

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 41: Vala Afshar

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 today is Vala Afshar, Chief Digital Evangelist at Salesforce.com.

Vala: Hi my name is Vala Afshar and I am the Chief Digital evangelist at [Salesforce](#).

Whitney: My very first question for you Vala - welcome, I guess, first of all - but what exactly does a chief evangelist do?

Vala: That's a terrific question. It's the same question my nine-year-old daughter asked when I announced to the family that I'm joining Salesforce as their chief digital evangelist. We looked, you know, in the dictionary and the closest definition of evangelist that we found - that both my daughter and I could relate to - was a passionate advocate. I was asked to run a customer service and support function at a prior company in 2003. And when I accepted the challenge I realized that we didn't have a tool that would help us better understand all of our customer and partner touch points into our business. Across sales, marketing, service and support, communities, so on and so forth. So I started researching and found that there is an entire industry and solution category called Customer Relationship Management. And at that time Salesforce was only 4 years old. So, a hungry, up-and-coming company from the West coast. Of course I'm in the Boston area. Never heard of the company, but there was a buzz around their brand even, you know, 2003. So, 13, 14 years ago. And once we started engaging with the Salesforce team we realized that we had a very common vision and north star. And as I learned more about Salesforce as we implemented more of the solutions and it helped grow our company and build customer advocacy and loyalty, I started to develop a deep affection for the company. I've shifted my everyday work from a practitioner from someone implementing technology inside of business and helping grow the business and get closer to customers, to more of a storyteller. Along the 13 year journey I made a ton of mistakes - original mistakes, I hope, you know, learn from them. I didn't try to repeat the same ones over and over. But, you know, partnering with an innovative company gave me the courage to experiment more and I worked in an environment that we had safe space to experiment which was fantastic.

Whitney: So at this company, you feel like you, so there's a safe space at

Vala: Oh at Salesforce? Oh absolutely, absolutely. The first time I read [Marc's book](#) the chapter that stood out most for me was his advice in terms of adopting a beginner's

mindset. Be curious. Be hungry. Be open to new ideas. Challenge assumptions starting with your own. Forbes recently named us the most innovative company of the past decade. This year we were number one on the list. Last year we were number two behind Tesla.

Whitney: So what would you point to to say - this is something innovative that Salesforce has done.

Vala: In 1998 - I think was March 8th or March 10th, 1998 - when Marc Benioff and Parker Harris decided that they wanted an Amazon-like CRM experience. They didn't want heavy on premise enterprise applications. Where you need to stand up servers and clients and have an army of I.T. staff to help you manage your business in the construct of CRM. So this movement to the cloud - and now this is you know 18, 19 years ago

Whitney: Well, no it's almost 20 now.

Vala: Yes, it's 20 now! Exactly. So 20 years ago, the conversation of moving your most sensitive data, your customer data, your partner data outside the walls of your business. Those were spirited conversations. In fact it took many, many years for large organizations to recognize that there is scale and security and agility that comes with cloud computing. So the power of cloud was super innovative. And now it's a multi-hundred billion dollar industry and companies are very quickly migrating to cloud because speed is the new currency in a digital economy and cloud gives you speed. The second was the pay as you go model. Salesforce was born based on a subscription based service. You decide the number of users you have and you right size the business to the application. And so it was a license subscription model. Today we're in a subscription economy, but 20 years ago subscription model innovation was business model innovation. Out of day one Parker and Mark decided that they were going to contribute 1 percent of the product, 1 percent of their profit, and 1 percent of their employee time to charities. And of course at that time they didn't have profit. There weren't a lot of employees. But that bold one-one-one model has now been adopted by over a thousand companies. Many Silicon Valley companies have adopted this one-one-one model so this was philanthropic innovation.

Whitney: Who did Salesforce disrupt, or who are they disrupting?

Vala: You know Salesforce disrupted some of the companies that are still you know they're still in the market but large companies like Siebel at the time. You know the Oracle, SAP some of the large Fortune 100 companies.

