

The Importance of Play



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke

The Importance of Play

CrisMarie: Welcome to The Beauty of Conflict, a podcast about how to deal with conflict at work, at home and everywhere else in your life. I am CrisMarie.

Susan: And I'm Susan.

CrisMarie: We run a company called Thrive Inc, and we specialize in conflict resolution, stress management coaching and building strong, thriving teams and relationships.

Susan: Now, we know, no one likes conflict, not even us and we've written two books on the topic. In our work over the last 20 plus years we've found most people avoid, manage or diffuse conflict. The problem is when you opt out of conflict in these ways you miss the creativity, the connection and the possibility that lies in conflict.

CrisMarie: We also know 2020 has been, well, let's face it, a stressful year. And what Susan and I realized is all the tools that we've developed and utilized around conflict apply directly to uncertainty, which is what we're living in now.

Susan: In this podcast we have tools; concept and interviews that will help you cope with the stress and uncertainty of conflict, of Covid, of social justice issues and, yes, even politics. We hope you'll walk away from this episode with some fresh ideas that change your day, your week and even your life.

CrisMarie: Our business is about the Beauty of Conflict and what many people may not recognize is...

Susan: Well, first you've got to say most people, CrisMarie, when they hear that our thing is the Beauty of Conflict go, arrgh. How can you be...

CrisMarie: How can you focus on conflict? Don't you want to change that word?

Susan: Yeah.

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CrisMarie: And well, and what I was going to say Susan is that they don't recognize that one of our values as a business is play.

Susan: Which may, I'm sure some of you when you hear that are thinking, really, play?

CrisMarie: As a value.

Susan: As a value, isn't it much more serious, is it your business? Definitely it sounds more serious when we say it's about conflict. But really play is similar to conflict in a different way. People do not value, do not recognize how important play is. I mean maybe as children they think it's valuable, but even that's been kind of a lost art.

CrisMarie: And there's been a researcher, Peter Gray who said we've lost a lot of play. We're actually play deprived. And Stuart Brown, another researcher has done a lot of work on the benefits, the science of it, the purpose of play and how important it is to us as human beings.

Susan: Definitely he has brought it to light in terms of the importance of it for children. And as adults we tend to take ourselves maybe a little too seriously.

CrisMarie: Oh my gosh, do we ever take ourselves too seriously, because play – so even I think Stuart Brown's definition is kind of engaging in something without a goal. Just the experience of doing it for pleasure which is so rare in our goal oriented society.

Susan: So I want to share a story from way back, my initial onset into my career was to be a teacher. And I taught K through 7, health and physical education. And so I had these kids out in this playground area, a big thing and had them lined up in little groups of five, they were sitting there with – each of them had a ball. And the idea was, I said, "I'm going to say go and you're going to get up and you're going to dribble your ball down to the end and come back."

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CrisMarie: Oh wow, dribbling.

Susan: And then the next person would go. I went through exactly how it went. And I said, I would go, “On your mark, get set, go.” Every child got up all at the same time, ran around, they all were bouncing the balls, tossing them to each other, bouncing the balls. I was in shock. And finally I blew the whistle, they all ran back down and sat in their respective lines. And then looked at me and said, “Miss Clarke, who won?” And I was like, oh my goodness.

CrisMarie: It’s such a cute story.

Susan: And they so – that to me was the essence of play. Now, and also a little bit of the influence of our culture which is who won at the end. But they didn’t seem to care that I had no idea. But if you could have seen the chaos that was going on and how they were just – they found a whole different way to do relay races.

CrisMarie: That’s so cute. And of course, brain development they probably aren’t very goal oriented at five, but what a good teaching lesson for you as the teacher.

Susan: Look, I learned, from there on up I actually made sure that we didn’t do anything like that again. I’d just bring in enough balls for everyone. We’d play different types of games. And any time I wanted to stop all I had to do was blow my whistle and they’d sit down and get in lines and ask who won. And I’d go, “Oh, well, everybody.”

CrisMarie: And I think, I know for myself I stopped playing pretty early on because with my dad as the army colonel, it just wasn’t – did not feel safe to be playing. And so I focused on achieving and pleasing. And that really worked in my household, but it really squelched this play.

