

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 97: DAN SHAPERO

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. My guest is Dan Shapero, a VP at LinkedIn responsible for LinkedIn's global sales organization. For those of our regular listeners that are thinking Dan's name sounds a bit familiar, that's because we featured him in our latest book, *Build An A-Team*.

WHITNEY Dan, it is a pleasure to have you. Welcome.

DAN Pleasure to be here.

WHITNEY Very first question for you: where did you grow up and what did you want to be when you grew up?

DAN I grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Go Eagles, and-

I think when I was growing up, there- there were different stages of it. I- I think there was a professional baseball player stage, which lots of kids go through, but I think the two big things that I, uh, I got really excited about growing up, one was being a teacher. Uh, I always thought that, um, teachers have such a big impact on people. From an early age, I really got excited about crystallizing ideas and helping people understand them, uh, and so that was a big area that I actually still am passionate about. I- I believe that perhaps my next career will be one where I can be a college professor.

And then the other one was an entrepreneur. I have a lot of entrepreneurial roots in my family on both sides, my mom's side and my dad's side and I always thought that maybe I'd start a company or be a business person.

WHITNEY So, tell us about some of the entrepreneurial things that your parents did.

DAN Yeah, well, my grandfather on my mom's side, he owned a clothing store in- in, uh, Philadelphia. He was the first business that sold suits to men and boys all over the Philadelphia area. And his big thing was being the place that, uh, a Jewish, uh, boy would get their first Bar Mitzvah suit and actually had this brilliant marketing thing where every month he'd take out a full spread in the local Jewish newspaper and he would take photographs of each person that got their Bar Mitzvah suit at his store, and he would basically cover the two pages of the newspaper in these little thumbnails of all the boys that had their first suit and it was a perfect place for, you know, their grandmother or grandfather to show off their new kid in their fine threads and it really became an iconic store for the Jewish community in- in, um, Philadelphia.

WHITNEY That is brilliant. That's brilliant. What was the name of the store, just so that we have that context?

DAN Yeah, it was called Fleet's. That was his last name. And- it- you know, the people, I meet people still to this day that remember- who are from Philadelphia and remember getting their Bar Mitzvah suit from Fleet's and it was just- it's such a thing. Almost like the original social-proof marketing where look, look at all these families that have entrusted, um, us in outfitting your child on this big day, you know? It was really cool.

On my dad's side, my grandfather and his brothers, um, they were Jewish immigrants. They lived in Maine and then in Boston and they were trying to figure out how to get going economically. It was a really tough time for them. Very poor. And they started a local pharmacy in their town and so there are all these great stories about all the things they had to go through to find the store and to convince people to sell them things that they would provide in their store, how they learned how to make drugs. So this was the time when, you know, pharmacists actually got out the materials and mixed them together and made pills on the spot for people.

So there's just this really rich, uh, history in my family of- of people starting things and trying to create value in their communities and- and all the things that go with it.

WHITNEY What a wonderful tradition.

So let's just touch lightly on the teacher piece of it. Were there teachers, professors in your family?

DAN Uh, I think that everyone in my family has a bit of a teaching style to them. I don't think I-

WHITNEY [laughs]

DAN None of them have made teaching uh, a career ambition, but- but there's a real premium placed on taking something complicated and making it simple.

WHITNEY Hmm.

DAN Um, and how hard that can be and how the people that understand things the best are often the people that make them the simplest. Uh, actually, I think, you know, Satya Nadella of Microsoft has this great framework he uses to talk about leadership and he says "Leaders bring clarity and energy." And I think this idea of the art form of bringing clarity to a topic that really requires deep understanding to- to create that clarity is something that I really buy into and- and I've always appreciated when people can do that with things that are complicated.

WHITNEY Where do you think that came from, Dan? This desire or this, this sense of the importance of being able to make complicated ideas simple?

DAN I- I think I experienced it, um, more as a- a thing that I found joyful than as something that was important. I, um, when I was in college, there were often topics that I found really intuitive and really natural, whether they were, you know, things like economics or math or computer science. And I used to meet with all my friends try to help them prepare for some of the tests they would take and I just got so much out of the idea of trying to boil it down to the essence of the topic and communicate it to my friends in a way that resonated with them. Sometimes, you know, each person has a different thing that they, that works for them.

So how do I get it down to, like, the simplest concept that- that we can build up from, um, is a real art form and something that I've always thought was both fun to figure out, it's a real challenge and also, something that is incredibly valuable, uh, for people. So, it's always been something that's been exciting for me.

WHITNEY Do you speak another language? A second language?

DAN Uh, unless programming languages count, then- then no. Just English.

