

Agency for Change Podcast: Sterling Hawkins, Author, Speaker, Investor

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Sterling Hawkins:

To deny your discomfort is to ultimately to deny part of yourself.

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

Hello, everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast.

I want to start today by throwing out a question, and it's a question I'd like you to keep in mind throughout the show. Are you ready for it? The question is, 'when was the last time you felt discomfort, and what did you do about it?' If you're like most people, you may have tried to hide from it, you may have tried to stuff it down or avoid it, you may have tried to get numb. I mean, really, who wants to be in a state of discomfort for very long? But today's guest has a very different approach to not only facing discomfort but how to use it to turn around your life and reach your goals. I really can't wait for him to share his wisdom. Joining us on the podcast is Sterling Hawkins. He is an entrepreneur. He is a motivational leader. He is internationally recognized for speaking, and yes, he is the expert on discomfort. On today's podcast, he's going to share more about being comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Sterling, welcome to the podcast.

Sterling Hawkins:

Thanks, Lyn. Great to be here. Thanks for having me on.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm so excited to talk to you today because I love authors. I love authors. I love your story. But before we jump in and talk about the book, I really want to talk about you. Can you share more about your background and how you got to the work you're doing, Sterling?

Sterling Hawkins:

Of course. It's one of those backgrounds I never would've predicted. This is where I've arrived now.

Lyn Wineman:

The best ones are always like that, though, right, unpredictable?

Sterling Hawkins:

It seems that way. I look back, I'm like, "I cannot believe that I went through that journey." It started out in Upstate New York. I actually grew up as a fifth-generation retailer in my family's grocery store. And loved it. You worked in all the different departments as a kid and growing up and through college, and then right out of college I thought, "You know what? Time to spread my wings a little bit. I want to leverage all this retail expertise that I have but strike out a little more on my own."

Lyn Wineman:

Makes sense.

Sterling Hawkins:

So, I start this retail software company with my dad. Of course, my family store was our first customer. Sell the closest dollar, that's the first lesson of the day.

Lyn Wineman:

If your dad was not your first customer, I'd question your product a bit.

Sterling Hawkins:

Exactly. Exactly. And long story short, we end up selling it to this group in Silicon Valley where it becomes part of Apple Pay before Apple Pay. This is the early 2000s. Everybody's looking at this thing saying, "Hey, that's the future." We're starting to sign on clients and users, and private equity's throwing money at us. We raised over \$550 million, multi-billion-dollar valuation.

Lyn Wineman:

That gives me chills. This is the real-life Shark Tank stuff, and you were on the top of the world.

Sterling Hawkins:

It was living a scene out of Wolf of Wall Street, like models at the office, parties at the Four Season. Not just the movies, this is it, I've made it.

Lyn Wineman:

I love it.

Sterling Hawkins:

I did think that it was just a matter of time until I'd be crowned the next Steve Jobs and buy an island and a private shed and all the things. Well, needless to say, it didn't go that way. When the housing market collapsed, our investment dried up, and the company ended up going bankrupt.

Lyn Wineman:

My heart is breaking just hearing your story. I'm feeling anxiety and sadness at the same time.

Sterling Hawkins:

It was not only heartbreaking, but my whole identity was so caught up in it, when the company collapsed, so did I. I end up playing this sad country song of a story out going from penthouse, living the

dream to my parents' house, and six figures of personal debt. Even my girlfriend broke up with me. It's like every beat of that sad song.

Lyn Wineman:

Did your tractor break down though?

Sterling Hawkins:

Everything. My car had work that I couldn't afford to get done.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm so sorry.

Sterling Hawkins:

And I had this really profound moment at my parents' house where I said, "Either I'm going to cut this whole thing short, resign myself to the rest of my life in my parents' basement, or I'm going to start going after the things that have scared me most in life." It was really that moment that started turning the whole thing around and was at least the beginning of building myself back.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. Sterling, I feel so much anxiety just listening to your story. I feel it in my chest that I'm not surprised that your book is called "Hunting Discomfort." Just hearing your story, if it were a movie, I would be like, "Oh my gosh." So, "Hunting Discomfort: How to Get Breakthrough Results in Life and Business No Matter What."

