

Disrupt Yourself Podcast
Episode 32: Scott Pulsipher

On today's show:

"First and foremost, one of the things is - we have no classrooms. Everything that's done here is on a one-to-one individual basis between faculty and student. All the courses and the learning resources are entirely delivered online. So we often use the phrase of – we reach and teach the students where they are."

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption.

My guest for this episode is Scott Pulsipher. An Amazon alum, and now President of Western Governor's University – an online, competency based educational institution with over 85,000 students enrolled.

S: I'm Scott Pulsipher and currently the President of [Western Governor's University](#). I joined about a year and a half ago and prior to that I've been in technology software startups for nearly 20 years.

W: You got your degree in Finance and Management. Has your career unfolded the way you thought it would?

S: Uh, not even close. Finance actually was a real passion of mine. Uh, it even remains until this day a real interest of mine. You know, I intended to be a hobbyist investor; I loved the investment management aspects of Finance and I was really good at the analytical part of that, so even coming out of school I was looking into those routes. I found a really good fit in consulting, but the interesting thing about that is I realized I didn't like being an advisor. I liked, you know, owning things and being accountable for the decisions. My father, at the time, even when I was going to business school, he was developing his own software startup and his own software application and that's when I started getting a real sense that I was pretty good at understanding and learning new industries, but the common thing across all of it was that technology was powering all of them. And so I found myself trying to figure out pretty quickly as to, alright, what was it that I really wanted to do? And technology started to, or it consistently came to the top of the list I would say.

W: So do you remember when you sort of had this 'Aha' of "Okay, I don't want to be advising people; I want to be doing."

S: Yeah, now that you ask the question I can definitely, distinctly recall. So, one of the opportunities I had at Monitor was to work as the executive assistant to Joe Fuller who was the managing partner for the consulting arm of Monitor. And a lot of the work that he had me doing and focused on had to do with the management of Monitor as a company itself. And so, what type of talent do we recruit, how do we develop that

talent, the finances; the how do we price even the consulting...the consulting products that were being offered. And I started to get pretty interested in, like, 'Alright, now do you run a consulting business?' And that was very different than the client-side of my work and I started to recognize that I enjoyed more of contemplating the decisions around management that would directly impact the employees of the company that I was an employee of. And that was the first time I started to realize that that meant more to me, was more interesting to me than trying to advise other clients on what they should do in the same regard for their businesses.

W: So you worked at Monitor for how many years?

S: Three years.

W: Three years. And then did you go to B school directly after that?

S: I did. Yeah. I will say this is that the things that I was pursuing subsequent to that really fit into one of two categories: one was, is there a place where I can be an owner in an industry that I was particularly interested in—and that included pharmaceuticals and technology were two areas I was particularly interested in. The other side was still that Finance bug, that I still had this interest in the investment management side of the world.

W: So when you say you wanted to go do...be in a pharmaceutical company, like be—like run a startup, like what were you...what was your brain thinking?

S: Yeah, so to be a general manager in a pharmaceutical company.

W: Okay.

S: I had a great experience, by the way, because I worked for the CEO of Novartis Pharmaceutical out of Basil, Switzerland, and at the end of the time there, he was like, "Listen, Scott, you come back and work for me, you do it for two to three years and then you want to go run a country for us or you want to run a product line, you can do that." He's like, "That's the path to an executive role and a CEO" that he pursued, that he had the benefit of, and that was an option that I could have pursued as well.

W: But you didn't do it.

S: It was not a great fit for our family at the time.

W: You had young children.

S: Young children; it wasn't a great fit for the overall family. It was a little tougher on my wife on the challenges of working and living in a foreign country.

W: You got your MBA in...?

S: 1999.

W: 1999.

S: I graduated from Harvard.

W: Okay, so you got your MBA; there have been huge technology shifts in the last 17 years. How do you see yourself acting ahead of, rather than responding to change?

