The Weekly Take

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Winning: Morgan Stanley's Carla Harris on How to Succeed in Business

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Spencer Levy

I'm Spencer Levy, and this is The Weekly Take. Sometimes I've just got to learn to get out of the way and let our guests do the talking. And this is one of those times. On this episode, the business world according to one of the most accomplished and well-rounded guests we've ever welcomed on the show.

Carla Harris

One of my favorite sayings is that when life comes to teach you a lesson, if you don't pass the test, you will repeat the class.

Spencer Levy

That's Carla Harris, a pioneering executive who built a career on Wall Street and performed before a sellout crowd at Carnegie Hall. How's that for a combination? The daughter of a schoolteacher and commercial fisherman, Carla attended Harvard University, then climbed the ranks at Morgan Stanley. Serving in several leadership positions, and now, as she celebrates her 35th year at the firm as a Senior Client Advisor. Along the way, she has written three books on business and leadership, including "Strategize to Win" a 2014 book that we'll talk about a lot in our conversation. Carla also chaired the National Women's Business Council during the Obama administration, and has sat on the boards of numerous foundations. Somehow, she found time to launch a podcast as well. Morgan Stanley's "Access and Opportunity" with Carla Harris, and to record four gospel CDs, including a Christmas album that was a bestseller on Amazon. Talk about live, work, play, Carla has done it all. Coming up, we're on location at last month's CBRE Multifamily Conference in Nashville, for a powerhouse perspective on life, business advice, career strategy and the real estate industry. The voice of Carla Harris. That's right now on The Weekly Take.

Spencer Levy

Welcome to The Weekly Take, and this week we are privileged to be joined by Carla Harris, Senior Client Advisor for Morgan Stanley, speaker right here in Nashville, Tennessee, for our Multifamily Conference. Carla, thank you for joining us.

Carla Harris

Oh, thank you for having me Spencer.

Spencer Levy

Wonderful. Well Carla, thank you so much for joining us today. And Carla, I would love to read your bio, and I say this with no disrespect to my prior guests, it would take the whole show, it is that impressive. Not only is your bio impressive, but I was able to read one of your books, "Strategize to Win", which we'll be talking a great deal about today. It talks about leadership, career advice. If you are reading this book, what do you want your readers to get out of it?

Carla Harris

Sure. I wrote that book actually with three types of people in mind. Number one, millennials, people who in 2012 were starting to start out in their career, and they were trying to figure out what their first job was. I wrote it for people who had been laid off, who now were trying to get another job. As you remember, there was a lot of dislocation in 2011 and 2012, and I realized part of the reasons people weren't getting jobs, they didn't know how to tell the story, they didn't know how to tell their story. And then I also made it for career switchers, people who might have been a nurse or who might have been a teacher for 30 years and decided they wanted to go into marketing or they wanted to think about something in finance. Again, how to tell the story, how to think about it, how to recognize opportunities.

Spencer Levy

What I love about what you said, and most of the things you said in this book, is storytelling and communicating. And one of the things I do in addition to this podcast, and being a public speaker myself, is I teach public speaking, and I talk all about storytelling and being able to do it in bite sized pieces, and being able to speak to the audience. How important is communication skills as part of your package of skills that you talk about in your book?

Carla Harris

Yes, communication skills are probably, that skill is probably the most important one, Spencer, I would say because, not only should you be able to express yourself in a written way, but being able to communicate an idea in the way that the listener wants to hear it. I say to people all the time, if your listener does not act on that which you are asking them to act on, then perhaps you're not a great communicator. So you should always be thoughtful about how somebody needs to receive the message, before you actually start to deliver the message. But being able to express yourself is important across all industries.

Spencer Levy

Now, of course, you mentioned many other skills in your book. You talk about strategic skills, presentation skills, management, selling, but does everybody have the ability to demonstrate their skills for success?

Carla Harris

I don't think people equally have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills for success, depending on the environment, because one of the things you've heard me say, Spencer, is that I think so, so often, people of color and women are under- leveraged in organizations. They can do far more than they've been asked to do. So I think it's important for organizations to think about whether or not they're giving equal access to opportunity. But, I also say as an individual, you should look for opportunities, even if it's not in your job description, to show what you can do, and here's an example. I started in mergers and acquisitions in my get my career in 1987. I wasn't necessarily getting an opportunity to go to this board meeting or that board meeting or present, but I was very involved in recruiting, because that was important to me. That was something that I

wanted to do, so guess what? It really did enhance my selling skills. I never lost candidates early on to the competition because I could sell, and if I could sell nothing else, I could sell Morgan Stanley. So by the time I did get to that boardroom, I knew how to make a compelling sale.