Sterling Hawkins:

No matter what.

Lyn Wineman:

I know what your motivations were for the book. What was the process like writing it?

Sterling Hawkins:

Well, so I started to realize there was this pattern of things that I was doing to grow personally and professionally that just was working. A lot of failures, even from the point I started to turn myself around and a lot of coaching, a lot of self-development, hundreds, thousands of hours working with people that are far smarter than myself, but there was this pattern of things that seemed to just work again and again and again. Now backed up by years of research using the pattern to launch, invest in or grow over 50 companies, and more recently this book, that pattern's been formalized as the No Matter What system. Funny enough, Lyn, I've been working around this stuff for years now, and people have been telling me to write a book and I say, "I'm too busy. I'm doing this. I'm speaking there. I'm working with this executive team." I'm just "too busy." It wasn't until the pandemic hit where I realized that I wasn't doing what I was talking about. I was scared.

Lyn Wineman:

It took a time of global discomfort for you to write this book on discomfort.

Sterling Hawkins:

It did. It did. I realized that I was avoiding it using the best excuse in the book, which is I'm too busy. When I caught myself is when I started calling publishers and narrowing down on things and signing a contract as fast as possible before self-doubt could stop me, and thus the process began.

Lyn Wineman:

I love it. I love it. So, tell me more about discomfort and why that's important to break through, and really, why is this a different approach than others?

Sterling Hawkins:

Yeah, well, most people when they hear about "Hunting Discomfort," they'll say something like, "Sterling, you got to look at my business and my bank account, my relationships and my kids and all the things."

Lyn Wineman:

And my dog and my...

Sterling Hawkins:

Right. "And I got inflation, a little bit of depression. We got the war in Europe. We've got all these things, cost increases putting pressure on my business and myself. You're crazy, I don't need more discomfort."

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Sterling Hawkins:

My answer's always the same, which is, if you are surrounded by that much discomfort, you are living with it, you're not hunting it. When you are hunting discomfort, you're opening your mind to new perspectives and new ideas, and you're opening your heart to maybe some really uncomfortable feelings to let them pass through you, leaving you forever free of it. Does that make sense?

Lyn Wineman:

Kind of, but talk more. Tell me more. I get what you're saying, like, "Hey, if you just live with it, that's an indication..." "Would you say that's an indication of fear or being stuck?"

Sterling Hawkins:

I think it is the reason we get stuck because we're unwilling to do the things that have kept us stuck. When we're unwilling to feel uncomfortable feelings or change our perspective about some things, no surprise, you're going to get yourself backed into a corner pretty soon. Now, from an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense, right?

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Sterling Hawkins:

Our ancestors, the cavemen back in the day, when they felt discomfort, it was actually a motivating factor for them to do something.

Lyn Wineman:

To stay alive, literally, right?

Sterling Hawkins:

Exactly. They had to do something, or they would perish. If they had the discomfort of hunger, they've got to go out and pick berries or hunt, or if they have the discomfort of feeling scared, they've got to build a shelter. It's driving their behavior. Now, in modern times, for many of us, we don't live in that survival paradigm of, "Hey, if I don't get on this Zoom meeting, I might die."

Lyn Wineman:

"I'm going to die." Yeah, there have been very few times where I've been like, "I might die. This thing that I am overly worried about, I might die." Very rarely do I have that thought.

Sterling Hawkins:

Exactly. So, we are able to avoid the discomfort, deny the discomfort, or just batten down the hatches and just show up, just survive through the discomfort, which somewhat ironically leaves us not dealing with the source of that discomfort.

Lyn Wineman:

That's crazy.