WHITNEY [laughs] I think it counts.

It's interesting how you have this idea of you love to translate an idea and make it simple or speak it about it a way that makes sense to someone who may learn about idea differently than you do. Fascinating.

All right, so, what did you study in college?

DAN I studied, uh, I did a double degree in math. Uh, applied math, and in economics.

WHITNEY So once you got to college and you're studying applied math, economics, what did you think you were going to do? Because you weren't going to necessarily be a baseball player at this point.

DAN I spent the first summer working at the Brookings Institution, uh, which is a- a think-tank in D.C., and I thought that maybe I'd go into academia or, um, something economics related, but from the academics side. And I quickly realized from that summer, there was a great experience, I worked with amazing people, but it just wasn't the pace that I was looking for. I- I later discovered during college that the internet was just getting going. It was from 1997, '98 where there was all kinds of excitement about the potential of the- of the technology internet and I started a company with a friend of mine, uh, that was an internet business. And we started- we did it in addition to our studies. We had such a good time doing it, it was very hard, it was tiring, it was amazing, it was all these wonderful things.

And at the same time as that business was going on, I read a book called *Startup*, uh, which is an amazing book about entrepreneurship. It's a story of a company called the Go Corporation, which was an early, hand-held digital device company that was too far ahead of its time and this company raises a ton of money and they go bankrupt. They essentially run out of all the money and it's this massive implosion. You know, it's like when you read a story that's essentially a tragedy and the whole time you're reading it you wish you were in the story it's so exciting, I- I knew that, you know, building companies was going to be something that I was going to be passionate about. It was like if you ever in- like, if I'm like, I'd love to be part of the story and the story goes wrong and still wish you were a part of it, you know? [laughs] It's sort of one those.

WHITNEY That's so interesting. So you did start a company then, so tell us about the company you started.

DAN I started a company with a, uh, friend of mine at school called Collegiate Recruiting Technologies. Very, um, m- [laughs] very vague title, but we- we built an internet platform to help high school athletes get recruited by college coaches and it- it went really well. We had people from all over the country, really all over the world using it as soccer players and we realized that there were, there were real challenges to getting noticed as a high school athlete by someone that potentially has scholarship money and it's the kind of thing where the main sports like football and basketball have a ton of money, there's a ton of infrastructure for them to find the next- the next generation of athletes, but in some of the other sports like soccer, volleyball, field hockey, just really didn't exist and we thought maybe the internet could play a role.

We built it over a couple of years and then we sold it when we graduated to another company, um, which was really exciting.

WHITNEY It's interesting because right now, like, as we're having this conversation in the last two days, there's a person on my team, her son plays baseball in high school. He's really interested in getting recruited by a certain college where I have connections and so I reached out on his behalf to see if they'll take a look at him and it- so, and I'm thinking about your platform how that platform is made exactly for people like that who are trying to get seen by colleges but don't necessarily have someone to pick up the phone and make a call on their behalf. Very interesting.

So, you then go to work. You sell this company, you know, spike the ball, huge success. You've just graduated from college and then you go to work as a senior marketing manager at Paramark. I'm wondering what that experience was like because you'd been your own boss and now you're working as a manager and you've got people that you're working for. What was that experience like of going in-house? And you didn't stay there that long, so just talk us- to us a little bit about the experience overall and- and what lessons could be learned.

DAN Coming out of, uh, having my own company, and- and this happened during college. The big thought I had was - this amazing this is happening in Silicon Valley. I don't really understand it, but I got to get out there and I got to get involved and start to learn. And so the idea was now I'm going to go do it for real with people that have way more understanding of the start-up world than I do.

And so this is actually a place where the LinkedIn profile hides some history, uh, so [laughs] from the time I graduated to 18 months later, I went through three different companies that I got hired, uh, to join and then it didn't work out. The first one ran out of money, the second one went through a leadership shakeup and- and, um, I got laid off. The third one, uh, kind of went through the same process and so it was a really tough time of uh, having this high of selling my company and graduating and embarking on this new journey and then it's 2000, and I can't keep a job.

WHITNEY Wow.

DAN I actually found the experience to be amazing to because when you're doing your own thing, yes you have all the freedom in the world, but you don't really know what you're doing, or at least in my case I didn't know what I was doing. And you're looking for guidance. You're looking for people that have done it before and can show you the way and I've found that I learned a ton from going through uh, these experiences. Um, but [laughs] the time was so tough in the market and, uh, literally being worried about my apartment and can I afford my bills and can I get a job because jobs are turning over so quickly, and ultimately someone gave me the advice of it might be a good time to go back to school and get your business degree.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DAN My- my wife and I, my- my, uh, girlfriend at the time, um, we applied to business school and we wound up going together.

