

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPIISODE 99: ILANA GOLAN

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. My name is Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. My guest is Ilana Golan She's the CEO of Golan Ventures, working with Israeli companies to accelerate success in North America. She's also a serial entrepreneur and former F-16 flight instructor in the Israeli Army.

Whitney: Welcome to the show, Ilana.

Ilana: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here, Whitney.

Whitney: I want to start by asking you about where you grew up and, uh, what you wanted to be when you grew up.

Ilana: Oh, so I grew up in Israel, um, in a city called Haifa. Um, I always wanted to be a doctor. Obviously, did not pan out. (Laughs). And like a lot of, uh, kid's dreams, but yes. Um-

Whitney: So what's Haifa like? Tell a little bit about, is it a large city? Is it a small city? I mean, some people are going to know, but not everybody does, so just a paint the picture ...

Ilana: Right.

Whitney: ... for us.

Ilana: Uh, the third largest city in Israel, uh, but honestly, it's about probably 300, uh, thousand people, so it's, you know, relatively small in ... in U.S. proportion. Um, it's been a very independent childhood. Uh, we grew up on the streets, uh, playing ballgames and coming back at night to eat dinner, basically. Nobody knew where we, you know, we're roaming around. Uh, it was a very good childhood is ... is that sense, in that sense. I think I learned a lot about independence from that, actually.

Whitney: What was your favorite game to play on it ... on the street as a child?

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: Were you playing soccer, (laughs)? Were you playing dodge ball? What were you playing?

Ilana: Well, it was probably various of soccer ball ... I mean, soccer, but we didn't have the spaces that you need for soccer. We really had small areas, so, you know, you would throw the

ball on the sidewalk and hope that you can catch it later. It was really weird random games that don't even have names. Um, but, you know, we had a small area, and we made the best out of it. Um-

Whitney: So you were just making stuff up? You got creative, you got innovative, even as an 8, and 9, and 10 year old?

Ilana: We did. Yes. Yes. Even as a 4 year old, I packed, uh, a lot of the stuff from my house, um, just like pens, and random pets, and I created like a little box of things outside my door, uh, uh, outside the door on the sidewalk and sold it to people. Uh, and eventually, I realized that I sold it for very cheap. So I was definitely not a good salesperson at a 4 year old one, (laughs), but I was definitely innovative. (Laughs).

Whitney: You were a salesperson, so you had things that you wanted to sell. I love that.

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: Um, okay. So you wanted to be a doctor, um, and, but you didn't end up becoming a doctor. So when you were in high school was it ... was the plan still to become a doctor or had you started to shift more toward what it was you actually going to study in college?

Ilana: Um, no. So, first of all, I'll say one thing about that I kind of reflect back on, um, maybe around 11 or 12 year old. I remember that, um, girls were supposed to go, uh, to a sewing class and boys were supposed to do work with wood. Um, and that already sounded weird to me because I would love to do work with wood. Um, so I went to the teacher, and she said, "No," you know, "Girls go here. You ... You know, the boys go there." And I don't know where I got this, but I actually went to the principal.

Now, I was lucky because the principal was a good person that was listening. You know, sometimes when you're very young, rejection is very hard to, um ... to recuperate, but actually, I went to the principal, and he actually listened very carefully, and he said, "You know what? You're right." And he let me, and a few of the other girls go to this ... to the, um, wood, uh, area and, you know, this was probably, now in retrospect, I say, you know, it's probably the first time that I actually fought for something I really wanted.

Now, back to your question, so yes, I wanted to be a doctor. I don't know if I really wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to help people, um, but I don't know if I also said that I like being a doctor because it just got everybody to be so emotional and getting really positive feedback. (Laughs). Um, (laughs)-

Whitney: (Laughs). Uh-huh (affirmative). Yeah.

