

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 38: Deb Dugan

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

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Speaking of leading thinkers and doers, my guest today is Deb Dugan, Chief Executive Officer of (RED), a non-profit founded by Bono and Bobby Shriver, to help fight AIDS in Africa.

Deb: Hi, I'm Deborah Dugan. I'm CEO of [\(RED\)](#). I love working at (RED) because I feel like it uses all of my skillsets that I used in business to disrupt philanthropy. I deal with youth and if you can get youth to give a darn about this world, companies come. And then if you get youth and companies to come to the table, you can use that to affect policy. I feel like I've had a career of using my skillset in business often to make rich people richer. I'm using the same skillset to hopefully change the world.

Whitney: It's interesting. I love how you just described this. We had not long ago [Donald Miller](#) who wrote this book called the [StoryBrand](#). He said that whenever you talk about what you do, it's important to make sure that you're not handing a person a slippery bowling ball because then they don't know what to do with it. And I feel like the way you just described what you do I know exactly what to do with it. So, thank you. That was really articulate and pithy and powerful. So, let's now dive in a little bit and I'd like to look a little some at your background. You were trained as a lawyer. Tell us a little bit about how you decided to go to law school, where you went to college, just a little bit about your background and the beginnings of your career.

Deb: Yes. I was raised very, very poor. I lost my father when I was six and he had no life insurance. My mother had never worked a day in her life. She had what they termed in that time a nervous breakdown and I didn't see her for two years as well. As soon as I could start working, I did. At 14, I would get ladies lunch at the beauty parlor because they would be hours under the blow dryer over their head and I would come with like a Coke and a turkey sandwich and get a big tip. Really from then on have just always worked full-time. I worked full-time and paid for my own undergraduate and graduate school. Everything from waitressing to making false teeth. I kid you not, I was a factory worker in Mobile, Alabama making axles for garbage trucks as a welder one summer. I've done very disparate things. I got my undergraduate at the University of Florida. Was a teacher and very happy at teaching at Sugar Land Junior High and decided that I wasn't done learning. I really wasn't sure that I wanted to be a lawyer. I certainly wasn't thinking of Atticus from To Kill A Mockingbird or Perry Mason or any of that. I was thinking, "Gosh. I'm burnt out on English. I had majored in English and Education. I

didn't take enough of organic chemistry and those kinds of science things to go to med school." By default, I thought, "Well, I could do my own will and learn about taxes and purchase my own home." It seems like a very practical degree, and I was very interested in critical thinking. Although I got accepted to many great law schools, NYU, Columbia because my LSAT scores were strong, I ended up going to the University of Utah, which had a lot of ... At that time it was in the top 15 of the law schools. There were many Mormons that would go to school there and just stay in Salt Lake City, so the reputation of the school wasn't growing. And at this particular year, they wanted to recruit people from the East Coast to go to school there and then go to Wall Street and have the reputation of the school expand, which in my case is exactly what happened. I ended up going to a law firm and doing mergers and acquisitions on Wall Street at a time when it was its heyday. Worked incredibly, incredibly hard. 90 hours a week. Always felt like I had to prove myself. I did have a corporate partner say, "Most people here are from Harvard and Yale. Deb, you've swam in Florida and skied in Utah. It's time for you to work."

Whitney: Wait, stop for just a second, Deb. Was that true you swam in Florida and skied in Utah or was this just sort of ... Because you worked really hard to get where you were, right?

Deb: Oh, completely true. No. I'm surprised even much later in life when I've been interviewed at Tribeca Film for example that people still give me a hard time about my schools. And I love my schools. Each job I've had, each course I've taken, you get something out of it. I had very good experiences. I wouldn't have done it a different way, but I do have to explain it quite often.

So I was always very curious about music and having my work be about my passions. On the side while I was there, I did pro bono work for a group called Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts that would help artists, musicians with their legal issue that they needed a lawyer for, but they didn't have enough money quite frankly to hire a lawyer. There were 800 at the time, volunteer lawyers, in the city that would help these struggling artists. I found that saving a rapper in Harlem \$300 on a bad recording deal meant more to me than those multibillion leverage lease of aircraft. Again at each stage you learn a lot about yourself. So when Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts called me and asked if I would know of anybody that could help lead that organization, I said "I'll do it." They said, "We pay X." X was \$70,000 less than I was making right out of law school and I had student loans up the wazoo and I did it. It was one of the smartest things I've ever done in my career.

