

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 19: Adda Birnir

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I'm an author, a speaker, and I write frequently about disruption for [LinkedIn](#) and the [Harvard Business Review](#). In my book, [Disrupt Yourself](#), I set forth a framework for putting disruptive innovation to work. Because I can't get enough of these ideas, I am continually looking for ways to explore them in greater depth.

My guest is [Adda Birnir](#), CEO and Founder of [Skillcrush](#) – an online tech-education company that teaches coding and web design – mostly to women. Adda grew up the daughter of Icelandic immigrant university professors. She then goes to college, planned to be a photographer, but when she couldn't pay the bills, she started to build websites.

In this episode, Adda shares how she started Skillcrush, the ups and downs of entrepreneurship, and what she would do differently if were to start her business today.

Adda: My name is Adda Birnir, and I'm the Founder and CEO of an online education company called Skillcrush that teaches coding and web design, mostly to women who are looking to make a career change.

W: What was the most disruptive thing you did growing up?

A: I grew up in a university town; I grew up in Santa Barbara, California, and my parents are professors at the University of California, Santa Barbara. And so as a kid I spent a lot of time just like bumming around campus; like, technically our house was on a satellite part of the campus because we were like faculty housing but then just summers and things like that, like, really my parents would like let me loose on campus and I would just walk around and hang out. I got really interested in banned books and that kind of led me down some funny avenues and then I made it my business to read them all. And that was just to say that was sort of the first kind of inkling in like activism and those kinds of issues. And then, um, that sort of got me thinking about diversity and discrimination and that kind of stuff and one day I was, you know, walking around the campus and walked by the Women's Center and they had this sign in the window and I was 12 at the time, and it said something to the effect of, "we're a safe space and we accept people of all gender, sexuality types, etc. etc." And I was like, "this is really nice...I feel like there's a place for this in other parts of my life. And so then I talked my friends into helping to like make this big...we basically, like—you know those banners you make for a school pep rally? So we basically, you know, got some butcher paper, make like this probably like four foot by ten foot banner and said on it,

“We the undersigned students of Goleta Valley Junior High School, hereby declare this safe space for anyone of any gender, sexual orientation, race, economic status...” and I kind of like listed every sort of identity group that I was aware of at the age of 12. The next Monday or whatever day of the week it was, I took my banner to the assistant principal and asked him if I could put it up in the hallway. He said, ‘yes’ which was very nice of him and then I put it in the hallway and then invited all the students in my junior high to sign it.

W: At 12 years old.

A: At 12 years old, yeah. I know, it’s pretty funny.

W: What did your parents say when you were reading all these banned books, or did they know?

A: It’s a good question whether they knew. But I think they probably knew. I have European parents, you know, who grew up in Iceland. In Iceland you just open your door and your kid goes out and they come back when the sun sets. For them especially growing up in the 50’s—they had no conception of being concerned about that or needing to, like, supervise me or anything like that, so I really did....

W: So you’re saying they weren’t worried about you wandering around campus. I’m thinking more of you’re reading banned books.

A: Right. But I guess I think it just extends...

W: Oh.

A: ...to every aspect, like, I think that for them....

W: That was just part...you wandered campus, your brain wandered in...?

A: Exactly. Basically, like, I feel like they gave me, like, access to bookstores and libraries, and just let me have at it and didn’t supervise a lot.

W: What did your parents teach? I’m very curious now.

A: Math and anthropology. So, yeah. I really don’t think that they were giving a lot of thought to what I was reading. I think they just felt like as long as what I was busy doing was reading-related it seemed fine to them. They took me out on sabbatical to Sweden when I was nine, and we were only there for six months; it was like too short for me to learn Swedish, so they put me in an American school. But it was really far from where we lived. In short, I had no friends and was very lonely and so their solution to that was just to give me all the books to read and I soon exhausted the children’s books and then read my

mother's books which in retrospect were...like I read a [Margaret Atwood](#) book. I don't know if you've read [The Robber Bride](#)? Which is a great book but not appropriate for a nine year old.

W: So you've been a disruptor from a very early age?

