

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 31: Claude Silver

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Speaking of which, with this podcast, we are trying something new – a content upgrade, where we've distilled some of the key takeaways from the interview. These will be available for download at whitneyjohnson.com.

Today's guest is [Claude Silver](#), the CHO, or Chief Heart (H-E-A-R-T) Officer at [VaynerMedia](#), where she oversees talent, recruiting, benefits, compliance. She says it more pithily -- she oversees 800 heartbeats.

C: So, my name is Claude Silver. I am the Chief Heart Officer at [VaynerMedia](#). I work for an incredible man named [Gary Vaynerchuk](#) and I take care of all of the people here at this agency. So we're almost 800 people—that's 800 heartbeats. I oversee that which is HR, so that's benefits and compliance. I oversee some Mini Me's. I oversee talent and recruiting and culture and communications and resourcing. So basically, think of it as people operations with a heck of a lot of EQ. I do a lot of personal coaching, a lot of helping people unlock themselves and find their purpose, really trying to get to a place of achievement here. We work with 80% millennials, so even if you're not a millennial I think it's extremely important to find purpose in your day-to-day and to be able to touch that gold ring, whatever that gold ring is of...that someone deems, so that they want to come back again and, you know, and bust it.

W: What does VaynerMedia do? Just to set the context. I suspect most of my listeners will be familiar with what VaynerMedia does, but I'd love to hear in your own words what your company does.

C: So VaynerMedia is a full-service digital agency. So we do creative, social, strategy, digital for a lot of Fortune 50 brands. Much like the Drova's of the world or 72 and Sunny's of the world, we compete with the BBDOs and the Ogilvies and all of those other agencies. We have a full suite of media services here. So we are the real deal, um, speed is, as Gary would say, speed is our Number One, um, KPI. So everything we're doing—and I'll walk you through this in a second—but everything we do is to basically surround our people with EQ, with empathy, with passion, emotion, self-awareness, so at the end of the day it really results in loyalty and longevity, resilience and speed. I joined almost three and a half years ago. I came from London; I've been in agencies for a very long time, so I know the landscape like a soccer field. And I joined...I believe I was probably employee 380 and now we're about 780 with offices in, uh, two in New York now, L.A., Chattanooga, Tennessee—whoohoo—London and a small little one in Denver.

W: How did you choose Chattanooga, Tennessee?

C: (laughing) Well, we've got some clients in the South, but I don't know if you're listeners know, Chattanooga has the fastest internet in the nation. So with that said...

W: Fascinating.

C: ...they have a very, very big entrepreneurial and tech hub. They've got a lot of goodness going on. Uh, the government and city are really, really pro entrepreneur and social media week and all of those things. So, it's a great place for us to be and for us to also service the South.

W: That's very interesting. One of our guests, [Naveen Rajdev](#)—he's the CMO for Wipro—I interviewed him a while back and one of the things that's...one of a real pet project for him is Cities—and making sure that we don't have a lot more rustbelt cities. So hearing you talk about what Chattanooga's doing would suggest to me that they're a model for exactly what he's talking about of the city really working together to make sure it is this vibrant business hub.

C: That's right. And as a matter of fact I was there last week and my taxi cab driver was a retired police officer and he was sharing with me in that wonderful, buttery southern drawl, how the crime scene has changed drastically for the good because the city has cleaned up, because there are parks now, because there are, there are places where people can sleep if they want. It's a very different city, so I think you're very right about that.

W: Interesting. Um, let's go back a little bit before we go forward. You were previously the head of strategy and digital at Publicis, London; I had to look that up to make sure I was pronouncing Publicis correctly—um, for about a year and a half. How did that job come about? Had you worked internationally before? Just talk to us a little bit about that experience.

C: Yeah, absolutely. I would say I was in the right place at the right time in the beginning of 2009, right as everything was crumbling. And I was working for JWT, San Francisco, another very, very large and old agency. And I got a—I was running their digital department—and I got a phone call from a very posh sounding British man on the other end of the phone, the CEO, and he said, "I understand we need someone with your skillsets," in a very posh, Dick Van Dyke way, and, uh, I was confident enough—and I mean 'enough' by the hair of my chinny chin chin, to not say, 'what skills do you mean?' I said, "Great, when do you need me there?" And in 2009...