S: I think one of the things that I would say is that you do have to be really sensitive and aware of many of the different trends that are changing the way consumers and individuals think. Um, for example, I simply think about that we individually as humans—we're all consumers—I think that what goes on in the consumer context really starts to shape our expectations for what we expect in a lot of different aspects. I even leverage examples of how doing your taxes has become so simple and self-service and individually capable, rather than what it used to be, which is I had to go to a service provider to deal with a very complex topic. But now I start thinking about, "Well, what is it that we learn through that type of model that's changing individual expectations about what other practices or things that I do—what are my expectations now being set as or changed because of experiences I'm having in somewhat unrelated areas?" And so the example I think of here is we start thinking about "Well, if I thought something as simple as applying to get a degree at WGU or going through a financial aid process, or applying for transfer of credits—what are all the things we can learn from what consumers or individuals are experiencing in how they do their taxes?" And so we start to try to envision, like, "Well, if this just were to be assumed that it could be done self-service, then all that complexity, and all that data and everything else—if all of it could be kind of wrangled, what would the experience be differently and how do we start designing for that?" So that's some of how, today, now as I think about in education where I am, but in prior experiences, whether it was in online commerce, whether it was in banking and payments, it was that type of an approach. They often thought about what were the unrelated experiences that were changing how individuals think, that's going to shape, then, how all these different processes we do today are going to be done in the future.

W: Let's talk for a moment...we talked about early in your career; let's talk about how did you get to be here, at WGU? Because you graduated from business school; you thought about going to Europe to be in the pharmaceutical business, own that business. You decided not to for family reasons. What did you do next? Kind of walk me through the chronology of how you ended up where you are today.

S: Yeah. So, the...even the other options that I was considering out of business school; they didn't materialize right away and it was somewhat disheartening. I was actually really passionate about software as well and technology and what it was going to do. But all the pursuits I had coming out of business school, none of them materialized—meaning I didn't have a technology background, no computer science degree; I didn't know how to code. I was arguably very much a novice in the overall kind of tech world, if you will. So those opportunities weren't realized.

W: So what did you go after that you didn't get? Because I think...so the reason I'm asking you to share this...

S: Yeah.

W: ...is because I think that sometimes people think, "Well you got a degree from Harvard, so everything's easy." And I think for you to be able to share, you know, regardless of where you are things, things are still hard.

S: Yeah.

W: And so for you to share a little bit of that I think would be really helpful to our listeners.

S: Yeah. So specifically, I was looking at, um, I would probably put it into two camps: product management roles and business development roles in technology software companies specifically. I was, I will have to say, much more interested on the product side, because I simply have the belief that products run everything and that for me it was one where if you're making decisions about the products you offer, the features they have, the value it drives, the price point—everything else kind of starts with the product and everything else is downstream in the value chain, if you will. But for a product management role, I did not have the technical skillset; I didn't have the computer science background. I hadn't coded before in my life. I hadn't worked closely enough with data architectures and data models to where I could speak the language that gave any of them the confidence that I knew what I was going to do. I returned to Monitor and worked at something I was really good at, but in many ways it was a waystation. I will tell you very quickly that, Yantra where I ended up ultimately working—they did not offer me a job coming out of business school. I went back and worked in M&A advisory in the finance world with Monitor and I worked with, you know, incredible individuals like Tom Copeland who literally wrote the book on valuation and I got to work with him. About three months later, Yantra came calling again and offered me a role, but it wasn't a fit. And I had at least the courage to say, "I appreciate the opportunity but it's not a fit with what I want to do and what I believe will be a good path for me," and so I declined. And then about three months later they came back again and said, "Alright, we really want you to come work with us. We think this is going to be a great fit."

W: How did Yantra figure out—when they'd originally said "No, thank you." Were you doing work with them as a consultant that they got familiar with your work?

S: Yeah. Well I kept good relationships with the CEO, Founder of it. I also stayed connected with the CFO and VP of Finance, who was kind of keeping me abreast of what were the developments and how it was progressing. So I had enough conversations over breakfasts or lunches to continue to ask them questions and then offer my perspective as to where I thought I could add value. And ultimately there was one big pivot that Yantra made too, which was it moved out of warehouse management and into more order management, which was going to be critically important as ecommerce and direct-to-consumer retailing was rapidly scaling.

