

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 78: Margaret Busse

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest today is Margaret Busse, community leader, mother of 5 children and Harvard MBA, who has a passion for public service and is [currently running for state senate in Massachusetts.](#)

Whitney: Margaret Busse, welcome to the podcast. We are delighted to have you.

Margaret: Thank you so much for having me, Whitney.

Whitney: So, what I'd like to do is, um, I, I found that our listeners really find it interesting to hear about, um, hear about our podcast guests, and what they were like as a child. And so, we would love to hear what you thought you wanted to be when you grew up.

Margaret: Yeah, it's a great question. Um, I wish I had something really exciting like, you know, a policeman, or a investigator, or something like that. But the first thing that I can really remember in terms of what I wanted to be was actually in advertising. So, I specifically remember standing in front of a mirror, and making up a commercial for deodorant. I don't know why it was deodorant, maybe I'd seen something on TV, (laughing) but that's what I remember.

But I also, you know, remember, and that was, I'm guessing that was maybe fourth or fifth grade. But I remember in about sixth grade, I, I would think a lot about sort of societies, and how they interacted. And I remember having this thought in maybe sixth grade, and I grew up, you know, at the height of the Cold War.

I remember being just sort of distressed over this constant sense of conflict between the United States and the USSR, and thinking, you know, maybe if we, if we ever had an enemy that was from another planet, of course, I'm sure I was watching Star Wars and this kind of stuff too, then maybe we would all be unified as a, as our own planet, to fight this other planet.

And I remember thinking about that and, and hoping, you know, somehow we could, you know, we all could be unified in some way.

Whitney: Interesting. So, you had this thought of if we could be united together against a common enemy, that could make a difference?

Margaret: Yeah, exactly. I was just trying to think of like, how could we ever come together? Like how could we bring our nations together. It felt intractable as a child, you know, and so that was my thought. And again, I'm sure that I'd been watching, you know, different science-fiction movies too about other planets. And so, um, that's probably why it stuck in my head that way.

Whitney: So you go to college, what do you study in college?

Margaret: So, I studied, um, public policy and economics, and I took my first economics course, I think my freshman year in, and economics as, as many people have told me, when they take that first class, they either hate it or love it. They either hate it, because they just, it does not make sense to them. It, it doesn't, it doesn't reflect how they think about the world. But other people love it, because it, you know, it's exactly how they think about the world.

For me, I loved it. I just loved learning about how markets worked, and how, you know, important efficiency was, and, and all that kind of stuff, I loved that. I also loved public policy. We actually used a lot of my economics courses in that, that I was really interested in, you know, how do you, how, how can public policy really help people? Or, or maybe have unintended consequences that are actually hurting people.

But how can policy be used as a lever for good. And I ended up actually getting very interested. I did a, um, I was a research assistant for one of my professors, who was developing a, a textbook on development economics, and, and different, um, methodologies for, uh, helping developing economies.

And, uh, in that, while I was doing that research, I came upon something called micro-credit, or micro-entrepreneurship, and I just became very, very fascinated with that methodology of how to help people in some of these emerging economies help themselves. And so, uh, so that's, that was the sort of thing. I ended up doing a, a master's thesis on, on micro-entrepreneurship in Africa, and yeah.

Whitney: So, so this idea of systems really started to sink in when you were in high school, and then just got reinforced when you were in college. And then you did graduate work around that. So, um, what I wanted bring up now is that you're now running for political office, and I remember reading an essay that you wrote in the book [Dare, Dream, Do](#), about your first brush with politics.

And I would love if you can share at least some portion of that story, because I think it's not only very charming, but I think indicative of where it, you know, uh, one question I often ask people is what did you want to do when you were a child, or what are some of the things that you, you, you played with. And, and so, I'd love if you could tell a little about the story about, about root beer.