Spencer Levy

And being able to sell the thing you want to sell, you're selling the organization. And you talk a lot about, in this book, of the content. Finding content of things you want to do, because if you want to do it, you're going to do better at those things. Tell us a little bit about that.

Carla Harris

Yes, the content of the job is important, and in the context of "Strategize to Win", the way I talk about it is, so many people say I need that particular job. And so I tell readers, don't focus on a specific job with a specific title. Think about the content of the job, and are you getting that? So here's the example. People say all the time, oh, I want to be an analyst in M&A because I really want to know how to value companies. Well, guess what? You can do that as an analyst in M&A, but you can also do it in research, and in research, they have to value companies because they have to say, is this company more valuable than that? Guess what, in credit research, in order to put a credit rating on a company, you need to be able to value the company because that's going to impact how you thinking about the, you know, the credit rating. So there are three jobs as opposed to one, now. If you're focusing on the content, each of those jobs will teach you how to value a company. So that's what I meant by focusing on the content, and not the job title.

Spencer Levy

Well, you know what, Carla? If we could drop the mic right now, I think I might drop the mic right now, because when I talk to folks in the audience of young professionals in the real estate business, I say, who here wants to be in private equity? Every hand goes up, and I'm like, why? He said, well, they make the most money, they do the coolest things. I was like, let me tell you a story. The most successful professionals I know, including many of the top producers standing right out there, started in research, started in financial consulting. They started in appraisal. These don't sound cool, but getting the experience of underwriting all different types of deals, early in your career, doesn't have to start at the end point. You agree with that?

Carla Harris

That, absolutely. It's about building this portfolio of skills that actually makes you attractive for lots of other jobs. As you know in "Strategize to Win", I talk about getting these strategic skills, right. The communication, the organizational skills, the problem solving skills, because these things are actually useful across any industry, whether you're in real estate or you're in entertainment or you're in basic finance. No matter what seat you're sitting in, if you have those skills, you can get that opportunity, because getting a job, as I also talk about in "Strategize to Win", is not about your prerequisite experience, it's about understanding what the buyer is buying. And if you know what the buyer is buying, you can tell your story through that lens, so that in telling your story, they hear that you know what it takes to be successful in that job. So I tell people all the time, if I'm trying to get a job at Morgan Stanley, and I'm trying to get a job at the New York Times, same woman. So now, if I'm interviewing with Morgan Stanley, I'm going to talk about my outstanding analytical and quantitative skills, my attention to detail, my ability to work really hard, to follow up, to follow through. Same woman is going to talk, is going to stress, now, my writing skills, my relationship building skills, my ability to connect with people and get them to tell me things

that they don't tell other people. That's how I'm going to become a great reporter. Same woman, different story in terms of what I stress. All of these parts are Carla Harris, but The New York Times is not necessarily buying the analytical and quantitative skills, and Morgan Stanley is not necessarily buying my ability to connect and get people to tell me things that they wouldn't tell other people. They value those things, but those aren't the things that are the key success factors for those jobs.

Spencer Levy

And one of the things, the concepts, that you use in your book, and I use a lot in my business, is the concept of table stakes. What are the basics you need, that are, if you don't got these, you know, have a nice day. But then you, in your speech today, you talked about this quote, "hustle gene". And I've often said, and maybe I'm incorrect, when I teach public speaking. I can teach you how to write a great speech, I can teach you how to deliver a great speech, but I can't teach you drive. Do you disagree with that?

Carla Harris

You know, I do think that drive can be instilled. It is better if it's innate, but I do think, sometimes people don't know how to harness or manifest their drive. And so I do think it can be taught, but the real, the real hustlers, yeah, I would say is more innate than not.

Spencer Levy

Well, there's another concept you use in this book, and I use almost daily, which is maybe the most important word in the English language, which is courage.

Carla Harris Yes.