Ilana: So I don't really know what it was, but, um, I actually fell in love with tech, um, in the military. So in the military, was the first time that I didn't really know what computers are. You know, all we did was play Pac Man and a bunch of other things. I did like computers and I already wrote like little snip it's of code to create. I liked it, but nobody really did much with computers at that time. Like, it wasn't like a big thing, at least not that I knew of and, um, but then in the military, we used computers to teach pilots to defend my country and come home safe and that was mind boggling. So that was the first time that I realized what technology can do, um, and I knew that I'm shifting towards engineering.

Whitney: Interesting. Okay, so you graduate from high school when you're 17, 18. So talk us through, very briefly, at what age do you go into the military in Israel?

Ilana: Most of us go right after. Some people will study before and then the military will be more, um, according to what they studied, but most of us will go, you know, right after, you know, about a year or two prior, so you do a lot of tests, and they basically built like a profile on you, and then, you know, um, in a certain date, you actually go. Uh, you and ... and, um, and then you're adjusted to where you're supposed to go moving forward. So in my case-

Whitney: You know that's-

Ilana: ... yeah, it was ...

Whitney: Yeah.

Ilana: ... Air Force.

Whitney: So ... so ... ho ... so just a ... I want you to keep going a second, but I was to pause because I think it's really interesting. So right out of high school, or during high school, they do this whole battery of tests on you, if I'm understanding correctly. To get a sense of what your aptitudes are, and then, based on your aptitudes, once you join the military at, I guess, 18 years old, they say, "Okay, Ilana, we're gonna have you go work here based on the aptitudes that we saw that you have." And so then you played that out for a couple years.

Ilana: Right.

Whitney: Is that what I'm hearing you say?

Ilana: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, and ... and, you know, if you don't come from a military background or a military family, which is me, like I ... I don't have a lot of, you know ... of military experience in my family. I mean, they went to the military just like everybody else, but it's not one of those that, you know, lived in the military. So if it's not, then it's new to you and you go wherever they tell you, um, and in my case, I was just very lucky because I got a really, really good role that I know a lot of people want.

Whitney: Yeah. You know what's, uh, uh, fascinating to the ... to me about this, so we have a daughter who's a senior in high school right now, and, um ... and trying to decide what she's going to major in once she goes to college, etc., and last year, she took this whole battery of tests called the Johnson O'Connor Test that told her, "Okay, here is where you're ... you've got aptitudes, here's where you don't, etc., etc." And it just seems to me that at your, you know ... at the age of 18 when you don't actually know what you want to do, there's real value in, for a year or two, or I guess it's, the military's what, three years. Is that right?

Ilana: Yeah, in my case, but yeah, sometimes it's shorter for girls, but yes.

Whitney: Yeah, where they just say, "Okay, here's what you're good at, here's where you're ... you've got aptitude," so it's sort of an arranged marriage for your career for two years, and then after, you can decide what you want to do, but for these two years, this I what we see you're good at so let's ... why don't you give it whirl and see what happens.

Ilana: Right.

Whitney: Is that ... is that completely off base? Or accurate.

Ilana: I think it's absolutely right, and I think it's way beyond that because what you're experiencing is ... are things that are way outside what we study. Right? So it's not ...

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ilana: ... the math and the tests and the language, etc. It's ... it's leadership, it's, you know, how do you cope with unexpected situation? How do you cope with things you've never learned? How do you cope with, you know, new materials? With people that are different? Because, suddenly, you have all of Israel in one place. Right? All the different people and some are poor, and some are rich, and some grew up in different areas and suddenly, they're all together. And how do you cope with that?

I can't talk about all the things that I stud ... I learned there because it's really priceless, um, and it's shifted a lot in terms of my mindset. From a pretty shy girl, I grew up to be a, you know ... I realize that I'm a pretty good leader. I became a commander, I was the first female commander, so I ... I realized I liked breaking barriers.

I don't think I would have known that. You know, I think I would have, you know, went through some pattern, If I would go right after high school, I would probably, you know, go to, I don't know, to medicine or to whatever, I think that it just completely opened my eyes

So I do think that you need that time out from school. School is not an example to real life. It's ... it's nice tools, but it's not an example.

Whitney: Interesting. Okay. So, you get into the military, and you discover that you're good at technology. Can you just walk us through the journey to go from starting the military to ending up becoming a flight instructor? What did that look like? And walk us through that.