Margaret: Sure, (laughs), so, so this was when I was I second grade, and there was a kid that was running for student body president of our elementary school, so he must have been, you know, big fifth or sixth grader. And I think he was actually, might have been friends with my brother. But he and a bunch of other people were running, and they all had to do some kind of skit type of thing to, um, you know, to convince the voters, as it were.

And I think as a second grader, I don't even know that I could even vote, I don't know that I was qualified to vote. But I remember hearing it, and this one guy, you know, he

was promising, uh, he specifically prom, promised to put root beer in the drinking fountains. And I just (laughing) remember thinking, well, that's not realistic, (laughs).

And I, and I went home and talked to my, my mom about it. And I said, "You know, how can that guy promise that? He can't really do that. That's not right." And so, we had a discussion about that, and how, you know, politicians often promise things that they can't do.

That guy actually did not win, so it was, it did, it did not turn out to be a winning proposition, even though I'm sure lots of people were excited about, uh, the fact that, uh, we had, that you know, having, having root beer in our, in our drinking fountains.

Whitney: (Laughs).

Margaret: But I later ran, uh, I later ran in high school. I think it was and I was running for senior class president. And I actually ran, sort of, you know, in, in, almost in reaction to that second grade experience. My maiden name is Woolley, and so I was, my slogan was, you know, vote a hundred percent wool, don't vote for polyester politicians, you know, with the idea that polyester is fake, you know, we want the real thing.

And so, it was kind of building on that, that theme that I had sort of picked up on when I was, you know, seven years old or whatever it was.

Whitney: That's a great story. You ran for office when you were high school. You're now running for political office. What are you running for, I, I suppose first of all, and then what's it's like to run for office. What are some things that are unexpected, expected, etc?

Margaret: So, I'm running for, uh, state senate in the state of Massachusetts, uh, specifically in the Middlesex Worcester district. It's been a great experience. I have to say overall, I, I approached it, uh, I think with more trepidation than maybe was called for. Uh, in part, I was just nervous that it would be, take a lot of time.

But it, and, and that certainly has been the case. But I think the other part was just this sense of unknown, which I think we all face when you're taking on something, something completely new, and different and you really don't know how it's going to play out at all. It's been a lot less scary than I thought it would be.

I am a person that loves being with people. I love meeting people. I, I'm naturally very extroverted. And so, going out and meeting people has been super fun. Just kind of stepping back though for a minute, you know, there's, there's some, there's a lot of things you have to do to kind of prep yourself for office.

And one of those things is, uh, learning what, you know, the issues are, and learning where you stand on different issues. And sometimes that can actually be challenging, right. Well, what do I really believe, and why? You know, what are my motivating philosophical underpinnings that is driving me to run for office?

And I think, you know, anyone that runs for office, has to really sort of come to grips with those things, really, before you, you enter in the process. You know, and certainly, you learn more about issues as you go through it, and that's fine, and I think that happens with everyone, and certain different issues come up as you, you know, as you are in the process.

But understanding what your fundamental moral philosophies are, political philosophies are, where you're really strong, and where you really are, um, sure of things, and maybe where some other things maybe you're not sure of, and you want to learn more, and all of that, I think is, is really important going into it, you know.

Whitney: That's super fascinating.

Margaret: The reason that I was motivated to run, was I just felt very discouraged about, you know, just being in divisive environment politically where we are, and I really felt like I had, I'd spent eight years in my town government. And I, I really was committed and passionate about finding ways to bring people together, and, and bringing unity, uh, to situations where there was not unity.

Whitney: So, you, uh, you were in the town government, it was in Acton Massachusetts, is that correct?

Margaret: Yep.

Whitney: Okay, so, you did, um, the Acton 2020 Plan, and from the news reports, they say it was well respected. It was a robust committee, because they looked for what they had in common, and, and people really took ownership of their roles. Um, so, that was really, it sounds like your first taste of being an adult and playing in the political, or one of your first tastes of playing in the political sphere.

Um, I guess one question I have for you is just the, the process generally, of when someone says, "I want to run for office." Like what are some of the, the technical logistical things you have to do. Um, you have to put in your name, how do you, you have to raise money. Like what are some of those aspects of it?