Whitney: What did people say, Deb, when you took that job?

Deb: People thought I was nuts. People thought I was absolutely nuts because I was on track to be a partner that had potential huge, huge dollars signs, prestige, everything associated with it. At that time Wall Street, people weren't taking it down. People were building it up.

Whitney: When was this? Was this in the '90s? Was this in the '90s probably?

Deb: Late '80s actually.

Whitney: Late '80s. Okay.

Deb: All of the mergers and acquisitions and the heyday in the '80s to walk away from that and work for a small not for profit, people were startled.

Whitney: Do you remember what went through your mind? What calculus you were doing in your head when you made that decision?

Deb: I did the strategic where do I see myself in 20 years. It's not just about where you're working. It's what am I wearing? Where do I live? What is my partner like? Do I have kids? Do I not have kids? Am I skiing on weekends? Am I volunteering at a soup kitchen? I really thought a lot about that and then worked backwards. I didn't want to be one of the partners at that firm. Many are crazy intelligent. Many are crazy great at their jobs and so it's not a negative to them in any way. It just wasn't me.

Whitney: All right. You went to work at this nonprofit. People thought you were a little bit cuckoo, cuckoo bananas, but you did it anyway. Then what happened after that?

Deb: Well, I focused mostly on music legal matters because that's what my passions were around. Nine months later somebody hired me for a startup late record label. Doubled my salary and it was called SBK Records. We signed, and I'm so dating myself here, Technotronic, the first electronic dance music in the United States with "Pump Up The Jam", Vanilla Ice, Wilson Phillips, Tracy Chapman, Barney [inaudible 00:13:36] We were immediately taken over by EMI Records. I spent eight years at EMI Records and those were really pivotal for me learning about how to run a creative organization.

Whitney: So, what were some of the highlights of being at EMI and more specifically can you think of a boss there that was especially influential for you?

Deb: Very much so. At EMI, my boss was a man named Steve Murphy, who I had dinner with last Thursday. He went on to run Rodale Men's Health, Christie's, the art auction house. But in those early days at EMI, I was more the deal maker and the lawyer and he kept saying to me, "You are more creative than you know. You're always finding the hit single. You're always getting the photograph that resonates." He had been trained and well ahead of his time to be awake at work and very mindful. He was influenced by a Buddhist monk Michael Carroll. I was his number two, which taught me how to be number one. It was really his saying it to me that you are more creative than you know and taking me out of being a cerebral lawyer, thinking a lot alone in my office to general manager of record label. We together had a spirit of entrepreneurship that led to many successes. One that again, dating myself, but was really interesting, we saw that Gregorian chants were selling in a certain area of Spain right before the holidays. We said in a small room of five, "Gosh. There seems to be this new age movement. What if we just call the Gregorian chants "[Chant](#)" and we put a picture of a monk and a blue sky and we put it out in Classics," which is sort of a sleepy division. It sold 12 million copies and the monks were dead, so there were so royalties that we had to pay for.

Whitney: Impressive.

Deb: It was the cover of Ad Age as the growth marketing concept. It was really just a few people in a room as it always happens that were just thinking differently about things.

Whitney: Deb, you've said a couple of times that you didn't think you were creative. Can you come up with in your mind a time or what happened that made you affix that label to yourself?

Deb: You know, that's really hard. I still am very self-doubting about my own creativity. I feel like I'm quite good at leading a creative organization and dealing with highly creative people that are often difficult. I have high thresholds for creativity. I just think it's worth it and so I spend a lot of time nurturing and being with highly creative people. But I think it came from judgment of time and time again making the right call and going with your gut. I think I applied very creative principles to business and it's not the obvious creativity of dance or art or design or music, but there is some creativity of seeing things that aren't there, putting two things together that wouldn't normally be together that are business skillsets that I think get overlooked.

Whitney: Do you think of yourself as creative now?

Deb: I do.

Whitney: Okay. So this boss of yours helped you start to be able to see that you were in fact creative. It's just you needed to expand your definition of what that looked like it sounds like.

Deb: Yes. There was no turning back.

Whitney: Okay. Given that, what is something that you have done in the last couple of years and you've been CEO of (RED) since 2011, tell us about one or two things that you've done that you look at and you say, "That was highly creative."