Ilana: First of all, it's a hard transition, um, so, you know, from, uh, you know, being an 18 year old, 17 year old that goes home every day and, you know, has, uh, food on the table and, you know, your mom to, you know, put you to bed, etc. Suddenly, you're alone. There's a very clear regimen. It's very cold atmosphere in general, um, in the sense, not, uh, temperature wise, but you know yes, sir, you know.

Uh, if you screw up, you start running, uh, you know, and you run with a big backpack and, you know, whatever it is, it's a very cold atmosphere that you're not used to because everything was very hugging until then, and, um, I think it teaches you to become a much more resilient person, um, not take things too hard, laugh about things that are hard, which I think was definitely something I took later on. Smile when things are harder, and they somehow become easier.

We studied pretty hard for a few months, um, and it was ... there was a lot in terms of whether women are allowed to become pilots or not allowed to become pilots. There were a lot of fighting at that point, um, between men and women in that sense, because men were allowed to become fighter pilots and overall pilots, and they were very protective of women, because they were afraid what's going to happen if you're captured beyond enemy lines.

We had a few of these examples, and somehow, the thought of women being captured beyond enemy lines was just not something that Israel was accepting. Um, and so, women were, you know, going towards becoming flight instructors instead. You know, I think to some extent, it's something that taught me so much that, you know, in ... initially, you were kind of bummed by, you know, the lack of opportunity for women, and now in retrospect, I

think I learned so much from it that, um, I think it was actually a gift because suddenly you're supposed to train pilots, and some of them are, you know, you're going to walk them to the ... the very first flight they're ever going to do, and you're going to teach them everything about the plane.

But, for some, they have so much more experience than you ever going to have. And, just being able to talk to different levels is something that I found priceless later on when you talk to customers, when you talk to your boss, when you talk to investors, when you ... You know, so I think later on, and to your team. Right? I mean, later on, I just learned that this is actually one of probably the most important lessons I learned in life.

Whitney: Okay. So, Ilana, just for a moment, I can tell there's some back story here, so you wanted to be a pilot, but at that time, women were not allowed to be pilots.

Ilana: Right.

Whitney: Is that right?

Ilana: Right.

Whitney: And so you trained to become a pilot, and then once you trained, you became a flight instructor. Is that how it worked?

Ilana: Right. That's how it worked. Basically, it was a way to basically defend, um, the ... the ... the women, I accepted the reason, um, but it was least hard for me to understand why then we can't become commanders in the F-16 flight instructor squad, because why would you need a pilot to do that. If we're good enough to instruct these pilots, why can't we become commanders? Um, so at least I decided that I'm going to fight that one.

It was a lot of hard work, and ... and breaking barriers is actually, uh, really, really tough. You're consistently out of your comfort zone, and you really don't have a lot of examples to look at. Right? That was really, really hard and challenging, and obviously, there were a lot of failures along the journey, um, but eventually paid off, and I did become the first woman to become a commander in that squad and ... and be in charge of basically the F-16, um, education and training agenda for all the pilots in Israel in the simulator. So that was ... that was really, really exciting.

Whitney: Wow, that's amazing.

Whitney: So, Ilana, you said there was a failure along the way. What was ... what was one of your, um, things that happened that was just like, "Oh, this isn't working anymore."

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: On that ... on that commander train.

Ilana: There was ... there was ... there was so many. (Laughs). There's so many that I could only think ...

Ilana: I'll tell you one. Uh, it's ... it's ... I tell it sometimes in my, um ... in my stories just because I think learned a really good lessons from it. Um, there's plenty of other failures. Sometimes you just don't take as much out of it except for, "Ew, I flunked." But, um, this one

specifically was a very high ranked commander, he was actually number two in the Air Force, so he was very high up, um, General, and he came to do training.

