

Disrupt Yourself Podcast
Episode 28: Feyzi Fatehi

Welcome to The Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. On today's show...

F: There were so many restrictions imposed on education that in America we don't have those restrictions, and a word that he said that truly I think I...the reason I'm here today—and I've spent most of my life here—was that one word. And that was the word that you can 'drop' a class. That's disrupted. That disrupted my entire being.

Welcome to The Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Feyzi Fatehi, the CEO of Corent Technology, a software-as-a-service transformation and delivery platform. Originally from Iran, Feyzi came to the U.S. as a teenager. Things have sometimes been different here than he planned. He's sometimes jumped, sometimes been pushed to new learning, or S, curves, but in either case, there's always been an opportunity to grow. And grow he has.

F: My name is Feyzi Fatehi. I'm the CEO of [Corent Technology](#), the biggest small software company in the world. We're about 120 people. Humbly I believe it will revolutionize the way software will be deployed and distributed and offered as a service as we move forward with the cloud revolution. I was born in Iran; when I was 15 I went to Cambridge. My high school—I loved it, um, and I had a...

W: Cambridge?

F: Cambridge, England. Yes.

W: Okay, just making sure.

F: And by the way, I was very lucky to be in a great family that valued education, and there were great role models, the parents and the family, phenomenal educational system and wonderful teachers gave me a great foundation for curiosity, for love of learning. I met an American roommate who told me about American educational system...

W: Ok, before you go there, though...so were you in boarding school in Cambridge; were you...?

F: Yeah.

W: Okay.

F: I was at Lennox Cook, next to Cambridge campus.

W: Okay.

F: So we were interacting with the main, main campus and at the same time with the general cultural scene in Cambridge, which was phenomenal.

W: Okay, so for...I suspect for, for people who are in the United States, who aren't familiar with London, it would be like growing up in a bedroom community of Harvard, or going to school at a high school near Harvard or MIT.

F: Like Cambridge, Massachusetts.

W: Yeah, near Cambridge, Massachusetts.

F: That's kind of the atmosphere, except buildings are 1000 years older than the ones in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

W: Right.

F: It was a phenomenal opportunity for me, being from the middle class—we weren't that privileged. It was because my parents valued education, culture, being worldly; that was a gift I received at that age.

W: I think that's...it's important and interesting, because right now we have a...we have two children, but one child who's a...who's 16 years old. And I'm just thinking about...I mean, you left Iran to go all the way to London.

F: I had extra edge of my mother's side, for centuries—for like three centuries—they were diplomats. So they've been all over the world. My mother's grandmother was French and so we had a lot of international influence in our family with a deep respect for own culture, literature, the poetry, the philosophy that was created there, at the same time valuing other forms of knowledge, education, enlightenment that happened in the rest of the world. So it was from that perspective—respect for science, for knowledge, for learning, no matter where it came from and, and so that was an opportunity to expand on my, my quest.

W: Right. So for you then, you had seen your family, your mother perhaps, your father; they had gone to study abroad when they were younger?

F: My mother was a graduate of American University, probably around 70 years ago.

W: 70.

F: Yes.

W: So, I think that's really important because one of the things that we often times think is okay, well, we want our children to go out and do these daring sorts of things and yet if we ourselves haven't, it's a lot harder for them to even be able to see in their minds how this is a possibility. But for you, you saw what your mother, your grandmother did; maybe your father, your grandfather. So going to London—probably you were scared, but....

F: For about a week.

W: Yeah. And then you got there.

F: So and meeting great friends and new friends...one of them was in a bed and breakfast, was my roommate from America. And he helped me understand that despite my fascination with the old world, from Iran to Cambridge and the depth of philosophy and knowledge, there were so many restrictions imposed on education that in America we don't have those restrictions. And a word that he said that truly, I think I...the reason I'm here today and I've spent most of my life here was that one word. And that was the word that you can "drop" a class. That's disrupted. That disrupted my entire being. Wow, I didn't know even physically it's possible you drop a class. And in the U.S., he said, if you don't like the teacher, you don't like the textbook, you don't like the direction the sun shines in the classroom, you go and drop the class.

W: You couldn't do that in London?

