



**Podcast:** One Thing - New Professional

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**Episode Title:** 10. Whitney Sullivan

**Summary:** We chat with Whitney Sullivan, a former program leader for fitness, wellness and student/staff development at Montana State University and is now a motivational speaker and leadership coach.

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#### B E G I N T R A N S C R I P T

**Stuart Brown:** Welcome to Student Affairs One Thing - New Professional, a podcast that asks a simple question of new professionals in the field; what is one thing you've learned, you feel will help you as you move forward in your career? I'm your host, Stuart Brown, the developer of studentaffairs.com, one of the most access websites by student affairs professionals. On our pages, we have the most cost effective job post board listing hundreds of open student services positions and a wide range of webinars on today's episode. I am very pleased to have Whitney Sullivan, who is a former program leader for fitness, wellness and student/staff development at Montana State University and is now a motivational speaker and leadership coach. Welcome to the program. Whitney,

**Whitney Sullivan:** Thank you. Happy to be here.

**Stuart Brown:** So Whitney, what is your one thing?

**Whitney Sullivan:** Well, my one thing is start getting practice now in difficult conversations and especially when you have low stakes opportunities because if you can do it when the pressure is low, you're going to be far more equipped to do it when the pressure is high.

**Stuart Brown:** That's a great one thing something I think a lot of us try to avoid. So how did you come to that one thing was is there a story behind that something that happened in your career or in graduate school?

**Whitney Sullivan:** I always like to tell people that even leadership coaches have their failures. But in my first professional level leadership role, one of my employees was actually transferred to another team because I failed to lead them and I just I had had a bad habit as an emerging leader of over using empathy or just having compassion without limits. And I didn't realize at the time that being empathetic didn't mean I shouldn't also give critical feedback upon expectations, set boundaries and that empathy didn't mean I wasn't ever going to upset somebody with a difficult conversation. And so I learned from that failure and I hope to share the fruits of that failure with anyone that might need it.

You know, empathy is more how we show up to those conversations and it's a stance we take. It's a mindset of curiosity and it's a skill of perspective taking that we build. But empathy, we can be empathetic and do those difficult conversations as well.

**Stuart Brown:** I think a lot of times staff, they might not at the moment appreciate that you're up front with them, letting them know the good, the bad, the ugly as opposed to going around in circles or drawing things out. I remember when I was in graduate school talking about something that we learned many decades ago and there was a student who I think I had to fire and I brought the person into my office and I was just hemming and hawing. And he finally said to me look Stu if you want to fire me, just fire me. And I was so taken aback. Of course I then said you're fired, but it really taught me to be up front with people and not drag your feet.

**Whitney Sullivan:** And I think sometimes we forget that even if someone might be upset because they got fired or they might, you know, we might hurt feelings from a difficult conversation. I think we forget as leaders sometimes that there's a part of our employees that does expect that from us. I think when we have that courage to engage in a difficult conversation, it does reinforce clarity and our role as leader and then usually people come back and they're like, well I guess it checks out like I guess I expect that from my leader.

**Stuart Brown:** I think it's it's something where it clarifies for the leader but also for the individual because they could just be zipping along thinking everything's fine. And then at the end of the semester you have this really bad, let's say evaluation. And they're looking at you well, you never said anything. How come there were no checks and balances along the way and then they get even angrier than if you spoke to them at the beginning of the semester.

**Whitney Sullivan:** That's why it's so important as they say, we never want anything to be a surprise and a performance and evaluation. And when I work with leaders, I encourage them like don't wait until the performance evaluation to uphold an expectation to set a boundary to have that difficult conversation. Because otherwise it's just gonna build right and it's going to make for an even more uncomfortable situation later on.

**Stuart Brown:** I guess that's why it might be important to you have a lot of one-on-ones with staff, so you can have those conversations in an easy going format that this is a planned thing. It's not, the phone is ringing on the desk or the email blinks, get into my office now, but it's something scheduled and you can really plan to bring things up. And I guess it's also and this is maybe where your expertise comes in, it's how you say it, that it's not going to be confrontational, it's not going to be yelling, screaming. So anything that you can talk about in that respect?

**Whitney Sullivan:** When I work with leaders in my coaching practice now, we almost always devote a full session to a conversation that they need to have a boundary they need to set that might be difficult. My favorite thing to ask them in those moments is, you know, what is yours to own in this situation? What is your responsibility? And the reason I ask that is that sometimes we need to deliver difficult news or have that conversation, we get over focused and how the other person is going to respond. And I see that leaders kind of go one or two ways. They get so kind that the message is completely watered down and the person doesn't even know what you said right there. Like wait, what, what did I do? Or the person is, well I'm just gonna say it like it is. But like that kind of shuts down connection. Like if you're rudely blunt right that will also shut down connection. And so leaders find that something that they can own is finding that balance between being clear and kind in delivering that message and then creating a safe space for that person to just receive the message instead of trying to control them. Oh you know don't don't cry, don't be angry, don't be upset. It's like well maybe you told them something that was kind of hard to hear and instead of trying to control the reaction, just let them react. And then they find that they can control circling back a few days later to say hey you know what does support look like for me moving forward? Like just wanted to check in a few days later and most of the time that person is going to be like hey you know what thank you, thank you for giving it to me clear and kind thanks for checking in. Thanks for letting me just be in the moments. And like we were talking about earlier it's like they had that time to process the message and be like oh yeah I guess that's what I expect from my leader.

**Stuart Brown:** Is this a two way street, not only the leader talking to the subordinate but also the other way around and how does that work where the subordinate maybe has the freedom or the comfort factor to speak with the supervisor on. These are things that I don't think you're doing or that I need more assistance with.

**Whitney Sullivan:** Absolutely a two way street. And I would really applaud anyone that had the courage to share that with a supervisor or with a leader. Because it takes a lot of courage to say, hey, like this isn't working or I need to give this feedback. And especially from supervisor to leader phrasing that I encourage folks to use is contrasting language. You know, something like, hey, this is what's working for me here, but what's not working for me is. And it kind of helps balance out that message and deliver it because I think what employees typically fear in those moments is that they don't want to be a complainer, right? Or they don't want to it to make it seem like they're failing or something like that. So contrasting language can be really powerful when you're going through this process from employee to say supervisor and the other way around. But otherwise, absolutely, the process totally applies to any conversation, difficult conversation you might have to have.

**Stuart Brown:** Whitney. I want to thank you for sharing your one thing. I think this is so important, especially for individuals in student affairs that are starting out. This is something that is, it's going to be uncomfortable and maybe graduate students can practice, practice among their colleagues or in their positions. But it's

something that you want to work out at the beginning of your career, not at the mid or upper level because then it's it's just going to make it harder I think for everyone.

You've been listening to Student Affairs One Thing - New Professional, a podcast that asked a simple question of new professionals in the field, what is one thing you have learned you feel will help you as you move forward in your career? My guest today has been Whitney Sullivan, who is a former program leader for fitness wellness and student/staff development at Montana State University and is now a motivational speaker and leadership coach. I'm your host, Stuart Brown, the developer of [studentaffairs.com](http://studentaffairs.com), one of the most access websites by student affairs professionals.

I hope you'll join us next time for another episode.

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