Susan: Well, tell me where I’m wrong, CrisMarie, but it seemed like this is – when you tell your story about when you started to row, it all came about

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because of a romance movie. And you went out on the water, and that actually seemed like when you started it, it was playful.

CrisMarie: Well, what I was doing is in high school I started music. Well, no, I started music in fourth grade. But I evolved and I was in a quartet orchestra band and it had become really competitive. And I remember I was headed to the University of Washington, which all my friends were headed to east coast schools. So I thought I'm going to UW, whatever.

And I was watching a made for TV movie about a love story. He was a rower and she fell in love with him. I'm just a sucker for love stories. But they showed him rowing and how beautiful it was on Washington and then they were kissing under the cherry blossoms in the Quad at the University of Washington. And I thought, okay, I want to try that. And when I did show up I had no sports background, and 110 other women showed up. But I was just like gosh, this is really cool and fun, and look at the mountain.

And I didn't really get hey, only eight out of this 110 are actually going to row. So I had this little bubble where it was just fun. I was connecting with people. I was getting in shape. And it was like wow, look at my body change, this is cool.

Susan: Yeah. So we want to first off tell you a little bit about a different definition for play than you usually think about. And this comes from the work, *The Science of Play* with Stuart Brown, but the idea that play is purposeless.

CrisMarie: Yeah, there's no goal.

Susan: And what he discovered, and if you want to see this, it's really quite powerful.

CrisMarie: Oh my gosh, you should see it; definitely, we'll put the link in the notes.

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Susan: Because he talks about how this shows up in the natural world with – and he has a video where there's this – happens up in Alaska, up far north. And there is a dog that has been tied.

CrisMarie: A husky.

Susan: A husky that's caught up, can't get away. And a polar bear is coming towards this dog and you can tell that the dog is going to be the polar bear's breakfast or lunch, or whatever time of day it is. They definitely have narrow eyes. He talks about this distinction that happens with animals when they're on the hunt and the prowl.

CrisMarie: Like the head down, the narrow eyes, heading towards, straight line.

Susan: And the dog clearly gets the message I think. And what the dog does is actually goes into a play bow, starts this whole different dance. And you could watch, it shows you in the video how the eyes of the polar bear changed, they relax. It's a whole different...

CrisMarie: His body relax and they start kind of moving opposite each other.

Susan: And as a result the dog, the husky is not lunch.

CrisMarie: Or dinner or breakfast.

Susan: Or dinner. And so again, I'm bringing that up because that's really a potentially high conflict situation in the animal kingdom.

CrisMarie: That's true.

Susan: And they use that benefit of play to kind of loosen it. And the same thing can happen in your workplace. You can watch for the signs and signals when somebody is on a track.

CrisMarie: Yeah, a mission.

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Susan: And if you can find a way to lighten that up, maybe you don't want to make fun of them, but you could make fun of you. You could do something different, you could dance. You could try to loosen it up the same way that husky did with the polar bear.

CrisMarie: Yeah. And it is powerful because too often in our culture we get stuck in – and this is me, I do this. I've got to get these things done, you're in my way. I can't take time for that, whatever that is, going to get a coffee or that might even be a little playful thing. And so we miss, we're actually operating out of our left brain, very linear, analytical, and we're not using our whole brain, which is the right side, which can see bigger pictures, makes connections, doesn't have a sense of time. And so there is more of a relaxed state.

And another, Jill Bolte Taylor who had a stroke and her left brain was not active. And she was all right brain and she was like, "Wow, this feels so different." And not that we want that to happen but there's definitely benefits to actually loosening that focus, that driven nature, which by the way, I'm wired to, and coming more in a sense of discovery, and openness, and ease, and flow.

Susan: And just to mention, CrisMarie, that Jill Bolte Taylor, she was a scientist. So her work is kind of profound because she is coming from a lens that's very different. It's quite an interesting thing [crosstalk].

CrisMarie: Well, she was having a stroke and also being aware she was having a stroke and oh my gosh, this is my body of work. So it is a fascinating, Stroke of Insight I think is her book, I believe, yeah.

