

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 37: Peter Sims

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. This episode is brought to you by [Harvard Business Review](#). Its weekly podcast, the [HBR Ideacast](#), features leading thinkers in business and management.

My guest is [Peter Sims](#), CEO and Founder of [Parliament Inc.](#), a learning and doing community of thought leaders, authors and senior executives who are working on the ideas and trends shaping business and society. He's also the author of [Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries](#) and a former venture capitalist.

Peter: I'm Peter Sims, I'm an entrepreneur. I'm the founder of a company called [Parliament Inc.](#)

My very quick story is that I grew up in a small town between Sacramento and Tahoe, Northern California, about 2,000 people. Colfax, California. Very rural town. My dad was a judge. My mom was a photographer, artist type. My Uncle Joe was a logger. It was a very classic rural, small town upbringing.

I ended up going to college on the East coast. I went to Bowdoin, small liberal arts college in Maine. Which was a great experience. My dad had gone to Amherst College. So he introduced my brother and me to the liberal arts colleges. It was great to get to the east coast to be closer to the tradition and the history of the founding of America and some of the philosophical traditions. So I loved the experience there and ended up working in Boston for about five years after that. I wanted to get into venture capital after college, and I ended up doing that with a company called Summit Partners. Which is a big growth equity firm investing in fast-growing, privately-funded businesses. It was a great experience, both in Boston then I also moved to London with a partner. We started the London office.

Whitney: What did you major in, in college?

Peter: I majored in government and minored in history. I took a lot of liberal arts classes, economics, sociology. A very broad swath of the humanities, I guess you would say.

Whitney: You did government and then you did VC, how did you know that you wanted to do VC? 'Cause that's kind of a big leap from government to VC.

Peter: Yeah, great question. I grew up in this small town where my only exposure to the business world was working in the savings and loan during my summer before going to college, where my scout master was the CEO, believe it or not. It sounds really kooky, but that was my exposure to the business world.

When I got to Bowdoin, the exposure to the business world was the Board of Trustees and the Board of Trustees at Bowdoin had a number of venture capital investors who

were the movers and shakers in getting things done. And I just thought, "Wow. I want to be somebody who can make things happen." I was really interested in business, so with that very naïve, early view of the business world, I thought that would be something to strive for.

Whitney: I love how you say that because I think that we forget our perspective at 18 or 19 or 20 years old. Our view of the world is just so small and you got to college, and you met these people and you're like, "They get things done. They do venture capital. I want to do venture capital." And it's sort of that simple isn't it?

Peter: Role models are crucial for all of us. Our role models change at different stages of our lives. When I was a young person, I was an achiever. I was a classic, achiever, striver, whether it came to grades or being elected to certain offices in student government, or you name it, captain of sports teams. It was just kind of a classic-

Whitney: What sport? Just so we know.

Peter: I was a skier growing up, because we lived so close to the mountains. And also played tennis, but I was a terrible tennis player. I was really motivated by team sports actually. That was the thing that stuck with me. But our role models evolve and change. That was something that was crucial for my development as a human.

Whitney: So you did VC, then you went B school. You went to Stanford. One of the things I remember seeing is that you, well what did you do after you came out of Stanford, actually?

Peter: When I was in venture capital, I love working with entrepreneurs. We had this enormous set of challenges to try to figure out how do we do investments in Europe? We didn't know what we were doing. It was me, and a 36 year old partner, Scott Collins, who was one of the most accomplished people I had ever worked with. He was captain of the football team at Harvard and the longest resume I could spew out by the age of 36. There I was, 10 years his junior.

We had to figure out legal applications in Germany and France. Do we want to do deals in Italy and all this stuff. We were working 80 hours a week, 85 hours a week. And I burned to the ground. It was to the point where I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. That was a very strange phenomenon. But it was this achievement drive taken to the extreme. And so when I went to business school, I really wanted to take a step back and figure out-

Whitney: Wait, so you burned out? Or you were just physically-

Peter: Physically unable to function. I would feel tired and uninspired every day. I would just feel like I couldn't function the way I was accustomed to functioning as a capable, "successful" person. I was just going through a period of enormous confusion. I knew I had to try to figure out what to do next.

I had planned to go to business school after a few years. So it was all on plan to go back to the U.S. to ... And I fortunately, I was able to get into a school in California. But I was really lost. So when I went to business school, it was a two year project to figure out how to be myself, truly authentic to myself and successful.