W: So warehouse management meaning software that helps you manage...

S: Manage all the operations of a fulfillment center.

W: Ok.

S: That's right. In 2000—February of 2000 is when I joined Yantra ultimately—there was no doubt we were in the midst of a rapid pivot to, “you know what? Consumers are going to bite big on this direct-to-my-home.” None of the retailers that were playing in the space had any ability to ship a single unit to a customer; they all were used to a physical location where they could easily break bulk and you could come and buy a single unit. But when you start ordering one unit, they’re “How do I do this? I don’t know how to manage it.” They never took orders before; it was just point of sale transactions. And so that pivot also said to me, “Alright, this company’s also figuring out where the big growth is going to be,” and was now working on a product that was a software product that was going to be mission-critical for so many retailers.

W: Such an important couple of observations there. I think one of the things that, you know—when it comes to personal disruption—one of the tenets is that you need to step back in order to slingshot forward. And I think what you did, post-business school, is a great example of that. You knew exactly what you wanted to do. The market was telling you “you don’t know how to do exactly what we need to do...

S: Right.

W: ...yet.”

S: Right.

W: And so you said, “Alright, I’m going to take a step back. I’m going to drill down on finance; I’m going to drill down on what I know well. But at the same time I’m going to continue to keep the conversations...

S: The relationships, yeah.

W: ...open with people I want to work with, so that the two of you, basically, ended up kind of creating a role for you.

S: The thing that was very telling—I joined in February of 2000. If your listeners know what happened in April of 2000. The Nasdaq which was at 5000 at the time, plummeted beginning in April of 2000. I remember distinctly where I was and it was a lot of nervousness, particularly at Yantra. We saw our logo wall—meaning all of our customers—we probably lost 75% of our customers in the year 2000 alone. And so even at Yantra we had to reinvent ourselves as well as figuring out which customers were going to provide the long term potential and there was a lot of hand-wringing going on during 2000/2001 before kind of 2002, when we knew we’d kind of made it through the other side. We actually figured out that we needed to pivot to what I’d call brick and mortar retailers who were going online quickly because they had the cash; they had the established customer base. We started that mid-2000. Our first big win was Hallmark, then we won Target, then you win Best Buy and then it kind of started scaling up from there. And we knew that that product was going to realize the vision that so many retailers had and we also knew we had a great product when so many of our competitor software companies that didn’t have our product started marketing like crazy that which we knew we had the product for. And we would even just ride their coattails in marketing, because we knew when the customers were going to invite different vendors to come in, that we knew we had the product to show.

W: They were marketing what they wanted to have...

S: That's exactly....

W: ...and you could give them the product.

S: That's exactly right. So....

W: Oh that's funny. What happened next? So you sold that business.

S: Yeah, so Yantra, it got acquired by a company, a software company, called Sterling Commerce; Now the strength for my position again was that I could learn how payments and banks worked; I could learn how manufacturers and what their priorities were because previously I'd been selling primarily to retail and logistics companies. But I started mastering the product set that Sterling Commerce had. The other thing I had is that I developed the expertise around how to manage product.

W: How did Amazon come about?

S: So Amazon found me. Ultimately I think Amazon...they have their executive recruiting function. You know, they know what they need to find for leading new businesses that they're developing and so they had under development a new, kind of complete turnkey e-commerce opportunity that they were looking for an executive to take on. Here's why it was a good fit for me—it was a much smaller business, but the scope of accountability was a much better fit for me as one who wanted to develop into a General Manager / CEO.

W: So another step back.

S: It was another step back.

W: So you had gone from a business that was \$650 million to...

S: Zero.

W: Zero!

S: Yeah, I mean, the reality was that Webstore hadn't really launched; we were in product development. We were planning to launch February of 2010; I joined in August of 2009, sorry. And then six months later we launched our first version of it. They had an iteration of it running, but it wasn't anything significant. It was basically, like, come start this business inside of Amazon. And I was more interested in developing the full scope of accountability and decision-making and learning what it required to really work in an interdependent fashion to where the full field of view is part of what I had to learn and develop in.

