali back to her roots, to a very deep place, a place that she hasn't thought about in a while, to uncover the why behind the work that she does. I found her journey inspiring and thought-provoking. I hope you will too.

Whitney Johnson: So, Mbali, tell us about a formative experience that, something that helps us have a sense of who you are and perhaps prefigures or foreshadows what you do today.

Mbali Maseko: I'll just tell you a funny story. So, when I was in, actually in high school, I was large. I was a big girl. And I mean, every teenage girl has their insecurities and mine was my weight. I was a very big girl. So, one of the things that I wanted to do for myself is leading up to my matric dance, this is your prom. I think you guys call it a prom dance. So, leading up to my prom, I wanted to lose weight, you know, and just look alright, or I'd be able to get a nice dress and feel confident, feel good. And like every teenage girl, I had a crush, of course. So, there was always a boy behind that story. So, I did a lot of work. I lost a lot of weight, you know, And I got so much feedback from my schoolmates, and they all wanted to know how I had done it. It's like, how did you lose all this weight? Losing weight is so hard. And this is where my journey started, really. And I was like, okay, I was good at this thing. I was good at this thing, weight loss thing. So maybe let me think about careers in that. That's when I looked up dietetics, and I became a dietitian because of all the weight that I had lost in all the work that I had put in to actually

lose the weight. And I thought maybe I'll give people advice for a living. So, that's how I got into dietetics after losing all that weight. And I went on to study dietetics. And while I was studying dietetics after that, actually, I went on to work for a public institution.

Mbali Maseko: So, it's a public hospital. And as I was there, I would spend time with like the CO other professionals there. And I saw that, okay, the CO is doing a good job. You know, he's got a background in well, he was a nurse, he was a professional nurse. So, he's got a background in nursing, and he's got an MBA. He's done his MBA; he's got some finance background. It's like, hmmm, so, if I want to be CO of a hospital one day, maybe I'm better get to it. And that's when I went on, and I studied my accounting. I started my MBA. Then I wanted to really broaden my experience and broaden my knowledge outside of just dietetics. I wanted to understand how business works and everything. Obviously, wanting to be a CO of a hospital at that time, but that dream is long gone. And really, this is where my journey started. And for me, it was exceptional because it was a big achievement not only for myself but for my family as well. Because, I mean, it's not a quick thing, but to this day, so, I'm a first-generation graduate, but nobody else also in my family still has a graduate degree. And this is even my extended family. It's quite unfortunate, my cousins, all of them. So, there was also that push. So, once I got started, there was that push for me. I mean, my mom was a factory worker. She worked at a clothing factory. My dad was a bus driver. So, I mean, really, they did they based, I think like every parent does.

Mbali Maseko: But it wasn't obviously the best of circumstances. I mean, I think my dad had no concept of what a student was saving for studies because none of my older brothers had gone on to tertiary studies or to study post-graduate or graduate degrees. So, my dad had no savings whatsoever. He had no cooking clue. We had no place to start in terms of how do you even get started, How do I go on to study this dietetics? And, you know, my dad was like, what is it even about? I mean, in the so, where I'm from. So, it's a location in Soweto. So, Soweto was it's actually a very key location for the apartheid uprising. I don't know if you know much about that, but where there was all these racial fights between whites and blacks, and yeah, so, it was just so Soweto was at the heart of that. So, my parents have no concept of what any of these things are. You want to study, graduate. You want to what? Go to university, How much is this going to cost? Shame. So, my dad, being who he is, he retired. So, you took early retirement or resigned, rather, left his job so that he can get all his pension moneys and then pay for my studies. So, he had no pension whatsoever. This is the only way he could actually put me through school because he had no savings. So, all his pension savings went to pay off my studies. So, this is really when I say I am from the humblest beginnings, I honestly mean that.

Whitney Johnson: Wow. Okay. Stop, stop. Okay. First of all, you are such a good storyteller. I'm just like, Oh, okay. And then there's more. So, let's pause for a couple of things. So, you grew up, you had written in your bio humblest of beginnings. I think this is astonishing that your father cashed out his pension so that he could put you through college. That's amazing. It's very interesting to me. How old were you when you made this decision that you were going to lose all this weight?