A: Yeah, I think in some sense, yeah.

W: You started a company called Skillcrush, which is meant to help people disrupt themselves, learning new skills and transforming their careers. What do your prospective students, or actually, your students that matriculate, what do they have in common; what do you offer them?

A: This is such an interesting and complicated question and it's something we think about so much at the company, you know...what is it that people are really looking for? Because I think often when you create a product you're so focused on the product, you know, like, 'We have videos and office hours and like these things,' Our students are looking for something different. I think this is something especially among professional women right now, um, it's something that's talked about ad nauseam, this feeling of like, you know, being a square peg in a round hole and the...basically the working world being the round hole. Some of it is around flexibility and they want greater control and flexibility. A lot of it is also just about just lack of fulfillment in their work. And some of it is monetary for sure...I think it's this feeling of just wanting to feel like your abilities are being exercised. Like you have the opportunity to really, you know, contribute.

W: So most of your students are women.

A: Mm hmm.

W: Are they a specific age? Are they mostly in their 20's or 30's or 40's, 50's? Is there a wide range?

A: There is a really, really healthy range, which has been surprising to me. But the...I would say the predominant group is sort of late 20's to early 30's and they kind of fall into two camps. They're either the women who have been in the workforce for about five years and are starting to really feel like, 'There's got to be more to it than this.' The other sort of part of that persona is the woman who is either literally about to have children or starting to think about wanting to have children, and thinking about, you know, what her life is going to look like, what she wants it to look like, how she wants to make changes now. We get a lot of pregnant women, which is really interesting.

W: That is interesting.

A: Yeah, and I love that.

W: If I sign up for your class, what am I going to learn?

A: So, what we really focus on to begin with is we try to get everyone to get sort of a foundational set of skills and we focus only on web development, which is a distinction that probably doesn't mean a lot to people who are listening, but it's basically anything related to websites as opposed to mobile apps or software or hardware or any of those types of things. And the reason we do that is because it's where the biggest growth is and it's also where it's most beginner-friendly.

W: So it's primarily for women; why...what is there in how you teach the courses that makes it women-friendly and do men sign up, and if they do, what do they say?

A: This is a really interesting question and I think about it a lot because I do a lot of user interviews where I get on sort of these counseling sessions and I talk to students. I don't know the breakdown; at one point I did a survey and it was like, 90% of the respondents were women. I would bet that it's more equally balanced now than it was at that time. That was a long time ago. But, there is this type of guy that will come sometimes, that sort of has some characteristics that to me are emblematic of what I would define as the very masculine approach, and for them, it's all about like how hardcore is this. Like, am I going to learn enough of the good skills; am I going to learn the right stuff? Is it going to be really intense? You know, and I think you see that mirrored in a lot of our competitors. They're very focused on, you know, brand names. Like, Google Engineer taught this course, and it's like all kind of about like mastery and genius and, you know, how intense are you going to be and this is going to be hard and grrrr. And that is not a marketing message that's going to resonate with women in my experience. Such a big obstacle for us with our students is their belief that they can do this. I mean, also their concern that they're not going to like it is a big one. They have so much anxiety about whether they can do it, so so much of what we have to do is about sort of reassuring them that 'yes, you can do this. There's lots of women who do it. We're here to support you every step of the way.'

W: So I go through the course; how long does it take to finish this course and what are some of the outcomes that you've seen that you are thrilled by?

A: How long it takes a student to complete the course varies quite a bit because, I guess, our sort of standard course is three months long, but tradition...what we see is students take more than one. So it's probably about six to nine months, I would say, is really like a good...they'll really get really far in that time frame. There's great success stories of women landing full time jobs at different companies which is amazing. I think I probably get the most

excited about women who really do not fit sort of a traditional profile who are starting their own businesses that are dev and web-design based, so an example is we have a woman named Sarah Greer who is based in Georgia and homeschools four children and makes a living coding websites after her kids go to bed. Um, there's also another amazing woman named Katherine who, um, is older, so she actually retired and is doing this as sort of a second career. That's not typical of our students but it's exciting for me because I feel like those are really audiences that like don't have a lot of options. Um, she runs this really great Facebook group that's called something like...it's like Boomer Business Owners, or something like that and I just love it.