WHITNEY Oh! She went to business school with you?

DAN Yeah.

WHITNEY Huh. I want to come to that in just a second. I just want to call out, I think it's really interesting and important and useful. So, when, uh, people who are listening are going to be able to hear

how successful you've been, but early in your career you had one big win and then you had three year and a half, two years, where just like I don't know what I'm doing. Nothing seems to be working. The economy's crashing, these businesses are imploding. Um, and you figured it out, but you had to have this experience- or you didn't have to, but you had this experience early on. But I think it's really valuable and useful for people to understand. Do you talk about this much with people?

DAN I don't know that it's come up as recently as it used to when it was more recent?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DAN But it's not just me, I mean, a lot of my friends went through this. We- we came out to the Valley in search of the internet story or- or the amazing things that technology can- can bring to the table and we found a market that, you know [laughs] it's was a tough time. One of my friends, I think he went for a year and a half without really finding a job that- that he wanted to do and then, you know he's now uh, amazingly successful in his own right.

So there were a lot of people that went through tough, tough moments.

WHITNEY I think that's really encouraging, um, because I think a lot of people early out of school think I'm never going to figure it out and you do figure it out, but it- there can be a lot of messiness at the low end or the launch point end of the curve um - so thank you for sharing that.

And then, I just thought it was fun, you and your wife both went to business school together. What was one of the highlights of being able to go to school together?

DAN Oh, just being a- it's such a- such an interesting experience. It's such a focused experience where you have all these people that have done amazing things in their life come together and they go on this two year journey to learn things, to build relationships, it- it's really an amazing time and to be able to do that with her, um, and to share that together, the- the highs, the- the challenges was really a gift.

WHITNEY Yeah. Okay. So you go to school together. What was your emphasis in B school?

DAN I don't think I had an emphasis, but I was known as 'The Start-Up Guy'.

WHITNEY Ah.

DAN You know, I was the guy that had come out of a bunch of startups, my own went well if you didn't and- and I did a lot of things that were around growing companies.

WHITNEY Okay, so you graduated from B school, where do you go to work next?

DAN I went to Bain Consulting. At the time, I was very afraid that I had this terrible looking resume that was a bunch of companies no one had ever heard of. At least like if I had worked at Pets.com, which was the, you know,

WHITNEY [laughs]

DAN The example of a brand went wrong, I could've told a good story that people would have been able to know, but in my case no one had ever heard of any of these companies so it's almost like a hole in your resume. So I really- I wanted to work for some place where I could continue to establish myself a little bit more and Bain, uh, amongst the management consulting firms had

an, uh, a really great reputation for entrepreneurial thinking and in fact, I think that that's played out a lot of, um, really successful companies have come out of Bain founders all over the landscape.

And I- I planned to spend two years there, but they gave, uh, me and my wife an offer to do some international work, uh, so we spent a year in Australia and then six months in India before returning and so two years became four

WHITNEY Okay. All right. So four years at Bain, you polish up your resume with a name that people now know, so you've got a good business school, you've got a good consulting firm under your belt, and now you land at LinkedIn. How did LinkedIn come about because LinkedIn when you joined it in 2008 wasn't the LinkedIn that we know today. So talk to us about how- how that all unfolded.

DAN My decision to leave Bain was very proactive. I knew that it was time to get back to what I really loved to do, which is to grow things. And so I quit before I had the job lined up. I went on a trip for three weeks to kind of reset the clock. I went to China, which at the time was this foreign place to me that I'd never been and when I came back, I created a short list of criteria and it was really, really small. It was - company about the right size in growth, a product I love, and in the Bay Area. Those were my three criteria.

WHITNEY And what's about the right size?

DAN Bigger than a garage, but still didn't know what it was it going to be when it grew up.

WHITNEY Okay.

DAN That's a broad range. I was like you know, 20 to \$100 million of revenue felt about right, um, and what was interesting is at the time, in order to be a company that looked like that, you essentially had to be founded somewhere between 2002 and 2005 and because of the market, there were very few companies that had really gotten off the ground at that time and so I realized that my criteria was actually a pretty small list of- of companies.

But I had learned to use LinkedIn when I was at Bain as a research tool. How do you find experts to talk to about different industries? Um, I- I spent a lot of time at Bain being on a team that analyzed industries for private equity buyers. Is this a good industry to make an investment in? LinkedIn became this indispensable tool and so I thought wow, like, seems like there's a lot of potential in this business. I like the product. I should put it on the list so it was named as one of four or five companies that I- I really tried to get to know. And part- and funny enough - it was the only company that I couldn't network my way into. I got the job by applying to a job on the website.