W: So you had to learn how to run an entire business...

S: An entire business.

W: ...not just part of a business. So go from the informal decision making process to the...

S: Actual decision making process.

W: ...actual.

S: Being held accountable. I don't know if Tom told you the story in talking to him, but my boss, Tom Taylor—when you own a business at Amazon you have to go through your annual review, and then you present your operating plan to Jeff Bezos and his S-Team as it's called at Amazon. So it's all....

W: What does S-Team stand for?

S: S-Team just stands...it stands for the SVPs, the Senior Vice Presidents...

W: Okay, S-Team. Got it.

S: ...that report directly to Jeff. And it seems very ritualistic, too, because you are responsible for writing your operating plan and it reviews your performance from the last year as well as what you're going to do the next year. Um, and our...my first review—that was in...pretty sure it was October of 2010, so we launched just, you know, seven, eight months prior, in February of 2010 and it was not going well. I mean, we had missed a lot of requirements: the ease of use, and the challenges that we had presented our customers with were challenging enough that as I remember remarking that, you know, seven out of ten customers hated our product. I knew going into the review that, you know what, the performance is what it is and it's not good and there's no one for me to look at and say, "Well, I only own the product." No, I own the whole thing. So...and some of the decisions were made before I joined, around some of the design, etc., but I had to be accountable for the whole thing. And so we presented, I think, as matter-of-factly as we could have—what worked, what didn't work. This ritual exists where you have to sit directly across from Jeff. To his right or left will sit the CFO; at the time it was Tom Scutac. And your finance business partner sits across from him. Your SVP, or your boss, like Tom Taylor in that case...I think it was actually Sebastian Gunningham still at that point, that person would sit next to you as well. And then all the SVPs would sit around this huge table; there maybe 30 people around this table, right? And so, after they've done reading, because there's that silent reading hour, there's about two, two and a half hours where then it's just questions and answers. And it's really....

W: So they sit there and read what you've given them first.

S: Yes, for an hour. And you're just sweating it because you've read your document a million times. And so you do all that prep. But we had one fundamental issue which was that our business wasn't doing very well. So I had to convince them that, "listen, the strategy's right and the plan's right; we just haven't executed very well. But I know what I'm doing; we know what we're doing. We're going to get this done right. Here's what our priorities are and here's how we're going to get this back on track with what it should be. After that, kind of reading....Oh, after the reading's done, Jeff will then

say, "Are we going right or left?" And all he really means is which direction are the questions going to start because he always goes last. And so all the other questions kind of get out on the table; the issues are already coming up, you know, etc. But it gets to Jeff, and one of his first comments were, "This is one of the worst three performing businesses in the whole of Amazon." And you're just kind of like, "Alright." So, and it was very challenging....um, you know, here is the thing...which is about two weeks prior—in fact, I remember telling my lawyer this, my lawyer being the Amazon lawyer....

W: Okay, not your actual lawyer.

S: So our legal business partner...

W: Right.

S: ...because we worked with him on a lot of stuff. And I remember telling him about two weeks before, I had to somewhat emotionally separate from the whole thing. Because you had to go...I personally had to go through this mental and emotional exercise, to realize that regardless of what Jeff feels or says or does about Webstore as a business, it doesn't change who I am. It doesn't reduce my own confidence in my ability to do what I need to do. It doesn't mean, that you know, my prior 15 years of experience are for naught. It didn't...for me, I had to recognize that it didn't diminish my own self-worth. We started to recognize that even as important as these things in business are, and how it affects individual lives, it's not as important as other things are. And that even if this opportunity for me didn't work out it doesn't mean there wasn't going to be another opportunity. And so I mentally had to go through that process of just recognizing that, "you know what? He could fire me on the spot and I will still be okay." I had to kind of go through that mentally and emotionally to where I...the anxiety level for me came down enough such that when I was actually in the meeting I could sit with my back straight. That I could confidently and well-reasoned, respond to the questions that were being lobbed at me. That I could continue to articulate a clear sense of what our priorities were and everything else. Such that...