Spencer Levy

And I think it's the most important word because it is the table stakes to get big things done. It's the ability to make mistakes and move forward, and I'll give you one story. So, mid-career, about seven, eight years ago, I gave the biggest speech of my life, and I was in front of 3000 people, Board of Directors. All of the big bosses were there. And I made a strategic decision. I said, I'm going to do this my way, and my way is a little theatrical, it's a little bit more emotive, and used the term emoting a lot. But I didn't have that courage to really do it until I was mid-career. How do you teach people to have that courage earlier on in their career?

Carla Harris

Yes. One of the things I say all the time, Spencer, is that there are very few things in life that are irreparable. Most things can be fixed. So, if you buy that and you believe that with me, then that would give you the courage to take a few more risks, to understand that you can fix it. And one of the ways that I prove my point to people is when I'm speaking to a large audience, I said, how many people in this room have had a disappointment? Right, and everybody raises their hand. I said, oh, and you love to tell it, right. You get beyond it, you'll get to the other side. And in most cases, it was not damaging, right. The key is to understand what you learned from the failure. Why did it fail? What would I have done differently? And you need to understand that, you know why? Because it will come again. One of my favorite sayings is that when life comes to teach you a lesson, if you don't pass the test, you will repeat the class. It's coming again. So now, will you know, will you take that thing you have learned, and apply it the next time around? That's when you know you've conquered.

Spencer Levy

Well, now, your book is not just designed for the professional that's rising in the ranks. It's designed for the bosses, the senior professionals, to be a better leader. And I think enabling people to be courageous, to give them the ability to fail, and to embrace it rather than critique it, for people to be fearful in the office. I guess the word is trust, being the important ingredient. You talk about that. Tell us a little bit more.

Carla Harris

Yes, trust is key, especially if you're trying to build an environment where people feel comfortable taking risks, and therefore, if they feel comfortable taking risks, they're going to innovate. So, again, as the boss, you have to be intentional about making sure that when somebody takes that risk and it doesn't work out, you speak on it. You know, you say, oh, man, Dan, this was a huge mistake. This one might even cost us this quarter. But we got to give Dan a hand because he took the risk, and because he took the risk, we now know the following three things, or we now know these things that will help us to do X, or help us to do Y. And when people see that you appreciate the contribution, that you value the fact that they took the risk, then that will give them the encouragement that they need to go out and take a risk. They know it's not going to be career limiting. They know it's probably not going to cost them, you know, a promotion or cost them something else. And that's the reason that people don't take risks, because most of these environments, and certainly throughout my 30 years on the street, is that you felt like if you made a big mistake, it was career limiting or it was going to really impact your bonus or it was going to stop you from getting promoted. We can't afford to have that in cultures today, if you want people to innovate. And if they don't innovate, you won't be able to lead.

Spencer Levy

And innovation is, I think, if I were to use one of your things that you're trying to get at, from your team, is innovation. And that leads to productivity. And by the way, in my business, very difficult to measure productivity. Very difficult, you can measure cost, but you can't measure productivity. But, you know when things are working, when people are collaborative and they're being innovative. How do you foster the most innovation out of your team?

Carla Harris

Yes, I think as a leader, you have to provoke it. You have to poke it, right? You have to say things like, okay, we have something here that we know will work, but let's just take a blank sheet of paper approach. If we were starting all over today and this was our objective, what might we do differently? If we could truly leverage partnerships, if we could leverage relationships? Just think about it. 20 years ago, 30 years ago, the Holy Grail was to have something that was proprietary or to trade market. And then all of a sudden technology came along and they made everything open architecture. They weren't going to charge you for it. Everybody could use it. And they found a different way to make money. Oh, look at that, right? Now, we have that same kind of opportunity. How might we do it different? If we charge for this, what happens if we give it away for free? What else could we create that people might value? Could we, in fact, get more customers if we gave this away for free? How might we, you know, approach work, and look at what's going on with back to work, right. People are so afraid. There's so many people trying to go back to the way things were. So many people trying to convince them that that's the only way that you can teach, and to lead, is for people to be in the same place. Well, it's interesting. I've been having a lot of conversations with Z-Ers, saying, you know, I believe that you guys prefer to have work from home, but talk to me. And you know what they've said. You know, we believe that you can work from home and we want at least one day, if not two, but, we do value being in the office because it's more efficient, not because, oh, I'm going to learn

more from you or I like being in the same place. But it's efficient, because if I have a question, I can turn to you and ask and get the answer then. If I have to email you, I got to wait 30 minutes, and think you might be busy and you haven't gotten back to me. So it was an efficiency argument, not a learning argument.

