

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 35: Maureen Chiquet

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Maureen Chiquet, former CEO of the iconic brand Chanel, and most recently author of the book [Beyond the Label](#).

Maureen: My name is Maureen Chiquet and I just finished writing [Beyond the Label: Women, Leadership and Success On Our Own Terms](#). I had a really zigzag career because I studied literature in college and...really film and theater as literary text. I mean what do you do with that, right? So I ended up - because I had fallen completely in love with France when I was 16 and had gone back as a junior in college - I ended up going to France right after college and trying to find a job and I found a job as an intern in the marketing department of L'Oreal Paris. And that was really my first job coming out of there. After about three years I left because I'd met the man who was to be my husband. Some extenuating circumstances - we decided to make our way to California, only we hadn't really researched the market and there weren't that many product management jobs. So I ended up seeing this wonderful poster of Miles Davis with his head in his hands. It was a Gap poster and I quote unquote fell into The Gap. I worked for Gap as a merchant. I had no idea what merchandising was, but I started over. I was a merchant...

Whitney: What is it? So for everybody else that doesn't know what a merchant is?

Maureen: What is it? Well, the reason I had no idea is when you hear that term and you think about a merchant, you think about somebody who actually stands behind the counter and sells you products and I thought, "Oh my God, I don't want to be a salesperson." But it turns out in retail lingo, a merchant is someone who works with the design team to pick the very best products for the stores. And then she will look at those products and figure out how much she should buy, how much to invest in. And then from there, where to get them made, how to get them made and follows their sales trajectory all the way through to mark down and, and when they're done. So, a merchant kind of is a...I mean in those days it really was a jack of all trades in the retail business. So merchant at the Gap for six years when I got a little tap on the shoulder from a colleague.

Whitney: Wait. Before you do that, we need to back up. So, how did you get that job? I mean you know, what you just you just described a really fun job figuring out what people want to buy, working with, with designers to design the clothing and...and you said you fell into The Gap, but how did you actually fall into The Gap?

Maureen: Well I should I should say at the beginning of the job wasn't all that easy. Number one.

Whitney: What was it?

Maureen: Well, so you know. So coming to San Francisco not having any job, I sent my resume around and eventually got a call back from the Gap and I sat down with the recruiter, and the recruiter said "What do you want to do?" and having seen that poster - and this is Miles Davis, who I loved, the jazz musician in his black T-shirt, soulful, head in his hands - like..."I want to market the Gap because I love what your posters say about about the company. They say anyone could look cool in a Gap t shirt and express his or her own personality." He looked at me like I had 10 heads and he said, "That's advertising. We don't do marketing," and this is you know we're talking about 19 whatever 88 now and he said "You're a merchant," and I said, "I'm a what?" And that's actually how the merchandising thing started. But my first job in merchandising - when I first started was a trainee and this was after, by the way three years of marketing at L'Oreal and I thought I was, you know, thought I was something after those three years. Turns out I didn't know anything about retail, so I started in the sample closet - so that's where all the old samples go to rest - and organizing the sample closet was my first big job. Which you know, in the end, was actually kind of interesting, because I learned all about the products and what makes them, you know, the kinds of things that you sell.

Whitney: So your first role at the Gap was the sample closet?

Maureen: Yeah, it was pretty much cleaning the sample closet and then doing these very onerous spreadsheets called the "Open to Buy" which is basically an inventory control mechanism. But at the time we didn't really have computers in the same way, so we were doing them on paper with, you know, pencil and erasing and writing back in again. And it was, it was a it was a hard thing because you had to collect a lot of data to put into the sheet and as a young merchant not knowing where anything is or where things belong, It was a really challenging moment for me to learn all these numbers that again, I hadn't had, into which I had no exposure when I was at a place like L'Oreal.

Whitney: You said you fell in love with France when you were in high school. How did you fall in love with France? How did you get exposed to France?

Maureen: So, I went, when I went to my - I had changed schools when I was in 10th grade from a public school to a private school because I really, really wanted to learn and I had one of those great teachers that you know you get - that just inspires you. And through her accent speaking French, the pictures I kind of held this romanticized version of the country. And I wanted, I wanted to taste, it I wanted to feel it. I wanted to speak that language perfectly. I also really admired my father growing up, and still do. And he had learned French without ever having a textbook. That's how they learned in his high school. And it turns out, his accent was flawless, so I wanted to be like my dad. So, I asked my parents when I was about 15-16 if I could go spend a summer in France. And I found a program where you could spend a month with a family. Turns out, I was so lucky, because I got to go to the south of France - to Provence - right near Nimes, a tiny little town called Calvisson which is on the outskirts of the big city, and just in the fields of lavender. And everything in France - I mean everything in that part of France - just lit up my senses. It was like the golden light shining on the wonderful limestone, those lavender flowers and that that the smell that kind of invades every cell, and then tasting goat cheese - goat cheese was a whole new thing in France for me. My dad, I mean my

dad had kind of had us taste the American kind, but we couldn't get the, the real sense of that kind of grittiness and wonderful pungency of a good goat cheese.