WHITNEY Really?

DAN Yeah, and in fact, I didn't even apply to the job I got. I applied to a analyst job and I wrote in my cover letter "This is the wrong job, but can someone please call me?" [laughs]

WHITNEY [laughs]

DAN And lo and behold, the guy that called me, uh, his name was Mike Gamson and he turned out to be this transformational character in my life, who has until recently lead the LinkedIn sales organization.

WHITNEY Fascinating. Okay. So you wrote in your letter, I'm applying for- what job were you actually applying for?

DAN Research Analyst.

WHITNEY Okay. This is the wrong job, I'd actually like to do - did you know what you what you wanted to be doing?

DAN Uh, well the job was in a new area for the company and I said I actually really believe in the area that it looks like you're starting to grow, um, and I'd love to help you grow that area, but this is probably the wrong role.

WHITNEY Interesting. So, what was the role that you ended up with?

DAN It was- it was, um, a start-up business within LinkedIn and, that helped companies do research. I basically ran the operations for that team, which at that stage of the project is really just a jack of all trades. I did everything from doing planning for the team, I helped customers execute what they had bought in some cases helped customers run surveys so I would even pull this list of members, I would program the survey, whatever it took, you know? You're at a start-up but it was my- it was my first job.

WHITNEY So you run a start-up. You were running a store with inside of a- a growth-stage company, effectively.

DAN That's right, which was the best of all worlds to me at the time.

WHITNEY Right. So you do that for how many years and then what happens? Just let- let's start walking through what happens.

DAN Yeah, so about three months after, um, joining LinkedIn, my boss comes to me and says I am going to take a new role, uh, I am going to go start to help LinkedIn grow this recruiting business that looks like it might have some legs.

WHITNEY So this Mike Gamson at this point.

DAN This is Mike Gamson, yes.

WHITNEY Okay.

DAN So he basically got, uh, asked to do a bigger role and he asked me to step up and to do more of what he had done as the GM of this little start-up within LinkedIn and that- that sort of was his first role. And so, I started by just helping out and then more officially took on the GM capacity of that group for about a year. And then, realized very quickly that the recruiting business at LinkedIn had tremendous potential. It dwarfed the potential of this little unit that we were running on the side. And we'd built this amazing team and it became pretty clear that if we unleashed this team on the right problem of running the recruiting business, it would be massively beneficial to LinkedIn and so I- I recommended to Jeff Weiner our CEO and to Mike that we shut down the team about a year later and just to take all the talent we had and put it behind the best opportunities.

WHITNEY So you recommended that they shutter your operation. And redeploy you.

DAN Yeah. I believe my quote was, "If we do, uh, an amazing job then we will contribute three percent to LinkedIn's market cap." [laughs] and so- and which- which wound up being vastly overstated.

WHITNEY [laughs]

DAN But- but the time, who knew how great LinkedIn was going to get? But it became pretty clear that- that we didn't have the best opportunity we were swinging at.

WHITNEY How did that feel when you were saying let's do that? Were- was there any trepidation on your part?

DAN Oh, a ton. Uh, there's people lives involved and- and- and luckily we built this amazing team and we could harness a lot of the capabilities that they had into the next opportunity. Um, but you know, we'd actually done really well. We'd grown the business to about \$10 million, and at the time, that was actually a pretty big chunk for LinkedIn.

WHITNEY What was the revenue? Overall revenue for the business at that time? 100 million?

DAN We did- yeah, like 100, 150 million at the time?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DAN And so it was- it was a hard call, I probably made the call six months after I should have, but once we- once we made the call, everyone got it right away. We were doing so well in recruiting, we had such talent on the team, and those people really- like any growth business, talent is your bottleneck. You can only move as fast as the capacity of your team. We just brought this amazing group of people to the right challenge the company was really harnessing itself against.

WHITNEY All right, so from a procedural standpoint, Mike Gamson's been your boss. He's moved over recruiting and you have a relationship with him such that you can say I think we should move this team over to this problem, what say you? Is that effectively what happened?

DAN Yeah.

WHITNEY Okay. All right. So you move over to recruiting. Is that- is that sales? Just keep talk- walking us through the paces of what happened.

DAN So around the same time I started to help Mike Gamson recognize I had some experience on the strategy side at Bain and he started asking me to help him on questions around growing the recruiting business even while I was in the startup, I was starting to become aware of the challenges and opportunities. And, um, at some point in the process he said, listen. This looks like it's going to work. We're going to grow an enormous team around it. If you want to be part of that, then we should start getting you some sales role leadership experience.