Margaret: Yeah, and that was, this was all a complete learning experience for me. I just didn't know really about any of these things.

So, the first thing I did, once I had decided, as I started to put together a very small team, just so we could think about sort of messaging. And, and, going through what I was going to stand for, and, and that sort of thing.

And [we built a website](#), and we did that. Then, knowing we would need to raise money, the second thing we did was we had to file with something in Massachusetts called the OCPF, which is essentially an elections commission for the state of Massachusetts. So, you have to get a number that essentially tells you that you can now raise money. And

in order to do that, you have to have designated a treasurer for your campaign. That's the only actually required position the campaign has to have, has to have a treasurer.

So, you know, one of my friends stepped up to be a treasurer, so that we can take in money. And it, you know, it's obviously a very important function, for someone to make sure that all the money going in and out is, is tracked. So that was, I guess, the second step. Then, of course, you have to raise money, so that's, you know, a, a big deal, and we've done that.

And then, there was a, there was a deadline in which in order to get on the ballot, we have to, you have to go out and collect a certain number of signatures. For so, for my office, we had to get 300 verified signatures, people living in the Middlesex and Worcester district. And so, that's kind of a process. 300 doesn't sound like it's that many, but what you have to do is you have to get a lot more than that, because sometimes signatures aren't valid for a number of reasons.

So, you plan on maybe getting 400 or 500. You have to go in to each town clerk. There are 14 different communities in my district. You have to go in to each of those communities where they have a town clerk, and they have to go through and verify that all your signatures are correct. Then you take those up to the office of elections in the state house.

And they say, "Okay, we now, you've, we've verified 300 signatures. You are now on the ballot." And that has to be done in a, in a certain timeframe. Uh, for us, it was basically the month of May, and then we're officially on the ballot. So, those are some of the technical things you have to do to make sure.

And you would be a, you would be surprised at how many people actually declare their candidacy, but they do not get the signatures, because it can be a challenge, or sometimes you miscalculate, or for whatever reason you don't get the signatures.

Besides the technical aspects, then of course, it's just trying to figure out how you meet people, and how you get to them, right. And so, it's going to different community events, it's going door knocking, and meeting people that way. It's doing, you know, holding meet and greets. It's all of that. So, it's, you know, how do I get to voters, and how do I get my message out to voters. And so, we're constantly doing lots of different things to try to do that.

And then, you know, how do we, we raise enough money to fund the campaign? So, it's, you know, it's both fundraising, and it's how do you get the message to voters.

Whitney: It's so interesting. So you've got the part where you had to figure out exactly what you think, and like you said, your, your moral, your, your political ideology, and then, what are the implications of all of that. And obviously, your training in public policy and economics and, and your professional life has helped you be able to do that aspect of it.

But then there's the whole aspect of the logistical complexity of it, of just technically being able to enter the race. And then there's the part of actually going out and getting people to know what you're doing, and how you talk about it. It sounds a lot like a startup to me?

Margaret: You know what Whitney, it really is like a startup. I've thought that same thought so many times! Building a campaign is very much about building a team. And, it's an interesting team because it's not just a team of paid employees. We have a couple of paid employees, but it's also a team of volunteers, which makes the dynamics even trickier, because you want to make sure that, well, we have to make sure that we are continually motivating the folks that are helping us.

I've been incredibly appreciative of all the people that have been willing to give of their time, and, um, just their effort to, to really make our campaign work. And so that's something I'm always thinking about, how to motivate our volunteers, how to make sure my staff is feeling like their time is, is being used well, and that they feel motivated as well.

And then just as, as, just like a startup, you know, you have to figure out, what are the right ways to communicate? What are the ways that we're going to work together well? What are our systems going to be? All of those things. It's very much like starting, you know, a, a small business and getting it off the ground.

Whitney: Wow. So, so, it's interesting, so you've hired people. Um, can you disclose like roughly how big your team is, and how many people volunteer and like how did you find volunteers? (Laughs) I mean, that's interesting too.