Whitney: So you had changed schools. You ended up with this amazing French teacher.

Maureen: Right.

Whitney: And the combination of that and your admiration for your father, France was the place for you.

Maureen: Yeah. France was the place for me and I wanted to explore it and really get to know it. In fact it was almost like we started a love affair, France and I. I became obsessed with everything French. And the other thing I think that happened while I was there which was crucial, is I started to notice the way the French appreciated and took in beauty. Everything slowed down in the south of France. I mean moments just to look out into a beautiful field of wildflowers. Moments of you know having l'apéro with pastis. It was just like, they reveled in the beauty, in the natural beauty of their land, of their foods, of the things around them, and that moved me and that made me want to go back.

Whitney: So they were mindful before mindfulness a thing.

Maureen: I feel like there is, there was a kind of mindfulness because things were slower and there wasn't that push to always do. You know, there was a kind of sense that something could be just as enjoyable if you're just sitting around and chatting over a pastis.

Whitney: A pastis meaning pastry?

Maureen: No, no, pastis is this, it's anisette liqueur that you add to water. Famous. And Ernest Hemingway talked about it famously in one of his books because it comes out clear. But when it hits the water it becomes cloudy, so it's, it's kind of a mystical, yeah.

Whitney: You studied film and literature at Yale. How did that influence you as a merchant and as a marketer?

Maureen: It was amazing, actually. I don't think I could have chosen a better course of study, which sounds strange when, you know, when you think of marketing, and when you think of retail, you think of numbers and you think of spreadsheets and pie charts and graphs. But it turns out that what literature did for me, first of all, was all about stories and about human connections. And most products - any product that I was going into - but most consumer products rely on a certain emotional connection, so I think that's number one. Number two, film and theater really dimensionalize and show signs and symbols that get us emotional, right? So as you're looking at an image that evokes a certain emotion - you, so, and particularly in French New Wave which I studied - there is a way that being very attuned to my own emotions while I was watching something allowed me to think about how consumers might see something. How they might view something, and ways that we might change or, or craft an image to, to encourage purchase.

Whitney: After you graduate, you go to over France and you get your very first job and it's L'Oreal.

Maureen: Correct.

Whitney: How did you get that job?

Maureen: Upon graduating I did not have a job. My dad is a lawyer. Still is and was then. A very successful lawyer and I admired my dad so I thought, "Well, I don't know. I guess I'll just go take the LSAT." I mean what else do you do, right? All of my friends, by the way, had jobs in banking or management consulting and you know, I was a lit major and I was not going that way. So I went to take the LSAT and I sat down in front of the test, and the words just started swimming around. And I you know I, I read one problem, but I couldn't really figure out the answer I just guessed it something I did that with the second, the third. Ends up I after six questions I had no idea what I was doing. So I called over the proctor, I raise my hand - he looked at me like I had 10 heads - and he said, "What is it?" And I said "Here's the test. I don't, I don't want my results." And I walked out. I walked out on the LSAT. So fortunately...

Whitney: And you'd probably never done that before.

Maureen: I, never! I was so high achieving. I mean I was a kind of kid who spent, you know, every Saturday and Sunday in the library.

Whitney: Right! You went to Yale!

Maureen: I went to Yale and I worked so hard and you know I was determined to get. I got really good grades. I was determined! I really wanted to do something, it's just, I realized it was one of those moments where you go, you know, I can't do this. This is not the life for me. And as much as I love my dad and think what he does is interesting, I don't feel it inside me, so you know you know, I got up. And by the way, quite uncharacteristically, I had not studied for the LSAT at all.

Whitney: Which should have told you something.

Maureen: Should have told me something, but you know, you're 18 or whatever, 19, 22 years old and you know you think you, you think you have it all figured out, right? So, quite fortunately, my very best friend when I was in France and roommate, and I had been very lucky to have a roommate when I'd gone on my junior year abroad. Um, had her, her uncle knew somebody, and I was able to get an internship for six months in Paris and that's how I eventually ended up in Paris. But I've got to tell you, I don't know what I would have done. I think, actually, I do know what I would have done. If I had not had a job, I would have moved any way to Paris and I would have gotten, I don't care what kind of job. I would have swept floors, I would have, you know, waitressed - I would have done something so that I could be closer to that culture. That's how important it was to me at that time and still.

Whitney: It's an interesting comment that you make about, that you were willing to sweep floors because in your book, you talk about a number of instances where you took on roles that weren't necessarily glamorous or exciting. You know, here you've been the CEO of Chanel but it's not like it was one straight shot up the ladder with, you know, a path of rose petals. What are some examples, I mean, you talked briefly about the sample closet. What are some other examples where you took a job or got a role that wasn't quite what you thought it would be?