Mbali Maseko: So, heading into grade 12, that's like the 12th grade, I think in the US heading into grade 12, I was 15, I was 15, about to turn 16 in grade 12. So, it's between 14 and 15. So, it was really tremendous work for me because my mom did all the cooking and telling an African parent what they must cook to help you lose weight, trust me, is not an easy conversation. Because they cook what they cook, and they cook what they know to cook and what will nourish the family, basically. So, yeah. So, this is how I actually, then yeah, between 14 and 15, that's how old I was.

Whitney Johnson: So, you are 14, 15 years old. You discover this resolve in yourself. If you're going to lose weight, then you decide you want to do dietetics. You said had anybody in your family gone to college, or you said graduate degree, but you mean like no one had gone to one?

Mbali Maseko: No one, so not even no one, had gone to college. So, my dad even didn't finish the 12th grade, so my dad didn't finish high school. So, but that worked for him. That's why he could become a driver. Because to become a driver, you did not need to have a college degree. You do not need to even have finished school. You just needed to have the skill of driving. And my mom had got had finished high school, but she did it through night school because she had already had my brother when she was 19, I think. So, she couldn't even finish high school. And it was around again, the apartheid era when you were not allowed if you were black, you were not allowed to

finish grade 12. You were not allowed to finish school. So, there was no prospect of them getting into any college because the apartheid regime. You could not if you were black; you were not allowed to study past grade seven. So the highest level of education you could get as a black South African was grade seven.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, there was this sense of, people didn't feel a lot of hope. And so, I'm assuming and so what I think is so interesting here and I would love for you to give a shout out more of a shout out to your parents. Because one of the things I hear in you as you talk about growing up and what you do today is that you somehow had this sense of hope that you could have a better life for yourself. And there was something in your parents that even if they didn't necessarily feel that for themselves, they believed it was possible for you. And so, any quick thoughts on that?

Mbali Maseko: They worked really hard. Shame. My dad places soul. He would even take this overtime. That's it. He would take overtime jobs just to be able to cover all the household expenses. I mean, he managed to get. One, one of the things that he really wanted was to get us out of that. There's a location, obviously, the neighborhood to the area that was just not conducive for any kind of growth. So, that's the first thing that he did. Being a driver. He managed to get us out and into a better neighborhood. Really, really was a good neighborhood compared to where we were coming from. And he was really worried about my brothers. I mean, my three I had three older brothers, and I was the only girl there. So, not only was he worried about me in that, okay, you are in this environment. Every second a girl was having a child in high school. So, I mean, this is something that he definitely did not want for me. And every, well, every male, every black male child was not ending up in a good space. And it's something that he definitely did not want for us at all. So, really, definitely shout out. I think they deserve a shout-out. So, I would say my ethic, my work ethic definitely comes from them.

Whitney Johnson: What a tribute to them and a tribute to you for having this grit and determination. When I hear of people moving from one place to another and starting here and going here, I'm always just, regardless of what the circumstances are, but thinking about yours, I have so much admiration for that willingness to say, you know, it's not where you start, but it's the slope of the line. Right.

Mbali Maseko: Thank you so much, Whitney. I mean, I don't think I was born with it. If I, if I was, I don't know. But I think my environment was very conducive. My environment allowed me my home environment of the outside environment was not so kind, but my home environment was always quite conducive. I was very close with my brother. He was a, and this is one of the things that I don't want. I don't want to say I regret, but I feel sad for him that he did not have an opportunity for this because he's brilliant, he's super smart, you know, And I think spending a lot of time with him, his drive, his determination, I think that also helped me to be the person that I am. My brother was he cracked the whip. He crack the whip, not like my parents. My parents were just happy to see you going to school, doing what you needed to do to get by. You know, you're at home, you're not in the streets. They were happy. My brother, on the other hand, I would come home excited that listen, I got an 80, I got a 90, he was like, Where's the other 20? Where's the other ten? So, he was cracking the whip on me. So, I don't want to say it. I was born with it. But I think my environment and my brother. My brother.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Is your brother still alive?

Mbali Maseko: Yes. Okay. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So, we now have the backdrop, and you have gone on to I'm going to read some of your credentials and talk about what you do today. So, you've got an undergrad degree in dietetics, a master's in public health, and MBA, and you are currently pursuing a Ph.D. in leadership at the University of Chicago. Did I get that right?