W: Good for you.

C: Thank you.

W: I like how you're calling that out.

C: Thank you.

W: Yes.

C: Uh, I packed up my bags, I put my stuff into storage on the heel, was going to be the heel, of my 40th, and moved to London. And so, for two years there, I established a community and a world and a vibrancy. I found myself in different ways, just turning 40 there, not knowing a soul. Uh, I walked the city with headphones on and just fell in

love with London. I went back to San Francisco, and then my boss from JWT went to Publicis, London and hired me back. That's how I got back to London and you know, they say you leave your heart in San Francisco, which I have after 18 years there, but London has my spirit, absolutely.

W: So how did you end up at VaynerMedia?

C: Really great story. My best, best and oldest friend is a wonderful woman named Gail Tifford; she runs media at Unilever, North America. She had met Gary and she wrote me in London; I was there, working on P & G, so her competitor, and she had been dying to get me back here to not work on her competitor. You know what I mean? Totally selfish.

W: (laughing) Yeah, exactly.

C: Totally, totally selfish. I mean, our moms met each other pushing us in baby carts so it would be right to have some ownership over...

W: Right.

C: ...a journey. Um, she introduced us on email and we had a very...Gary and I had a very quick conversation—four minutes. I flew to New York a month later and I believe probably within five minutes we fell...pretty much fell in love with each other.

W: Wait. So you take speed dating to a whole new level.

C: I mean, with Gary you do, because you get to the point. And I have to say, that's something that I've learned with him, I think, under his tutelage in many ways, um, is to be very clear, and to try to minimize the wild things that fly in my head and I know they fly in other people's heads and do what Max said to the wild things and just say, "Be still." And, uh, so I got...we got to the point very quickly; you could tell there was a chemistry on the phone call, flew to New York and within 30 minutes...I left that meeting—I was on Lexington...73rd and Lexington, called Gail and just said, "I need to be around this man and I have a feeling he needs to be around me." Which again, that has a lot of bravado. I meant...and of course I meant it in the best of ways. In the...you know when you feel that chemistry with someone and that you are going to raise the vibration on this planet in some way, shape or form—with people, with purpose.

W: It's interesting. When I hear you say that it almost actually brings tears to my eyes because I feel this resonance of what you just said. And I do think it's fascinating because we talk about, you know, people are on the same wavelength and we use this in this very metaphorical way, but I think it's literal. So when you just said that, it felt to me like it was a literal wavelength, not just a metaphorical.

C: That's right. I mean, you can see the smile on my face. It's a...it's something that doesn't come around every day and so, uh, it's something that I gravitated towards and had to grab.

W: What I'm intrigued by is when you first arrived at VaynerMedia you had one role and then it looks like you left...

C: Mm hmm.

W: ...so you...and then you boomeranged back. How did that happen?

C: I started—when Gary brought me aboard and I moved from London—I started as the...his first SVP and I don't know if that was because I was in my 40s or had a little gray hair, but, uh, I was the SVP and I ran the Unilever business, so I was then partnered with my best friend, which was a hoot.

W: So selfish scored.

C: Yeah, selfish to the Nth degree. And, um, I had a wonderful time and built the team to be a better...about 50 people. And we really operated as our own agency in many ways. We would...at team meetings we would do everything from show-and-tell to reading poetry; I mean, it was that special. Team is extremely, extremely important to me. Extremely. I think of myself as a servant leader, so everything is about team. What had happened on my year anniversary, as I went to Gary and I recognized that I wasn't living my purpose. I was having a wonderful time developing, growing and being with this team...

W: Right.