Spencer Levy

That's interesting because I would have actually looked at it a little differently, because I say that people can work from home efficiently, but they can work in the office productively because I define the two terms very differently. And productive is a higher level work, creative, collaborative type of work. But I want to go to a term that you use consistently throughout the book, and it relates directly to work from home, which is relationship currency. Now, forming relationships is a complicated thing. It takes years, it takes trust, it takes going out for a cup of coffee or a beer after work, okay? These are some of the things that go into the mix. So, if you're trying to build that relationship currency, how does that fit in the new world of work from home?

Carla Harris

That was the most asked question of me over the last two years. And let me tell you, I will debate you on one point, about it takes years. I tell people that building relationships is easy. It's just frequency of touch. And what I've been saying now is touch doesn't have to be physical. It can certainly be virtual, because here's the thesis. If you think about the people in your life that you're close to, especially from college or other places, how did you get close to those folks? Maybe you said, oh, we're both Econ majors, let's sit next to each other. Or, you know, can you pass me those notes? Let's go to the football game together. Let's go to the keg party together. It was that touch that then created the relationships. Well, here's what I said, told people in the virtual world. Well, if you're trying to build a relationship with Spencer, now you say, Spencer, before we went into this shelter in place protocol, I wanted to get a few minutes with you to talk about A, B and C. Can I do a ten minute zoom with you? Then when you get that ten minute zoom with Spencer, you say, oh, I'm a woman of my word. I want to earn another 10 minutes with you. So in 9 minutes and 30 seconds, you cut it off. Now one or two things are going to happen. Spencer is going to say, oh, you know, I enjoyed this conversation, any time, just get another 10 minutes, talk to someone so I get it on my calendar, or he's going to say, oh no, I have another five or ten if you do. And then be prepared to move the conversation, and then do it again. It's the touch. I don't have to physically touch him. I don't have to go to coffee with him. But we can communicate in this way. And now, your ability to build a relationship with Spencer is a function of your intentionality, right? And making sure that you set up that time and your initiative, that you reached out, and not wait for him to reach out to you, because there wasn't a leader in the last two years that did not want to engage with their people. So nobody's going to turn down that request.

Spencer Levy

Well, I love the word you use there, intentionality. I use the word purposeful, a word very similar.

Carla Harris

Same thing.

Spencer Levy

Similar word. But, you said the number of touches, and I think something I also impress upon my teams is the quality of the touch. I'd rather have a thirty second elevator speech, where you had one unique fact, than a ten minute discussion about the weather. How do

you get people to have that level of intentionality, purposefulness, to really think hard about that one thing that says, geez, I'm going to go back and talk to that person again.

Carla Harris

Yes, I say to them, think about what you're going to say if you get that 10 minutes with Spencer. So, what do I want to ask him? Do I want to ask him, you know, why he came to work at CBRE? Do I want to ask him what was different when he made the decision? How should I be thinking about it? Do I want to talk to him about how he motors through a tough time? What do I want out of those 10 minutes? Be intentional about that. Every time I go into a client meeting, Spencer, I say to myself, what am I playing for? Am I playing for another meeting? Am I playing for the sale right now? Am I playing just to get to know that person? But if you have an objective around why are you doing what you're doing, it gives you a better shot at executing and executing well. So that's how you use your 10 minutes. Then I say to people, what are you going to say if you get stuck with the CEO in the elevator? You know, that quote "elevator speech". Think about it when you're by yourself, you know, when you're riding in your car, when you're on the subway. If I met so-and-so, what would I say? Well, you want to say, here's who I am, how long I've been at the organization, here's who I work for, I really enjoy it, I hope I can come and see you sometime. Boom.

Spencer Levy

One of the things you talk about is something that surprised me, which is, don't expect to have one job, don't expect to have two jobs. You can have multiple jobs in your career, in fact. But you, yourself, you've been at Morgan Stanley for 35 years. Is that a fair statement?

Carla Harris

Yes.