Whitney: How old were you at this point, 26, 27?

Peter: 27.

Whitney: Do you think that's typical? That a lot of kids, and we can say kids now, that are in their 20s that feel this sense of, "I don't know what the meaning of life is."?

Peter: I think it is a common set of questions. It's a human set of questions. I can remember vividly, moments in venture capital where first of all, full disclosure, I loved the experience of working with entrepreneurs every day. It was inspiring. I would be able to speak and get to know entrepreneurs who were changing the world. Very lucky, at that age, to be able to have that perch.

I got to live in London. I dated a beautiful French woman. I had a life where I could live very comfortably and travel throughout Europe. It was, in some ways I was living the dream. But I can still remember the night when I was in the partner's office, not Scott, another partner, and we were at 5:30, getting ready to do the night shift.

Whitney: Right. You'd have dinner and then-

Peter: We were getting ready for dinner. We were prepping to outline the work that needed to be done from 5:30pm until 10:30 or 11. That was a typical night at Summit Partners. I was standing in the window of the partner's office, looking down on South Station and seeing all the people going home, all the real people. All the regular people going home.

I just remember being curious about what their lives were like and what was meaningful to them. And wondering, "Is this normal to be staying at the office so long?" And thinking back on a commencement speech that had been delivered by an amazing guy at my college commencement saying how he had interacted with somebody who had been out of school for a long time, wondering why he was going home on the last train every night and just wondering, is this the life that's the life? And this is in the boom era of the venture capital or the dot com era where all the smart people in my college class wanted to be in venture capital. I was in the premium perch.

Whitney: You were living the dream.

Peter: Exactly. And yet, I wasn't. And so to go to business school was to try to find the path that was more authentic.

Whitney: So what did you discover in B school?

Peter: In business school the main thing that I would become curious about was how to be authentic and effective. This notion of authentic leadership became a strong interest and I happened to meet [Bill George](#), who wrote the book on [authentic leadership](#) when he came to visit.

Whitney: Bill George, former CEO of Medtronic, right?

Peter: Of Medtronic and then Harvard Business School Professor, came to Stanford to speak. I met him just on the walkway above the building after he spoke, just by chance. He was walking by, and I stood up and introduced myself. We then came into email contact.

The very long story short is a group of us students were inspired by this notion of being authentic and being effective as leaders at whatever line of work we went into next. We wanted to start a class at the GSB about that. We worked to start that and -

Whitney: While you were still in B school?

Peter: In B school, yeah. The Deans gave us permission to pursue it and I ended up getting to know Bill well, because he was trying to start a similar class at HBS. We just learned a lot over a year period. And then he said, "Hey would you like to work together to write the book that would be How Do You Become An Authentic Leader? So of course, that was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Not planned. Not anticipated, but just along the lines of trying to find a path that could be authentic and true to my own values.

Whitney: So you wrote this book, or you [co-authored this book](#). You and Bill George were having these parallel experiences of, you're developing of course at Stanford, he's developing of course at HBS. And then end up partnering. So you write, did it end up being a New York Times Bestseller?

Peter: It was a Bestseller at Business Week and Wall Street Journal. It sold hundreds of thousands of copies thanks to Bill. He's really the-

Whitney: A bestseller. You get to write a bestselling book.

Peter: Yep, by accident.

Whitney: See, I want to unpack that a little bit. Because you're saying it's by accident. And yet-

Peter: Not planned. Not anticipated.

Whitney: Yeah, okay. I know what you're saying. I read on your website that you're an accidental author. At the same time, you seem to have a pattern in your life of getting access to some really, not just access, but collaborating with, working with, connecting with, some very interesting people. This is not something that everyone can do. Have you ever sat down and tried to unpack what it is you're doing that - It's interesting. I think it's one of your superpowers actually.

Peter: Oh, thank you. I'm very curious. I think people appreciate that curiosity. I do appreciate that I feel like I could be a good collaborator.

I thought more about collaboration over the past couple years. I'm 41 now. So I'm getting to be pretty ... I'm much farther along at the learning curve, I guess. I was really curious about why it is that certain people are so productive. Especially Steve Jobs. Why is it that so ... How could Pixar and Apple happen? And how could, in addition to that, a good family happen? I don't believe that Steve Jobs is a god by any means. He has many, many flaws and weaknesses. But he was a good collaborator. And I think the people who I know and respect who get a lot done, are really good collaborators.