W: While still owning...

S: While still owning...

W: ...the fact that it wasn't going right.

S: Exactly right.

W: Right.

S: That you had to own the mistakes that were made.

W: Right. Right.

S: There was no doubt about that but I had two probably objectives. One is to learn...to clearly signal that we had learned from the mistakes that had been made. That we had rectified, or clearly now laid out a strategy of...and a plan of things to

execute that was going to get it back on track. And third, that I had the backbone as a leader and an owner to actually accept both the mistakes but also lead the thing going forward. My team had not lost confidence in me, nor should any of those executives lose confidence in my ability to right this thing. The other reality was is that, after his kind of question and answer period, and really kind of addressing his concerns, the question was posed, "Do you have the right plan, the right strategy and can you execute?" And his answer was, "You have the right strategy, you have the right plan now; now you need to go execute." And when he said that, we then committed, we said, "To prove to you that we can execute, we'll meet with you every other month or once a quarter, until you're confident that we're executing the plan that needs to be executed." And he was good.

W: I think...I think there are lots of lessons in there for, for everyone who's listening, which is, you have to be willing to own the mistake and at the same time be able to convey that you've learned what you needed to learn and that there's value in what you've learned and now you can execute it. And to be able to hold both of those things at the same time, that's tough. So that brings us to your current position. President of Western Governors University. Tell me...tell our listeners a little bit about what you do here?

S: I am responsible for all aspects of the university. That includes everything from our academic offering, how we design and deliver that offering. I'm responsible for all the student outcomes and the success that they achieve. I'm accountable for the financial operations and our economic viability as a non-profit organization. I am, more than anything, also accountable for nearly 5000 employees who've chosen to work with WGU in making sure that I motivate and inspire them every day to do great things. It was fundamentally designed around three simple things. One is, how do you dramatically expand the access to higher education? Especially to those underserved. Um, second, how do you improve the quality of that higher education, so that it increases or tightens the link, if you will, to higher learning and opportunity outcomes? By opportunity, I think we think about jobs and income gains and employment opportunities and overall well-being. Third, we think specifically about how do we continually optimize student success. We are a student-centered organization overall.

W: So what does that mean exactly? Give me....

S: I think the best way is sometimes to contrast it with what you would see as more of a traditional universities. Whereas, if we're a student-centered organization, everything that we do: how we design our curriculum, how we design our programs, how we teach, how we mentor, how we assess, how we place them into clinical rotations and demonstration teaching—whatever it is; even the programs we offer are all centered around improving the success for the student.

W: Okay, so I, today, dropped my son off at college.

S: Yep.

W: He's going to Utah State. How would his experience here be different from going to a traditional state school?

S: First and foremost is one of the things—we have no classrooms...everything that's done here is on a one-to-one individual basis between faculty and student. All the courses and the learning resources are entirely delivered online. So we often use the phrase of "We reach and teach the students where they are," rather than making them come to a center. There are other things that are different. It is a student-centered model in the teaching, meaning that the quality of our faculty is more a function of how they're achieving student outcomes, like how are you doing in course completion rates? In graduation? In on-time progress and retention of students? Whereas more traditional universities, a faculty is measured on how well...you know, what's your research like? How much is that research getting published? What is your, you know, comments and review of that research? It's measuring something that's more what I call on the dimension of advancing knowledge than the dimension we're on which is the transfer of knowledge. How do you get that knowledge to those who need it to improve their well-being and their opportunities? Other things that he would notice that are different is that there are no, uh, emerging adult experiences at WGU. There is not quad to go to, there's no student center, there's no athletics. It is entirely centered around degree-oriented programs to which our students traverse across virtual courses and one-to-one faculty engagement through phone calls and chat sessions and video sessions—never in a classroom.

W: So what are some of your most popular degrees?