Susan: And so again just another example. And I mean also I know for me, I do a lot of executive coaching in work I do with teams, I bring in the horses. And for those of you that don't know, it's not horseback riding, it's all on the ground. The horses are – what would you call, at liberty. And leaders go in to try to work on their communication. And they don't have

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any tools. It's kind of like they haven't had training in horse talk, that's not the idea. They are just trying to develop a relationship with the horse.

And because the horse is an amazing bio feedback machine, they are kind of... And what they want to know is who is the most embodied and will be able to track and pay attention to what's going on in the environment and knows and is clear about what they are trying to communicate?

CrisMarie: That's the horse wants that?

Susan: Yeah, that's who they are going to assume and be willing to partner up with. And if that leader isn't doing that, if they're just in their head, storytelling, doing all sorts of – the horse is not going to have a thing to do with them. And it's quite a powerful experience to watch this interaction. But I think one of the reasons it's also really powerful is you can't help but be a little more playful when you're out there in the pasture or in the round pen with a horse.

And I watch people who are usually really uptight and relax. And the very thing they normally would do, they'd be like, "This is not going to work."

CrisMarie: Or it doesn't work.

Susan: Or they try it. And so it's quite wonderful to see that occur.

CrisMarie: And it's also when we're working with teams, consulting with them, and a lot of times teams are like, "We've got to figure out these answers and get moving." When any of us are responding from that place, we're not bringing our whole brain online. We're in our fear response. We're in more of a left brain. Our IQ is lessened. And so we really try to slow the team down and say, "Hey, let's actually have a dialog, let's even brainstorm here. Change the energy. Are you actually hearing what Mary's saying?"

And we will reflect that back. And it creates a loosening of the driven-ness, which brings more creativity, more ideas. Different ideas, which is what we

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mean with conflict, different ideas up and a space, a container to hold them so that they come up with new solutions, not the same old driven one.

Susan: This might be a different lens to even think of it, CrisMarie. But also the idea that storytelling is another way that is often, I think has its roots in play. Because a good storyteller knows, I mean, you kind of tell the story for your audience. And what I mean by that is I've watched master storytellers and they can take the same story and they just – the way they tell it, they're not varying from the truth. But you could call it, you know, there's a little bit of don't let the truth get in the way of the best story. There is a little of that in there.

But they tell it in a way that really reaches that audience and it is, it's like a dance that's going on. And a masterful storyteller can do that. And that's what we often talk about, even with leaders you need to be able to develop your story. You don't want to just have all these linear things about your business.

CrisMarie: It's true because people don't remember, even the people who are working to solve your business problems, they're going to be more influenced if you actually frame up a story as to why this is so important. It's something about how our brain is wired. And I'm sure people who have studied it know it. But we will remember stories and forget facts over, and over, and over again.

Susan: Yeah. I mean you think about children, they learn to read with stories, and it's a beautiful thing. And we sometimes, we lose that. Now, another place that I think is worth talking about here, and you are the master of this in your acting role, is improv, which is such a powerful way of even thinking about business.

CrisMarie: Yeah. So even acting in general, because acting, you have an objective, so you do have a goal. But you have to also be flexible in how you're going to get there. And learning how to improv is a great way to identify different tactics rather than getting stuck in your rut. And so improv,

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it's always whatever the other person gives you, rather than saying, "No," you say, "Yes, and." And we're so often in business saying, "No, but. No, I don't think so." Versus, "Well, yes, I hear that and let me build on."

Susan: Well, maybe at the executive table it's like, "I heard you, and." Or, "I heard you, but." And really that is not the same energetic experience.

CrisMarie: It's kind of like a hand in your face, versus catching the ball and then sending it back out.

Susan: So it's really, because an improv, you are actually taking what was given to you and moving that forward, versus countering it with your own position, which is such – and so back to our original thing about the difference between conflict and play. Conflict, and I often say, "The difference between conflict and fight." I mean just the other day I was on a business podcast about our book. And we started talking about this. People often think conflict means fighting. No, fighting and conflict are very different things.

CrisMarie: Could you describe the difference for our listeners, for you out there?