Sterling Hawkins:

That's what the system's about it. It really capitalizes on that discomfort as an indication of, "I've got to learn something. I've got to do something. I've got to change something here." And it says, "Hey, that's actually an opportunity, a big neon sign saying, 'Here's where your growth is.'" And when you pursue it, and I would say pursue it inside of the five steps of the system, you are able to make those necessary changes and grow in just profound and oftentimes surprising ways.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. You've mentioned the research and you've mentioned the system. What I love is you've got something here that's based on your personal story, your personal experience, you've lived it, and now you've combined it with research and created a system. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Sterling Hawkins:

Yeah. Well, I found some Norwegian research that started to show me that discomfort for many of us in modern times works like a governor does on your car. If you have got a governor on a car, no matter how hard you hit the gas, you won't go any faster. Similarly, if you are avoiding, denying, or surviving discomfort, this research shows that you are not unwilling, but you're actually unable to act in accordance with the knowledge that you already have. So that means you know exactly what to do, but discomfort stops you.

Lyn Wineman:

You're literally hitting your head against the wall over and over and over again, and that discomfort is the wall.

Sterling Hawkins:

Exactly. Now, the flip side is also true. Latest research out of Yale says that when you experience the symptoms of discomfort, whatever that is for you, your palms get sweaty, your heart races, adrenaline kicks in, when you are experiencing those feelings, if you're open to it, if you embrace it, you are primed to learn up to four times faster. It's a bio hack.

Lyn Wineman:

Whoa, you're blowing my mind. Wow.

Sterling Hawkins:

Right. Evolutionarily it's a bio hack to be better, faster, and smarter because it knows when you feel those things, you've got to act. And if we're not able to act, we're going to get stuck. And when we do, we're primed to act in better ways than we could on a normal basis.

Lyn Wineman:

All right, so when we are done with this, I'm going to have you tell me that story again, make me feel anxious, and I'm going to run out and learn some new stuff.

Sterling Hawkins:

Perfect. Perfect. Well, that's actually exactly how it works. So, you felt physical discomfort, I'm sure. We all have, right?

Lyn Wineman:

Oh gosh, yes.

Sterling Hawkins:

And emotional discomfort, yes?

Lyn Wineman:

For sure.

Sterling Hawkins:

Especially coming out of a pandemic here.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Sterling Hawkins:

Physical, mental, emotional, the brain and the body process it almost identically, research is out of University of Michigan, so much so you can take acetaminophen like Tylenol, and it helps you with emotional pain. It's crazy. Now, all the disclaimer, I'm not a doctor. That's not a bio hack. I don't suggest

you or anybody do that. But what I do suggest is we take that next step, which is, if where you meet discomfort is the same anywhere, we can grow our capacity to deal with it everywhere. It's a muscle you can build.

Lyn Wineman:

If any of my staff at KidGlov is listening to this right now, if I put them under stress and discomfort, it's actually for their own good. Is that what you're saying?

Sterling Hawkins:

If they embrace it, yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay.

Sterling Hawkins:

Now that's the trick. You can't put it on somebody else.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay, all right. I was kind of kidding about that too, I was totally kidding.

Sterling Hawkins:

But it points to, the first step in the system maybe obviously is hunt discomfort, right, go after those things. But the second piece is to commit to going through that discomfort in ways where there's no going back. I call it getting a tattoo. Again, you can't put it on somebody else. You can't say, Hey, here's your goals for the quarter. That person has to buy into those things. They have to take that commitment on and go through that discomfort themselves. When they make a commitment like that, it actually reframes their brain and their perspective to look for new openings for action that are quite literally invisible to them where they sit prior.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. So Sterling, I know you work with a number of highly successful people, CEOs, owners, celebrities. Do you work the system with individuals, or do you work with individuals and teams as well? Can it be a team sport hunting discomfort?

Sterling Hawkins:

I think it just is a team sport. Companies only grow, and translate it into anything, communities, families, any groups of people only grow as much as the people inside them are willing to grow, especially their leaders. When leaders open themselves up to this discomfort in a really open and vulnerable way, it lights the path for everybody else to do the same, and you end up cultivating this very intentional and inspired NoMatterWhat culture. Otherwise, you end up with a default doesn't matter culture. But when you're doing this together, that NoMatterWhat culture is unstoppable. I think it's the only competitive advantage there is.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. All right, you've shared the first two steps, do you mind sharing the next couple?

Sterling Hawkins:

Of course. The third piece really is about that team. I call it building a street gang. I know you've got a rowdy audience, Lyn, so the disclaimers...