C: ...but my purpose is to be of joyful service, and I'm very clear on that. It's to facilitate growth and change with people and teams and companies. I wasn't doing that full time. I was still having to educate clients on whether or not it was digital, or talk to clients about what their, uh the brand equity pyramid was about and all of those things that are super, super important in marketing and I had done and had a wonderful career of doing it as a strategist, but no longer fed me. One thing led to another and Gary said, "Look, you know, I need you to stay on longer." And I said, "I don't really have that much time." And so we agreed that I would find someone to backfill me—and we didn't have the notion of a CHO here, or Chief Heart Officer—we had a Director of HR; I'm not HR, not an HR practitioner, so I couldn't step in there. Um, and so I politely resigned. And it was a very, very challenging conversation with someone that I have so much chemistry with. I think we both felt, um, gutted in many ways. And Gary said something to me that was very valuable. He said, "I don't want to be like those...the college, uh, the college boyfriend/girlfriend that looks back in 30 years and says, "I wonder what that could have been like? And I really firmly believe that when I left that room, he then started to figure out which way to bring me back. And when I did leave, when I first said to him, you know, "I'm done with this portion of my life."

W: Yep.

C: He said, "What is it that you want to do?" And I said, "I only care about the heartbeat of this place. I only care about the people." So heartbeat came in. And, uh, so he called me; we had breakfast, and he said, "This is your role; this is your job." And I knew exactly what he meant because we speak a very similar language.

W: Yep.

C: I knew that it was to spread the empathetic blanket over here. I knew that it was to, literally, get this culture into a place where it wasn't just top down, but we were nurturing and feeding it from the soil bed, and from the sides. And so I asked him what..."how do we know if I'm successful?" I asked him all of this in one breakfast and he said...he said, "You will touch every single employee," meaning I will spend time with every employee. And that is what I do.

W: Are there any other conventional...unconventional titles inside of your organization?

C: Well, we have something called The Office of the CEO; that's probably a little unconventional. It's not Chief of Staff; it's the four people that are also within Gary's ecosystem and helping scale him. So everything we do is to scale this guy and then, of course, then scale me, and then scale culture. Because if you're scaling Gary and you're scaling Claude then you're touching culture; you become a culture carrier by osmosis.

W: So, Claude, let's play with this a little bit. So I...I work at VaynerMedia...I start at your company and, um, let's actually look at the life cycle because, of course, I love S curves, so I've interviewed, I interviewed with you. What does this look like? What does the onboarding look like? Kind of walk me through that.

C: So, your experience...my team is called the People and Experience Team. I know...I took away the main HR because I'm not HR; I don't even know what HR means in today's day and age.

W: Yep.

C: So your experience begins when you first put your resume in, through LinkedIn or however you find us. You interview with me; you interview with...you know, we used to hire for culture fit and skillset was wonderful if you had it. So, um, you like Dave Matthews; I like Dave Matthews. That's great; you're hired. Oh my God, that's terrific and I'll teach you the rest. Or, oh, you like white water rafting, oh, terrific. Now we hire for skillset...more so for skillset fit and culture addition.

W: Interesting.

C: Yes. Because we've become more specialized. And because I don't need you to be like every other apple here. I want you to be a different fabric. I want you to have a different texture. I want you to be bringing something to this vibrant place and to be adding to it. Day one, you start and you have four days of onboarding. So you're with...you're with a class and in those four days you will be buddied up; you'll have lunch dates. You will sit with the team you're going to be on at some point, but you will go through school. Four days. And in that school you will, um, see Gary; you will see me. You will learn what paid media is; you will learn what platforms are. You will learn the nuts and bolts of what it is to be at VaynerMedia. Which is very, very different than - had you walked in to Publicis. Which—great agency—my onboarding was a 30 minute video. There was no humanity whatsoever. And so we also ask everyone that's here to spend the first four weeks just listening. Going on walks; going

and talking to people. Oftentimes people will say, “Who are the ten people I can meet?” Terrific. I would love to give you 11 people. And so we really want you to get a feel for what this place is about, which will then accelerate—first of all, your learning has just accelerated, because you’re with us for four days.

W: Exactly.