Mbali Maseko: Yes, There's some of the ones in me that I also do, but I don't that I also did. Like I mentioned, I did accounting. So, I'm also an accountant, by the way. But I think I always just would like to flesh out what's relevant for the setting and for the role that I do. So yes, so that's what I.

Whitney Johnson: Wait, you did accounting? You have an accounting degree?

Mbali Maseko: Yes, I also got an accounting degree. I do, I do. When I learn a skill, I don't just learn a skill. I want to get recognized. Having learned the skill.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. You're giving your children a hard high bar, haven't you?

Mbali Maseko: And they best get to that bar.

Whitney Johnson: All right, so that brings you to what you're doing today. And I wanted you to tell these stories that when you tell us what you do, people will say, Oh, yes, of course, that makes sense. So, what do you do today?

Mbali Maseko: So, today I head up the Wellbeing division at Sasol. So, Sasol is a petrochemicals and energy company in South Africa. I think it's actually one of the biggest in Africa. And it's, yeah, it's an energy company, basically. And one of the biggest employers of people or private employers in South Africa. And Southern Africa, actually, because it's also got a huge presence in Mozambique and in Ghana and other European countries. And Lake Charles, actually in Houston, I think so, yes. So, that's where I work. I like to think of myself as. When people ask me, ok, what do you do? I don't just head up the wellbeing division. What I do is, I create opportunities for the individuals, for the employees, or for the people that work at Sasol. I give them opportunities. I create opportunities for them to look after their health, their wellbeing, to be engaged, to just show up, to be able to show up. And this is what has happened with me. I mean, having lost all that weight and having done all those things, I felt I was able to show up better. My confidence was more if I've got my health, I'm more confident I can be present, I can do things. And this is really, really at the heart of what I do is what I provide opportunity to the indigenous. Then empower them to actually be able to do the things that they want to do. So, this is really my role. I don't make anyone do anything. They do it themselves. I just enable them by giving them the opportunities to do so and the resources and the tools and information, anything that they need to actually then look after their health and wellbeing and help the organization to help the people.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, Mbali, could you give us one or two examples of success stories of inside of your organization?

Mbali Maseko: Okay. So, within the wellbeing space, it we've got three focus areas. We've got the physical wellbeing, we've got the psychosocial or emotional wellbeing and then we've got the financial wellbeing. So, we empower employees through the three pillars. My role has since expanded, and we now also look after people experience because we know that wellbeing is part of a bigger thing. We know it really impacts how individuals also experience the organization. So, that's one of the things that we now do, is looking after the people, the employee experience. So, in doing that, obviously, with the we have interventions in place that make sure that physically employees are taken care of financially, employees are taken care of and psychosocially or emotionally they're taken care of. So, one of the things one of the big successes is, is through our financial pillar. So, in educating, we had a couple of employees. Actually, the organization was going through a huge restructure. We had to take pay cuts. And for them, this was not an option. I mean, if you know, the people that actually the guys that are in operations, every cent counts, and without the financial wellbeing being taken care of, they're not going to give a damn. Excuse my French about any other thing that you have to offer they will not worry about.

Mbali Maseko: You are telling them this, you're telling them all these nice things that you've got in the organization. They're not engaged. Things are not well in their personal space. So, with the pay cuts that were coming, a lot of employees were impacted. So, we managed to weave through our program. We've got something like a financial consultant, a couple actually, we've got a couple of financial consultants, and they educate, and they help employees. So, not only education, but they also go as far as negotiating with the creditors, negotiating interest rates, getting their interest rates cut, getting their loans halved with the promise that obviously you are likely more likely to get whatever money that the employee can get if it's a little bit less. So, they negotiate all sorts of rates, and then we've done that for a couple of employees. And there was one employee that actually came to us and said, Listen, I had almost lost the house. I had almost lost the house because I could not afford. I had so much debt I could not afford to look after my family. I cannot afford to look after myself. I cannot come to work because I don't have money for a taxi, not even money for fuel to put in my car because this person doesn't have a car.