And I thought it was the worst idea I'd ever heard. I went to him and I said, "You're trying to grow this great business and you know, the company's looking to you to show it a path to success. The last thing that you want is a newbie like me messing that up by taking over a team and not doing well." [laughs] So while I appreciated the vote of confidence, I thought that- I thought that the, um, it was the wrong decision for LinkedIn and he sort of set me straight. He was like I- I have an instinct here that this is going to be just fine, um, why don't we do this? And so he gave me a team of nine reps that ran the West Coast for the recruiting business and I ran that team for nine months, which was an amazing experience. First time I'd ever been involved

in a quota-carrying team. And at the end of that year, he then gave me all of North America, and then at the end of that year, he gave me the global team.

WHITNEY Okay. Whoa. Whoa. Okay, so- [laughs] so you thought- okay. There's a couple things here that are just like blowing my mind just a little bit. So, you yet again go to them and say first of all, you're like shut down this business and move us. Then they try to give you this really plum job. You're like no, I'm the wrong person for the job. Do you have a history of doing that? That's fascinating. No, this doesn't make sense, but then people s- say do it anyway?

DAN I don't.

WHITNEY [laughs]

DAN Uh, the context of the time was that it was a time when LinkedIn was debating whether having salespeople at all was a good idea.

WHITNEY Huh.

DAN And so I was really concerned that Mike needed to perform and show the company the value of the sales team and but putting me in a role, an unproven quantity in that role at the time was going to make what I saw as an existential decision harder. So I was really worried about, um, about, uh, the company making a bad choice.

WHITNEY So wait, did he ever tell you why he thought you would be good at sales?

DAN I- I don't know that we got into the detail other than him just, uh, saying that there's a lot of upside in this. [laughs]

WHITNEY And I think you can do it. All right. So how big was the business when you started and then how big was it when you make your next move?

DAN Uh, so when I first got involved in the recruiting business it was about \$40 million in revenue and, you know, taking on various capacities over time and running the sales team. And by the time I exited the sales team in 2014, it was a billion and a half dollars.

WHITNEY Hmm. A rocket ship.

DAN It was amazing. I mean, the numbers were hard to believe. Uh, when you're a consultant, you have this- this thing you do where you say, "In four years, we could build a billion dollar business and here are the three things we're going to do." And it never happens. Right?

WHITNEY [laughs]

DAN And in this case, we literally set the timeline and we set the priorities and the timeline was right, and the priorities were, you know 60% right, which is you know, I- I- I- I think of as an amazing achievement. We just had a great group of people and a great group of clients and it was really was, uh, in business where you just have something that's better than the old state of the art and the market needs it and so you become the steward of a movement in the industry and we became a steward of this movement towards proactive recruiting strategies which has become a standard at- at great companies.

WHITNEY It must have been thrilling. Absolutely thrilling.

Okay. So, it's now you said 2013, 2014. Is that right?

DAN That's right.

WHITNEY All right, you then had a conversation with Jeff Weiner, the CEO. Could you tell us a little bit about the conversation and what transpired?

DAN Sure. It was a- it was a- a normal meeting, you know? We would catch up maybe monthly and Jeff would take walking meetings. We were at Shoreline Amphitheater, we had these beautiful walks. And um, I think he asked me a very simple question like you know, "So where do you want to go from here?" Or "How's it going?" And- and I said I was really proud of the work that I'd done and you know, someday I'd love to lead a great tech company, you know. And like how much I thought that what I was doing was really helping me towards that. Um, and, he very matter of factly told me, I think you might be in the wrong job. And I was shocked. I mean, I had just put up an amazing year. Uh, our team was doing so well, we'd hired amazing people, and then here was Jeff telling me, you know, despite all of that success you're actually not on the path you thought you were.

And so I started off feeling kind of angry about it, to be honest. Uh, almost unappreciated. And I went off, and I was like- I was like well, tell me more and he was like well, "Great tech companies are built on either great technology or great product. And if you want to lead a great tech company someday, then you need to understand how great products or great technology are built." And as I thought about it and it took me probably two months to- to sort of process that conversation, I realized I agreed with him. That that was the kind of hard truth that I needed to hear and after thinking about it, I went back to him and I said all right. I should go to product, um, after being in sales.

WHITNEY [laughs] Did you ever think about leaving at this point?

DAN Uh, not really. I- it- it really was a moment of pausing and I think, uh, realizing that the path that I thought I was on maybe wasn't the path that I was on.

WHITNEY Hmm.

DAN So I thought all sorts of things, but most of it was in the context of, uh, LinkedIn. I had been so connected to the company's mission and purpose, economic opportunities, deeply meaningful to me, you know, if you think about my family's story, economic opportunity is a big part of how my family came together. You know, the entrepreneurial history we have.