F: No. It was A level...O level...A level in Iran. It was 16 subjects. If you failed one of them, you failed the entire year. You go to summer school and take it again. It had to be there—at least in Iran—to create a regimen, a discipline. They didn't have computers to keep track of who...you either take it, take the whole thing, or not. And the second was to my disappointment, the same restriction, rigidity, take or leave it. And then said, 'Wow.' At that moment, I heard the word 'drop,' my jaw dropped and I already felt American. I loved...that was the true sensible, palpable meaning of freedom. I said...there's all rhetoric about freedom...freedom, what does it mean? You walk into the grocery store, you have freedom to choose any kind of cheese that you like. You know, what kind of freedom? And that was an empowerment of the individual at a young age—that you choose your classes; you select your classes and if you don't like it, you drop it. I said, "Wow, that's the ultimate personal freedom." So I...my mind said my life was disrupted at that moment.

W: How old were you?

F: I was 15. And then, the next year...so I decided to go back to Iran and my mother, being a graduate of American University, Beirut, actually, which is, if not the best university in the Middle East, one of them. Two weeks later she said, "Look, your dad and I were fascinated by your story and your excitement about the concept of freedoms in U.S. and we have done our research—remember, that was before communications were so prevalent—and we found this high school in Princeton...Hun School, Princeton. It's been there for like 80 years and is one of the top high schools and believe it or not they have accepted you. They have very high acceptance criteria, so it's up to you. That's our gift to you if you want to go." Room and board; it wasn't cheap. "You can go and you don't have to go." And that night I remember I couldn't sleep. I was...I knew that's a fork in the road, a major one. And in the morning I'd made up my decision and that was the beginning of the rest of my life.

W: Amazing. When did you decide that you wanted to do mountain climbing? What was the genesis of this?

F: I moved to Silicon Valley; hired by HP directly from school. And was very, very much involved playing tennis, you know, competitively, and through Sierra Club I was introduced to the whole joy of hiking and nature and Yosemite and Lake Tahoe and Sequoia National Park and so on. And one of my good friends, Scott, he was a former Navy Delta Force, special ops, and had all these trainings. And he said, "Feyzi, I want to go to Mt. Whitney; we got to get a permit. They just issue very few permits. We have to be proactive, and I want to train you. It's going to be three months. There's theory behind it; there's practical training." So we went through three months of training together and another friend who was literally a rocket scientist, working for NASA. John, a PhD in aeronautical. So John, Scott and I—the three of us—decided to go climb Mt. Whitney together after the sufficient training. And that was a phenomenal journey—not only the physical but the mental and shows the value of setting your purpose and get behind it and achieving it. And not only focus on what you want to do, like getting to...on the summit, but also how you want to do it, with your mental and consciousness and awareness and enjoying the journey. Because each time you go up you see a new lake and it's different color, different beauty. The birds, the flowers, and it just opens your mind up that there's so much we're missing everyday if you don't pay attention.

W: So your decision to scale Mt. Whitney has become—of course I love that name—

F: Yes, for some strange reason.

W: ... to scale that, that mountain has become, has become a metaphor for you...a sort of...not even a metaphor but kind of a touchstone for you, um, and a...sort of a Feyzi myth that you live your life by.

F: You said it so well, Whitney. It's like it became a blueprint, that if you set a goal it has to be audacious, bold; it shouldn't be easy. It should challenge you so you muster all your mental and physical and possible training that you can get there. It's possible to do it, despite ups and downs, because climbing a mountain is not a straight line. You get to a peak, you have to come down and then go up to the higher next one. And then with each experience you see new vistas, you see new beauties that you haven't experienced before. So it becomes a journey of experiences—new experiences—if you're aware.

W: Oftentimes you're going to see the most breathtaking vistas in life—either figuratively or literally—when you're exhausted. And so it takes a lot of stamina or gumption to be willing to say “I'm exhausted, but I'm going to see the beauty of what's there to see right now.” You think you're going to be able to see the beauty when you're rested but oftentimes you have to see the beauty through the exhaustion.

F: For some strange reason that's the way life works at least has worked for me.

W: You wanted to be a solar engineer initially; what steered you into being a computer scientist?

F: It's good to be a disruptor but whether we like it or not, Whitney, sometimes we get disrupted. So I finished my degree as the first total solar engineer from UT Austin. Soon as I graduated there was a change of policy in the federal government and all the tax subsidies went away. And the solar engineer—that was the day it died. For 20 years. And I graduated and I instantly was disrupted because my market died. So what do you do? And as an immigrant, just trying a pursuit of happiness, education, enlightenment and making a living and I was lucky that I ran into a very good friend of mine and he said “Hey, next to Austin there's a school that's just creating a computer science department and they badly want graduate students.” I said, “I have no idea. I took a FORTRAN class; I don't know anything about computer science.” He said, “That's the point. There so desperate that they'll accept anyone who passed....”