Mbali Maseko: They don't have money for taxi to come to work and actually be at work. So, these are some of the things that we do that's just in our financial pillar. And I mean, I always say wellbeing is a thankless job because particularly with the psychosocial or the emotional components, we've got a lot of suicide ideation, a lot of suicide ideation. And we help the colleagues. But you never know the colleagues that almost committed suicide but didn't because of your service, because of your offering, or you having something for them to reach out to and say this really helped me. So, that's one of the things that we do see quite a bit in our guys that are in operations. I mean, just last week we had an employee that actually committed suicide because there's so much these guys are going through, so much that we cannot even begin to understand. And a lot of it is sitting in the financial wellbeing because they cannot pay for their life, basically. They cannot pay for their living, for the life that they're living.

Whitney Johnson: So, one of the things that really struck me and the way I first discovered you and your work was doing a panel with you and Chester Elton and Chris Rainey, and you were talking about the wellbeing. So, much of the conversation that has been taking place over the past couple of years was around knowledge workers. And you were really focusing on people in operations and manufacturing. And so, I was very struck by that. And as you know, I begged Chris to give me your email address so that we could have a conversation. With the people in operations, do you have any metrics that you pay attention to that are leading indicators that you might need to intervene? Like with this person and their creditor? What are some things that might come up, and you say, okay, we've got to get in there. We need to have a conversation. We need to help them.

Mbali Maseko: So, one of the things that we track and because of the highly regulated nature of Sasol being a petrochemicals and energy company and the high-risk nature of the job and the work, when you've got miners that are mining coal that go underground. So, their health is of paramount because they cannot be anything that happens to the guy as a result of him being underground, maybe not being able to stand heat, not being able to stand depth, going down too deep. So, things like that or tight spaces. So, we do, we spend a lot on the medicals. So, we spend a lot actually making sure they're physically well. And if they're not well, we actually put them through support. So, we have programs for them. They go through a program which tells us, okay, this guy is okay now is getting better. So, they actually go through medicals. So, there's medical screening, we do biochem. So, the whole full screening that we do and part of that, obviously, then we're able to identify any markers. And part of that also is psychosocial. So, we also do a psychosocial screening. So, we check how is their situation, and it's either through a questionnaire, they'll spend time with their counselor just to understand what's this person's mental state. Because if you go underground, you're not concentrating.

Mbali Maseko: You literally have lives in your hands, and you need to be mindful. You need to be present. And this is really one of the biggest my biggest joys of the work is that I'm able to make sure that these employees are present when they go underground, and they understand how important they are. And I think that's something that we miss a lot with particularly with an organization like Sasol. When you've got a lot of white-collar workers as well as a lot of blue-collar workers. You know, the guys that are in operations, these guys actually are carrying the company. And we fail to understand this. You know, we sit in our nice offices, we can work from home. We've got all this nice tech, we've got gadgets. I can talk to a dietician now, if I wanted to talk to a dietitian, I can speak to a doctor. They don't have the luxury. They don't have that opportunity. So, for me, it's paramount that I take care of them because I have my job, because they have their jobs and because they can do their jobs. I mean, they're the guys that actually produce the product. They're the guys that give us the energy that produce the chemicals that produce the fuel that we use every day.

Mbali Maseko: So, I'm always mindful of that. And again, from my background, I mean, for the longest time, when my dad had obviously had to take out his pension savings to pay for my studies, he didn't have medical aid anymore. So, you couldn't pay for private health care. That meant my mom also couldn't access private health care. Luckily, I'm the youngest, so, my brothers had already gone off the medical aid. So that's one of the things that I also think about. So, when I started working, only then I was able to get them on private health care. But private health care in South Africa is not cheap. It is not cheap. These guys cannot afford it. So, I always just remind myself that I am possibly their help in terms of medical support. So, it's those things that I like to make sure of that. And it's something that I also want to remind the others. I mean, we can access support any time they can't. And another thing is that we have different problems. What worries me is not the same thing that worries the guy that's on the ground. He's worried about trying to make enough money to put food on the table. I'm worried about my wi-fi is down, my Internet is not working.

Mbali Maseko: You know, things like that. We worry, or I worry about my child maybe not going to the best of the best schools or the best private school, maybe going to the third or fourth best. This is not even a concern for a guy in operations. So, if I can do my part and do it well, at least that's one thing that he has to worry about. He worries less about his financial stability, worries less about his psychosocial well-being, and worries less about his physical well-being. And then he manages that. So, through the different screenings that we do so, we'll do like I said, we'll do the full biological screening, we'll do the blood tests, everything, and we monitor that. So, as soon as there's a flag, we obviously put interventions in place to support that colleague. If we have to get them off, out of the mining site while we help them, we do that. Because we understand if he's not in the right space and he goes underground, it's got implications for his life and the lives of others. So, while we're getting him to health again, getting back to health, we get them off the ground and then doing alternative work. So, those are matrices that we generally use.