Whitney: They had to move over and make room for Salesforce

Vala: So we pioneered CRM in the cloud. Today all of the companies I just mentioned including Microsoft and others have CRM solutions in the cloud, but we are the fastest growing in this space and we have the largest market share.

Whitney: So who are the people that could disrupt Salesforce?

Vala: Every company. No company is immune to disruption.

Whitney: So let's go back to the question of being the chief digital evangelist. I think one of the things that people really struggle to do in their jobs is to be able to have a scorecard and say to their boss, "Look at what I did! I added value this past year or so. What metrics do you use? What metrics does your boss use to measure if you're doing a good job?"

Vala: Sure. It's just a great question because the fourth innovation that, that most people don't know about and I probably think it's the most important innovation within Salesforce is a process called V-2 MOM. It's Vision Values Methods Obstacles and Measures. Every single employee - 31,000 employees in Salesforce from an intern to Mark have a V-2 MOM. And when Mark and Parker create their V-2 MOM it cascades down to everyone in the company. So there's a general understanding of the framework around the company vision and strategy.

Whitney: So, repeat it again - vision?

Vala: Vision, Values, Methods - how you're going to achieve your goals. Obstacles - you want to know in advance what you think will prevent you from success so we can help you. And then measures.

Now to be honest with you, I believe it was the first evangelist hired at Salesforce so it was new territory, in fact, that wasn't an open open position that I applied.

Whitney: It was not an open position or you created it?

Vala: I expressed interest and they created it.

Whitney: OK. Market risk!

Vala: Market risk, but you know, this is the beginner's mind set. I find that companies that are progressive and they value talent, they're not confined to, "Well, we need to have a job description and open headcount. So thank you, talented individual looking to join our family, but you know, we need to wait until there's an opening." That's not how it works, I suspect, with companies that are growing and are able to attract and keep individuals that are, that have demonstrated you know ability to help companies and help and help customers. So I actually applied - my conversations with Salesforce started on a direct message Twitter conversation.

It started with my tweet that "Look I've been a customer for a long time and I would love an opportunity to learn if there's an opening in the future." Again, it wasn't searching the web site employment page looking for you know a match. To be honest with you, I didn't even know, I wasn't sure where I wanted to go. I started in engineering and then I ran service and support. And the last four years before joining Salesforce I was a chief marketing officer.

Whitney: So you've been a customer now for, you know, over 10 years. Right? So they know you, or they know of you. You know, you've been vetted in that respect. So you just say, "Hey, let's talk."

Vala: Right. Right.

Whitney: And then what happens?

Vala: So that's the unique position. And I think it's uncommon where you know, they receive interest from a candidate that has been a customer and more than just a customer. You know I presented at many industry analyst conferences representing a trailblazer Salesforce customer. I spoke at Dreamforce - the annual conference in San Francisco three, four times, umm...

Whitney: As one of their model customers.

Vala: As one of their leading innovators. I had advocated starting in 2013, that the C.V - the traditional resume - is dying. That and the reason I advocated that is because I stopped looking at paper resumes and I spent more time researching the digital footprint of a candidate and more importantly the digital exhaust of a candidate. Those unintended consequence of things, bread crumbs we leave behind, that show us whether it's going to be a cultural fit for you to come and join our family. So when it came time to engaging with Salesforce, I remember the executive recruiter asking for my resume and I didn't have one. I didn't hesitate when asked, I said I don't have a resume. And I don't know if she could tell based on how quickly I responded that I really had no interest in creating one.

Whitney: I don't have a resume and I'm not going make one.

Vala: And I didn't express verbally that I'm not going to create one...