Deb: Wow. I feel like it is our model to be creative and disrupt philanthropy. What we do in social media, we just won an award for best hashtag for food emoji fight that we did around [Eat \(RED\)](#). We're the first in social media to do a Snapchat called Global Filter for Good, Turn Twitter (RED), get over a million on Facebook. We look for areas where we can connect with people's passions. Right now we have terrific [Omaze experiences](#) where for a sweepstakes entry of \$10, you can get a chance to play mini golf with U2. You can go with Snoop Dogg for a wellness visit in Colorado. You can have your ass kicked by Charlize Theron in a workout sessions. We are always looking for things to capture people's attention and to get them to really care about things that are going on in the world around them. And so we fish where the fish are. We go to where people's passions are and then try to do something quite awe inspiring, perhaps provocative, to get their attention and then have them influence policy.

Whitney: Can you walk us through ... Okay. Those are great examples. Maybe walk us through from beginning to end, policy you're trying to influence and then sort of from idea to ... We have this idea. Here are the people we attach to it. Here's what we did and then here's what happened.

Deb: I think the model lends itself for that to happen time and time again. What we do is we partner with the world's most iconic companies, Apple, Beats, Bank of America, Amazon, Belvedere, Starbucks. We get the greatest marketing minds in the world to help the poorest of the poor. We will literally have a brainstorming on what could we do on World AIDS Day December 1st that would have multiple touchpoints that would get people's attention because we are now in the struggle for our life. Policy, on the policy side, governments are retrenching in their foreign aid. There's much more feeling of local versus global. We can't stop on the fight against AIDS. After all of these years of progress of getting 20 million people on life saving medication, have a white flag of surrender and just not care anymore.

Whitney: Let's say you sit down with people at Beats or Apple and you have a brainstorming session. What does that look like? I know I'm asking you to move this at like 10,000 foot level, but I think people would be really interested to understand how you do what you do.

Deb: Yeah. I mean I think the genius of our model is that we always go first with what is a big marketing idea and then have many join us in it. Quite frankly on collaborations, it's when Jobs at Apple is talking to Anne Finucane at Bank of America, is talking to Neil, head of marketing at Amazon, is talking to Rodney at Belvedere that our best ideas come up because those people don't normally collaborate with each other. In fact, too many times their direct competitors. For the poorest of the poor, we rally them often in the same room. It could be anything. I mean one is do a takeover of The Jimmy Kimmel Show and have very funny skits about products poking fun at the late night infomercials and turning them upside them, and to having Robin Wright sell you a vacuum cleaner. The ideas stem from what would get people's attention.

Whitney: Got it. Okay. Then from that you raise money to be able to help the poorest of the poor and to fight AIDS.

Deb: In an odd way, it's a little bit like that ice bucket challenge where everybody was doing it and then they realized, "Oh, it's also for good, but I'm going to get to throw this bucket of water over my head." We let people do what they're passionate about. We might do a beautiful dinner backstage at Bonnaroo in the middle of the fields where nobody's expecting it. We might just capture everybody's attention by turning the Apple red on World AIDS Day. That Apple is never red and Steve Jobs was like, "We're never going to change that Apple," but then he did and people noticed. And Apple's given \$150 million to fight AIDS. Like those staggering numbers because they did something that nobody expected them to do. Dr. Dre and Jimmy Iovine when they started Beats, they did a [Beats headphone](#) that we didn't even know whether Beats was going to work. We didn't know whether are going to want this kind of headphone. Well, fast forward \$10 million, those red headphones have been iterated on and still sell. So we have [200 products for good](#). We have experiences that you could do. We have videos that you could share.

Social media that you could participate in. I think the genius of what we do is to have multiple touchpoints. You'll all of a sudden be playing Candy Crush, a game, and you'll see a red thing that's inside the game. You'll go to Bank of America at your ATM and all of a sudden you'll see one step closer to fighting AIDS because they're sponsoring the Chicago Marathon. Then you go to the homepage of Amazon and you see 200 products where it's all going for good.

Whitney: Very cool. Very, very cool. Thank you for going into that much detail. I appreciate it because I think it'll be just interesting for people who want to understand more of not just what you do, but how you do what you do and how you think about it.