And so uh, I- I- I really wanted it to work at LinkedIn and, but it was it this- this- this hard conversation that I wasn't quite ready for in the moment.

WHITNEY Hmm. So you deliberated for two months and you said you came back and said, okay, let's build product. Then what happened?

DAN Well, I- I think Jeff was shocked. He- he was like was like well, "Well, wait a second. You have a big job." [laughs]

WHITNEY [laughs]

DAN You know, um, I said, well, you know, "Listen, I agree with you, Jeff. I agree that great- great CEOs know how great products are built. Um and so I need to figure out a way to learn that."

And you know, there was some exploration of whether or not that could be done with my current job, but ultimately the right decision was - let's go build some products.

So I started conversations with the product leadership to try to figure out if there was a- an avenue to do that. I had amazing support from Mike Gamson, my current manager, to explore that option and orchestrate what was a- a- a move that really had never had happened before of a, you know, a head of sales to moving over to the product team. And, ultimately about nine months later, uh, I moved from running about a 1500 person organization in sales to being an individual contributor on the product team.

WHITNEY Wow. So let's- let's unpack that for just a moment. The CEO, Jeff Weiner was supportive, but was he reluctant initially?

DAN Well, he- he put it on me. He said, "If you're going to make this transition, then your responsibility is to make sure that you're leaving your team in a great place." And I thought that that was fair. And so part of the nine months of preparation was me getting the team to a point where I feel like I could- I could, um, move into a different role and felt strong about the trajectory that the team was on.

WHITNEY And what did Mike Gamson say? What was his- what was his reaction?

DAN Mike- Mike's always been incredibly supportive of people on his team finding their path. Um, uh, we- we sort of, we- we believe at LinkedIn of this concept of transformation and that your experience at LinkedIn should be a transformative one. Um, on the other hand, I think he thought I was a little crazy [laughs] as many people did. You know, at home, amongst my friends, you know- you're really going to do this? You've got this plum job, it's going so well, you're going to mix it all up and do something from the bottom up? And I think everyone ended that conversation with a question mark.

WHITNEY Yeah, so what did your wife say? That's a fascinating question. How did she respond?

DAN She was, uh- she was great, you know. She- we started with the logic of the- of the move. You know, why did I think this made sense and we talked through that a lot. We talked about what it meant for the family, um, and ultimately we talked about Plan B, you know if it didn't work out, which was probably where I spent the most time. Um, if it didn't work out, what- what would happen.

WHITNEY What was Plan B? Do you remember?

DAN Well, I- I actually think that having a good Plan B was the foundation of being able to make the move at all.

WHITNEY Huh.

DAN Because I could relax a little bit about it failing, or- or- my- you know, me failing. And, um, I could focus on- on the learning experience, which is ultimately what I was trying to solve for. And so Plan B was for me was to try to move back to the sales side. At that level there aren't as many deck chairs to go around sometimes and so I- I sort of assumed that hopefully I'd move back to the sales side of LinkedIn, but if I couldn't then I'd probably leave LinkedIn and I would, um, I would try to find another- another company.

WHITNEY All right. One more question on that before we start moving you forward again.

What was it like- so you moved to product. How many people did you have reporting to you and what- your new boss probably had been a peer and now, this person was your boss. What- what was that experience like?

DAN It was, uh, it was amazingly supportive, I would say. Uh. It- there was this wonderful energy of - this guy is going to try to do this, how can I help?

WHITNEY Hmm.

DAN Which I think is really special about LinkedIn. It's such a collaborative, team oriented culture, uh, but with the time I moved over, I didn't have anyone reporting to me. It was just me as an individual product manager. I had a team of, I think, four engineers that I worked with. So we worked on a small project. And, uh, the- the thing about my manager which I thought was really amazing was that, uh, on some topics, I knew nothing. I had like a- like a zero basis of understanding actually what the job was.

I was- I remember being so happy when I learned that there were designers on the product team because I really was afraid of having to draw everything. Like I thought that maybe product managers [laughs] had you know, like, actually drew how the website looks and made this, you know, amazing design team that does that. [laughs] I remember asking just the simplest of questions. And so he was helpful in that, in assigning me a, uh, a great, uh peer in Alexis Baird who kind of helped me answer all the dumb questions and made sure I knew what do to.

And then on other topics, I had tremendous context. I had been at the company for a long time and I could bring a real strategic lens to things that hadn't, uh, been so obvious to- to the team. And so he did this really nice mix of being there when I needed him at the ground level, but also leveraging the things that I could bring to the table when we got into other topics.

WHITNEY You've had some great bosses, Dan.