Whitney Johnson: Are most of the miners men?

Mbali Maseko: Yes, they are. They are men.

Whitney Johnson: So, I wondered because you used him, so I wondered if they're all men.

Mbali Maseko: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: So, the other thing that came to my mind when you were talking is that the conviction with which you talk about supporting the individuals and operations. There's so much passion there. It feels to me like every day when you come to work to support them; it's like you're saying thank you to your father.

Mbali Maseko: It's personal for me. And I'm getting a little bit emotional because the other day I was in one of our operations, and my uncle, I was like, When did you start working here? I ran into my uncle, and I was like, You work here? And he said, Yes, I work here. And he's so frail, he's not well. Obviously, he cannot afford private health care. And in my mind, it's exactly like what you're saying. It's my uncle, it's my dad, and everybody that cannot afford private health care. And that's my essay that got me, by the way, into UIC. I spoke about the challenges that a lot of South Africans have in accessing health care. And for me, every employer has a responsibility to help. To just, even if you don't fully provide health care. But every employer has a responsibility to help because, I mean, our public health system is burdened with providing health care to everyone. So, for me, it's an opportunity to make a difference in that person's life. And definitely, it is very personal for me. It is very personal.

Whitney Johnson: I can feel it. So, how do you plug into the organization, Mbali? Do you work with the heads of the business units, HR, CEO, or all of the above? So, how do you fit into because you're getting things done in the organization. But in order to get things done, you have to have sponsors. You have to have stakeholders, people you work with. So, how does your work plug into your org?

Mbali Maseko: So, I like to see myself as sitting somewhere in the middle. So, my structure is sitting in HR. Because obviously, looking after employees is a human resource function. So, I see myself in the middle. So, my manager is head of HR Head of reward, head of employee benefits between him and me. So, there's me, there's him, there's employees. With him, I have an opportunity to then speak to the other heads because he's, he's the head. I then have an in with all the other heads. So, again, in every strategy that I develop, I always have to look down and look up. So, I have to look down. What does the employee need, what is important to them, what do they value? And then I look up and say, okay, see, this is what the employee values, what do you value? What do you want to see, and how do I bring it together with regards to wellbeing? So, I spend a lot of time in the business units. I'll spend time with the heads of the different businesses, but in operationalizing the plan, I spend time with other colleagues, so other individuals in the business that then also help me to operationalize the strategy. So, it doesn't only sit with me because I very much acknowledge that ownership is a very big part of people buying into any program they need to feel it means something to them or they need to feel that they've inputs it.

Mbali Maseko: And this is also the same with the CEOs, with the heads of the businesses because they want to put money in it, but they also need to feel that they get the benefits. Again, the same with the employees. They want to take part in it, but they want to know why. So, why does it matter? It's an opportunity for you to worry less about

these things and focus on other things. So, it's also bringing in the employee, How do I bring in the employee? So, I operate somewhere in the middle, touching all the layers up and also touching all the layers down. I do have a team, of course. I don't do it all on my own. I mean, Sasol has almost 30,000 employees, so I need to be able to get to each of them and to hear each of their voices as well. And we know that the voice that doesn't get heard is the one that's, you know, that's quite some way. And the guys in operations are there to just put their heads down, and they work. So, I also try and always have an in with them because also it builds credibility if your program is bought into. They actually want to be part of it. It tells the guy upstairs you say, Oh, I should invest more in this program because somebody is using it. So, yes, to answer your question.

Whitney Johnson: It's interesting because one of the things that we talk about frequently in our work is when you're looking at change management, you're effectively saying, I would like to jump to a new S Curve. But in order for me to jump to a new S Curve, in order for me to move these initiatives forward, I'm actually asking you to jump to an S Curve as well. I'm asking you to disrupt yourself. And one of the things I'm hearing you say, and it sounds like you have some intuition around it, but also you've been very deliberate at getting good at it, is figuring out how to make it safe for all of your various stakeholders to jump to a new S Curve so that they can so that you can collectively manage the wellbeing of all of Sasol's employees.