C: Talking to people will accelerate your learning and you’ll feel, I believe, a part of. And so, belonging is super, super important. You know, making sure that you not only are empowered to belong; we’ve set you up. If you’re a person of color there are people of color here. You see that...that’s important right? For your own safety and security. If you’re LGBTQ, there’s a pride group. If you feel like you’re a nerd we have a group called Vaynerds. And so that’s what your first week will be like and we will surround you with as much goodness as we can.

W: Something that you said that I thought was interesting was this idea that you go and you introduce people to ten different people, or 11, 12, 13 and what’s interesting about that is not only are you helping make sure that they feel safe and secure, but now all of a sudden they have a network so that when they have a question....

C: Bingo.

W: Right. You’re breaking down silos from the second they walk in the door. So, alright...so now, um, I’ve been at your company for two years and I am humming.

C: Yeah.

W: I am just on fire—en fuego, as we like to say. And what do you do to make sure that, you know, you’re just getting me stretch assignments and just kind of pushing me so that I just keep getting better. What do you do?

C: Um, so at the one year mark you’re finally, probably...you’ve shed your skin from the other agencies that you’ve been at, because that takes a while.

W: That takes a year, okay.

C: At year two my hope is that you...you are humming because you feel as though the purpose that you have in what we’ve given you is clicking. You’re achieving things and getting acknowledgment, so I’m on the right track—thank you very much. You’ve built your network, you’re a trusted VaynerMedia employee. You’ve been either asking for other projects...

W: Mm hmmm, yep.

C: ...or Gary or I may have given you some ideas. You have some passion projects on the side that you’re bringing to life here. Because this is a place built from an entrepreneur and we have the mindset of ‘yes’ and ‘possibility,’ if you are carrying around a video camera in your backpack and you’re shooting on the side and you want to make that come to life here—great. We have an entire production studio. You can go make that come to life. And you think you have the magic formula...formula for

that next Quaker granola bar campaign and it's your side deal? Bring it on in. So there's a lot of 'Yes' - there's a lot of runway here. And so the reason that I don't have that set answer for you is that it really depends on the individual.

W: Now - top of the S curve, right?

C: Yep.

W: Been in this role, been doing—I think I know what you're going to say, but let's just play it out—um, I walk into your office and I say, "Claude, you know I've been doing the same thing for three years"—and you're going to say, 'No you haven't' but let's assume that I have—"and it's time and I need to jump to a new S curve. And I know that I'm really valuable in this role and I know you need, need someone to do this, but I gotta do something new." What do you do?

C: What do you want to do? Is the first thing.

W: It's that simple?

Let's make it happen. And if, if what lights you up and is getting your juices flowing is not here...

W: Yeah.

C: ...let's make sure that there's still is connective tissue. Because we're all linked together. So if you say to me or to Gary, like, "I am ready; I want to start my own podcast business..."

W: Yep.

C: ...I guarantee you we will find a way to stay connected.

W: Okay.

C: But it really is...what is it that you want to do, because possibilities are endless.

W: What do you think's more innovative: the service that you're offering or the culture that you're building?

C: It's a cop out to say that they're both equal. I do think that they are in many ways both just as important. Because I am people first and because I am - I over-index in and heart and empathy and all of those things my parents told me I felt too much with, the culture for me is what...is what I think drives the bus here.

W: Yeah. Yeah.

C: The culture here is one, again, it was deemed by Gary in the beginning—we will be people first, family first, whatnot. My role is very much to find the texture, the fabric, the culture, the specialness, the warts and all of each and every individual and bring

that to life. That is where I believe we flourish. I don't believe the work gets done without this vibrancy.

W: Something that you said—I actually don't remember if you or Gary said this—that [you want to build the single greatest human organization in the history of time](#). I love the ambition and the audacity of that.

C: That's Gary. Gary said that. Um, I don't know if I could be that bold to say it and I love that I'm partnered with someone that does. And that means the culture.

W: Yeah, absolutely.