W: Even solar engineers.

F: Even solar engineers. But, you have to study a year and a half to catch up but you get to a graduate school, so I did get there. And three years later—it was longer than 1 ½ years—I did my Masters; and again something new that later was known as software architecture. I thought there could be something

better. I was a mechanical engineer, solar engineer—anything in line of my, my expertise. And I recognized there was a small power plant there and some engineers come and go not knowing that Honeywell was automating that power plant as the first automated power plant in Texas. And I went all the way to the CFO of the university to get a special permit to work there; minimum wage plus a nickel. And that was way below 800 a month but that training that I got, and participated and trained at practically working for free; people said slavery's revived, and that was the reason I got a job after I graduated. Forty people graduated; three job offers were made, and all three went to Feyzi. And that was because of disruption—disrupted the common thinking of you get the paying...you get the more paying jobs rather than....It was a disruption with a purpose.

W: Take a step back in order to slingshot forward. Alright so this power plant; how did you know that there was a job there? Did you just see the power plant? You said, "Okay, I'm a solar engineer; there's something intriguing there." Like, what did...how did you suss that out? Do you remember?

F: For some reason, school had very—it was Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos—unlike UT Austin that was very liberal; you wanted to do something you did it, and I did about 20 different jobs, from flipping hamburgers to work cash register to catering and project management; whatever they had, you asked for it, you got it. In San Marcos, they said, "No, no, no; students cannot do it. These are jobs not for students." I couldn't understand it. I said, "I don't buy this." So I went to the administration; I got myself to the office of the CFO and put my nice shirt on—ironed, cleaned, shaved—and I had a conversation with him. I said, "Is there any way I talk to the President of the University. I know that you cannot give me that permission." And he says, "You don't go to the President of the University; he was the head of the US Postal Offices, the next Governor of Texas, you know. It's...." And I said, "Look, it's five minutes; I'm not going to take a lot of his time." So bottom line, he said he's not going to send me to the President. And I told him there is a power plant; I'm a mechanical engineer. Is there any way I can work at this power plant. I can sweep the floors. Just be in a work environment. So, he picked up the phone and said, "Bob, I have this very nice student, very impressive, I'm sending him over. Please give him a job at the power plant. Would you please do me that favor." In front of me. And I just walk across campus to the power plant; Bob was the head of power plant. He said, "Oh, we have Honeywell working here and we have the only air-conditioned room with color graphic terminals and you are a mechanical engineer with background in heat transfer solar; you teach us how to use them because our knowledge is a little bit old." So I started working with Honeywell and that experience on my resume differentiated me from the rest of the students who didn't have that practical experience. And the economy was so bad....

W: What year was this?

F: This was January '86; I got hired by HP January '86. So I worked there '85.

W: So when you graduated from college you're saying that even in computer science there were 40 graduates and only three job offers made?

F: It was dead, even...

W: It was dead.

F: ...the companies would not come to interview because universities had a rule that if you come to interview and you don't hire at least one, the following year you cannot come back and interview. What I did was I went back to UT; I said, "I graduated from here; I didn't use the placement services and I want a chance to use it now." And they said, "No, that doesn't work that way; you didn't use it, you lost it." I said, "Look..." A little bit of negotiation, charming, and the head of placement office said, "You can negotiate with the UT," and the top companies came to UT because they wanted...and it's a long story but I got a call from HP that we want to interview you—full day of interview—and couple of our jobs. One was Tennessee, the Saturn plant's automating building the cars and with ARCO to design and build the first gas station that you can pay at the pump. And I decided to go with HP.

W: You're at HP; you take a step back. You take a 50% pay cut. You go to a smaller business. And I want to understand where you went, why you did it? And then, just to make it a little bit fun, I want you to pull in the metaphor of mountain climbing and tie that all together.