Susan: Well, fighting is really in the category of there's already a right, wrong. You are fighting for your position. You kind of defend it and locked in. Whereas really, conflict...

CrisMarie: In our view of the world.

Susan: In our view, is there are differences, but there's not – and the idea being you actually want to lean into that space, but from a perspective that's not as defended or fixed. We talk about vulnerability and curiosity as the ingredients that loosen that. So it's so easy to think of conflict as just fighting whereas that, you kind of narrowed it down.

CrisMarie: Yeah. We talk about the power and strength model in a previous podcast. But on one side, the power side it's control, versus the

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strength side is more vulnerability, openness, curiosity. And the fighting is on the power side, I'm going to be right, versus the conflict, well, let me be curious and interested. And also debate also has that right, wrong sort of energy versus, hey, let's have dialog or brainstorm. There is more of an open energy. And that's on the side of play versus goal achievement, which is on the power side. Goal achievement on the power side, play on the strength.

Susan: And again you might be thinking, look, we've got our goals, we've got our measures.

CrisMarie: We've got to do them, KPIs.

Susan: And what we often talk about with teams is – and with leaders is yes, and you – it's the movement along this continuum that's vital. If you are kind of someone who's very goal driven and you know that you're kind of marching towards getting to that end result. You may really want to pay attention to how can I shift in my role and relationship to the people I work with to bring in some of these other things, a little more vulnerability, a little more play.

And vice versa, if you're always on the kind of relaxed, say chilled side, you want to actually – there are times when we say to leaders, "It's not that you're never going to make a decision. It's not that this is consensus." So everybody gets to put their two cents. But you need some of that so that you can make a good decision.

CrisMarie: Yeah. And I think we tend to get too stuck. And I know I do, too stuck in that goal oriented driven, and it's really – I want to underscore it's really driven often by fear. And so we talk about stress and fear. And again, when you are in that fear place your IQ drops 10-15 points, you actually become dumber. And that's when you're trying to make your most important decision. So you're not using your whole self.

Susan: So some of the things that are vital to play that we, you know, we know this about children. It's actually where they learn empathy, it's where

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they learn how to social skills. It's how they develop a sense of curiosity and...

CrisMarie: Adaptability, and right now we are having to be adaptable as Covid, social justice issue, fires and smoke, the political environment. So play is really crucial towards being able to have that flexibility. It actually sharpens the brain. It's one of the best exercises for the brain is play.

Susan: Yes. And to remember also what we said earlier, I think this was from Peter Gray's thing, that when we are deprived of play we tend to get stuck in that more fear conscious way of operating. And we're not as creative, so conflict becomes a lot more rigid in that situation.

CrisMarie: Yes. And I want to give an example, a story about us, because I am – so this is, I'm revealing myself, I am goal oriented. And I have a real phobia of taking vacations.

Susan: Yes.

CrisMarie: Susan's agreeing.

Susan: I agree with.

CrisMarie: So I finally agreed to take a vacation, it was a yoga retreat in Mexico. We get there, at least it had some sort of structure to it. I felt good about that. And we arrived in our open air palapa, it's beautiful. And Susan's been lugging the bags, she puts them down and I said, "You know what, I'm really not very happy in this relationship."

Susan: You can imagine, I was not very happy in that moment.

CrisMarie: She wasn't.

Susan: Oh my God, you've got to be kidding, our first ever vacation and this is the start. So really in a way I was kind of caught, I don't know what to do here. I could get mad at her. But I did think, okay, so what would be

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playful in this situation? And I thought, well, one of the tools we talk about is what we refer to as the 5-5-5.

So I said, “Look, how about instead of trying to resolve this, if over the next five days,” I think it was actually seven days, six. “We agree that we’re going to try to enjoy this vacation. But we’re also going to spend some time on this issue of your dissatisfaction in the relationship.” By utilizing one of the tools we teach, which is the 5-5-5.

CrisMarie: And for those of you that don’t know the 5-5-5, there is a little podcast but it’s just five minutes of one person talking and the other listening. Then you switch the other talks and the other listens, and then five minutes of dialog. So it’s a 15 minute frame.