Whitney: Right. It was implied

Vala: ...but it was implied and to my pleasant surprise - I mean instantly was, "That's OK. We don't need one." And that was again at a micro level, a sign that this is a company I want to be with because I do believe in five, 10 years you're not going to flip through pages and look at talent in terms of your recruitment process. And given this massive and accelerated use of advanced analytics - whether it's machine learning, deep learning, smart data, discovery, all these branches under the field of artificial intelligence - recruiters and CHRO's are always going to be so much smarter in terms of vetting candidates and ultimately, even though we do our best to represent our very best in that one or two page CV, we can tell much more about your competence, your confidence, your character, your common sense, all of those through again, you know how active we are in a digital setting.

Whitney: Ok, so no resume. Then what happens?

Vala: So no resume and then and then the other beautiful scenario for me was that I felt I had a choice of where I wanted to be within Salesforce. I felt, if I can share meaningful stories as an evangelist, and the company and I believe that thought leadership exists in the field, it's just numbers, honestly no matter how big you are there's always more smart people on the outside than inside your business so if you if you're carefully listening there's amazing opportunities for disruption that's being discussed and somehow if you can go from concept to commercialization by paying attention. And for me it was not just storytelling, it was listening to folks that sat where I sat for 10 years as a customer thinking about doing these wonderful things to disrupt their business, their industry, themselves. Bring that back to the folks that are responsible for building products so that we can create solutions that can help them accelerate their mission.

Whitney: You're an evangelist and you're also a finder, a collector, a learner, a listener out in public.

Vala: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Whitney: Because you just said you're out, you're a scout.

Vala: I am.

Whitney: You're a scout.

Vala: I am. I believe I am a connector. I think it's part of being you know being mindful, of being humble. And just being comfortable knowing you're not going to know everything.

Whitney: How did you all come up with the, "Let's have you be an evangelist."

Vala: I think the social presence, [the book](#), [the blogs](#) and the fact that I had a [weekly show](#). The weekly show allows me to listen to extraordinary people and simply summarize the takeaways and so they will link to my content development strategy. So the book, the blog, the show, and the social footprint - I think we all realized collectively as we were trying to identify where my passion lies and how I can best contribute to scale the voice of the company.

Whitney: It kind of became obvious.

Vala: Trust me - I love to find a way to garner interest for Salesforce in a faster, more direct selling mindset. But that's not what I have done over the last five years on social. It's just educate, educate, from trusted resources at a high volume cadence. You know you're going to hear from me repeatedly, daily - and I'm and I'm giving you proof points of you know - this is why Airbnb is valued two times Marriott, this is why Uber is worth more than 80 percent of the S&P 500, this Blockbuster could have bought Netflix for \$50 million in 2000 and now it's a 70 billion dollar company. CIOs are 10 years or shrinking, CMOs have the opportunity to be trailblazers. So I will go after personas, I will go after industries, and I will go after technologies and constantly remind business leaders that 52 percent of the Fortune 500 have disappeared since the year 2000. But those are the

types of content that I share and what happens is that we've been, I've been very fortunate two years with Salesforce. I've been able to bring interested prospects into the business because they feel that they trust me.

Whitney: Right. Well and they trust you because you're a practitioner and because you give them information on a daily basis and just for our listeners, [Vala is formidable on Twitter](#). As of last count he had 390 people he was following. So this ratio - get ready, he has two hundred and twenty one thousand people that follow him. So it's, he's really, really formidable there. And, and I meant to look it up but you are considered one of the voices that CIOs or Chief Information Officers listen to most. It's like top 10 or something?

Vala: Yeah. For the last two years I've been the number one for CIOs and number one for CMOs.

Whitney: OK. Chief Information Officers and Chief marketing officers. OK.

Vala: Yes, so that's pretty cool.

Whitney: I love it. All right so you electrical engineering in college. Talk to us - you sort of said this already, but just talk to us briefly about how you got from electrical engineering to where you are today. And some of the pivots, some of the steps back that you've taken.