I would put people I've gotten to know over the past 10 years in that bucket, whether it be Beth Comstock, who's at GE and leaving later this year. Ed Catmull at Pixar. Anne-Marie Slaughter, who's in the New America Foundation. They're really good collaborators. Lenny Mendonca who's at McKinsey and who we worked together to start a social venture. I have worked hard to think about the discipline of good collaboration.

Whitney: What are one or two things that you've learned, to share with people?

Peter: I think to be a good collaborator, first of all, it's a really crucial two-way street. Generosity has to be at the core. I worked for years, in the financial sector. Obviously with venture capital, in the heart of the financial markets. There are very few people I came across who were generous people. In fact, as I think about my whole 20s, which I did as an exercise. I met one person and worked closely with one person who I thought would be a good life-long potential collaborator.

Whitney: Wow.

Peter: Ten year period. And if I'd take the ten year period in my 30s, it's dozens. Because I became very focused on people who had a certain value-set and people who were motivated by more creation than transaction. I think it's both understanding values and understanding mindset.

Whitney: Are there one or two things that you look for that help you recognize signals to you that this is a person that is focused on creation rather than transaction?

Peter: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Can you think of one or two things that you say?

Peter: Yeah, absolutely.

Whitney: Bingo.

Peter: I think it's a set of values. I think one crucial value is they have to be generative. They have to be generous people. They have to be givers. They're not takers. [If you use Adam Grant's paradigm](#), which I think is good.

I think they have to be curious, because people who are really curious and really life-long learners are going to be drawn to people who are other curious people who they think they can at least learn from each other in an interaction.

I think that good collaborators also want to get shit done. They don't want to talk. They want to do. Those are the types of people who I'm drawn to.

Whitney: Over time, people leave bread crumbs or exhaust. And you can tell where there are a lot of dead bodies, or not. And that's probably usually, if there are dead bodies, it's usually a good sign they're not a great collaborator. And if there are people who say good things about them, it usually a good sign that they are. Very interesting.

Peter: Absolutely, absolutely.

Whitney: That brings us to a couple of the companies/organizations that you started, [Silicon Guild](#), Parliament, [Blk Shp](#), which one came first and how did they come about?

Peter: Well, after [True North](#), I thought that I would become an entrepreneur, at that stage. That was the aspiration. But I didn't have enough confidence. I didn't have enough understanding of myself to know how I would be an entrepreneur. I was 32 or what have you.

I started doing a lot of experiments and a lot of the experiments revolved around how to not be alone, basically. I was an author. After [True North](#), I was an author. I felt very alone. I didn't know how to do that job well. I think a lot of people are in jobs where they feel alone.

I formed a group of fellow authors in the Bay area who were also interested in not feeling so alone in the journey of publishing. How do we think about new ideas for our next book. Or how do we collaborate on different articles. Or how do we deal with the world of publishing, which is just atrocious, atrocious world, if you're an aspiring author.

Whitney: It's very Byzantine, that's for sure.

Peter: A lot of these experiments were not necessarily intended to be businesses. But they ended up becoming that farther down the stream. I just basically wanted to be myself, be human, be working with people who were good collaborators and generous people,

[Silicon Guild](#) was this group of authors that is today, a publishing imprint. I like to say we do with two people what two floors of Simon & Schuster do. We publish books for authors in a way that's very lean. I think we believe, I say we, me and [Tom Rath](#), who's really the brains behind it. The author of [StrengthsFinder 2.0](#) and 7 million other books

sold. He leads that effort, but has been an amazing collaborator. We can do great things for authors. It's not a business per se. I mean, we don't make money on it.

Whitney: You don't?

Peter: No. I don't. If a book sells a million copies, great. But otherwise it's basically a non-profit.

Whitney: Do you remember the moment when you said, "Let's start a publishing imprint."?

Peter: There's a group of authors in the Bay area, meeting for years. Some of the people were pounding tables saying, "We gotta create a new approach to publishing." And basically went to dinner with [Dan Pink](#), who wrote a book that was near and dear to me, [A Whole New Mind](#) and has written a number of other great books.

Whitney: Love that book.

Peter: Amazing guy, truly generous person, amazing collaborator type. And he said, "Look, you gotta talk with Tom Rath. He's the one who's figured this out." I met with Tom Rath and he and his colleague Peel outline, this is how we've figured out how to do publishing outside the traditional publishing model. And here's the math. And so they just laid out the whole model. And they said, "Our mission is to try to unlock authors voices in new ways. And to not have that go through the traditional model."