Maureen: Well, I mean I should probably start back with L'Oreal, because when I got there, you know, I was going to be in marketing. By the way, couldn't spell marketing properly at that point. No, I really didn't know what it was. But they send you out on the road as a sales rep, basically. And I really didn't like selling things, but I was kind of looking forward to it because I thought maybe they'll send me back to the south of France and I can visit my family and I can see all the beauty there. Not so fast. I ended up being in the north of France in coal mining country, which is traditionally sort of the foggiest, greyest, most dismal part of the country and that's where I was stationed. To sell cosmetic and hair products out of my little suitcase into hypermarkets and hypermarkets are like giant supermarkets.

Whitney: Like Sam's Club.

Maureen: Yeah, like Sam's Club. So imagine, I'm alone, I'm now twenty two and a half, or whatever, with my little suitcase, staying at two star hotels and trying to sell products to people who - in French, by the way of course - who really are buying that, plus peas, plus sanitary napkins, you name it. They really don't care about my hair gel. So, I think it was the first time I had one of those kinds of jobs that like, "I don't think this is what I bargained for." I was supposed to sell end caps. Do you know what end caps are?

Whitney: I have no idea.

Maureen: Ok. End caps at the end of an aisle - the things that are on promotion.

Whitney: Oh, yes!

Maureen: So, I was supposed to get one of those.

Whitney: OK.

Maureen: And I was supposed to negotiate it, and the marketing team -this is the only thing I knew about marketing at the time was what the marketing team did, which was basically these pamphlets - had set up this great you know marketing speak for me to go and try to sell this guy who buys peas too, some Studio Line, which is a new gel product. Some hair mousse. And I go you know wait for him, in the cold freezing back room. He comes out, shakes - extends his elbow for me to shake - because, you know, his hands were dirty from stocking things. And first of all I told him my name, and he was like - my maiden name is Popkin. He goes, "What? What kind of name is that?" It looked, he looked kind of looked kind of like he had a lemon and, and then I proceed to tell him,

you know, and I'm looking at his hair which is all, like, slicked back and I'm telling him he could get more fluff in his hair with this Studio Line mousse and I could see this is not resonating.

Whitney: Right.

Maureen: He is not listening. And then I realized, you know what, I can't speak this marketing speak. I have to speak his language. So I just sort of said to him, "How much would it cost? You know, what, what would it cost me to get one of those end caps?" And that's when we actually got into conversation and we each did our little dance on our calculator and I ended up getting the end caps that I wanted and my boss is really excited because I had succeeded in, you know, in what he had asked me to do.

Whitney: Yeah. But you weren't able to do it until you spoke the language of this man.

Maureen: I mean it was sort of again one of those moments where you realize you're on the wrong track, you know, and you know, I'm looking at his hair and realizing that he has this broader responsibility, that he doesn't really care about Studio Line, and that really what he cares about is getting the right products that will sell through and that will that, he can eat and make good money on, essentially.

Whitney: Your first job is in L'Oreal then you and your husband, you moved to the United States, you get a job at the Gap. You start in the sample closet where you can kind of give us the zigzags and maybe one other job that was difficult or not so fun along the way, and then you got to Chanel.

Maureen: Yes. So after the sample closet, I was actually in the accessory department and my responsibility in the accessory department - I was assistant merchandiser of socks and belts. Now, here I have gotten to the Gap, and I think I am going to be buying all those cool t-shirts and jeans and, nope, my responsibility is socks and belts. Not exactly what I bargained for. But what was so interesting about it is, I found ways within that opportunity to actually kind of stake a claim and make a name for myself. And notably, it was with belts. Because belts had been ignored by the Gap. And when you walked into Gap stores there were these rounders and most belts sold at \$9.99, which was kind of barely above cost and - I don't know if you remember this, but there were these braided belts and all the guys wore them - that was basically the belt assortment. So, I'm like, "This is an opportunity," and I'd noticed that a lot of women were wearing jeans and a lot of women were wearing wider belts and it was, belts were kind of a thing, so I decided that I was going to build this new assortment of belts for Gap. Well, turns out and because I've I actually really at that point was kind of an aesthete and I loved leather, I loved the way it smelled. Turns out that the kind of leather I could get was expensive - that I wanted - was expensive, but I took a risk and had all these belts made and actually ended up convincing my boss and my boss's boss that we should price the belts much higher. Like in the 30s and that I was convinced that we sold them - that we could sell them and in fact, we did.

Whitney: Wait - how did you convince them? What did you do?

Maureen: How did I convince them? Well, in this case, I basically, you know, I set up - I got all the belts made, number one. Which you, know...

Whitney: That's risky.