Vala: Sure. So the reason for electrical engineering is, it's complex and simple. My family immigrated from Iran to the U.S. - 1980 - during a war. You know I'm 10 years old so I have no idea about, you know, how privileged we were. You know my father was in the oil business. He was a GM over 10,000 person plant, Petrochemical Oil. And so we had a good life. And then suddenly there's civil unrest. The Shah of Iran - monarchy, the king - leaves the country abruptly. Then there's a war with an adjacent country and so complete turmoil, and we fled the country and it took four years for my dad to join us. He was essentially hiding because, he was in danger - again being in the oil business at that time was not a good thing in Iran. So when he comes to the U.S. in 1984.

Whitney: Wait, wait, wait, wait. You fled the country? What did that look like?

Vala: That looked like my parents telling my sister and I that we're going to go on vacation. And again, we had a good life, so to sporadically pick up and go from Tehran, the capital of Iran, to Caspian Sea and vacation it would mean getting on a private plane and going. You know, we had a pretty, again, incredible life. So I don't know mid-week. My mom and dad said that we're going to we're going to go on vacation. So what was strange is that in the past when we would go on vacation we would actually host a gathering at our house and tell family and friends that were going to be gone because it wasn't a one or two day vacation, usually it was measured in weeks. Sometimes we'd be away for a month. So we get to the airport. My father doesn't get out of the car, so that was totally - that never happened. We never vacation without my dad. But you know my dad couldn't go to an airport and leave the country at that time. So right away, you know butterflies in your stomach. So we get to the airport and we're going very light. So

almost like duffel bag light for my sister and I, and one suitcase for my mom and it was a small suitcase, so I didn't think much of it because I felt like we're going to come back soon. I mean we were traveling fairly light. I didn't realize you couldn't leave Iran with cash or jewelry and they would actually screen folks leaving with a heavy number of suitcases. So when we left, when we're air bound, when we're in the air, my mother shares the story with my sister and I that we're not going come back. You know dad's going to join us later. But it may take some time. I remember being super angry.

Whitney: Why were you angry? You were leaving everything?

Vala: That it was unclear whether we were going to see my dad anytime soon and that I wasn't part of the decision making process, which is silly.

Whitney: At 10 years old. Ok.

Vala: But wasn't as silly as I was the man of the house now at 10. I'll get to your question. So. So from 10 to 14 I didn't see him. So my father comes to the U.S., two master's degrees, on his way of working on his doctorate, halfway through and managing an incredibly large organization and he can't find work.

Whitney: Once he gets here in the U.S.

Vala: Can't find work. Our last name is Afshartous - T-O-U-S. That's a long name. When we became U.S. citizens in 1990, he shorten it to Afshar. He went to school at Arlington High. He went to school at Northeastern. If you were an affluent Iranian family you would send your kids abroad, so he could speak the language. He spent seven years in Boston before going back and meeting my mom and marrying and settling there, but...

Whitney: So he could speak English, but he couldn't find a job?

Vala: Now again, you have the hostage crisis, you are burning flags on TV. Iran even today is not - you know, certainly tremendous negative sentiment towards the country. And so he couldn't find work. And he tried and tried and after several months, with a smile, swallow your pride, night shift, a night shift security guard in a security guard outfit with a hat, with a badge, but with a smile. So I'm 14-15, I'm old enough...

Whitney: Wait, so your father...this makes me cry. Your father had run organizations with ten thousand people.

Vala: Yes.

Whitney: And then he came here.

Vala: Yeah.

Whitney: And he was a security guard.

Vala: Security guard. Yep. It was...

Whitney: Oh. Your dad. What an amazing man.

Vala: My hero. My hero. At 60, while working two jobs he went back and at 66 he earned his Ph.D.. So never quit on your dreams But the amazing part of it is I don't remember resentment, anger, negative discussions. He was just a happy person. Now of course you reunite with your family after four years. I have three children - 14, 11 and 7. When I go on conferences or I'm away from work for four days, I feel like part of me is missing. I can't even imagine, even remotely imagine being away from my kids for four years. Nothing would, would keep me away from them that long. So you had to go to political asylum and it's a whole story of how courageously He joined us but he did. And so, I remember him showing me a Time magazine article that said the highest average salary in the U.S. right now are electrical engineers. And he said, "Son, learn to build things, because as life throws you changes, abrupt changes, you want to have a skill that would be needed and revered no matter where you are."