Whitney: So what are some books that you published?

Peter: Well so we published [Tom's last book](#). It was basically just a testament to Tom's prolific nature. And then we're going to publish a book by Patty [McCord](#) who's the former head of talent at Netflix and the co-author of [Netflix Culture Deck](#), called [Powerful](#). It's coming out early next year and Patty is the person who never anticipated writing a book. Has an enormous platform and voice already as somebody who's a truth-teller and basically challenges all the assumptions of the talent industry and the HR industry. And has a great voice on how we can think differently about gender issues. This is her first book. She's done a phenomenal job with it. So it's gratifying. We've got a couple of others in the hopper that are in process.

Whitney: When you talked to her about publishing it, 'cause I think one of the things that I've discovered in talking to people who are first-time authors, there is this element. Some people are just like, "I'm going to self publish." But then I find that once people get this motivation to do it, they want to go with the big publishing houses and not do something that's disruptive. That silly little thing that's out on the fringes. What did that conversation look like with her? With her as a persona, meaning when you're having these conversations, do you have to persuade them? Or are they already like, "Let's do this."?

Peter: It's a conversation with Patty that says basically, "Look. I think you have an important voice. You should write a book. Here are your options. You can go this route, this route, this route. I'll go introduce you to as many agents as you want. I just want to see the

book get done. Here's this option that we have where you could talk with Peel and Tom and see if that fits. Now the trade-off, if you take our option, is that you don't get an advance."

Now a lot of authors don't want an advance. The benefit to this route is that you gain a tremendous amount of upside on the backend, and you own everything, and it makes getting the book out a lot easier because you don't ... Basically can buy the book very cheap and give it to audiences and see the market and has enormous marketing benefits to authors. By the way, we're going to pair it with another platform too.

Whitney: Oh you are?

Peter: Well, we do with [Parliament](#). We use Parliament to get the word out on those new books. Patty just said, "Look. I don't need an advance. I made tons of money. And I get paid a lot to go speak." So she's in a unique special class. A lot of people aren't in that position. I certainly wasn't in that position when I wrote my second book. And so I had to get an advance.

I do appreciate and respect the fact that the traditional publishing model grants advances to people to develop their work. My issue, is that I felt like I spent a year and a half of my life, blood, sweat, and tears and then had no support on the marketing and no support on actually getting the creative work into the world. So that's what I was passionate about changing, and we are changing. But there's still a broad spectrum of options for people.

Whitney: I want to go to your other endeavors in just a minute. Before we do that, I want to talk about [Little Bets](#), which was your second book. For our listeners, what's the basic premise of that book?

Peter: So the essence of the book [Little Bets](#) is that when you're doing something new, whether it's in a new venture or thinking about writing a book or doing anything that's creative, you should start small. You should, think about what you can afford to lose, rather than what you can expect to gain when you're trying something new.

Whitney: How has this idea of little bets informed [Parliament](#)? And the building of Parliament, and what is Parliament?

Peter: When [Little Bets](#) came out, I had the very good fortune of having the opportunity to meet people who would use the book and use the principles in real organizations, which is the most rewarding feeling for an author of a business book. One of those people was [Beth Comstock](#) at GE. She was the Chief Marketing Officer at the time. She invited me and a group of five or six others onto an innovation board, to help GE think about how they would build startups.

Whitney: Okay, before you go there though, how did she discover your book?

Peter: This is a good story.

Whitney: Right, this goes back to that question.

Peter: Yeah. In getting a book out to the world, I and other authors try to get the book in the hands of influencers. In the case of Beth, and she laughs at this now. I sent her a cold email and I said, "I want to send you a copy of this book if you'd be open to it. I just need an address." So I cold emailed her. I guessed her email and she got that.

That's the approach that I learned when I was at Summit because when we were at Summit, we would reach out to entrepreneurs and we would cold email them or cold call them. So if somebody seemed really interesting as someone who would really appreciate the book, I would try to reach out to them. So, it was amazing to, I'm not in any way shape or form a big company person, obviously I'm an entrepreneur and yet, it was fascinating to see what a big company like GE was doing under the leadership of people like Beth Comstock to become more iterative and adaptive and to be able to make more little bets.