W: And so you don't work with them on how to actually go out and get the business; it's more just skills development and then it's up to them to actually build a...?

A: We do actually.

W: You do?

A: We do. Because we find that that's an equally important and difficult part of the challenge. It's harder to teach in a lot of ways because it's so dependent on them doing it and doing it is the hard part, we can't do it for you.'

W: You have to do....you still....

A: And that is the hardest part.

W: You have to do the work still.

A: Yeah.

W: During the early days of your business, uh, which you said you started...well, you said you started in early 2012 and incorporated in 2012 and then went fulltime in 2014ish, 2015. During the early days, what advice did you find most valuable to you?

A: I am very, very fortunate to have a mentor who's now an investor in my business who has been, like, absolutely crucial to every step. And so, he's given me an enormous amount of tactical advice at every stage. I would say early in the business so much of it is about, like, perseverance and continuing. And I think especially when you've never done it before and I just look back at that time and it's all a long hard slog, but I think back then you kind of have so little to go on in terms of, you know, validating what you're doing. I guess it's just sort of belief in yourself and your mission and I'm not even sure if I had that, but I think I'm just very, very stubborn and I just wasn't going to give up until, I don't know, I felt like I really....

W: Well how did you find this mentor?

A: So he is a family friend.

W: So like, almost like a godfather or something...

A: Yes. I think I'm a very good mentee. He's an ex-computer science professor so I think for him, mentoring people is sort of a way for him to scratch that itch, because since he left computer science to start a tech company and then now is running a second tech company. I joke that he gives me advice as long as I listen to it. And I do listen to it very actively because it's been fantastic advice. But I think so much of what I've appreciated from him and other entrepreneurs was just sort of that like, it's normal for it to be really hard and you should keep going.

W: Can you think of one piece of advice he gave?

A: Early on?

W: Mm hmm.

A: Um, I mean, I guess in terms of tactical advice he has always really coached me in the lean start-up stuff, so this is like eight years ago, before Skillcrush was even a glimmer in my eye, he handed me [Four Steps to the Epiphany](#) and told me to read it.

W: [Four Steps to the Epiphany](#)? Who wrote it?

A: Yeah, which is by Steven Blank.

W: By Steve Blank.

A: Yeah. Um, which is not an easy book to read, but I slogged through it, um, and then I read [The Lean Startup](#) and he's just always really coached me in all of those methodologies and the idea that there is a process for this and if you follow the process it will work.

W: So [The Lean Startup](#) by Eric Ries. Now, he gave you that book; were you already talking about doing a startup at that point?

A: With [Four Steps to the Epiphany](#) I was running a services business where I built websites for people, and yes, I had done a project for Big Apple Ed...or, sorry, the name of it was Big Apple Ed; it was for the Big A** Competition. And I...that was actually sort of...I think I went to him and was like, "Look at this

thing I did.” And he was kind of like, “This isn’t a business.” And I was like, “It’s not?” And he was like, “Here. Read this book and learn how businesses work.” And I was like, “Okay.” And obviously I was running a services business but that’s very different than a startup.

W: It’s interesting. You said...you’ve said twice...there’s the implication that you are good at being a mentee, which I think is really important. We...actually in my newsletter today I talked about the importance of actually recognizing that we’re being mentored a lot more frequently than we actually believe that we are. There’s a corollary to that which is we need to be good mentees. What would you say to people who are listening who want to have the kinds of mentors you have? One piece of advice on how to be a better mentee.

A: I mean, I think it’s as simple as, like, nobody wants to keep giving you advice if you don’t listen to them. And I’ve had that experience as a mentor. I’ve literally had people who I adore and mentored and I gave up on them in terms of mentoring them because I was like, “I can’t keep having the same conversation with you and you don’t listen to what I do.” Um, I think that....

W: So get one piece of advice, do it, go back and report. Ask for more advice.