Maureen: Yeah, I got them all made - exactly. I lied them out on the table and I really figured out what the downside was to - one of the things that they taught us at the Gap was, you know, if you're going to take a big risk, make sure you know what happens if it doesn't turn out OK. And so I had everything prepared and I had all the data points prepared. I looked at how much denim was selling. I looked at the increases of denim selling, you know I mean I basically I didn't actually take pictures of women with belts on, but I pointed them out in the office - I'm like, "Shouldn't we as Gap, an American company, have belts to go with our American jeans?" And indeed, that was uh, you know they were willing to take the risk with me and it was an amazing success and it built, in so many ways it built my reputation. You know I became kind of like "the belt girl" and it was funny, I was telling this story to someone not that long ago. And she said and I said I did this belt called "The Sea Buckle" and became our next staple belt for women and we hadn't had a belt for women. And she's like, "Oh my God, the Sea Buckle! I think I still have that in my closet!" So it really was kind of a big coup. And you know, at that time you could say well, belts, that's a small area. What are you going to do with that? But it was really for me finding the opportunity in even the smallest areas that I had.

Whitney: Right! Absolutely. That's a great story. So that was a career maker for you - playing where other people didn't want to play turned out to be a career maker.

Maureen: Yes. Taking, you know, even when you have a job that you think is lesser than what you're supposed to have, or isn't as interesting as you want. Finding the thing that you can get passionate about, that you can get behind and make into an opportunity and for me that was a critical part of my merchant career.

Whitney: Wow. OK. So belts at Gap. You create this, you build this market out substantially.

Maureen: Right.

Whitney: What happened next?

Maureen: So I was then later promoted to the denim department which was really interesting for me because denim was an area that relied a lot - and contrary to what I thought - that relied quite a bit on sourcing fabrics. Figuring out how much fabric is getting to the cutter and how much needs to be cut. And it was actually very technical and very difficult for me because I once again, I kept seeing myself in this fashion job, but now that even in that job I found ways to innovate and it ended up that new washes were really popular then - you know, stone washing and sandblasting - but it did lead me to one of my biggest lessons when I got yelled at by the CEO of the company for not listening to him.

Whitney: I would love to hear this lesson.

Maureen: Yeah. So I was I was now, I think, associate merchant in denim so I'd grown, you know, I'd been promoted and I was seven months pregnant. My boss was actually on maternity leave, which is a great model for me, and Mickey Drexler who was the then CEO called me into an advertising meeting. And the goal of these meetings were usually to figure out what products we're going to advertise at the Gap. And so you know I'm rushing to get my denim samples all on the rack and I'm waddling around because I'm seven months pregnant and I had gained quite a bit of weight in that pregnancy. So I rushed down to the area that the conference room, where the meeting was and I started to show him my brand new finish in a new pant called the wide leg jean. And boy was I excited. And I just, I just went in and, and I also knew Mickey, so I was trying to second guess what he might think. And so I thought, he's going to think I'm a wimp for not buying a lot but I'm going to show him how much I bought, so I gave him and I'm buying X amount of units and you know, half, half way through, partially through just he stops and he says, "Wait a minute. Can I see that wash?" And he looks, and he goes, "Great wash, but if this is such a good wash why aren't you doing it in the classic fit jean?" I'm like, "Well you know, no one wants to wear the classic fit jean anymore. It's old. It doesn't fit right." "No, no, no. But how many classic fit jeans are you selling?" And I said, "Well, I don't know 20,000 a week." "And how many, you know, of this wider leg thing..." at the time we had a similar jean and it was like not even, not even a fraction. And I kept going, I said "But Mickey, you know, the classic jean just doesn't look good anymore." And I just kept, I was almost steamrolling him and finally he stopped the meeting and he said, "You are not listening to me!" And he got really upset, walked out of the meeting, said "I've got to go. I've have another meeting," and walked out the meeting. Now I'm an associate merchant - by the way, I was the sole breadwinner in the family.

Whitney: What did you do? How did you feel?

Maureen: Well I started to cry. I mean really, I was, I was really upset because I thought I'd lost my job. And I realized I'd really, really aggravated him and I was sure that, this is it. You know this is the end. Went back to my office, I'm thinking about calling my husband saying, "Honey, we, you know we've got to figure this out. I don't, I don't think I'm going to have a job after today." And the phone rang. And it was Mickey. And Mickey said to me, "Maureen, you're a really good merchant. But you need to learn to listen." And he said, "Really listen. And not to me. Not because I'm the CEO. That's not the kind of listening. But listen to your colleagues. Listen to your customers. Open your ears. Listen. Take things in." And I thanked him, and obviously he didn't fire me, but I thanked him. And you know, and now I continue to thank him because I've told that story before because it's such a critical part of who I became as a leader. The skill of listening because I think listening can be as important if not more important sometimes than talking.

Whitney: Can you think of the time when you were CEO and you found Mickey's voice in your head in this particular conversation with someone where you thought, "I need to listen right now." Can you think of one of those times?