Mbali Maseko: So, that's one of the things that it's tough it's very tough to do because getting somebody to change behavior, it's not easy. But I always put myself in their shoes and understand what do they value. The guy in the mine, He does not value having a fancy phone. He does not value that. So, just understanding what they value and communicating it, that I know what you value. I understand. I see you. How can I help you? And then once there's an in again, like you said, once you have that in, you almost build trust and credibility with the individual. And I know the senior guys, they also, they always are told to account with this cost go with the return on investment. So, you also need to give them a reason to invest in your programs and to show them. So, we always tell the success stories. We always have to share the success stories with them. So, we can say, See, it's making a big difference. And we do get a lot of senior guys that also now are part of the program. They buy into the program; they make use of the program. So, it's not just for the guys on the ground. We also need those at the top so that they can invest more and buy into it and give us that sponsorship.

Whitney Johnson: I was going to ask you that about. So, you've got operations, miners wellbeing, but now you've got people who are the knowledge workers who are also, and over the course of the pandemic, I suspect that there's been an opportunity for you to gather some data points of well-being for all employees.

Mbali Maseko: Yeah. Definitely. And I think it's something that you've probably heard me mention before. When the lockdown happened, production at Sasol skyrocketed. I mean, the production was insane. The guys said we don't have anyone on our back chasing us the whole time telling us how to do our work. We were able to work because all of you were working from home. We were able to fully engage and actually do our work, and this gave us an opportunity to actually think about it. Step back. Wait a minute. What is it that's actually a problem in production? These guys are skilled. They might not be knowledge workers, but they're highly, highly skilled in what they do. I mean, they've been doing it for years, and we know a lot of the work can be quite repetitive. So, they know how to get the work done, and they know how to get it done well. So, if a guy is not producing, it can't be; he doesn't have the skill. It's definitely not that because he's got the skill. He's been doing this for eons of years. What's the problem? The problem is that manager that's busy shouting on his back, busy telling him this, busy telling him that. So, this is one of the things that they said to us is like, you know what, I'm so happy lockdown happened because I'm able to do my work uninterrupted and I'm so much more engaged. So, we also look at those things. We say, Are our managers actually getting in the way of people getting things done. And even at home, one of the things that we found with knowledge workers, they said they found that they were constantly switched on.

Mbali Maseko: And I think this is also the case everywhere in the US and all over in the world. Is that we are always switched on. But now I'm being micromanaged to a level that does not stop because if the office you can micromanage me, but it stops when I don't see you. When I get into my car and go home, it stops. But now that we are all fully wired, you can continue to micromanage me. Even when I'm at home, I'm sitting at home watching TV. I can hear my phone beep. It's this person. So, it's those things that we actually got to find that's happening with the different guys. So, fatigue was definitely an issue, but it was also tech fatigue with the guys. They're always screen fatigue. They are just always switched on. And then obviously the guys changed. So, a completely different picture is

that the guys then in operations felt lighter. You know, they felt free. They could take breaks when they needed to take breaks, but still get the work done. And I guess for the organization, it's also a key learning. To say, should we be managing these guys' time? Should we be managing it at the extent that we manage it? I mean, they work seven days in, seven days off, so, that's like full seven days nonstop. You are working, and then you just take a break, although it's a good break, but the nonstop working, so it's things like that that think that's given feedback for me personally. How far the organization is taking it, I really can't tell. But yeah, for me this is feedback, and I did share the feedback, so.

Whitney Johnson: In our work, we talk about how when you get to the top of an S Curve, you can be very, very good at something and then feel like you can no longer keep doing it because you're not learning anything. Now, as I hear you talk about some of your workers who you say are absolute experts, they are very good at what they're doing, and yet it sounds like they continue to find meaning in their work. So, where is the meaning from your perspective coming from?