C: That means bringing all of these people to life and even if that means bringing them to life not at VaynerMedia. That's the key. It is all the same to us. It is, it is so incredible to, to be...to work with someone who cares about people the same way I do. I never thought I would find that, Whitney, I mean in my...and that was something I kept in my soul; I didn't really share that all the time, because that's a big, "ooh, ah ah, woe man, you might be a little too intense for me."

W: Yeah.

C: But to now have that here and to find joy in it. So when I said my purpose is to be of joyful service; it's not just to be of service. The unlocking is where I get...that's where I...that's where I want to play.

W: You said...you said something about how you love to see the glimmer in the eye and then turn that glimmer into a smile and that's the unlocking, right?

C: It is. It is. When people...I do a lot of white-boarding here; I'm a visual learner so I do these white board sessions. People call them north star sessions; they're not, because north star for me is aspirational. They're very much guiding principles...

W: Yeah.

C: ...and it's something I learned in a...a great psychology class at Prescott College, years ago.

W: For people that want to get inside of your brain just a little bit, what would you recommend people read or study, um, just one or two things?

C: Um, [Tara Brach](#) is extremely important to me.

W: Okay.

C: A Buddhist psychologist. [Tara Brach](#) is extremely important because she speaks about—in my translation—the revolution of tenderness, um, kindness, compassion. The opening. Um, I don't claim to be Buddhist, I mean, I'm everything. But that really speaks to me. [Pema Chodron](#) really speaks to me.

W: What's the name?

C: [Pema Chodron](#).

W: Okay.

C: She's, I believe, a Tibetan monk.

W: Okay. Okay.

C: And, um, [Daniel Pink](#), A Whole...was it [A Whole New Mind](#)?

W: Oh, yes. Mm hmm.

C: My father gave that to me years ago, when it first came out, and it actually rocked my world because it was the first time I read that it was okay to be me. I read that it was okay for my brain to be more dominant on one way, shape or form.

W: Does he know that you feel that way?

C: No he doesn't. I've never written to him. I need to.

W: Okay, now it's going to happen.

C: Okay, thank you. It's amazing.

W: Now it's going to happen. Yeah.

C: Wow. Thank you very much. Yeah.

W: So, here's my last question for you: how will you disrupt yourself in the next twelve months.

C: Everything that I've just shared with you will be on a wider platform. I want to take it there. Out into the world.

W: Out into the world.

C: And that is disruptive for me because I'm safe here.

W: Ah.

C: This is...this is an enormous playground for me and a wonderful playground. And the more I'm able to speak with people the likes of you, go out—I'm keynoting a conference next week in San Francisco—the more I'm able to find that voice. Remember what I said to that CEO—what I didn't say to the CEO was, "What skillsets are those?" What I did say is, "I'll be there soon." That's what I need to disrupt constantly with myself. Constantly. So how do I take this and package in some je ne sais quoi...

W: Yep.

C: ...and take it into the world where I do believe—and it's boisterous for me to say—I do believe I can make a difference.

W: Absolutely. What's one of the first things you're going to do?

C: I'm going to write...

W: Okay.

C: ...a lot more. And I'm going to be okay with it being freeform because this is...we just had a freeform conversation. There was nothing you gave me...no questions prepared for. I would probably have looked at them and not prepared anyway because I'm prepared. And so being okay with—Daniel Pink—being okay with me.

W: Yeah.

C: Being...you know, turning the revolution of tenderness inward is super, super important for me.

W: So is that a dare that you're going to take? Are you going to...

C: Yeah.

W: ...are you going to email Dan Pink?

C: I'm going to email Dan Pink. I'm going to email Dan Pink today. Handshake

W: Good. Fantastic. This has been so fun. Thank you, Claude, and um...

C: Thank you....I am going to...yeah, thank you again.

C: Alright. Great. Yeah.

W: Take care.

C: Thank you very much. Appreciate it

W: Bye bye, Claude.

C: Bye.

So, Claude took the dare, and e-mailed Dan Pink. Here's what happened...

W: Just really quickly, um, recap what you said you were going to do and what you did and what happened.