Margaret: Yeah, great questions. So, like I said, I have, I have two paid employees that are full-time, and then I have some folks that are doing by hour, they do some paid work, um, going around and canvassing. And then in terms of volunteers, you know, our volunteers come in, in every shape and size in the sense, in the, in the sense that they do lots of different things.

So, some people will host an event for us, some people will put stamps on mailers. Some people will, uh, go door to door, you know, doing the door knocking. Some people make phone calls, that sort of thing. So there's, so there's a variety of different things that volunteers do. I would say, if we add up all of those different volunteers that are doing those different things, you know, we'd probably have around 60 to 70 people.

Many of those people are people that are my personal friends, and really want to see me win. Some of those people are just real, are, are people that I've met along the campaign trail, and are really motivated that way. And, and that's really the combination, I guess, of the way that we recruit volunteers. And, and again, I've just been incredibly honored to, to see the people that are, again, giving their time and effort, on behalf of my campaign.

Whitney: It's fascinating to hear like the, the mechanics of, of launching a political campaign. So, one of the things I find really interesting about you is, uh, you, there was an interview that you did on, and by the way, I noticed that you were one of six people in Massachusetts politics to watch by WGBH, so congratulations. That's the NPR station there, so, good job.

So one of the things you, you, you talk about is all politics are local. And, uh, you mention that you've stayed home for a few years, following getting your MBA at Harvard, um, primarily because you had small children. Um, for a lot of people, that's going to look like a huge step back, as we think about this in disruption parlance.

But, can you talk about maybe how this step back to be at home with your children in many ways, or could, uh, or is, has potentially been a slingshot forward in terms of how you think about the political landscape? And, and more generally, running a political campaign.

Margaret: You know, after I had been home for a little while with very small children, I wanted to really be involved in my community. I knew I couldn't do a full-time job, while I was taking care of these very little people. But I wanted to be able to use my skills that I had gained in work experience and, and my MBA and all of that, in some productive way.

And I've always been interested in sort of, you know, how you build communities, and, uh, I really loved the town of Acton that I live in. So that's why I decided to get involved, and I spent eight years involved in my town government in various capacities. And through those learnings, it was really what propelled me forward to want to run for office.

Because I felt like I really enjoyed the process of how do you, you know, deliberate on issues, and make good decisions, solve problems, while making sure that you are always trying to bring people together around common ground? That's always been my first priority in the different functions that I've done in the town government of Acton.

Because of that, that's where I wanted to, that's what I want to bring to the state senate, and to the, overall political environment. How do you solve problems and bring people together around, uh, common goals.

Whitney: So you feel like being able to, it gave you the bandwidth to focus on doing some of the volunteer work, that you might not have felt like you could have, have done had you been, um, out working in a, in, in the paid workforce. I'm, I'm wondering though to, if there are some things that you've learned from being a mother and running a household, that have helped you as you're, um, launching your political campaign?

Margaret: First of all, I think it's, it goes back to this notion of how do you solve problems together effectively? And, you know, I've learned that probably the most effectively, you know, I, you know, even if I take in all my work experience, and all that really just in the home. You know, we have five children, and, you know, how do you solve problems together as a family, when things come, come up?

Well, we listen to each other. We learn from each other. We figure out what the right solutions will be based on what we've learned. And then we take action together. And so, that's what's I think the process that I go through in a political sense, um, that I've gone through in, in my roles in town government, that we go through in our family, as we try to figure out how to solve problems, without being divisive, right? Without creating all this contention within the family. And as you know, you know, contention in the family is going to happen frequently. You know, with the, the most intimate relationships, that happens a lot. So, we figure out how we solve problems without creating divisiveness, without creating contention.

And so, I think that, you know, the family has really been my learning lab, first and foremost, of how to go about solving problems. And obviously, it's different, you know, in the political realm. But a lot of the same skills and methodologies I think are very relev- relevant in the, in the political realm.