One of the key lessons that I learned from that experience was that if GE was trying to make an MRI machine that was a new device, they would be ... You have a team of people within GE who would be trying to figure that out. They would be out trying to meet with the VC's and with the doctors who are the leading users, the leading adopters. They would go to those people largely through Beth's team. Because Beth and her team were just so well networked that they knew all the kind of cool, early adopters, interesting people. They were very curious as a team to try to bring that insight back into GE.

Beth became this exemplar to me, of a new power leader. Very collaborative, and I quote, [*New Power*](#), that's a book coming out by a couple of people who are up and coming thinkers, Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans, about how in this world, power is becoming more decentralized.

Beth was at GE out in Louisville, out in Silicon Valley, getting to know all these potential learning partners and collaborators and joint venture partners for GE and basically Parliament was informed heavily by that insight that the world is becoming much more horizontal in its power structure. And that if one wanted to be the future Beth Comstock, which everybody wanted to be, because and everybody still wants to be because she's considered probably the most innovative or one of the top five most innovative Fortune 500 leaders. You have to get outside your four walls. And how do you get outside your four walls in this systematic way? It's very hard to do.

So we at Parliament have an ecosystem and a platform where we've identified and vetted people who are super collaborative, really good at what they do and understand that as we go after different problems, they're all in one place just like Beth was able to do with her ecosystem at GE.

Whitney: So she's a big role model for you.

Peter: She is, she is absolutely. She's a role model in the sense of creating this new power structure. And I say that to her, she's become a good friend. She's an amazing human being. And I tell her, "I think this approach that you have taken is going to be the future, and it's going to happen outside the four walls of Fortune 500." And I think she believes that. I don't know how much she appreciates that, that could be a big part of the future of innovation because inside Fortune 500 companies, the four walls and the incentive structure is so constraining that it's really hard, you can't be entrepreneurial.

That was another conclusion. It's almost impossible to be entrepreneurial, even if you have the most enlightened leaders at the top of organizations. We at Parliament, built a model that is informed by that ecosystem based approach to take any problem that you can come up with, you need to be building a set of collaborators and learning partners, across a very broad swath - across many different industries, many different sectors. Some people believe in that approach, the creative types do. That Beth Comstock model. Some people don't.

Whitney: So you decided to build this organization, can you be very, very basic rudimentary, what does it look like? What's the business model? I'm assuming this is for profit.

Peter: Yeah.

Whitney: So the publishing platforms, Silicon Guild, is your gift and Parliament is the business.

Peter: Yes, exactly.

Whitney: So what does the business look like?

Peter: The business of Parliament is that we are funded by a membership model. Where people like Beth Comstock or senior executives join as members for a yearly fee and they are basically given access to a bunch of different gatherings, to a bunch of different elements of this ecosystem. And they're given a concierge service through that. That's the business model, the outside that allows us to self-fund.

The second piece is the Silicon Guild in the sense that we have these authors who can sometimes feed into the conversation and want to feed into the conversation. We can take a problem just as an example that we are really interested in, so diversity inclusion and belonging is a big problem within the Fortune 500.

There are people who are leading lights, whether it be Matt Brightfelder at BlackRock, or Pat Waters who was at LinkedIn, now Service Now. As well as Susan Cain, who wrote the book, [Quiet](#), as well as Tom Rath, as well as Dan Pink. As well as a number of the third house of Parliament is what we call the House of Uncommon.

These are entrepreneur who are out hacking away at different pieces of this problem of diversity inclusion and we call belonging because that's become more of a theme of late. But this could be an entrepreneur that's trying to build an app to be able to give instant feedback. These are all people who are wrestling with different pieces of the problem.

Whitney: So at its simplest, you convene people?

Peter: At its simplest, we're a platform of platforms. That's what people, they want to plug in. They want to be Beth Comstock. They want to have a very broad set of insight. They want to be able to know how to very quickly navigate some of these big problems. And they want to not be alone. They want to be able to do things. Our members aren't entrepreneurs, but they come to Parliament to test their ideas with other companies and with other entrepreneurs.

Whitney: So the members of corporations and then you bring other thought leaders and entrepreneur to the table to help, to have the conversation

Peter: Entrepreneur to the table and then they partner off and a lot of that happens organically.

Whitney: Tell me about [Blk Shp](#).

Peter: There are moments in our lives when we feel like we're not being as human as we could be. And when we get inspired by being more creative and the world is not structured to support that. So as an MBA, I felt like everybody ... I would get together with my classmates and they're amazing people. Oftentimes, to be looking at size of apartments and comparing and being competitive. That mindset just isn't creative.