Deb: I will say one thing that (RED) is a charity that operates like a brand and we're a nonprofit that operates like a startup. We have 20 globally minded people here in a loft in Tribeca. That's it. That's (RED).

Whitney: What's one of your proudest moments as a developer of talent? You look at people in your sphere and you've really gone to bat and sponsored them and helped them grow and develop as a professional.

Deb: When I've been able to develop the talent of my team where at a young age they come up with ideas and they have the wings to think freely and to contribute. We don't care if it comes from the person in accounting, if it comes from the person that doesn't even work at (RED) that's at the front desk and we just say hi when we pass them in the morning. I think that being a developer of talent is being able to enable those underneath you and around you to contribute, and to see their talent blossom has been the biggest gift for me.

Whitney: Did you have a really good idea coming from the person who was sitting at the front desk in the office building?

Deb: Well, oh god, this is kind of wacky, but he always ... It's an older man and he always gives me magazines that I don't want. Somehow I guess the mail, they just pile up up there, and so he will all of a sudden hand me an edition of *Real Simple*. By doing that, he's actually sparked a lot of ideas where we just constantly go back to are we making something too complicated. Like Ralph says in the front desk, "You have to keep it real simple." It's just inadvertent. I also know the people that work in the building are my focus group. I'm like, "Hey, would you ever wear these sneakers?" They're like, "No. They got that gold on the back." I'm like, "Yeah. We don't like that." We just look all around us for clever ideas for I don't want to be cliché and say the white space, but I do think a lot about what Hamill said about having the right people in the right seats on the bus. I spend the most time developing my people.

Whitney: Would people who knew you when you were 10 years old be surprised at what you're doing now?

Deb: Oh my gosh. Yes, absolutely. I was a bit of a troublemaker in school. I don't think that people thought I was particularly creative, particularly bright. I think I was very much in

survival mode. I did live my values in a strong way. My dad passed away - did help set up the [Peace Corps](#) with Sargent Shriver. That led to my at a very young age thinking about Bobby Kennedy who was at my dad's funeral and had me on his shoulders and what was it he's doing. Then he got shot a few years later and it got me thinking about civil rights and everything that he was standing up for. So I do think early on people knew that values were very important to me. In that sense, I don't think they'd be surprised. I think they'd be surprised that I was actually successful and having some kind of impact.

Whitney: It'd be interesting to know for sure because sometimes you might think that they thought that, but in fact they thought, "Wow, that Deb, she's going to do something when she grows up." You just said something that kind of caught my attention. Your dad helped start the Peace Corps? Like woah!

Deb: Yeah.

Whitney: Say more about that.

Deb: Both he and my mom came from Brooklyn and he came from a long line of construction ironworkers. He was in the ironworker union. My mom talked him into going to college and then he ended up being a narcotics agent for the Justice Department and working very closely with Bobby Kennedy who at that time was US Attorney General. They had a lot of big mafia busts. He testified in about 250 federal trials. So when Sargent Shriver was starting the Peace Corps, part of the issue was security of going into these countries with a lot of young American students and having to know everything about that country and what would be safe and what would be impactful. So he had done that. I have pictures of he and Sargent Shriver doing jumping jacks in Turkey that left a big impression on me. Maybe it was in my blood. Maybe think there was something there to look at ...

Whitney: The imprinting that takes place, right, when you're little. Did you know then Bobby Shriver like as a child? How did Bobby Shriver connect with Bono in (RED)? Did you facilitate that connection or is this just complete serendipity happenstance?

Deb: No. Life is completely crazy. When my dad died, as I mentioned, my mom had no life insurance. The community was so helpful. The Shriver's, the Kennedy's, the Humphrey's at that time went to my school and asked if I could please go there for free. They just did many things to try to help out my family. I was six. I have this career that I've just talked to you about that I went to law school and then to Wall Street and to EMI where I learned a lot about creativity, and then Disney where I learned a lot about brands and marketing. Then I wanted to do something else after eight years at EMI and eight years at Disney. I'm a bit like a millennial in that I don't love the idea of a career ladder. I like the jungle gym.

I'm a curious person. I thought, "Well, what else can I do with this skillset?" I was on a path to get another like corporate CEO job and it was a very good recruiter by the name of Jim Citrin at Spencer Stuart.

Whitney: Oh, I know Jim.