DAN I know.

WHITNEY Um, so- all right. So, that's 2014ish. Um, what happened after that? What- what- what- after you did product for a couple of years, what happened?

DAN Well, over the course of the product tenure I went from running a really tiny team and getting my feet wet to being given more and more responsibilities. So about six months after I- I came into the product team, I started to run the job seeking experience at LinkedIn, which is an area that, uh, a lot of people think of LinkedIn as being core to, and we really hadn't invested in it as much as- as we probably should have and so I built out this new team called the careers team, focused on improving the job seeking experience, then about eighteen months after that, I took over the product team for our recruiting products which is the biggest business at LinkedIn, then ultimately I also added the learning product set to that, and all of our content efforts.

Um, and so up until recently, that's been my job is from the job-seeking, recruiting and learning products, uh for the company.

WHITNEY And did you have sales reporting in to you in that- in that prior role or was- it was just product?

DAN I, um, the leadership had- had asked me to take because of my sales and product experience had asked me to take a more centralized role in coordinating a cross-function so my primary experience and responsibility was running the product team, but I was also responsible for making sure that the whole business came together.

WHITNEY Got it. Okay. So, just recently you took on a new role. Tell us about that new role and what happened to the amazing boss that you've had, Mike Gamson-

DAN [laughs]

WHITNEY Who's really, like you said, been a transformative role in- in your- in your life and your career. What's- what's happened recently?

DAN Absolutely. So Mike, after I believe about 11 years at the company, he's such an iconic leader and a real part of why LinkedIn's been so successful. Um, he's decided to- to leave LinkedIn, take some time off with his family, um, and chart whatever new course he sets for himself. And so he's leaving the company and I'll be, uh, taking his old role, running the sales organization for LinkedIn across all lines of business. So moving back from product to the sales side after four years and starting a whole new tour of duty as Reid likes to say.

WHITNEY Hmm. So we- we've talked a few minutes about some- some really terrific, important bosses. So Mike Gamson, Jeff Weiner, um, your other boss in product who, I think if I recall correctly, his name was Kevin Simon, so shout out to three really important bosses. As you think about your role now, um, in product and sales, are- are there any people on your team that are sort of the yin to your yang that without them it would tough to be as productive as you are?

DAN Absolutely. I- I think that the number one- Jeff and I have talked about this. The number one skill of a leader in many regards is self-awareness and the- the more senior you get the easier it is to build your own narrative of how you're showing up as a leader and you know, but also at the same time, leaders can't be superhuman. They can't be great at everything and so there are a bunch of areas where, um, I deliberately surround myself by people that are great at the things that I am not great at. And those people, in some regard are like the some of the most valuable people on the team because we really come together and do the best collectively, um even if individually we- we quite- we do our jobs differently.

WHITNEY So is there one area that you are willing to share with everyone in the world to hear about that you're like, yeah, I'm not so strong in this area? Because it sounds like you're a pretty strong player in a lot of different areas. Is there one area that you find, yeah, I really do need one or two people here because- because they're just so much better at it than I am?

DAN A- absolutely. Um, I would say uh, sort of the fundamentals of organizational skills, like how do you turn, um- you know, for me, the idea of ideas and coming up with a nugget of insight that unlocks value, that feels very comfortable. Um, at this scale, my team is over 5000. At this scale, turning that into action and having follow through, and having accountability all up and down the chain is an enormous body of work and there's a real art form to it. And it's something where I lean on the people around me a lot to help me understand what needs to go right and how do we make sure it is going right at the detail level. Um, because I think that- that follow through is, you know, central to making progress.

WHITNEY Yeah. Fantastic. Okay. I'm going to read you two quotes that you've shared as we start to wrap up. And then ask you, you know, if you want to- to elaborate at all. One is: "I have a philosophy that I share with people that I work with of being impatient for learning but patient for a new title." And the second one is: "I want to be learning as fast as possible because I firmly believe that the people who learn the fastest over the course of their careers get the best opportunities and the most interesting experiences."

So elaborate perhaps and then a piece of advice that you have for people who want to learn faster.

DAN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

I tend to take a long view of my career. I tend to, um, I'm a big lover of biographies, you know, for- for- lots of biographies and business biographies and one of the things that you start to thread across biographies is that the people that- that do amazing things in their life, um, they've been working towards those moments for a very long time. They've been preparing themselves, and in many cases, preparing themselves in ways that they didn't know how it was going to play out. It's not like they said, oh, someday I want to do this, and so I'm going to plan, it's just that all of those pieces of experience added up to who they needed to be at that great moment where they showed up.