So, when I went and had the opportunity to go to Pixar, it was the most inspiring moment, because there was a place where people were very human and making great things happen all the time. At Pixar they call people black sheep who are the artists who think differently, who challenge the status quo. And so it was just inspiring to be thinking about, "Wow. If you're a black sheep at Pixar, that's pretty high bar." So it was aspirational and literally just made t-shirts and hats. This is a very small bet.

There were 12 or 15 people who were wanting these hats and t-shirts and it just kept growing. It was just, people wanted these hats and t-shirts. I was kind of blown away by that.

Whitney: How did you connect with [Ed Catmull](#)?

Peter: I set out to meet Ed and to get to know him and interview him for the book really, for [Little Bets](#). And I couldn't get through to him.

So I was, at the time spending a lot of time at the Stanford design school. I heard that Ed was going to be coming to the computer science school for a lecture. And I thought, "Well my God, this is perfect. I can go right to this lecture." He ended up opening his lecture by saying. "I'm going to share about my lessons learned about management. And I'm thinking about writing a book."

So I thought, "This is perfect. I'm going to take copious notes." So I did. Basically afterwards, went up to him and said, "Look, hey Ed, I'm Peter Sims. I would love to send

you feedback on this lecture." And he said, "I'd really appreciate that." 'Cause I had spent five, six years working on books. I knew something, to be dangerous. He said, "Great. Here is my assistant's card." So I spent two days, and at that stage I wasn't eating Ramen, but it was damn close. I mean, I was living off a skinny advance and really just taking this path that I was very unsure of, especially having come out of venture capital. So anyway, I spent two days writing this-

Whitney: You were being poor now, having-

Peter: Yes, poor, but happily poor. I was doing what I felt like I should be doing. I wrote this memo to Ed. I literally think of it today as, Memo to Ed. I just, I was so proud of the damn thing. I never thought of myself as a great student. But this memo was impeccable. This was like, I footnoted everything. I was so proud. I gave him all the insight I could possibly give.

Sent it off to Wendy, his assistant. And a week passed. Two weeks passed. Nothing. And then called Wendy. I said, "Hey, did Ed get the memo?" And she said, "He received it. Thank you Peter." That was it. It was as if that was just the end. So I thought, "Okay. Life goes on."

And then months passed and my girlfriend at the time and I went to the Oakland Museum. We saw the Pixar exhibit there and it was just ... You know those moments in life where you just feel like you're just transported. It was just, to me, this was the highest quality work. The respect for the creative process. It spoke to me.

I was so moved by it, I wrote another email to Wendy. I said, "Hey Wendy. I was at the Oakland Museum, my girl, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So inspired." I said, "If you could pass this to Ed, I would be grateful." And so she wrote me back and she said, "Hey, Ed wants to talk with you." So we talked on the phone and he said, "[I'm thinking about writing a book](#). What advice do you have?" And I shared everything I knew about writing a book. And then that was it.

And anyway, what ended up happening is that my friend, Lenny Mendonca, who was the head of McKinsey Global Institute, which is a big fancy title for a guy who's very down to earth and regular person. He and I worked to co-found a social venture together and he said, "Peter, can you introduce me to Ed Catmull?" I said, "Well, Lenny, I know Wendy. I can't promise anything."

But I wrote Wendy this email and I said, "Look Wendy, he's this amazing guy." Long version of the story. But the long and the short of it is, Ed said, "I'd love to meet Lenny." And so when he met Lenny, he said, "I'm thinking about [writing a book](#)." And he said, "Who should I talk to?" And Lenny said, "Here are a couple people." One of whom was me. I met with Ed, and he said, "Who should I have as my agent?" And I said, "Well look. You could go any number of options." And I said, "My agent was Christy Fletcher." He said, "I'll work with your agent."

Whitney: Christy Fletcher is your agent?

Peter: Yeah.

Whitney: I didn't realize that. She's amazing.

Peter: So he said, "I'll just work with your agent." I said, "Okay. Well I'll introduce you when I get home." After that, he needed a mentor and a set of mentors on his book. That was the irony is that he was and is my role model as an entrepreneur and in many ways as a human. He's just an amazing human being. But I could contribute something to him that I didn't even realize, I could actually help him as much as he could inspire and inform me. So sometimes that happens.

Whitney: Can you think of an experience in your life that brought you at the time, either a lot of sadness or shame or both? But as you reflect upon it now, you really feel like it was formative. It sort of made you who you are.