A: Exactly. I mean, I think that pretty much sums up all my mentorship relationships going back to when I was a small child. Um, I think, that’s how mentorship is supposed to work.

W: You make it sound so simple.

A: I know. But, I mean, I just, I guess I can just say, like, as somebody who has now mentored people. You’re doing it because you love this person or really like them, connect with them and want to see them succeed and you have experience in what they’re trying to figure out and you want to give them advice, but then if they’re not listening to you it’s so frustrating. Also, why would you be going to a mentor and trying to be mentored if you’re not going to listen to anything they’re going to say?

W: Because sometimes we want...we just want people to fix it for us.

A: Well, that’s true, yeah. Or you just really enjoy, like, being listened to, but I don’t know, but I’m like, that’s what a therapist is for. People probably overemphasize mentorship and underestimate their need for therapy.

W: I think you may be on to something there!

A: I’m a big believer in that too, so....

W: Uh, me too. What is the most important thing you've learned about personal disruption since you started Skillcrush?

A: I mean, I think one thing that's interesting for me is thinking about the business and what it does for me. I think that's been very challenging for me. And it's actually something that my mentor has worked with me on, and said, you know, "You have to see this as a vehicle for yourself. You know...and I imagine this is hard for women who have families and stuff like that, but just like trying to locate yourself in it. I think those have been the hardest messages for me to receive.

W: Say more about that: locate yourself inside the business.

A: I don't have children, but I imagine that in some ways having a business is similar to having children in that it's this thing that's totally dependent on you and it will just, like, take and take and take and take. And I just have a hard time seeing it as something that's supposed to give back to me also. But the thing is, if you don't think about it that way and try to extract those things out of it, then it's really like, "Why are you doing this?" Because it is painful. Um, so you better be getting something out of it. And I think you end up in that situation where you haven't taken that approach and then you kind of like, you wake up one morning and you're like, "I'm miserable. This is really hard. Like, why am I doing this?" You know?

W: Have there been moments where you thought, "I'm done."?

A: Oh, many of them.

W: I'm done. What's one, and when was it?

A: Probably the biggest one for me was the end of 2014.

W: Where was the business; what was the status at that point?

A: No, it wasn't; it was 2013. I think this is actually characteristic of a lot of startups, but I had an incredibly tumultuous first year of the business where I started with two co-founders and ended up just me. We had raised a little bit of money which was a small amount now. At that time it was more money than I'd ever seen in one place, which was \$75,000, but...Anyway, it was very tumultuous and it was, you know, and I think in some ways, like, I almost was...it was not going well; we weren't making any money. Ironically, I think them leaving kind of spurred me to dig in a little bit more. But then in the end of 2013 what happened was, we were starting to gain some momentum, but it had just been such a hard year, like, we're talking really, really nasty protracted legal battle as one of my co-founders left. And we got all this press in December of 2013. All of a sudden all this attention. It was one of these

experiences where I felt like I was such a fraud. I was like, this business is a disaster, you know? Like, I don't make any money; it's horrible. Yada, yada, yada. Here I am being, you know...

W: Touted as the next....

A: ...touted as the next whatever. And I was just like I'm so tired. I feel, you know, like tidal waves of imposter syndrome. I'm not comfortable with this at all. I'd also just hired someone fulltime—my developer, who's still my director of engineering: wonderful person. I'd just brought her on fulltime and I was like this is a bad idea. And I remember, I quit. I like, I called my mom; I told my husband, who wasn't my husband at the time. But I was like, "I'm quitting," and he was like, "Okay." And then I called my mom and told her I was quitting and then I called my...one of my co-founders who I had still, like, a good relationship with, and continue to. And I said, "ok, I'm throwing in the towel. I'm done with this." And I remember she said to me...she said, "That's totally understandable. It's been a good fight. Like, you did a good job, but, like, I get it. Um, but now you're going to have to tell Emily. And I was like..."

W: Who's Emily?