Mbali Maseko: So, it's the thing that I was telling you about that they are part of a bigger picture. And I've been reading up now on systems thinking as part of my program. I think it's the next class we're going to be talking about systems thinking. And I'm now trying to apply that to say they understand that they are a part of a bigger whole. You know, I drove past close to my house. We've got the Sasol fuel stations. And I can imagine, and I feel pride because I work for Sasol. You know, I can see this is the end product. This is what we are getting to. But for the guy that's actually producing the chemicals that lead to fuel, what pride must he be feeling? You know, it's way more than what I do because I'm not even touching the product. You know, I just support the guy that does. So, I think that there's that. But we're also finding that there's a group, and there's few of them obviously, that do find that great meaning. But there's a lot actually a lot of them that find, that are frustrated. They are frustrated with where they are. They are frustrated with not being heard. Because there's pockets. There's pockets in the organization where things are exceptional. There's pockets with things or not. And I think where the things are not good, it also affects them being the hands and feet of the organization. So, it's those things that we also always want to try and get right the balance. Because we can obviously this guy is super engaged, you know, he's there, but what about the one that's not and what are we doing to actually make the guy disengaged or what is happening in his personal space that's making him disengaged and how can we help? So, that's one of the things that we're looking at. How can we help outside of your immediate environment? How can we help you to be the best version of yourself?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, so two things are coming to mind. Number one, I thought it was interesting where you said people are working seven days on and seven days off. Also, this, the great need to feel that they are providing for themselves and their families. And so, there's some element of it. This idea of purpose and meaning of their work serves, and the work that they do and the money that people earn serves as an anchor of stability for their family, for their lives. And so, that gives meaning. And then also from a self-determination theory standpoint is they feel connected to creating and producing petrol. But they also, during the pandemic, when they had more autonomy, they felt autonomy. So, now you feel like, look at what I'm producing, I'm supporting my family, and I'm able to choose how I do that and what that looks like. There's a lot of self-determination that can be embedded in that, even though it's a skill that's highly developed, and they're not necessarily learning something new there. But there's still a lot of opportunity for people to feel agentic.

Mbali Maseko: Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, let's go to you. Personally, now, is how do you manage your own wellbeing? What does wellbeing look like for you personally?

Mbali Maseko: So, for me, it's being able to show up. I mean, with everything that's going on, I'm a mom. I work for a very big organization that keeps me very busy. I'm also studying. Doing my, the hours are very weird because I think there's a seven-hour difference, so my classes are always a very odd hours. So, for me, it's being able to do all of that and being able to shop and being engaged in everything that I do and doing it as I plan to do it. Not doing the little bit because that's all I could manage to do, and I'm pushing myself. So, where I find that I'm, whoooo, I'm okay is when I feel like I'm managing what's happening. I mean, there'll always be those little things that happen that pop up that like, surprise you that you need to manage. But how I also bounce back. I'm going to sound like a typical health wellbeing person, you know, bounce back, having resilience, but also how much I can stretch but be able to

bounce back. And I don't take things for granted. I don't take my sleep for granted. I don't take it at all for granted. I don't take my physical health for granted.

Mbali Maseko: I don't take my wellbeing for granted. So, I try. I even have a bike. Yes, When I think I am too busy, I'm too busy to hit the road. I love running or I'm too busy to hit the road. It's hot or the weather's not conducive. Hey, there's a bike here. Let me just do a quick 30 minutes and get myself moving. So, it's finding time to do the things that I really want to do. And being fully engaged in each of those things. I mean, it's a lot of different areas. And like the guy that's in operation that's on the ground, there are so many aspects of their life that we want to be able to touch. Same with me. All the aspects of my life. I want to be able to say, okay, I think I give each of these areas the attention that it deserves. I give my relationships the attention that they deserve, you know, and I don't feel punished. I don't feel too tired. Like, shoo, I gave too much of myself. I think at the end of it, I still feel like myself, you know, like I can still be.

Whitney Johnson: So, what I hear you saying is that you're making sure you're attending to some of the basics, like your physical wellbeing, your relationships. And when you know that those are in place, then that's foundational. And then you kind of have this barometer of if it's starting to feel like too much, you might need to pull back a little bit. But as long as you can be all in, to the things that matter to you. Relationships, work, Ph.D. Then you know that your well-being is where it needs to be. And so until it gets out of whack, you don't need to recalibrate. Is that accurate?