F: Yes. So I was lucky to be hired by HP during a hiring freeze. They assign me to a team. They had envisioned five people. One person, Lee Hong, has been hired, brilliant engineer and colleague; became my mentor. I was the next one and then three other people. Team of five people. They said, "This is the equivalent of the Manhattan Project for HP. Secret project, nobody should know, and you gotta design a database that's 10x faster than Oracle's Cybase and Formix and other mainstream databases because we want to be number one in factory floor and beat the competition's digital equipment deck." And so we worked on it three years and created the first real time database. Hundred percent running memory, eliminate any mechanical movement and we didn't achieve ten times—10X as they called it—we achieve 1000X, so it moved the response time from millisecond to nanosecond. Finished it in '89, got it patented. So HP paid for my MBA and I did my MBA in 4 ½ years in Santa Clara as opposed to Stanford—it had to be fulltime. I loved my job and I wanted to be involved during that time. Moved on to global challenges and alliances, Asia-Pacific. And in '99 as a highly successful person, and with a career that was exponentially growing, I decided to disrupt myself because I felt too

comfortable. Number One. And I always told myself when you feel too comfortable you got to move. You got to start moving. It's like in climbing; you can't just camp somewhere. You've got to keep moving. You can rest. You can look around; you can take a deep breath, have a snack. But you've got to keep moving; otherwise you get to complacent. So that was one reason. The main reason, Whitney, was the learning had declined. I had to learn. I was contributing and I wanted the work to contribute back to me. And it was contributing; however, it wasn't as exponential contribution

W: Right. You were at the top of your S curve...and you just weren't learning as much.

F: Yeah.

W: Okay.

F: Yeah, it was, it was flattening.

W: Yep.

F: That was too dangerous. Comfort and the learning is going down; I said, "I've got to disrupt myself," and I left HP without waiting for a package or I left a lot of stock options behind and didn't want to think about it because if you start thinking about it you get depressed.

W: So you just left.

F: I just left.

W: Without another opportunity?

F: No, I left and there was an opportunity with a startup who wanted to change the world of software as a service, so I joined four or five other people in that company, Jamcracker, and to the best of my knowledge Jamcracker was the first company in the startup in a software as a service that achieved a billion dollars in valuation. And, so we were way ahead of the...too visionary at that point; we had to wait. There were psychological barriers to moving to the cloud; it was very nascent, and also the broadband wasn't as pervasive. Two requirements: people have to be willing to take that risk and the technology has to support you. But we were so enthusiastic and visionary; we were way ahead.

W: You were too early.

F: And Corent....

W: You were, what, like five, seven years to early?

F: About five to seven years, exactly. And in 2005 Harvard Business Review published an article about the cloud and then it became more accepted, the same way that published...the write up about executive coaching in 2004, and then it was blessed—the fact that you have a coach doesn't mean something's wrong with you; it means you want to get better. Because Harvard Business School and Review....

W: They said it so it must be true. Yeah.

F: Yeah, it must be true. And 2005 was...so many people I knew brought me the article, "Feyzi, have you seen it? This is what you've been talking about for years." And then...so Corent, the company that today I have the privilege of serving as the CEO was a byproduct of that vision and other cofounders and a lot of other people's ideas and the idea was we want to democratize SaaS: software as a service.

W: So I still don't quite understand, um...okay, so I understand that you need to have a microprocessor inside of a...inside of a computer chip, right?

F: It's a brain.

W: It's a brain.

F: That's the engine.

W: Okay, so help me understand how this sort of software as a service...can you give me like a practical...

F: A practical example.

W: ...so for me and everybody else who's...

F: Right.

W: ...listening who doesn't understand your...

F: Perfect.

W: ...your world.

F: So, let me use a metaphor, if you don't mind.

W: Mm hmm.

F: Like turning a regular movie into a 3-D movie, within hours without any technical work. You run the movie through a process; all of a sudden you have a 3-D movie. The reason that we don't have a lot of 3-D movies is difficult to build it. It takes more effort and it's multiple times more difficult to create it. So simple analogy. Now software—people have a lot of tools to build their software. In the past it was more difficult; now there are a lot of tools to build a software application. And we're talking about enterprise business software application—multi-user: American Airline reservation system. Samsung distribution around the world is used by tens of thousands of companies and each one of them have users and it has to be managed, configured, customized—you're talking about the software that runs the world, right?

W: Yeah.

F: And that software, if you want to migrate it to the cloud which is a new platform that's ten times cheaper, better, faster, more elastic, more secure, and if you want to make that move that could be years of architectural rewriting and change. Let alone adding the as-is service capabilities to it so the software is not only running more efficiently on the cloud, but it has all the bells and whistles about subscription management, multi-tenancy, operations management, monitoring, metering, monetizing—that would be like 90% more work than the 10% you spent building the software. And what Corent does—take your software, migrates it to the cloud automatically; scan, analyze, optimize, migrate and—we came up with a word—SaaSify. Make it SaaS; SaaS enable that software, meaning plug in all the capabilities that it would need, all the instrumentation that it would need to be delivered as a service. Something that in the past a few lucky, visionary companies like Salesforce.com have done for their own product and they have conquered the world; they've just revolutionized and popularized....