Spencer Levy

So, that's a different example of riding the same firm, doing different jobs within the firm. But, you know, a great example of what I would call a traditional, home- run work model. But if you're a younger professional, and I'm going to give a shout out to a dear friend of mine at the company who taught me this. Her name is Laura O'Brien. She's one of the senior executives here. She said that career today is a jungle gym, it's not a ladder. And you got to, sometimes, you got to go over here, you got to go over here. Do you agree with that? Because I will tell you, I felt anxiety when I read that. And the reason is because early on in my own career, I switched from being a lawyer to being a banker. And it was a scary move, because they didn't think I could add. They were probably right, but I had to take a step back before I could take a step forward. And I felt that my job switching hurt me, though over the long term it actually helped me because now I do something I really love doing. So tell us about this.

Carla Harris

So the reason I wrote about that is that I felt that innovation was happening so fast that there are companies that have not yet been created that will present opportunities for millennials and Z-Ers. And so the advice that I gave in "Strategize to Win" is you should not be thinking 30 years, because I think you're going to miss opportunities to grow with respect to your skill set. You may miss opportunities with respect to, you know, leading our organizations. So think to yourself, five modules of five or six modules of five if you're going to do it the way I did it. Now, you may choose to do two of those modules in one place, but the organization, and this is the message to the organizations, are going to have

to create a value proposition that is competitive with the other opportunities that have now been created over the ten years that you were there. And Spencer, let me underscore another point. One of the things that I've been saying to companies over the last two years. It's going to be incumbent upon you now to present that value proposition as to why somebody should be at your organization. Many organizations that many leaders haven't asked the question and answered the question in a long time, why should you work here? Well, that's what employees are asking now. So that value proposition needs to be rolling off of your tongue if you're a leader at that organization. And that's why I wrote what I wrote, because I could see it back in 2012 when I was writing that book, that given what was going on with innovation then, it was going to dictate that if you wanted to get greater positions and more compensation, chances were you're going to have to move organizations, even if you came back.

Spencer Levy

Which is a shift, I think, from where we were.

Carla Harris

Huge shift. When you and I were starting out in my career, and I'm just going to put you in my grouping right now, I don't know where you are.

Spencer Levy

I certainly hope you do. By the way, I will say that I am a Gen- Xer. We didn't get enough love in your book. I will say that was the one negative critique I could say about the book. You have got to show us more love.

Carla Harris

Yeah, well, by the time I was writing the book, the millennials were coming on strong and I was like, oh my gosh, I got to try to be helpful to them. But I will tell you that, you know, when we were coming along, the Holy Grail was to spend 30 years or 25 years or 20 years somewhere. That was what was revered and valued in the environment. But given what happened with the Financial Services Crisis, and given the amount of dislocation that happened across all industries, you know, I was saying to young people then, there will be no penalty for you having three jobs in four years. Whereas when I was coming along, that was frowned upon. But given this environment of how many industries have been, you know, laying off people and restructuring, there'll be no shame in that game for you.

Spencer Levy

Hmm. Let me bring up what was mentioned by one of the prior guests on the show, a dear friend of mine. Her name is Wendy Mann. She is the CEO of CREW, Commercial Real Estate Women, the largest...

Carla Harris

I know CREW very well.

Spencer Levy

And by the way, I'm a member and I'm proud to be a member of that group. But I'm going to read a quote from your book from page 131. You say, quote, "While women are very good in forming and sustaining relationships, I find that in corporate environments, most women overinvest in performance currency relative to relationship currency." So I'm going to ask you a) about that quote, but b) I'm going to tell you about a study that Wendy cited on this very show. She said she studied women's careers during COVID and regrettably, they got hit harder than men did, and that's the bad news. The good news is now we saw

their participation in the labor force actually coming back faster than men. But the difference between women and men in the type of advice you give.