C: Okay, amazing. You gave me a challenge. Once I told you that Daniel Pink and *A Whole New Mind* was one my top, top, top books that impacted me, you said, “Have you thanked him?” and I said, “No.” And you said, “Well....” Basically, you nudged me. And next thing my, I knew I was in email...I was in an email dialogue with him; I reached out to him via his, um, his website. And he answered.

W: Really?

C: Right? Yes.

W: That’s fantastic!

C: Isn’t it?

W: Yes.

C: So it works when you fill out contact forms.

W: So you emailed him and you said, “Thank you,” and then what happened?

C: Thank you; you’ve been so impactful. “Would you be open to a quick chat,” he said, “Sure,” and we set it up. So, I didn’t know exactly what I was going to do other than say “Thank you, and this is how it impacted me.” So I knew I needed to prepare some questions—I mean, this is his time as well, and he’s busy writing. But I opened it up and just said, “You know, your book really, really helped, helped me make sense of the difference of my two hemispheres and that it is not only okay to be primarily right-brained or more empathetically skewed and feeling, but it’s something to celebrate.” And it just really helped me in 2006 as I was really kind of in that moment of my life thinking—and I think we spoke about this—I know I have potential. When...how and when is that...where am I going to find that matchstick.’ Which is just a funny thing that I do think a lot of females in particular sometimes struggle with. So I was able to really talk to him about that. We ended up speaking about linguistics, which is his background; code-switching, which is a term I didn’t know about, so we ended up talking about, you know, linguistics and how really we operate—he didn’t say subconsciously—but how we operate in two different languages, or more, constantly. And then we ended up in AI and speaking about the future and will robots be able to do that and so it was (whoosh); it was phenomenal.

W: Oh, I love that. And so will you follow up with him again do you think, or was this kind of a...?

C: I think I will at some point when I feel, quite frankly, when I feel I have something of...something tangible to follow up on. Um, he is so knowledgeable in so many places. He, um, actually gave a really nice nod to you, by the way.

W: Oh, that’s sweet.

C: Yeah, well I told him how I even got to this phone call and, um, which was really I thought very kind of him, so yeah, I will follow up for sure and I just want to say, I wouldn’t have done it—and it’s so obvious, right? To thank someone? But I wouldn’t

have...I just wouldn't have thought...I don't know what I wouldn't have thought, so I want to thank you for that nudge. You really...

W: You're welcome.

C: ...you really did it.

W: You're welcome. And I can already picture it; he's going to blurb your book.

C: (laughing) We'll see. I hope so.

W: That's my...my goal for you.

C: Alright. I love that goal. I love it. Thank you, Whitney.

W: Oh, you're welcome, Claude. And I am so happy that we've connected and, um, you know, we'll have more conversations. Okay, alright. Have a great day.

C: Alright, yeah.

W: Take care. Bye bye.

C: Take care. Thank you. Bye.

W: You're welcome.

Pretty awesome, right? Did you know that sound waves have a physical property to them? When we talk out loud, our words have a three-dimensional reality. So a dream said aloud comes alive. If you want something to happen, write it down, say it out loud.

There was so much in this interview. Like Claude's comment that when you scale the leaders in your company, you scale your culture by osmosis. Usually I think of putting your CEO in the public eye as an exercise in branding, and it is. But to think of it as a way to transmit culture is intriguing.

For those of you who are long-time listeners, you probably heard me leaping with joy out my swivel chair when Claude talked about how she makes it possible for people to jump to new S-curves. It starts with asking, "What do you want to do?" If you ask that same question -- and then act -- like Claude does, engagement, productivity, innovation will blow up. In a really big -- and good way.

For the content upgrade I mentioned at the beginning which includes questions to ask about your company culture, go to the show notes at whitneyjohnson.com.

Thank you to Janika Dillon for writing in. She says, "I listen to A LOT of podcasts on my commute, and yours is one of the best. Thank You Janika."

Thank you again to Claude Silver for being our guest, to Patrick Hodgdon for connecting us, to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager and editor Macy Robison, editor Heather Hunt, and art director Brandon Jameson.

*I'm Whitney Johnson.
And this is Disrupt Yourself.*