Peter: That's a great question. Well, Bill George and I worked on [True North, Discover Your Authentic Leadership](#), and a core question that we asked people was, what is your crucible? I had the view that you didn't have to have a severe setback at the age of 29-

Whitney: Ah, the naiveté of a young 29 year old...

Peter: You could figure these things out then you could develop self-awareness without having severe crisis and setback. And boy, was I wrong. And I'd say my 30s was a whole array of those moments where I felt like I failed and setbacks. And I'd say the one that was really the most formative, I guess, and as you ask, and I think about what comes to mind was that at the end of my work with Bill George, we just couldn't agree on what my role was going to be in the marketing of the book. So we had to part ways, very kind of abruptly.

It was so disconcerting and hard. I basically felt like I lost three friends, at the same time. Three people who I saw as being very important people in my life. We since were able to kind of reconcile, but it was still brutal for years. I had to have a set of realizations about what was important and to say things like, "Well, maybe having mentors is not the best route in life. And maybe I just have to find my own way and find my own voice and get away from the achiever path and get more towards the creator path." So that was a long process. But it started there. I'm eternally grateful for moments like that, now.

Whitney: So this punch in the gut. You moved from the Yoda model, sort of looking up to looking sideways and finding collaborators and inwards.

Peter: Inwards. Finding my voice. Finding myself. It's not easy to do. Always feel like you grow up when you're out of high school. Of course, that's not farthest from the truth. I thought about that a lot in my 30s. "How come people didn't tell me you don't grow up by the time you're in your 30s?" You have to go through this whole second phase of trying to come of age. I was just. It was a very difficult set of years and dark valleys.

Whitney: Who were the other two people that you felt like you lost? You said there were three people.

Peter: So Bill and his wife, Penny. And also Warren Bennis, who was our executive editor. They all kind of went away. It was very ... I would dream about them at night. I would just miss them so much.

Whitney: Yeah.

Peter: I mean, it wasn't...I understand why things happened the way it did.

Whitney: Right, but it doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.

Peter: It was, and in retrospect, it was small stuff. But at the time, it felt big. And the lessons I learned were just, "Hey, you have to find a new gear here, and find your voice and find yourself."

Whitney: What will you do to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

Peter: I think reflection is crucial. I think self-care is crucial. I think about practices and mindfulness. I think about a lot of things to just keep perspective and to recharge. I make a lot of mistakes by, this is, I took a vacation two and a half months ago and I'm fatigued right now. I'm very fatigued. I have to take three days off next week to recharge. That, to me is, I shouldn't have to get to that stage. How can I sequence things so that I don't ... And it's not, it's just curiosity. It's just, it's not doing anything other ... It's not that I'm stressed out.

Whitney: It's not like someone whipped your back. You just push, push, push and you've got to catch yourself a little bit sooner, so you can recharge.

Peter: I just get very curious and have a hard time saying no, and getting better at that. But yeah, I think that's-

Whitney: That's a great example. Peter, thank you. This has been so interesting and fun and fascinating. I really appreciate it.

Peter: Thank you, Whitney.

I remember reading Peter's [Little Bets](#) a few years ago, and subsequently reading Ed Catmull's [Creativity, Inc.](#) Because they both had the same book agent, Christy Fletcher, who I had unsuccessfully tried to get as an agent, I made the assumption that Peter knew everybody. And things must be easy for him. When I interviewed Peter I realized that no! He works really, really, really hard. And only because he was willing to show up, did he actually have a shot of at getting this thing that he wanted. Good lesson. Just because someone is more well know than you or I are doesn't mean it was easy for them. And if we think it is, we might be being a little bit entitled.

Also, Peter shared his experience with one of his mentors Bill George, I realized that mentors and sponsors are super helpful and tremendously valuable to us. But it's not the Yoda thing. Yoda only exists in Star Wars. Our mentors are human too.

Tactical Tip: The next time you look at someone and think, wow! How come that person knows that person and you feel a little bit jealous, remember what Peter did to get to Ed Catmull, and ask yourself: If there someone that you want to get to, what are you willing to do to develop a relationship with that person? What can you offer that provides value?

Thank you again to Peter Sims for being our guest. If you like what you hear, will you like it on social media, leave a review on iTunes (link in the show notes), or share it with someone you like? Thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager and editor Macy Robison, content contributor Heather Hunt, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.