Whitney: That brings me to, uh, something I, I think a lot about, uh, which are constraints. And I'm wondering, as you're running this race, um, what are some constraints that you've found, um, some things that have been, um, and maybe what weaknesses about yourself have they revealed to you? Some things that you're like, oh, I wasn't expecting that. I need to learn about that, or I need to that differently.

Margaret: In many ways, I think most of us, as much as you, the word constraint can have this kind of negative connotation. I think constraints are what help us get things done. If you're in an environment where you have no constraints, then you have no ability to sort of figure out what are my priorities and sort of move forward on those.

So constraints of time, of money, or just any other kind of resources are what allow us to be disciplined in figuring out what our first priorities are. And that's certainly been the case for me, you know, in starting up this campaign, it was a very, um, time constrained type of environment. I have five children. I was working four days a week. So that was very, very busy and intense. So it made me totally focus on what are the first priorities of this campaign.

And then as I was able to dial back work some, and then even more, and was able to take a leave of absence, then I could dial up on some of the campaign things and reprioritize, re-strategize on where we were. So, constraint is what gives definition to our priorities, and I think they're incredibly important. You know, in terms of weaknesses, of course, I have many.

Um, one of the things that I've enjoyed in this process is, you know, when I first started I thought, but I don't know everything about state government. You know, I would know a lot about my town government 'cause I spent time there, but I don't know everything about state government. So, what I've had to do is spend time in terms of, you know, prioritization, to spend time getting smart on a lot of the different issues that, now are at the state level. And so, that's something that I've had to prioritize even amongst the sort of time constraint.

You know, other weaknesses, I have many of them. I think that sometimes, I, I want to, um, I know, I'm not always willing to kind of come out and be, kind of come out swinging, I guess, against my opponent, because that's just not my style.

You know, uh, that's something I have to sort of think about, and, and, uh, how to sort of frame my opponent in a way that I, I feel comfortable with. Um, but that is also getting the contrast that we need to be effective, to sort of show that, you know, I'm the candidate that you should vote for.

Whitney: I would love to hear, what, what's been one highlight, or one or two highlights of, of, of this in terms of your relationship with your children? Things that you've watched or observed about them, moments that you've been able to have together. What, does anything come to mind?

Margaret: You know what, so much does actually. It's been great, you know, for a couple of reasons. One is that because I'm in this race, you know, we've always talked about policy and politics in our house a lot, because this is obviously something that I care about, something that my husband cares about a lot. But in this race, we get to a lot more detail about policy and politics, and methodologies of how you, um, go about that.

So we talk a lot about that in our household, and the conversations have only gotten more and more, um, you know, have more and more depth on that. They come up more frequently. And I love it, because it's something that I've, you know, always been passionate about. You know, the other thing that's been great is my kids along with me on the campaign trail.

So they, you know, get to come out. They come door knocking with me, which is super fun. All of my, four of my five kids have all been out door knocking with me several times. The fifth one is five, so I don't take (laughs) her out. But they've all been really helpful, so they kind of get to see what the campaign is like, and, and kind of some of our strategies and what we do.

They've been in some videos that we do for our campaign. My little five year old has been the star of a few videos now that we've done, which are just so fun, and she's just so cute. And, you know, just as I was driving her to something this morning, she says, "Oh, there's a Margaret Busse sign." You know, so she's already aware. And so, they're all excited about it. They're all very engaged with it. Um, and that's been really gratifying to see that process.

I think many of them were a little more apprehensive when I first decided to run, just because they didn't know what that was going to look like for our family. And now that we've been doing it for eight months or 10 months, or whatever it is, you know, I think they, they feel more confident. They're excited. They know what the process is, and has been and will be, so to speak.

And, so I think it's, it's been a great experience actually overall for our family. And I, and I hope it's something that they'll never forget.

Whitney: Just a couple more questions as we wrap up. Um, you sang acapella in college. Did you have a favorite song, and do you still sing today?