Lyn Wineman:

The most rowdy audience.

Sterling Hawkins:

Nobody should do anything unlawful, right? Don't point to me. I don't want to get the calls from jail like, "Sterling told me." This is about surrounding yourself with people that are going to give you the love, support, mentorship, and maybe most importantly, the accountability to do those things that you're committed to. Now, when you are held accountable, it might not feel good.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, sometimes it doesn't.

Sterling Hawkins:

But if you embrace it... Oftentimes it doesn't. I find myself dodging commitments, because if you never commit, nobody can hold you accountable to anything. But when you do it, you're not 70, 80, 90% more likely to achieve your goals, you're 95%, and as a team, you're four times as likely to achieve the goals that you have. It's incredible what it does to performance.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. That's amazing. All right, so Sterling, step number four?

Sterling Hawkins:

Step number four is what I call flip it-

Lyn Wineman:

Flip it?

Sterling Hawkins:

... finding a strength or a new pathway forward amidst the problems that we all have. Budget shortages, time shortages, you don't have the relationships you want, whatever it is, there is a pathway forward if you've got the courage to look at things in a new and different way.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Wow. And step five?

Sterling Hawkins:

Step five, I think it's the most important.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, all right, can we skip to step five first, or do we have to go through the first four?

Sterling Hawkins:

Well, the thing is it's kind of modular. You can use any of the steps in any of the places, and you'll see how the other pieces fall in, because every step is a little bit uncomfortable. The fifth piece is to surrender, and not give up and watch TV and order pizza, although there's a time and place for that. I'm a big pizza fan. But surrender in terms of accepting things exactly as they are and exactly as they're not. Carl Jung, famous psychologist-

Lyn Wineman:

Oh yeah.

Sterling Hawkins:

... father of modern psychology, right, he said, "We cannot change anything until we accept it." Condemnation about anything, your family, the economy, your margins, your team, your clients, the internet going down, condemnation about anything does not liberate, it oppresses. And it makes it very hard, maybe even impossible to do much else.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, you've blown my mind today, Sterling. I have read a lot of-

Sterling Hawkins:

Doing my job, Lyn.

Lyn Wineman:

I have read a lot of books, been part of a lot of systems, but, man, what you're talking about seems really fresh, and I could see how this would be really impactful. But I also just tied into that last step of surrender and the first step of hunting the discomfort. I mean, it's 2023 as we have this conversation, and people have been through a lot of discomfort. I mean, do you ever get people saying to you, "I can't do this. I can't go look for more discomfort?"

Sterling Hawkins:

Yeah. Oftentimes. It's usually a function of an unwillingness to surrender to what is almost always.

Lyn Wineman:

Mm-hmm. It ties to that last step.

Sterling Hawkins:

It does. When you stop fighting with what is and, just as important, stop fighting with what has been, that is what starts to free you from that discomfort. What is is. Whether I get in a fight with it or not doesn't change the facts of the matter. Now, I can do something about that, but to be most effective, I'm going to have to accept it exactly where it is now. Yourself included, by the way.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. Wow. Sterling, tell me about the hashtag. What is the #NoMatterWhat have to do with the book and hunting discomfort?

Sterling Hawkins:

Well, in these dark times bottomed out at my parents' house, I was about as numb as you could possibly get.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, I can imagine.

Sterling Hawkins:

This thing my mom said came back to me. I don't know how your parents and family are-

Lyn Wineman:

Mom, they're great. They're great, yeah.

Sterling Hawkins:

Great. I love my mom to death. She still has all these sayings, but the one that came back to me, she said, "The way out is through." To me it meant you've got to go through the things that you're scared of, fearful of, embarrassed about. You've got to go through those things, and what you're seeking is on the other side. I said, "You know what? I've been hearing this all my life. I'm going to put this thing to the test." And so, I started to tell myself just as a personal mantra, that I'm going to go through these things no matter what. It was really simple in the beginning, Lyn. It was like, "I'm going to get out of bed tomorrow no matter what. I'm going to call my creditors no matter what."