W: But they started there, and you're saying....

F: They started there and they started to build a SaaS solution...we've started building the processor for everybody else to turn their software into SaaS. Therefore, what I call it—democratizing SaaS...

W: Okay.

F: ...empowering anyone to deliver their solution as a SaaS.

W: Okay, so you're not necessarily saying we're going to take American Airlines system that's not in the cloud and put it in the cloud; you're saying you as a company have this software and we're going to help you make it so you can turn it into a service.

F: Yes. Perfect.

W: So you had Jamcracker; was that the company?

F: The first company that I left HP and joined.

W: So you left that company and that's when you took the big pay cut; you were this rising star...

F: Yep.

W: ...you go to the startup; that startup in that iteration didn't necessarily work, but then out of that came the IP, the ideas that you....Now, did you start Corent? Are you a founder of Corent?

F: I joined the founders...

W: Okay

F: ...the company had a different name...

W: Okay.

F: ...and, um, slightly different ideas and we collaborated together and came up with the name Corent; that stands for Core Enterprise, like Intel Inside. We are the core of the modern enterprise software.

W: So now you've been at Corent for about 12 years—where are you on the mountain? I mean, typically you can be in a role for three to four years and then you need to jump to a new S curve. You need to try something new. When was the last time you tried something new inside of this role?

F: The role itself has evolved. So, the reason I stayed with HP for 14 years was when I left I had for first time...look at people, say, "You gotta have a resume; you can't just not have a resume." Okay, I create a resume. I realized every two years I had kicked myself out of a job that I felt comfortable with and went to the next one and the next one. It was all voluntary in search of discomfort and therefore personal development and growth. I was saying, "I need to learn about the channels, about the alliances, about x, y and z and I gotta change my job so I can learn and expand my views. So with Corent, the same thing happened. It wasn't a straight line to the vision I described to you. We started with a vision that was about five percent and then grew to 10 percent and then Boeing became our customer and gave us tons of feedback and lots of money and then we took that and evolved a vision—because we were writing the textbook; we weren't following somebody else's textbook, so it...never a boring moment, never a boring day. Uh, tough days? Challenging days? Sleepless nights. Phenomenally exciting, inspiring days.

W: How will you disrupt yourself over the next 12 months?

F: I learned from a gentleman who was sitting next to me along one of those big travels around the world and we had a good conversation. And we came to the idea...he said, "Feyzi, I have a habit that I owe my success in life and at work to." I said, "What is that habit?" He said, "Every single day I try to do something I don't feel comfortable doing." Like disrupting yourself everyday; take a step out of your comfort zone and that's how you expand your comfort zone. Another simple disruption pattern is truly listen. It's one of the hardest things people...we all can do. We talk to someone—truly tune in to that person and be consciously aware and present and listen and nobody knows you're doing it but you're internally disrupting your own patterns of waiting to say something.

W: Well said. Feyzi Fatehi, thank you so much. I'm so excited for my listeners to hear what you have to say.

F: My pleasure, Whitney. Thank you.

W: One of the things I loved about talking to Feyzi was hearing about how his parents—his gatekeepers—opened doors for him. We ourselves are gatekeepers, at home and at work. Do we close or open the doors to others' dreams? At the same time, do we do everything we can to help the gatekeeper, like when Feyzi insisted on seeing the President of his university and asking him to make a call so he could get a job at Honeywell. Feyzi was a trained engineer but was willing to sweep floors. He made it easy for his gatekeeper to open the door to opportunity and once it was Feyzi was ready, including humble enough to walk through.

For a list of people, places, publications mentioned in this podcast, there are links in the show notes at Whitneyjohnson.com. If you'd like a transcript of this interview, it's available to our newsletter subscribers. Thank you to all of you who have been writing in, like Judith Petho who gave a shout-out to Wendy Sachs and Patrick McGinnis. Agreed, Judith, they're both really fascinating people. Thank you to Feyzi Fatehi for being today's guest; to sound engineer, Whitney Jobe, editor Heather Hunt, editor and show notes contributor, Macy Robison, and art director, Brandon Jamison. I'm Whitney Johnson, and this is Disrupt Yourself.