Susan: And why I call it playful, just because it’s purposeless, we’re not trying to fix the problem right then. It’s a form of really kind of brainstorming, just bringing whatever’s into it. And for me it’s not 5-5-45, so it’s not going to go on all day. And for you it’s five full minutes of freedom.

CrisMarie: Yeah. I won’t be interrupted, I know I can have my, you know, I can have space to bring all the things that will give me courage to say what’s really going on for me. And when we did that, I think sometimes we did a 5-5-5 in the morning and the evening.

Susan: It’s such a great game.

CrisMarie: Well, I want to say, couples often get into, we need to find the solution, the same way business teams do, we need to find the solution. And they miss; they’re actually solving the wrong problem. So here I was thinking, Susan you’re really the problem in this relationship, let’s be clear, I’m not happy. And over the course of the seven days, I really started to recognize, wow, I’m not happy in my world and how I’m doing my life. I am working too much. And I’m not doing anything fun.

I hadn’t been doing any theater, any painting, any dance, which are all things that I had discovered really enlivened me. And after that I recognized

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that while I was pointing the finger at you, thinking you were the problem, the problem was me not taking care of how can I have more fun and enjoy my life more? When we got home I started to integrate those things and I just felt so much more alive, which just gave me so much more energy to put into my work, even though when I was doing a dance class, or a play, or painting.

Susan: So we bring this up because if you're listening to this as a business, hopefully you can begin to think of ways you could bring more play into what you're doing. If you're a couple, this is another way to think about it. And a couple of other little things I think we should mention that are kind of fun is in our line of work, in the service of our values we do actually have what we call the dance break.

CrisMarie: Yeah. We will put on a song and that'll definitely change the energy.

Susan: Yes, and that's one thing that is really helpful.

CrisMarie: And that's getting out of your chair and literally moving your body.

Susan: Yes. And it is a great way to kind of play. Another thing thumb wrestling, something, or arm wrestling. I mean because when I first met CrisMarie, I mean she's an Olympic athlete so basically she can kick my ass when it comes to most things like that. But I did, you know, and I'd be so mad at her because she thought, well, I've got to let you. And I'm like, "You can beat me as many times as you want." This is not – I want you to play hard. I want you to actually engage.

CrisMarie: Engage.

Susan: Because to me it wasn't about win or lose, it was that kind of being met that I found was playful and fun. So finding ways for the people you work with to kind of engage in just little ways to meet each other, because it's that full engagement that actually makes it worthwhile. You can even

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try, if you're a couple, you know you have different positions on something, or even two people, you can go and say, "Yes, you will."

CrisMarie: And this is really good if you face each other and put your hands, I have my hands up, you can't see this right now, so I don't know why I'm doing it.

Susan: [crosstalk] to a video of this.

CrisMarie: And if you just actually look at each other and say – and this is a great acting technique too, "Yes you will. No you won't. Yes you will." Because you're getting this energy and it starts to feel really enlivening, which more of you is coming online, more of your energy, your brain, your creativity, and it's just really powerful.

Susan: I was going to say, one of the reasons we added podcasts, because we can have these kind of fun conversations sometimes.

CrisMarie: Yes, we like this. We hope you do.

Susan: And also we've added videos because you love being in front of the camera.

CrisMarie: I do darling, I just love when we get to create these one to five minute videos. It's just very fun for me.

Susan: But I will tell you, sometimes she really gets kind of task focused on it and there's like this, you know, we have the prompter, and we have the script, and it becomes – but you know what I've discovered really makes that playful? Is this is a technique we learned from a voice coach. And it was to do these little games. Now, I could talk about it like I'm talking like a wide mouthed frog.

CrisMarie: Looks like you're chewing and talking at the same time.

Susan: And to read the script like that. Now, I will say the voice coach said, "Never do this on the video." So I'm probably not really supposed to be

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doing it on the podcast either. But it is a way to take something that you're very serious about and make it kind of playful.

CrisMarie: Yes. And then some of you out there who have read Julia Cameron who wrote *The Artist's Way*, another kind of – I just want to tie this in, play. She talks about doing the morning pages, which is your download. And then your artist day is all about taking an hour a week, she says too, but I can do maybe an hour. And just do something different, take a different – drive a different way to work, or go to an antique store and look at all the different things. It's again no goal, it's more about discovery, and openness, and allowing yourself to be filled.