Whitney: Your dad suggested you do it.

Vala: My dad suggested to do it. And the fact that, at that point. So, I was naive at 10. I think I was certainly naive at 14, 15 not appreciating - I should have given him a hug every day for what he was doing, and I just, busyness of life and just being a kid, I didn't realize the sacrifices he was going through. As well as my mom. But at 17, 18 I realized I'm not going to ever put on a security guard suit and go and work from 12 to 8. That's just not going to be. So that Time magazine article was all I needed and my dad's recommendation and he didn't tell me with resentment. He just said it deep from inside him. It was, "Son, listen to me this is advice."

Whitney: This is important.

Vala: This is important. And I can count on one hand the number of times where we've had conversations where I know he really wants me to listen.

Whitney: I think it's interesting that on your Twitter feed and everybody should go follow him because it's incredibly uplifting - it's @valaafshar - V-A-L-A-A-F-S-H-A-R - the pinned tweet is the immigrants who have started businesses in this country. They are: Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Oracle and the list goes on.

Vala: And the list goes on.

Whitney: And hearing your story helps me understand why that tweet is so, so important and meaningful and why you have it pinned.

Vala: I'm disappointed when I hear the divisive dialogue around the importance of being a welcoming country. And the importance of equality. One of the reasons I joined Salesforce because I knew for sure this is a company that meant and had fierce

commitment towards equality. Whether it was gender, pay, race, background, whatever - holistic view of inviting talent to the company.

Whitney: Ok, so you're electrical engineering, so now talk to me about some of your twists and turns.

Vala: After six years of school I joined as a software developer and I was in the engineering track for, for the first 10 years of my career. A private equity firm comes and buys our company. Within weeks, entirely new management including a new CEO and his right hand person who was, you know the person ultimately, who ultimately became the next CEO of the company. He walked in and he realized that there was a there was a need to improve our culture. Technology was great for the most part, the talent was strong, but there's nothing more important than our customers as our north star. So they declared that there's going to be a major shift in our mindset, in how we recruit, in who stays. And if you are not passionate about servant leadership and the importance of, um, servicing customers, this is not a place for you. They were very clear about it.

So I remember, so I'm there 10 years - I probably been promoted 10 times. I started as an intern, at that time I was a vice president of engineering and so there was you know a project leader, a manager, a senior manager, I was associate director, director, associate VP, VP - so during a 10 year period. So continuous growth in terms of responsibilities. New boss comes in after a month or so, pulls me in his office and I'm expecting additional responsibilities. At the time I'm running engineering and I'm running services.

Whitney: And how many people do you have reporting for you?

Vala: 2-300. Evenly distributed within engineering and service. And his name is Chris Kroll and Chris tells me "Vala, I'm going to take engineering away from you. I want you focused on services only." That was like a punch in the face. I had never experienced that in my professional career. Someone reducing my responsibility.

Whitney: And not only reducing, but giving you customer service, not engineering.

Vala: Exactly. So, my pedigree - this is what I went to school, this is what you know. Exactly. That's, that's a very astute point because, because I felt it was the wrong half. And he explains to me that, "I see you in front of customers I see how you click, I see how you care and we can build products. But it's hard to find people that authentically inspire and motivate our customers." And I'm like, that's just this song and dance. I'm out of this company. He's just trying to buy time this problem. They're looking for my replacement. But then he said, "Your title will be changed to Chief Customer Officer." Well that that is counterintuitive

Whitney: That sounds good though!

Vala: Sounds good. Well so least I have a plus and minus list now.

Whitney: I'm a C-Suite Guy now!