It turns out that that personal mantra with all the research and everything else that's gone into it, other people just very unintentionally on my part, started to take it on. It was first my sister, like too many young people, she dealt with an eating disorder, she said, "I'm going to be healthy no matter what. I've seen you change, Sterling. I'm doing this." Today she's a championship bodybuilder. It's just unreal. We had somebody else from my professional past, his name's Sof, he said, "I will be a successful entrepreneur." Now, mind you, this guy came over as a Cambodian refugee, didn't really speak the language, he was flat broke.

Lyn Wineman:

Everything against him.

Sterling Hawkins:

Everything. Today, he's the founder of a Cambodian beef jerk company, which I didn't even know was the thing.

Lyn Wineman:

It sounds delicious.

Sterling Hawkins:

And he's selling more than he could keep up with. And story after story, individual after individual, business after business has realized that the way out for them too is through. They just have to go through no matter what.

Lyn Wineman:

So amazing. That's great. Sterling, what's next for you? You've done so much already. I know your travel and keynote schedule is bananas. It's a highly technical word, bananas. But what's next?

Sterling Hawkins:

I'm actually in the very early stages of working on another book.

Lyn Wineman:

All right.

Sterling Hawkins:

Yeah. Yeah. I found everything that I could think of, like the best of the research, my experience, the case studies, the work I did with clients has gone into *Hunting Discomfort*. That's what there is today. I'm starting to discover that there's even a level deeper that we can all go, and that's what I'm working on now.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, very exciting. Well, I can't wait to hear more about that. And since you're doing so much to motivate people, I'm going to ask you my favorite question that I've asked on every Agency for Change podcast. And-

Sterling Hawkins:

Let's go.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, you're on the hot seat now. This might be uncomfortable, Sterling, I'm just saying it out loud. No, just kidding.

Sterling Hawkins:

Speaking my language there.

Lyn Wineman:

Could you give us a few of your own words to inspire our listeners, an original Sterling quote?

Sterling Hawkins:

One of my favorite things is right along the lines of what we've talked about. To deny your discomfort is ultimately to deny part of yourself.

Lyn Wineman:

Whoa.

Sterling Hawkins:

Right.

Lyn Wineman:

There's a lot packed into that.

Sterling Hawkins:

Yeah. When working with people, leaders, business people, just about anyone, they all have this sense of, "I have more potential inside of myself. I can be more. I can do more. I can achieve more. I am more." When they come to terms with the discomfort that they have, that's the piece of them that they've held back, they've pushed away, they've ignored, denied, or survived, and as they embrace it, they truly embody their real potential.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. I have to tell you, you don't know this, my greatest fear in life is not living up to my potential. That quote, that is good stuff. For anyone else where you've peaked their interest, how can they find out more about you? How can they find out about your system, find the book, find the keynotes? What's the best way?

Sterling Hawkins:

The best place is my website, which is sterlinghawkins.com. There's a bunch of things there. One of the most inspiring things is we've got all sorts of pictures and stories from the NoMatterWhat community there, and you can even create your own NoMatterWhat, big or small, whatever it is that you're committed to, and become part of the movement.

Lyn Wineman:

All right, I'm going to make this commitment, I'm going to go do it, and then in the show notes of this episode we'll have the link to your website and we'll have my commitment in there too. How about that?

Sterling Hawkins:

I'm excited for it. I can't wait to see.

Lyn Wineman:

All right. All right. So Sterling, as we wrap up this great conversation, I've enjoyed talking to you so much, what is the most important thing you'd like to leave our listeners with about the work that you're doing?

Sterling Hawkins:

I think it's my mom's advice. She was right, the way out is through. We just have to go through no matter what.

Lyn Wineman:

Go, mom. I hope there's a picture of your mom on your website when I get there.

Sterling Hawkins:

That's a good question. I'm not sure there is. I'm going to have to go look.

Lyn Wineman:

Honor the moms. Sterling-

Sterling Hawkins:

That's right.

Lyn Wineman:

... I fully believe the world needs more people like you. I appreciate so much what you're doing, and thanks for taking the time from your busy schedule to talk with me today.

Sterling Hawkins:

Thanks for having me on, Lyn. It was a pleasure.

Announcer:

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