Maureen: Yeah there are a lot of times particularly when I first came to Chanel. When, when I first came to Chanel, I was really the only woman at the head of a table of ten men, and they were really savvy executives. All of them had been in the business for - the luxury end of

the business - for 20 some odd years. Many of them were a lot older than I was. Many of them had been in the company and had a deep history and roots in the company. And I remember coming there and I you know, I went through about a year of training, so I was traveling around Paris and meeting all sorts of people. Traveling around the world, looking at our manufacturing, looking at our sales, looking at our marketing - you know every department. I remember formulating quite a few opinions and really wanting by the time I got to be the CEO, really wanting to start some things. Institute some strategies. But I found myself really saying, "You've got to slow down. You've got to listen to things from their perspective. You've got to, you've got to sit at their side of the table and hear before you make any decisions." And it ended up being invaluable because I think the team - given where I was, and I was you know, 43, American woman coming from...you know, my biggest claim to fame was Old Navy, selling you know, \$5 T-shirts off the back of a truck - and I'm coming into the most iconic luxury brand in the world. So I think for me to earn their trust and for actually to be credible, listening ended up be more important than talking.

Whitney: What made them be willing to take a risk on you? Because from their standpoint, as you just described that, you were a big risk. You were, you know, "one of these things does not look like the other one." What do you think got them where they said, "OK. She's she's younger than we are. She's a she. She comes from a different kind of background - Old Navy, not luxury brand." What got them to the point where they said, "She's the person we want"?

Maureen: You mean, upon hiring me? Or once I was in the position... Yeah we had, we had a very interesting courtship, I would call it, because it was about a year - over a year that I was being interviewed on and off. And it was fascinating, because the first interview I went to with one of the executives, he asked me a lot of questions and almost none of them were really truly hardcore business oriented. They were a lot about how I might think about creativity, how I might think about the brand Chanel, what I thought about the brand Chanel. And it was it was curious to me because you know I went in there guns a blazing ready to tell them how great a business person I was and how I'd grown Old Navy from zero to five billion, I had started to turn around Banana Republic by that time, and you know there was there was a lot to brag about, but there wasn't really the appetite to hear that. They really wanted to know who I was as a person and whether my values - the things I cared about - were in line with theirs. And you know it turns out through a year of on and off interviews, I began to understand that what they really cared about was somebody who could hold creativity as the most important thing in a company. And in fact for me, creativity had always been such an important part of my life and the artistic part of what they did, for me was, was the most important part. So I think the risk, the ability to take the risk, came in knowing that for, first, that and then I think the second thing is, they didn't want somebody to come in and just change everything. They didn't want some kind of transformational leader who was going to upset this beautiful brand. And given that I was willing to be trained for three years - basically a year in France and took two years in the U.S. operations - that was already speaking to the fact that I was willing to really integrate. Take the brand in and understand the culture before acting. And to them I think that was really critical.

Whitney: So you interviewed for a year then you trained for a year then you went and did operations for two years, so basically, four years before you took the reins.

Maureen: Yeah, more or less. Because you know, in 2000, all right, let's see I'd probably met them the first time in 2002 and I became COO in 2000, so it was almost five years. 2007.

Whitney: So that's really interesting. So it's, it's this notion that - when you first walked in the door you had all the bona fides. Right? It was clear that you could build a business. That's why they asked you to talk to them in the first place.

Maureen: Yeah, I think that's fair to say. They knew they knew that I had achieved. I mean that they had the credentials.

Whitney: Right. So now it was a matter of - can she...all the soft skills. Because the domain expertise was established.

Maureen: Absolutely. Absolutely. That's exactly right. They were looking for soft skills and they were looking for, I want to say, a value match. You know something, for me to care about the same things - for the person who was coming in to care about the same things as they had cared about in the way they built the brand. It didn't mean that I wasn't allowed to make changes and that I didn't make changes later but it meant that I was going to take a good pause. Really integrate that culture. Understand the business model. Understand the people - where they came from, why they were doing what they were doing - before I went out and acted.

Whitney: What's your proudest moment as a developer of talent. Did you have any specific initiatives in place not only developing specific people, but also initiatives that would recognize people who were willing to develop talent.

Maureen: The thing that was really important to me - especially in a legacy company like Chanel where everybody's been there for so long and doing such incredible work in a very specific area - was actually to start to mix that up a little bit. And not in a way that would, you know, take people out of jobs, but actually get people exposure to areas that they hadn't been in before. So, one of the things that really worked was, was, identifying talent - just raw talent and moving them into other kinds of jobs. Not always up the ladder...

Whitney: Disrupting them! Yes!

Maureen: ...but often laterally. And what the benefit of that was not only did you get people re-motivated in the same company - you'd been doing the same jobs for a long time - but you got new ideas in places that hadn't seen new ideas for a while, right? So we took people from one region to another region. We took people from marketing to creative. We took people from sales to marketing. I mean I could name, you know, from fine jewelry to cosmetics, from fashion to fine jewelry, I mean, we really tried to mix it up and were, was, it was a purposeful initiative that actually, the entire leadership team

embraced, because they could see the benefits - both in the motivation of their people, but also in the new ideas that came out of those areas.

Whitney: If you were to talk to a college student who says, "Some day I want to be a CEO." What advice would you give them?

Maureen: Well, you know, I have this funny thing. I, I actually don't love to give advice, but I like to ask a lot of questions.

Whitney: OK.