Because when we're so busy producing, and goal driven, you're really – it's that deprivation that you're really not feeding your system. So adding play, discovery things, experiential, sensual things. That's what I mean, looking at images, going to antique stores, touching things. And it really fills your system and it really fuels your work.

Susan: So we hope this has been inspiring for you.

CrisMarie: It's been playful for us to do.

Susan: And you will consider bringing in some play into your day, you don't need to make it one of your core values, all you business folks out there that like much more serious things, go ahead.

CrisMarie: Well, one other thing before we end because Susan, because I want you listeners out there to be thinking about how do you play. So I thought we could each talk about how we introduce play in our daily lives together with, you know.

Susan: Well, I mean you did just get me up on a different track. And I will tell you, I was ill, I'm going to go back to some of the experiences I had. One of the things I would do is I would actually just go to the dog park. I would watch the dogs because they were so playful. I didn't have a dog at that time. Now I'm passionate about having a dog. But I love to go out there

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because it would really get me in that vibration of lightening up a little bit, even during this time where some, you know, dealing with cancer, very serious business.

CrisMarie: Yeah, it was life threatening cancer.

Susan: Or, I have to say the other thing was I remember meeting a couple of my friends and we used to have what we called the tumor table. And I tell you, we would talk as our tumors, and we would – the people around us, none of, you know, anyone around us would think we were nuts.

CrisMarie: Dark humor.

Susan: Dark humor, but it was such a way to kind of lighten our journey. So those were two ways during a very intense time that I found some joy and play.

CrisMarie: Yeah, I guess for me, moving my body and dancing, that is really fun, and also theater. And I didn't come to that until the last 10 or 11 years. And it's so funny because the play we're doing – I am in a play. And the play we're doing is *Sylvia*, which is about a dog who comes in. I'm the wife, and the husband and wife, third chapter of their relationship and he gets a dog and he's obsessed about the dog. And my character feels quite threatened. But just watching the woman play the dog *Sylvia*, it is so funny.

And there's so many – even though we have a general goal to put this together, we want to do it well, it is so fun in the process. Watch also, if you're doing something fun and all of a sudden it starts to become really serious, which I can do. All of a sudden I've got to do perfect in the role, versus no, stay with it and real, it makes it so much more alive.

Susan: So I did want to bring it, you know, what are the things I do now to play? And play for me is often associated with the Peloton. And I know for a lot of people it's not, because some of the instructors, it's very serious business.

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CrisMarie: The Peloton?

Susan: The Peloton, but some of them it's not, like Cody Rigsby. He's like dancing, having a good time on there. And for me I actually enjoy kind of the, you know, I'm going to try to hit those measures, the fun part. But when it gets too serious I just start laughing.

CrisMarie: I know, I have heard you.

Susan: And I think it is, it can be quite playful for me, that sort of activity.

CrisMarie: Yeah. So think about ways that you play, do you let your play become too serious because you're worried about your performance, or your score? And how can you actually bring more of that into your daily life, into your relationship, into your work? Because you're going to feed yourself and your brain, you're going to be smarter and more adaptable the more you introduce play.

Susan: Right, that's all for today.

CrisMarie: Go play.

Thank you for listening to the Beauty of Conflict podcast. We know conflict, stress and uncertainty can be hard to navigate. So if you want more support you can check out our other resources. We have two books on Amazon.

Susan: Our business book is The Beauty of Conflict: Harnessing Your Team's Competitive Advantage. Or our couples book, The Beauty of Conflict for Couples. We also have an eBook, How to Discuss Difficult Topics. We'll put the links in the show notes to make it easy for you.

CrisMarie: Also if you need help with your team at work we regularly conduct team sessions both live and virtually. If you'd like us to speak at your next event or if you want coaching, Susan and I each coach business leaders, individuals and couples. You can reach us at thrive@thriveinc.com, that's t.h.r.i.v.e@t.h.r.i.v.e.i.n.c.com.

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