Vala: I'm a C-Suite guy. And then he said Mike Fabiaschi, who is at the time CEO. He really wants you to do this. And again he's saying all of this but I'm not necessarily, you know, believing him until Mike did pull me into his office and he talked about the importance of total lifetime value of the customer and we need to grow and we can't compete against the HPs and Ciscos of the world on technology alone. It has to be a feeling that we are a company they can trust. It took me some time, but I realized the importance after a while. But getting closer to the customer was the best thing that happened to me in my career.

Whitney: So if he hadn't moved you, what would your career trajectory have looked like?

Vala: I'd like to think at some point I would have proactively pursued interests outside of engineering. But you spent 10, 15, 20 years within a function, it's hard for opportunities to come your way. So I'm glad that there was a major disruption in my career.

Whitney: Is there any moment that has been what felt like a like a big fail on your part and maybe even initially produced some shame, but as you look at that learning it's really made you who you are?

Vala: I had to work to pay for undergraduate and graduate school. So I spent ten years at Sears Roebuck, um, hardware department. I enjoyed the work, especially in grad school where there was such mental strain getting through the curriculum. I wish I didn't spend 10 years and not pursue internships in technology companies. So I worked 40 hours a week while I was a full time student.

Whitney: 40 hours a week?

Vala: 40 hours a week because both my parents worked two jobs. So, I couldn't afford school. So, I purposefully would recruit students once I realized that, you know, it was a it was a misstep on my part to work in a hardware department store for 10 years when I could have at least for half of that, work in technology companies.

Whitney: So I'm going to push back on you know a little bit. So, I hear what you're saying. I think it's important to get internships. At the same time, wouldn't you say that if you find a student who has good grades in college and has worked for 40 hours a week to put themselves through school...

Vala: Sure.

Whitney: That tells you that you've got some grit.

Vala: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Whitney: And so I wonder, have you hired some people who were a little bit unusual in that respect?

Vala: I have absolutely hired unusual suspects.

Whitney: Can you give us an example of an unusual suspect?

Vala: I've hired folks into technology positions that are English majors, history majors - because I realized during the interview process or searching their digital footprint, that they have critical thinking skills. They are creative. They are bold, but in a graceful way. I actually think liberal arts majors will have the biggest impact in the AI revolution because the importance of ethics and the biases that make their way into algorithms will require people that are not, that have a maybe a wider perspective that's sometimes lacking in the technology space. And I've always been a believer, because I have the - I'll say the PG version of this -the no jerk rule. It's import to hire for attitude and train for aptitude. I've had to I've had to fire incredibly talented engineers because they had a poisonous effect on the culture of a team. And I had to do it a number of occasions, unfortunately.

Whitney: And they were really talented?

Vala: They were really talented. I mean it's going to, it's going to the Cleveland Cavaliers and letting LeBron go. So the best talent on the team, but it was affecting the entire team.

Whitney: OK - that's amazing because usually people let those brilliant, toxic people stay. So how did you do it?

Vala: So I can't say it was an immediate process. In fact, when I look back I waited too long on on on on a couple of occasions. You know it started to affect my ability to lead the team. Once I realized I was compromising my own approach to building a strong team, that's when I knew it was the right time. And we were better for it after the fact. I don't like saying this - I was just about say no one is irreplaceable. But I don't like hearing it. I think it's demotivating and I think there are times where people's talents are so unique that it is very hard, and sometimes impossible to replace.

Whitney: But you're able to overcome it.

Vala: You're able to overcome it. Even if it means you going a little bit slower, over time what happens, if you can increase...

Whitney: Right, you step back and then your trajectory, the slope of your line is steeper.

Vala: Absolutely, because the eight or nine or 10 or whatever the number of team members that were affected, if somehow over time they're able to produce 5 percent more 10 percent more - that collective contribution will surpass that one star. And I think this is what shaped my approach in terms of recruiting. I couldn't get a sense of attitude on a CV - a list of accomplishments, grade, buzzwords, all the cool you know so maybe a job fit. But when I, when we would use, in fact Salesforce, what we call today Social Studios to create a digital snapshot of a candidate within seconds. So I can see all the all the breadcrumbs, so somebody would read a Whitney Johnson Harvard Business Review

article and then in a mean spirited way, in a combative way, share their point of view. That's not someone. That's not someone I'm going to bring...