S: Well we have four different colleges overall and each of them have different popular programs, but we have a College of Business; there's no doubt our undergraduate management, our undergraduate accounting are very popular courses. Our MBA programs are very popular. We have in our health professions our registered nurse to Bachelor's of Nursing Program is probably our largest overall program. In the nursing field, you effectively need a bachelors degree now where you used to be able to do so with a two year associate's degree to become a registered nurse. That's a very large program. Um, in our IT and Technology College our cybersecurity program which just recently introduced at a Bachelors level is in very high demand. Software development courses. And then also in our Teacher's College; we're one of the largest Teacher's Colleges in the nation. We license teachers in all 50 states, but elementary education remains a top one; special education another top one, so....

W: You describe yourself as a competency-based learning organization. Are you measuring competencies or, I mean, how does that come into play?

S: Yeah, that's actually a great question. I left that out of the design around WGU and that's something that your son would experience that's very different. So in a competency-based model, first and foremost, you design the courses and the curriculum to have learning objectives that directly match to competencies that demonstrate proficiency in a subject matter. That proficiency is really the standard that is maintained consistently regardless of who you are as a student and it's based simply on the notion that if you're competent then in fact you're meeting those standards that are needed in the workplace environment for that core subject matter, etc. That standard is the same regardless of who you are and by that what I mean is, there are no grades; you either pass or you don't. So the standard for proficiency, we often say, is you know, a B average or better. We often think about what would the

grad rate be if that same standard was applied to traditional academic models, um, but you don't have any grades so if you meet the proficiency standard you complete that course and then you can progress. You don't have to keep sitting in lectures and keep going through course materials, etc. And so the measurement in a competency-based model is competency, not time. And so how do you learn independent of time and some students can progress really quickly; other students take a little bit longer, but everyone can learn at their own pace.

W: Do they pay on the basis of time?

S: They basically pay a flat tuition for a six month term, but you can learn as much as you want in that six month term; there's no limit to how much you can learn.

W: So they're paying on time, not, not...

S: Yeah, so....

W: ...or comp...they're paying on competency.

S: They're paying on competency...

W: Yeah.

S: ...so basically it's like a subscription type pricing, where if for \$3000 for a six month term you can complete 12 credit units, you can complete 18—whatever it is. Ultimately, our undergraduates will complete their bachelors degree in two years and three months on average, and our Masters degrees will...they'll complete in about one year and eight months.

W: Do you think of yourself as disrupting traditional education?

S: Yeah, the short answer is yes. I think that the idea itself was very, very disruptive 20 years ago and in fact, I like the phrase that Jeff Bezos used at one time too, to describe that like, if you're a disruptor and inventor and innovator, you're willing to be misunderstood for long periods of time and WGU is definitely in that category of being misunderstood for long periods of time. Not only that, I would say that much of the sector often kind of dismissed it in the first 10, 15 years even. They said, "Oh, that's an interesting experiment; let's see how that works out." I would say that the disruption, though, is...it started with that student-centricity. We focus more on "what is it that the individual needs to gain from the higher education experience to be successful" and that's centers back to our purpose which is "to change the lives of individuals and families." We recognize that education still probably remains the single biggest catalyst for people to change their life. Well, that's what they need from education; how do we make that a possibility? And so when we approached that student-centered nature it meant that we designed around a competency-based model; we leverage technology to deliver a lot of that. We disaggregated the faculty role; instead of having one faculty that decides everything we have four different faculty models. We think about field placement and experience in a very different way. You'll hear plenty of analogies that I often use around self-service checkout in the grocery aisles—you don't always want self-service checkout. Well I was trying to figure

out how do you apply technology to the student experience to make sure that you change the model of higher education?

W: How many students do you have?

S: We have over 85,000 students today.

W: And how many have graduated?

S: We have over 90,000 cumulative graduates; and so it's a very large number. And on a four year basis, we graduate about 42%, which is higher than the national average overall for four year graduates.

W: Is it?