Margaret: I do sing. I love to sing. I've done a lot of musical theater. I did sing acapella when I was in Harvard Business School, that was great. One of my favorite songs to sing is called "Orange Colored Sky." It was an Nat King Cole song before it was a Natalie Cole song, and it's just a great song. It's very upbeat, very jazzy. So, that's, that's one of favorites to perform.

Whitney: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, oh, I love Nat King Cole, Orange Colored Sky, cool. The last two questions is first day in office, what will you do? Will you write a bill? Throw a get to know your party, get to know you party. Like what would you do first day in office?

Margaret: You know, it's, it's one of these questions that you get a lot. You know, that, that political candidates get a lot. What's my first thing I'm going to do, and, and that's supposed to sort of symbolize what, what, the, the person they're going to be. But, you know, obviously, realistically, going in on the first day, partly, I'm going to be unpacking my boxes, right.

But really what I want to prioritize is building relationships with other legislators, building relationships with all the community leaders of the 14 different, uh, cities and towns that are in my senate district. And building a platform in which I can communicate well with my constituents, and they can communicate with me.

Those are the people that I answer to, my constituents, the community leaders, and then having the, the relationships with other legislators, is the way that we get things done. So that's what's going to be my first priority, is getting those, getting the, the, the relationships set.

Whitney: Hmm. I love that. That's just so important, and, and, and really powerful. The importance of really, you're not going to be able to get anything done if you don't have relationships with people to get something done. And so, you know, like you said, the bill has to come, (laughs), well after you've started to lay the foundation of relationships, and being able to work with people. And I love that.

Um, any last thing you'd like to share with us? Um in terms of what this experience has been like for you, and, and perhaps what you hope your, your children and your husband will have learned because you've run for political office?

Margaret: You know, I think the biggest thing is that you just have to step up and do something, and that's how I felt, this was, you know, my running for office was really my reaction to just wanting to, to make, you know, improve the political environment that we have in this country. And, you know, get something done that's useful and helpful for the constituents of the, the Middlesex and Worcester district.

I want my kids and my husband to just be able to sort of take that, wow, you know, she decided instead of just sort of the hand wringing, uh, you know, the armchair hand

wringing that we often do, she's going to take action. She took action. She, she tried to do something with what she felt was important. And that's what I hope that they take away from it.

For me, that's been, you know, it's, it's hard. It takes, it takes courage. It takes (laughs), um, a lot of time, and it takes passion, all of those things. And I've had to continue to, you know, look inward to make sure that I, I have all of those things to continue to carry me forward throughout this race.

Whitney: Hmm. Margaret Busse, thank you so much for being with us today. I know people are really going to be, find, find the process of what you're going through interesting and, and find you inspiring. So thank you again.

Margaret: Thank you so much, Whitney. It's been great to be on here.

I really admire Margaret for stepping into political arena. Instead of standing on the sidelines, worrying, even complaining about where things are headed, she's committed to helping the people in her community. It gives her kids something to look to as an example of what to do when we want change, and it gives other people - her family, her friends - a reason to get involved. Maybe in the past, they rarely voted, but because they know her, they are now experiencing the workings of government in a new way.

I loved that she talked about how being a mom has prepared her to step into this role. She had this rigorous, rich background of education and work, which she was using to teach her children, but felt the pull to help her community as well. And the skills she's learned as a mother - negotiating between opposing points of view, working together for a common goal - are all extremely applicable in a political setting.

It's interesting to think of a political campaign as a startup, but really, that's exactly what it is. A pop-up start-up. Politics may have seemed the furthest thing from business when she started out, but when we try something new we often find that there is crossover with other skills and experiences that we can apply to a new situation, to a new learning curve.

Practical tip: We need people in public service who are compassionate and smart and willing to work with opposing points of view. You may not be ready to run for office, but is there a local candidate you could volunteer for? At a minimum – V-O-T-E, VOTE!

Thank you again to Margaret Busse for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.