Whitney: You pick that up?

Vala: Oh blog comments on blogs anything on anything, anything you have on, anything that's digital associated to you. Yes. Yes.

Whitney: Wow.

Vala: There are times I'm tempted when I see incredibly bad service to try to type the name of the company and organization and let them know,

Whitney: But you don't do it.

Vala: But I don't do it. The other part is that Salesforce is my only second job out of school. I stayed with my prior company for 19 and a half years. And I was completely not interested to talk to other companies, recruiters. I would constantly receive invitations, it was just a one time respond, move on because I felt like finding work is full time work and I should have been more open minded.

Whitney: But your lesson, I think what you're saying is that, it's always good to be willing to open up your network and see what else is out there.

Vala: Absolutely.

Whitney: So my last question for you Vala, is what will you do to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

Vala: It would in the next 12 months, I believe, strongly believe that it would have to be related to what I'm already doing because I love what I'm already doing.

Whitney: Right. So what's something you've been thinking about in the context of your current role that you've like – I should try that kind of little thing and you haven't tried it...

Vala: That's such a great question. I'd like to learn more about how we invest in up and coming young companies. Startups. Working for a private equity company prior to joining Salesforce, I would be invited to due diligence type activities and I felt like I could quickly assess capability. Talent, capability, potential, and I think a lot of times it was being able to identify the potential...

Whitney: The technology, right? Yeah.

Vala: The technology and even the team. I think a lot of times investment is team first and then technology. And Salesforce ventures, you know we invest more heavily than any company in any venture firm in the country - 200 plus companies in our portfolio. So that interests me. And so what I've been doing in the last year is I'm connecting startups

that I think are doing great work to our to our ventures team. And I enjoy doing that. I enjoy doing it because I think that companies that want to avoid disruption can't do it just organically. They have to have a hybrid model. So you could have a think tank or a second stream of innovation that's not tied to strong business metrics giving you freedom to experiment and innovate and fail fast and all the good things you hear.

Whitney: All the clichés

Vala: Yeah. All the clichés. Learn fast. Learn fast and make original mistakes. Another book would be terrific. A TED Talk someday when the story is compelling and polished - all of these things are on the radar.

Whitney: You haven't done a TED talk yet?

Vala: I haven't done a TED talk. [I spoke at BIF](#) which to me was...

Whitney: But you haven't done a TEDX Talk.

Vala: No no no no. So that's that's a bucket list item.

Whitney: What would you talk about?

Vala: Probably lessons learned as an immigrant.

Whitney: I dare you.

Vala: (laughing) Oh the gauntlet has been...how can I say no to a Whitney Johnson dare...dare dream do or dream dare do.

Whitney: Disrupt yourself, Vala! Well, this has been so fun. Thank you so much.

Vala: Thank you so much. My pleasure.

My first takeaway after speaking to Vala, was how he hires and fires people, and the importance of firing people that are poisonous. What is it about us that when we know we need to fire someone, or let them go, we wait WAY too long. Vala's experience is a reminder that when we know we need to let someone go, we need to battle our own sense of emotional entitlement -- of wanting to be liked -- and just do it.

I will say, I was very moved by the humility of Vala's father. He had two master's degrees, was working on a PhD and running a huge company -- and then when he comes to the United States, he works as a night shift - a night shift - security guard to support his family. And he didn't become embittered. At 60, he goes back to school to get his PhD and finishes it at 66.

Two tactical tips today. Number one: Is there someone in your life who has done something like this for you? Like Vala's father did for Vala and his mother and brothers and sisters? If there is, tell them thank you.

Second tip - whatever you are right now, whatever you're doing in this very moment, whatever you think it's too late to do, write that thing down now. In this moment and do something today.

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 Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Heather Hunt, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.