Mbali Maseko: So, when I feel that something is not going okay, or I'm not giving it the attention that it needs, I step back. I mean, I think about two weeks ago, I came down with the sniffles, and I was like, Hmm, I think I might be working a little bit too hard because there's nothing that, you know, should have given me the sniffles, you know? But my immunity was probably just taking a knock. And then I took a step back, and I was I remember I was telling my husband that I think I might not be very good at doing last-minute things. Because they probably give me undue stress that I can do without. Then I was like, okay, maybe let me plan my time better. Let me relax and let me do things on time. Maybe do them early, and then let's see how it goes. And I felt a lot better. I mean, I managed to push out my deliverables to just submit a little bit early, even if I submit before the deadline, instead of pushing the deadline and submitting everything all at once and stressing myself out, I think it's not worth it. I always told myself that I thrive under pressure. I don't think it's the case with everything, and I need to just be honest with myself because, you know, pressure can be good, but unnecessary pressure, not so much.

Whitney Johnson: So, use the sniffles as an indicator of hmmm, what do I need to take a look at? And then you made some adjustments.

Mbali Maseko: I made some adjustments. So, I do calibrate, and I think it happens automatically if you know what to look for. If you are tuned in to yourself and to your space and to your well-being. So, I think that's the most important thing is to be tuned in so that when it's out of whack, you know exactly. You know, the signs that it is out of whack.

Whitney Johnson: Which is so important that because of what you because you are responsible for wellbeing at Sasol, that you walk your talk, Right?

Mbali Maseko: Exactly. Exactly. I need to feel it for myself, for the other one to see it that. Oh, she's okay. She's doing okay. I can also be okay. I think it's very important that we show up not only for ourselves but for others who are looking at us as an example.

Whitney Johnson: What in this conversation was useful for you? It might be something that you said, but is probably a connection, a thought, or a piece of inspiration that you had as a consequence of this conversation. So, what was useful for you?

Mbali Maseko: I think, Whitney, you took me back. You took me back to a place. I mean, I know I show up, I go to work with pride, with confidence that I can actually help another individual. But you took me back because I think for the longest time, I don't know why, but I'm very passionate about what I do. And I love the people that I work with and that I work for because I work for the people, you know, I don't just work for myself. And this

conversation was a reminder of that. It took me to a place. I mean, I read the questions, and we spoke about it, but it took me to a very deep place, just having the conversation, you know, a place that I didn't go when I was just thinking, and like, I'm going to chat to Whitney, you know? So, I think for me, that was another big reminder of why I do what I do. I think that's the most useful thing that I think it just really sums up the entire conversation of going back to my roots. This is why I do what I do.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Mbali Maseko: Well, for me, nothing to share, really, but to appreciate having a conversation with an individual that reminds me to disrupt myself. I think this was proper disruption because really, like I said, I mean, taking me back. Of it's almost like I've got a new light now in me. So, when I go back to work on Monday. I have a new purpose, I have a renewed purpose, you know. And just reminding myself. And just really finding ways to actually disrupt myself at every opportunity I get. So, I think more than anything is just to share my gratitude with you for the opportunity.

Whitney Johnson: Mbali, thank you.

Mbali Maseko: Thank you. Whitney. It's been amazing. Thank you so much.

What a great conversation. I have three takeaways. Number one, the importance of your environment or ecosystem. We talk a lot about this in smart growth. You have to do it by yourself, but you can't do it alone. With Mbali, she has clearly done the work, but she also had parents and a brother who encouraged and challenged her. As we think about translating this into the workplace, the overall conditions may not be good. They may be downright bad. Like where Mbali, grew up. And yet, just as her family did, you as a manager, as a colleague, can still create conditions where people can grow.

The second takeaway is around connectedness. I loved hearing how her colleagues feel a sense of pride when they see a Sasol fuel station and how she feels pride in showing up to the people who are producing the fuel. If you feel like you are growing as you would like, guaranteed, you feel connected to what you're doing and who you're doing it with.

The third takeaway is closely connected, and that is reminding yourself on why you do the work that you do. I loved how I always said it had been useful for her to take a step back to be reminded This matters to me. This is why I'm doing this work. I invite you to do the same thing right now. The work that you're doing today think about why are you doing this work.

If you would like to do more listening, I recommend our episode with Mike Rowe, star of Dirty Jobs, who talks about the importance of essential workers who get dirty on our behalf. And also, Leena Nair, former CHRO of Unilever, now CEO Chanel, who talks about tapping into your purpose. Thank you again to Mbali Maseko for being our guest. Thank you, to you for listening. Thank you to Justin LeVrier our producer, to Whitney Jobe our audio engineer, Stephanie Brummel, production assistant, and Nicole Pellegrino production coordinator.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.