Maureen: So I guess I would ask the question, "Why" first. Why do you want to be a CEO? What about being a CEO really attracts you? And what makes your heart sing? Because what I've noticed is, that we have sometimes ideas and ideals about what these positions are, what you do, what you get to do - the privileges. But we don't always understand the complexity, the difficulties, the responsibilities. And so I would actually start with questions because, and I actually have, now I have it down almost to a series of three questions which I've, I've talked to a lot of people, that I've used before and it's really interesting to hear but I like to ask people what makes their heart sing. If I strip out the label, if I strip away the CEO title, that take away the title. Why do you want that job? What makes your heart sing? What are you really excited about? If I take away the title of your next job, what do you care about? What can't you live without? Like, I couldn't live without France for a while and I would've done anything to go there, you know? And you know, it really would have been sweeping floors. So, what is it that - everybody has those things. The second thing, and I hesitate to call it passion, because passion, people all of the sudden jump to job type. But really, inside you, what do you care about. The second thing I like to think about, which is kind of obvious, is what do you do well and where can you make a mark? That's distinctly your own? And what, you know, for me as a marketer I was up - again at L'Oreal. I was up against all these people who'd graduated from business school. They all knew the lingo - UPS and market segmentation, all these things. And what I knew, was how to see. I knew how to see, and I knew how to understand emotion. So that ended up being my mark. So what is your unique mark? You know we think about all the things you do well but what is the thing that distinguishes you from everyone else? And I think the third thing is, what context are you in, you know, where are you right now in your life? And there are times where you might have to take a job. I mean, initially, when I got that job at The Gap when I, you know, when I came from Paris, I didn't really want to be a merchant right? At least I didn't really know what a merchant was. And so, but circumstances made it so that I had to take that job and I had to do something with it. So I think that combining a lot of questions get you closer to something than kind of, advice for building a career to become a CEO.

Whitney: Right. So speaking of being a CEO, can you think of an experience - that you can talk about, because I'm sure that there are some that are confidential - but can you think of one of your hardest days on the job as CEO?

Maureen: Oh yeah.

Whitney: What was it?

Maureen: So this is, this happened actually towards, towards the end but I'd say three or four years before I left. I had made a decision based on how disrupted actually our world was. Meaning the Internet and globalization and millennials - all these things were coming at us that had not existed before. We're standing in front of the unknown. I had decided to launch a leadership program. Because I felt that the way to address problems - you had to go more systemically to the core and how do you actually get leaders to change their behaviors to be able to take in this unknown future. Think about this unknown future. So I had this great idea - I'm going to launch a leadership program. I had practiced a different kind of leadership myself, myself which was much more about listening and asking questions sitting on other people's sides of the table getting people to work in unique ways as I described. So I'd been practicing and it was working pretty well, so I figured we should all actually embrace these qualities because this will help us with all the disruption in our world, right?

Well on a rainy day - don't ask me why I decided to do this in July - on a rainy day in July. July is the worst month in France because it's, it's when everybody's getting ready to go on vacation. They're distracted, they want to get everything done, they're stressed. So on a rainy day in July, I corralled my team into this big dusty conference room. Actually it was a ballroom. We looked like little ants in there and I decided we are going...I had hired a consultant from California. Now by this point, by the way, there are more than 10 men on my team, they're now a team of 20 including at least six women. You know, I corralled them into this dusty ballroom. I first send them outside to do team building exercises. It's raining. I don't know if you've done team building. Sometimes they're great and sometimes you really don't want to do them. Well, this is one of those times - they really didn't want to do them. Then, I bring them back in and I tell them that we are going to proceed with this program. I put the consultant in and we're going to learn how to be more empathetic and we're going to listen better and we and we're going to be more agile and of course I'm doing everything but that right. I'm doing the opposite. So you can imagine what happened with my team. I mean they, they basically almost threw me out of the room, to be quite honest.

Whitney: What did that look like? What did they do?

Maureen: Well, at lunchtime everybody was chit chatting about how much they disliked the consultant, about how much they hated the exercises. There was there was like subtle and non subtle - when we, when we did you know, I asked them a series of kind of leading questions that they refused to answer. I mean it was really, there was just sort of strong resistance. When we started having conversations about some of the things that I wanted "us" quote unquote to do going forward, because actually I was very much in an "us-them" situation then, and it was them really them to do going forward.

Whitney: So then what happened? Once you realized this wasn't working?

Maureen: So we left and we left this ballroom, went back to New York. This is obviously in Paris and I really, really sat with it for a while and I realized that I had made the very mistake that I didn't want to make. I had actually become what I didn't want to become. You

know, I was trying to force a leadership program down their throats. So I decided, you know what, I was going to cancel it. I was going to fire the consultants who were good, but they just weren't right for us. We had had an offsite plan. I stopped the offsite and I actually wrote a letter to each one of my leadership team members 20 of them asking them for an hour and a half of their time just to talk to me about what they cared about.

Whitney: Wow.