Carla Harris

Sure. And I normally don't give gender specific advice, Spencer, but that is one place that I felt I had to, because I saw too many women get right there to the proverbial glass ceiling and just, you know, say, okay, it's just too much. If I'm going to have to invest what I have invested over the last 20 years to pierce through, I'm tired, I'm done. And what I see with most women, including myself, is that we would invest in the performance currency, making sure that the work is right, beyond reproach. You will never be able to criticize me about the work, and we keep doing that. Well, guess what? We can do that in our sleep, and that additional hour, half hour, 5 minutes that we're putting into the work is 5 minutes. half an hour or an hour that we're not investing in a relationship with someone. And when you get to the top, the candidates that are being considered, there is an assumption of equity. And what I mean by that, you hear the decision maker saying, oh, they're all good. All these candidates are really great. You know, we can't really make a bad decision. But you know as well as I do, there's generally some daylight between candidate A and candidate B. But the candidate that gets the nod is the one that people talk about behind closed doors. Oh, Bob is really great. Oh, I saw what he did with that particular client. Oh, you know what? People love working for Bob, and they don't know anything about Nancy. Or Nancy's pretty good, safe pair of hands, but it's not the same kind of qualitative comments happening because Nancy hasn't invested in those relationships around that table, so she doesn't get the pile on. She gets the one person that may speak, you know, objectively about her, but Bob's getting all these amens in the room. That is what relationship currency does for you. And if you fail to invest, it doesn't matter about the performance because people are giving Bob in many cases a pass on the performance. Yeah, yeah, Bob and Nancy, yeah they're pretty good. And sometimes there's a difference, but people know who Bob is.

Spencer Levy

So we're just about out of time here, Carla, so I'm going to ask you a couple quick hitting questions, if you don't mind. So one of the concepts you talk about in your book is, you know, sort of do what you love. You know, what if money didn't matter? So, if it's not too personal a question, if you weren't doing what you're doing today, if money didn't matter, what would you do?

Carla Harris

You know, I have to tell you, Spencer, I have enjoyed, for 30 years, what I have been doing, and I really am loving life now because I have an opportunity, you know, to, Carla the author, Carla the speaker, which I love, love, love doing. I have an opportunity to do corporate board work, which I thought was the right next step after gathering 30 years of experiential and intellectual capital on Wall Street. It gives me an ability to really be value add around a board table. And then I have an opportunity as a banker to bring all those skills to bear on early stage companies, through the Morgan Stanley Multicultural Innovation Lab. And then I get an opportunity to amplify the inequity in the distribution of capital to women and people of color through the Access and Opportunity podcast. So I love doing what I'm doing now. And I tell you that when I started my career in 1987, despite those hours, I remember saying, man, I would do this for free. Now I'm not going to tell anybody that because if the guy next to me is getting paid, I want to get paid. But I loved doing it then, because it was dynamic, you always learned, you were always being challenged, so I love doing it. Now I will tell you this, I do want to do one thing in my professional life. I want to get me a Grammy, badly. I want a Grammy.

Spencer Levy

I would love, I tried to end this podcast once with a sing along and it did not make the air. I'm not going to try to do that to you today, Carla, but Carla is an accomplished singer. Four albums, sold out Carnegie Hall a few times, the Apollo Theater. So, wow, you've really made the job. And I think that's another lesson learned from your career, is that you're not just an investment banker, you're all these other things within the context of investment banking. And, so I guess victory is loving what you do, but you helped shape that, correct?

Carla Harris

Yeah, that's absolutely right. And if there's any message that I want to leave to your, especially your early professional listeners, is that you do not have to compromise yourself or your passions in order to pursue something professionally that you also like or even that you feel like you ought to do. You can, in fact, have it all. It's just about defining what all looks like to you.

Spencer Levy

And I'm going back to that same special word again, having the courage to do so.

Carla Harris

Absolutely.

Spencer Levy

I can't end this show any better. Carla Harris, Senior Client Advisor, Morgan Stanley. Carla, it was an honor to interview you today. What a great job on stage. What a terrific interview. Thank you so much.

Carla Harris

Thank you. It was my pleasure. Thank you, Spencer, for having me.

Spencer Levy

For more on writer, gospel singer, podcaster and Wall Street leader Carla Harris, and more on our show, check out our website: CBRE.com/TheWeeklyTake. We'll be back with some special events in the weeks to come. Among them, we take the show on the road to the ICSC Conference in Las Vegas and to the CBRE Women's Networking Forum in Chicago, where we'll join some of our leading women executives in an interactive conversation with the audience in attendance. Lots of dynamic, informative programs on the horizon. For now, we hope you'll share this episode with your network and also subscribe, rate and review us wherever you listen. Thanks for tuning in. I'm Spencer Levy. Be smart. Be safe. Be well.