A: Emily was my developer who I'd just gotten to quit her job, and I was like, "I can't tell Emily." And I basically...I joke that I chickened out of quitting because I couldn't fire Emily. Um, but I will say that there was one other moment that was really critical in this process and that was that...I remember I was...because this was right around Christmas time and I was on the flight back home to California and I was feeling all these feelings about how ridiculous it was that I was being featured in all this press. And I remember sitting there and saying to myself, "You know, Adda, a year ago you would have killed to have been featured in this press." Right? Those were my hopes and dreams a year before. Now here you have it and you're ungrateful; you're like not happy about it. And I was like, "You need to get your....together." You know? Like, if you're going to ask for something you better appreciate it when it comes along. So I think those were kind of the two things....

W: Those two pivotal moments in turning you around and saying, "Alright, I'm going to keep going."

A: Yeah.

W: do you disclose what your revenue is or how many employees you have, or is that private?

A: I think I have about 16 employees full time and then I have another 15 or so who are part time because we have a big instructor base. It's not the biggest the company's been, but I'm very happy to have it be a little smaller. It's

been...this has been a learning which is that more people, more problems. And then in terms of revenue, we did \$2 million dollars last year and we're hoping to do three this year.

W: If you could go back and start your business again tomorrow, with no financial downsides, what is one thing you would do differently?

A: I think that a lot of, you know, a lot in the experience in the last five years is building up my own confidence, which I think in a lot of ways is also...has built up my risk tolerance. It's not that I didn't have a high risk tolerance in some ways but I also think that was...I had a really good handicap or whatever, which is that I was really young and didn't have a lot to lose. And I think I would take bigger risks now, you know; I would move a little faster. I would be less afraid...I mean, this is part of also what I'm trying to coach myself on a daily basis.

W: What will you do to disrupt yourself in 2017?

A: These are such good, hard questions! I really should have...I should have done my homework. Um, how will I disrupt myself? I think that, you know, like one of the biggest challenges most entrepreneurs face, but I'll just speak for myself, is that, I am really struggling with the process of disengaging from every single part of the business. Like it just...and it's so frustrating, like the thing...the hardest period for me in like the last six months has been having worked really hard to build up a team to...so I wouldn't have to be involved with day-to-day activities for every single team and then having a couple key members leave and then one that I needed to fire and just getting sucked right back into it. And I'm totally in a place right now where I'm way too critical to way too many processes. Um, and I'm mad at myself for having gotten myself to this place again and I think like that's really the work that needs to happen this year.

W: That's a good one. That's a good one—of basically disrupting how you manage.

A: Yeah. And it's really...

W: Delegating.

A: ...really, really hard.

W: You can do it!

A: Yeah. It's like you have to keep saying to yourself...like I remember the one time talking to myself where I was like trying to micromanage something and I

was like, “Okay Adda, like, your options are either to micromanage this and have it be exactly how you want it to be OR let it be what it’s going to be otherwise and not have to micromanage everybody, you know? And it’s like, in the moment, you always want to micromanage but in the grand scheme of things, you don’t. So, trying to keep that perspective.

W: Adda, thank you so much for being my guest. It’s been a pleasure to hear a little bit more about you and your entrepreneurial journey.

A: Thanks so much for having me.

W: Thank you.

A: Thank you so much for having me. I love this podcast, so I’m honored.

W: Thank you.

What I loved about talking to Adda is that she gives an honest glimpse into entrepreneurship and actually, into life. Frequently when a person’s narrative is unspooled, it sounds, it looks linear. I appreciate that Adda is willing to share the peaks and the valleys, the ups and the downs of personal disruption. And as a disruptor, what is not to love about her playing where and how no one else is playing. She’s teaching coding to women – in a way that women understand coding. After talking to Adda, I reached out to my friend and coaching client who is underemployed and said, “This is for you!” She is now halfway through the course and loves the challenge.

I was also really intrigued with Adda’s idea of locating yourself in the business. As we give what feels like our all to a living, breathing entity of a business, we can expect it to give back.

If this is your first time listening to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, welcome! And next you may want to listen to the episodes with Susan Cain, Coss Marte, Sarah Feingold or Patrick Pichette to get a sampling of what you can expect going forward.