Maureen: How, how they saw our culture - what in our culture do they want to keep. What did they want to evolve. Where were they in their leadership. How did they feel about their positions. And I collected all of those 20 people's - It was a massive undertaking collected all of their things and I created something that we called the "From's and To's" which is really, you know, where do we, where, where do we want to move from and where do we want to move to and brought them all together. And we agreed and gave input - everyone gave input - to a document that actually set the course for another leadership initiative which is one that we co-created together. But it was, it was, it was tough. It was very tough on me.

Whitney: And was it tough, because I mean, how did you feel when that happened?

Maureen: I remember purposely trying to be optimistic and keep kind of a big broad smile on my face, but inside I was getting crushed. Because I think the things that I, I wanted to bring forward authentically were good things - like I believed in what I was doing. And I kind of knew that I was going about it the wrong way. So I think my inner critic was very, very loud and I was pretending she wasn't there. But I was, I was crushed in a way by my own mistake by knowing that I, knowing that I went into this the wrong way.

Whitney: Do you remember the first time you put on a Chanel suit and how did it feel?

Maureen: I remember the first time I put on a Chanel jacket for sure. I was actually in Paris on a shopping trip. We used to if, if business was good we used to get these twice a year of shopping trips to Europe as a merchant. And it was really to look at trends, to look at visual merchandising to see what was happening and it's...

Whitney: This is when you were at the Gap?

Maureen: This is when I was at the Gap - actually this was when I was at Old Navy. And there was a, there was - it's going out of business now which is so sad - a store called Collette in Paris. Very hipster store, cool things and what's cool about the store is they mix high and low and they just do everything really well. And I saw this jacket on a tea stand and it was a Chanel jacket. And I thought, Wow, I really. That's that's really beautiful. That's cool. I thought you know at the time I thought you know I was kind of not, not for me it was for you know, more mature women. And I tried on the jacket and it just fit like a glove. I looked at myself in the mirror and I was like, I have to have. I became obsessed. I had to have the jacket and actually pursued the jacket all along Paris, I mean I went into every Chanel store which was actually very difficult because at the time I felt like I couldn't walk in with my jeans and you know flip flops or whatever. But I went I went

after that jacket in every store and finally decided that I'd return to Colette and get it there. And you know go for that. I remember calling my husband, "Honey, can I buy this jacket?" And it ended up being not one of the more expensive jackets, because it didn't have a lining, but the feeling of it was...you know, I feel like what Chanel jackets do sometimes is give us a feeling of confidence because they fit so well and in a way provide almost - and this might sound strange, but almost a little bit of armor to the outside world.

Whitney: How much did it cost?

Maureen: It was like \$2000.

Whitney: So, that was a big purchase.

Maureen: For me it was...

Whitney: Astronomical

Maureen: It was ridiculous, but I needed it, and it was actually kind of obviously prescient. I mean you know because at the time I had not been interviewing for Chanel

Whitney: At the beginning of your book you talk about how when you left Chanel, you put all your suits away and kind of packed them away and said it's time for a new wardrobe. How have you figured that out? What clothing now are you wearing that you feel like or maybe one piece of clothing you feel like really captures who you are now.

Maureen: I am actually still figuring that out. I feel like, you know it's funny when you say you know the book is called [Beyond the Label](#), but when you literally strip away the label, when I took off that label of a C of Chanel, there was a real rebuilding of my identity. And that you know, I tell that story because it came kind of in a very metaphorical way through clothing. But I think it's something I'm still figuring out. What I've found, is I've always liked mixing really easy, comfortable street clothes with nicer clothes. But one of the newer things that I really like are the shoes that I'm wearing today, because they're they're kind of their flats, they're not heels they're you should take a picture of them. They're oxfords and they have this cool chain around them and they say a lot about what I love in fashion which is a mix up. So they're men's shoes made for women. They have this little chain around the welting which is kind of a, I don't know, kind of a punky detail which I think is really cool on a more conservative shoe. And what's been always fascinating for me in my wardrobe in fashion is pulling together paradoxical elements. So, you know you wear the ripped jeans with the Chanel jacket. You know, you, you know, or you wear the really nice pants with the T-shirt. I just love that. That mash up. And so I'm finding that I'm really attracted to going back to mixing things up. I actually never left it because at Chanel I wore jeans every single day and actually it was great to watch how the female population started to move into jeans as well and realize that they could change their Chanel look.

Whitney: So what are you excited about now?

Maureen: Well I've been doing a lot of speaking, a lot of podcasts like this. I love connecting with people and hearing their stories. I mean one of the things is, as a literature major, and as you know, with, with film and theater - stories have been the way I learn. And so I'm hoping through story that we can have conversations and learn together. And that's been really fun for me. In addition, I'm doing some consulting work with young entrepreneurs. Companies that I feel passionate about, and I'm going to start writing again. I really, you know, I feel like writing was something that I discovered strangely late for somebody who was a literature major, major and spent most of her childhood reading. But I love the craft of writing so I'd love to continue doing that.