And then the big thread tends to be people that focus on learning as their number one priority and people that, um, they put themselves in uncomfortable situations. And so, I often meet people that focused on performing in their job, uh, as their number one priority, in an effort to get ahead faster and I think that in some cases, that's counterproductive to learning. You can't perform at the highest level, if it's new to you. You can't learn fast if you want to increase the certainty of a promotion, because oftentimes, um, it means you're in a job that you're not great at yet.

And so I've really benefited from this long-term view and this focus on learning, um, and I think that other people that do and take the long-term view have amazing advantage in their careers over the long-term.

WHITNEY All right. You just said biographies. You gotta tell us one or two biographies because I- I can just hear our listeners saying "Tell us what you're reading or what you've read that influenced you." Or one or two just come to mind immediately.

DAN Oh. Um, so, Richard Branson's biography, um, uh- I for- for- what the first book was called because I've read several of them. Um, uh- *Losing My Virginity*, I think it was called?

WHITNEY Okay. Great.

DAN Uh, is- is just a great book about the realities of being a start-up CEO. You know, it's not the glamorous things, it's the fact that we hear that in his first store, he stood on the street corner for afternoons counting people walking by because he wanted to know which end of the street to put his store at. Like- like I just love hearing the- uh, the real life examples of how people actually got to where they are and not the ones that are history after the fact. So that's a good one.

I love, you know, learning about Abraham Lincoln. Su- super fascinated about, uh, him as someone that was able to pull people together to solve global and amazingly challenging problems. Doris Kearns Goodwin has a great one, *Team of Rivals*. But- but I- I just think that there's all these stories to learn from and they're fascinating.

The one thing that I will say, uh- uh, those two quotes you shared, uh, that I've said in the past, I've got to find a way to modify the second because I had a conversation on Friday with an African American member of our team and I had this statement of you know, the people that learn the fastest, uh, tend to get the best jobs. And I'm not sure that's true for everyone.

WHITNEY Hmm.

DAN Um, I do think that learning the fastest sets you up for the greatest chances of- of landing that job that you love or creating that experience that you love, but- but it is not a level playing field

in all places and I- I- I- I think that that point really hit home for me when I was talking with him and, um, you know, I think it's a journey for companies and people to go through, but- but, um, it is- it is not a level playing field. I think learning is maybe the thing that we can control the most in that journey.

WHITNEY That's an important insight and I think for you at LinkedIn, you've got a real opportunity to help level that playing field, so it's an exciting opportunity for- for you and that- the products that you put out into the marketplace. Any last thoughts before we wrap up?

DAN Really, it was wonderful to spend the time and, um, uh, I- I, uh- I do think that switching up your career and disrupting yourself as you say is- is such a competitive advantage in your career. Like, the fact that you can come to the table with a- a plethora of perspectives, um, it's- it's a unique skill and it's a unique experience that not enough people have and so I would encourage people to explore it more.

WHITNEY Dan, thank you so much. It's been an absolutely pleasure.

DAN Thank you so much, Whitney.

There is so much here, it's really hard to know even where to start.

So, back to the beginning for a moment. Isn't it so interesting how the seeds of who we are today can be seen in our childhood experiences? That drive that Dan has to make things happen and to build things - it comes from his family. From the rich history of people starting things and trying to add value to their communities. Like Bob Proctor says, so much of who we are is in our DNA. It's not just our physical traits, but who we are.

Throughout Dan's career, he's really seemed to know who he was, and who he is. How he could help and what he wanted to do. That, combined with willingness to listen to others around him - his humility and willingness to be coached is just a powerful combination.

As I said in the intro, Dan is featured in *Build an A Team*. Textbook disruptor. You can do it in organizations. The idea of - he's talking to the CEO expecting he's going to get a pat on the back, and instead realizes he's not on the right track. He has the self-awareness, the confidence (with some time to consider and create that plan B) to take that step back to grow, to leap forward, and now has gone back into the sales organization even more prepared to lead.

While stories like these are so instructive in so many ways, I also know that hearing Dan's story might seem a bit overwhelming. Whether you're looking to disrupt as an individual or you're leading a team. But the thing about disruption is, it's a framework. Some people leap naturally. Some more deliberately. The good news about frameworks? If you're not born with this level of self-awareness, you can still apply the steps and still make huge improvements in a particular area.

Practical tip:

Think about something you're trying to get done right now. How might a step back turn into a slingshot for you? Whether big or small. It's a counterintuitive part of this framework, but as we've seen illustrated with Dan's story, it can reap huge benefits.

If you'd like to hear more about Dan's story, you'll want to check out my book *Build an A Team* with Harvard Business Press. You can download the first chapter at for free at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Dan Shapero for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Ruddy, 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.