Deb: At the end of the day, he had arranged for very high powered position for me and I said, and this is getting a little bit personal, but I had recently gone through a divorce. And so I was the main income winner and half of the nest egg was not there anymore. I knew I needed to get X to have my three kids go to school and provide for them and he was offering my Y. He was offering me like an amazing high powered job. I said to him, I think it was 3 o'clock on July 11th on a Saturday, "Jim, is there anything that just gets me this amount that I can pay for my kid's school and everything that does something public service? That gives back in some way. I had tried to work for the Gates Foundation. There wasn't the right job that would use my skillsets. I had tried to work for the Clinton Global Initiative. It wasn't the right job for my skillset. Before I take this path, can we just pause and is there anything in the public sector that might make a difference in this world that could use somebody that knows a lot about entrepreneurship, disruption, branding, marketing?" Then he said, "Well, have you ever met Bono?" I was a little embarrassed because in all my years at the music industry, like I like U2, but I wasn't like a crazy groupie. He said, "I think you should have breakfast with Bono," oh, which has a lot of alliteration. I said, "No, I have to do my wash." I got a lot of wash to do in the morning. I said, "Well, of course, I'm going to have breakfast with Bono." I'm so in awed by his creativity, but more so the impact on the world and what he's doing in philanthropy that I don't think people actually even know much about. I asked, "Well, what is the job about?" He said, "You know, there's nothing you're going to do overnight that's going to prepare you. Just go talk to the guy." We talked and oh my gosh, I was so inspired. As I mentioned Steve Murphy earlier, my second best boss, it's a tie, is certainly Bono who makes me think big. He really makes me think about am I living my best life. We had this great meeting and then he said, "I'd like you to meet the co-founder of (RED) with me, Bobby Shriver." I didn't even know that. Here I am a lifetime later meeting a Shriver. I said okay. I did a phone interview with Bobby and at the end he said, "Oh my god. You're great. This is exactly what we need. We've hit a wall. We need somebody to come in, think differently, disrupt this, how do you get the masses to be able to participate in philanthropy. We set up this good model, but we've got to take it to the next place. I'm just going to tell Bono you seem to be the right person to do that." Then after he said and only after he said that, I said, "Well, I'm quite moved right now and I can't wait to call my 90 year old mother and tell her that I had a conversation with you because your family was so, so ... You hear about what people do for a nation, but you don't hear the small stories of one family on Long Island and how you really helped us at a tragic time." He was so Bobby. He's got such effervescence and such personality. He said, "Well, you know what? I could tell you were probably the daughter of like a cop because you seem to be a person that like you either have cocaine in your pocket or you don't." I get to laugh because people my whole career have said that I'm just completely blunt and pretty straightforward and crystal clear in my thinking. For him to pick that up in a very short interview and throw it back at me and compare it to my attributes of my father was quite stirring. Then the other thing he said, which also warmed my heart is, "Hey, if it doesn't work out with Bono, why don't you come think about the Shriver's in the Special Olympics?"

Whitney: There you go. There you go.

Deb: It was one of the greater calls of my life.

Whitney: Deb, thank you so much. This was so, so interesting. I really appreciate your willingness to share your story and just, it's amazing what you've accomplished. I wish you many, many more successes.

Deb: Oh, thank you so much. It's great what you're doing because I love to hear other people's stories.

Deb Dugan's life is somewhat of a Cinderella story. She had a lovely childhood, marred by tragedy, which opened the door for her to discover who she really was and what she could do. The full circle moment came when Deb interviewed with (RED) and reconnected with the Shriver family. All of our lives have elements of Cinderella.

What also caught my attention is that for so many years, Deb didn't think of herself as creative. There is a delicious irony here given that (RED) has a highly innovative approach to philanthropy.

Tactical Tip: When you're looking to fill an empty seat, the second you find yourself dismissing a person's credentials, ask yourself – what could also be true about this person? Meaning, what is a strength that compensates for their weakness? And is it possible that what I'm dismissing could actually make them an amazing hire?

Thank you again to Deb Dugan for being our guest. Thank you to Coleen Wade for your tweet about the Maureen Chiquet episode – so glad you enjoyed the interview, Coleen. If you like what you hear, will you like it on social media? Leave a review on iTunes – the link is in the show notes – or share it with someone you like. Thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, Manager/Editor Macy Robison, Content Contributor Heather Hunt and Art Director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson and this is Disrupt Yourself.