Whitney: Will you write fiction?

Maureen: I want to. I actually want to write a screenplay, but who knows.

Whitney: Oh, good! Why wouldn't you?

Maureen: I...no reason. I'm going to try. Yeah.

Whitney: Yeah. Fantastic.

Maureen: It's a totally different form. I started learning it. And it's fun because I love the craft of something. I mean I why I really loved fashion. Just the beauty of the craft of something. So, because screenwriting has a completely different mechanism to write. I'm enjoying just the craft of it.

Whitney: Where can people find you?

Maureen: I have a [website](#). I'm on [LinkedIn](#). I'm on [Facebook](#). I'm on [Instagram](#).

Whitney: OK. @maureen.chiquet So do you have some fun photos on Instagram? I'll bet you're big into Instagram.

Maureen: You're so right. That is the one, that's the thing I like the most because I'm visual, so I love to take pictures. Yeah. I've taken some cool pictures. The other day I was taking - I love to hike. And we were taking a hike in the woods and for whatever reason it must have been raining a few nights before but there were these fantastic looking mushrooms. And I found myself looking at all the mushrooms and taking pictures of them so my Instagram - I have those cool mushrooms, I have pictures of you know Paris, I have silly pictures. I sometimes think silly pictures are fun. Like the time on the book tour. I got stuck in one of those tiny little planes in the back right near the bathroom actually moved because that they had they had a weight issue so we had to move to the back. And the guys wouldn't agree. So two women moved to the back and I took a picture of my Chicka Pop snacks.

Whitney: I had those yesterday.

Maureen: See those are good.

Whitney: So what will you do to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months.

Maureen: Well, I think I already have by taking this screenplay writing class and then the other thing that I really want to do and I don't know that I have the time to do is I'd like to take a 30 day break from this. (holds up phone)

Whitney: Ah.

Maureen: And the reason I want to do that is, I'm somebody who loves to take in the world through my eyes. I don't like being behind a screen. I get really, really inspired when I'm in nature, when I'm watching theater, when I'm watching film. But you know being a slave to the Internet seems to stop me from doing all that. So I'm, I mean, I'm hoping to disrupt that habit.

Whitney: Well, thank you so much Maureen. I really appreciate your time. And I guess the best boss I think you're going to say it was Mickey right.

Maureen: You know Mickey and probably Jenny Ming who was an amazing boss. And the reason Jenny was such a powerful boss for me was that, and I didn't write a lot about her in the book just because...

Whitney: When was she your boss?

Maureen: She was my boss the whole time at Old Navy, so eight years. And what I found remarkable about her as a boss, in a way wasn't the things, weren't the things that she was doing - it was what she wasn't doing. And I know that sounds kind of contradictory, but Jenny allowed me to grow. She when I was, you know, she would actually, she gave me guideposts like a good boss, but she also allowed me to grow and to flourish and put me in positions that I was able to do that. The other thing that I think was amazing about Jenny is she exposed me to parts of the business that I didn't know without the, without the responsibility of having to run those areas. So she pulled me into advertising, meaning she pulled me into real estate meetings while I was running merchandising and she was just very thoughtful about the way she mentored and the way it was much more of a mentorship and a partnership than it was boss to employee relationship.

Whitney: And she prepared you to become a CEO?

Maureen: She totally prepared me. Oh absolutely. Yeah.

Whitney: Well Maureen, thank you again. I really appreciate it.

Maureen: Thanks. This was a lot of fun. Thank you.

I'm still thinking about Maureen not finishing the LSAT. This was unprecedented for her. And from where I'm sitting, it was her first major personal disruption. She was willing to take a step back to let people think she'd lost her mind. As Seth Godin says, winners quit all the time, they just quit the right stuff at the right time. Key to disrupting yourself over and over again is knowing when to quit.

Another thing that caught my attention is the razor's edge of being new at something. Part of the value of your being at the low end of the learning curve is that you aren't blind through familiarity. And yet, people will not be able to hear a single question, a single word of advice if we aren't willing to hold what has come before us with some reverence and appreciation.

Which brings me to my tip. The next time you walk into a new role or assignment, you will see a lot that you would do differently. Make a note of it, because you'll forget. And at the appropriate time, share what you see. Also make a note of everything that's working, and admire it. One of my mentors, Carol Kauffman at the Institute of Coaching at the Harvard Medical School, recently gave me this advice. She said, "Whenever you're thinking about making a change, ask yourself where you are today on a scale of one to ten. Let's say you're at a three. Before you go any further, ask – why am I not a two? In other words, what's already working?"

I think this is great advice when you walk into a new situation. Before looking to make changes, look at what's working. What you're in awe of. And in time, people will be willing to hear what isn't working. What could be improved.

Thank you again for Maureen Chiquet for being our guest. To sound engineer Whitney Jobe, project manager Macy Robison, collateral editor Heather Hunt and art director Brandon Jameson. I'm Whitney Johnson and this is Disrupt Yourself.