S: Yeah, it's about 36% if you take the entire sector's four year grad rate. And mind you, again, we're 100% online, we're competency based, disaggregated faculty, you know, student-centered model and we also note some really cool things; Gallup's done some great surveys around how our students are more than twice as likely to be performing in all five dimensions of well-being. That includes emotional well-being, social well-being, financial well-being, career well-being, etc. It's delivering real value within four years of graduations, for example. On average, our graduates are earning nearly \$20,000 more in income than they did when they started. And we serve primarily the underserved, meaning that, working adults that have some college but no degree. This is a very large population of adults in the US; it's north of 35 million adults. It's not...we didn't design originally for the traditional 18-24 year old student.

W: So what's the average age?

S: Our average age is 37 years old.

W: How is been...how has been being a CEO...President of an organization been different than you expected it would be?

S: Well, I will say that, um, a leader should never underestimate the amount of time they spend specifically on motivating and inspiring the people that work at the institution you lead. I'm a big believer in the Simon Sinek "Start With Why." I think our own purpose at WGU was not well-articulated before I joined. And there were a lot of good statements around our value proposition, our promise, our mission, but no one ever answered the question, "Well, why?" And when we kept coming back to the why, that's when that purpose became very clear is like, "Well, we do all this to change the lives of individuals and families." So I would say as a leader, what I underestimated is how important it is for me to inspire those people to continue to keep their focus on why we do what we do, even if it's some of the more mundane tasks. Answering calls in the student support center is a very challenging job; how do you correlate doing that back to 'hey, I'm influencing the life of that one person.' I think about the practices and the policies that we want to develop to make sure that we as an institution continue to attract those who want to make a difference in the world. That we recognize the value that they add as much as the importance of serving our students. That we cannot do anything for our students if we don't serve our people

really well. I would say as a leader you should never underestimate how important it is to be an example to the people you're leading.

W: So you go into it sort of thinking 'I've got to keep the trains running' and then you...once you get into it you realize, 'I've got to make sure I'm motivate people to want to keep the trains running and then they'll run.'

S: Yeah. And I'd say even the reason I underestimated it is because none of the questions I got from the Board and the search committee were about the people. They were more about "How do you view the vision of the higher ed sector and what would be your key strategies" and so it was all about what I would call the operational and strategic aspects of running a university. They don't ask a lot of questions about "Tell me how you're leading? Tell me your style, your approach to leading a mass of people." I will say that being a leader is really fun.

W: Okay.

S: There's two things I'd probably say really quickly. One is, if I go back to recognizing that you need to be an owner to really start having the ability to influence and direction. I always ask that question of other people "Are you an owner" and if you don't know whether you're an owner, then you have to ask yourself, "Are you making the decisions or is someone else making the decisions?" In the same regard I think that people sometimes shy away from being a leader and by that what I mean is as soon as you're a leader you're opening yourself up to all sorts of criticism. I think that causes a lot of people to second guess wanting to be a leader. But I would argue that it does not at all highlight the...how much fun it is and how much it is just rewarding to recognize that you have the opportunity to change the lives of others and that we need great leaders to step up and do so. And I think whatever scale that is for you, take the risk. Know that you're going to be okay, that it's...you can have your opinions and others can disagree with you and you can be comfortable in that

W: Well said, Scott. Thank you so much; this has been an absolute pleasure and I'm really excited for our listeners to hear this interview.

S: Thank you.

One of my favorite parts of interviewing people is zooming in on their lives. What looks like a straight line of success at 10,000 feet is anything but when you look more closely. As I re-listened to our conversation, [I was reminded of a piece I wrote about Sheryl Sandberg a few years ago](#) which we'll include in the notes. My central question was – is Lean In advice she's giving herself? Sheryl's position, Scott's position, your position, to many, is enviable. But the lived experience is the lived experience, regardless of where you stand in the social pecking order.

And Scott's encounter with Jeff Bezos? Wow! What a great example of not allowing failure to become a referendum on you. I can't say it enough – it is shame that limits disruption. Not failure.

Thank you to Ross Morehead for writing in. Glad you enjoyed the episodes with James Altucher, Chrysula Winegar and Staci Olsen-DiStefano.

Thank you again to Scott Pulsipher for being our guest. To sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager and editor Macy Robison, editor Heather Hunt, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson, and this is Disrupt Yourself.