They all go ... go through training a few times a year, and obviously, I was, at that point, the highest ranked, so I will give him his training and, um, you know, I create a mission. We execute it together, you know, I give him feedback. So far, it's kind of a typical day, but in the back of my mind, I say, "Wow, I really hope this is working out. He's a super high ranked General. I want him to see that it's good that they took a woman to be a commander, blah, blah, blah."

You know, so I feel that pressure, although nobody's putting that pressure except for myself. Whitney, I'm sure you ... you've ... you had this before. When you talk to people and ... and you feel like something in the vibe is not working out. Right? I mean, something is not there, it's not clicking, and I don't know quite what it is, and when I'm done with the feedback, he gets up and stands in a really, uh, weird kind of, uh, downplaying ga ... you know, way and he looks at me and says, "Honey, do you know who I am?"

And at that point, I just wanted the earth to swallow me. I realized I screw up, but I had no clue who he is except for his name. Uh, we didn't have computers much then, and his profile wasn't computerized or anything and, you know, when I chose the mission that we're going to do together, I just looked through a few of his last, um, training on the simulator. I didn't know much beyond that.

So he continues and says, "Well, when you were about six years old, I bombed the nuclear plant in Iraq." And, you know, the nuclear plant in Iraq bombing is ... it's still one of the most successful, but, you know, insane missions ever accomplished by an Air Force. So clearly, he knows air to ground in his sleep and, um ... and it doesn't mean that my feedback wasn't correct, but it means that I should have said it differently if only I'd known. And at that point, it was really humiliating, it was a complete shock. I was really devastated for about a couple of days, but when I recovered, I realized, you know what, I actually don't know my audience. I'm training them, I'm giving them feedback, and ... but except for the last few trainings that they've done, I really don't know my audience. I don't know what they're scared of, I don't know what they're successful at, I don't know what they accomplished, I don't know if they had some, you know ... they need to eject a plane, you know, in the middle of, you know, the sea.

I don't know anything about them, and from that point on, we completely changed the training and education to be a lot more personalized. We started collecting everything and in the computers as much as we could. Um, and yeah, personalize the experience. I mean, it's all about that.

Whitney: You know what's interesting about that, Ilana, is, uh ... And hearing you tell the story, I can't quite, I mean, I hear the idea of audience, but I can't quite figure out what you did wrong actually. You looked in the simulator, so, I'm pushing back, 'cause I'm like, you looked in the simulator, and your ... the records, and you knew what he had done before and since, and so ... and you just trained on the basis of that.

So I guess, I ... I ... was it more a sense of you didn't ... you weren't aware of the customer and being able to contextualize things for that person so that they felt comfortable?

Ilana: Exactly. Exactly.

Whitney: Oh, okay. Okay.

Ilana: Because I could have said exactly the same thing, but if I had started it differently, it was like, "Wow, it's such an honor sitting with you today. I would love to hear your story about, you know, the bombing of Iraq at some point. Um, how do you feel you've done here?" You know, "What would you tell yourself," and yes, the feedback, you can still squeeze the feedback, but first of all, you can sometimes pad with a little bit of pat in the back, and again, if you know who you're sitting with, um, you can ...

Only when you understand your audience, you can actually move people's minds. You can be more persuasive, you can get them to, you know ... to get your lesson better or to get your idea better. And I feel that that just ... You know, I totally missed it. It was too shallow. I was trying to do something that it was more of a cookie cutter and you can't.

And I think, even today, you know, whether I'm talking to a customer or investor, or a founder or my team, or who ... You know, even my kids, a clerk in the supermarket, it doesn't matter. If you're trying to understand who is in front of you, you can persuade. You can move people's mind. If you're trying to talk to your, you know, team the way you're going to talk to your kids, or whatever, it can't be the same. Uh, each one will be persuaded by different things, and it's the little things that matter.

Whitney: Hm. So, Ilana, what was it like the first time you flew a plane?

Ilana: (Laughs). I threw up. (Laughs).

Whitney: (Laughs).

Ilana: I was so busy throwing up. It was am ... amazing. (Laughs).

Whitney: (Laughs). Oh, that's so funny.

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: So, um, just because it was ... it was so unexpected of how it felt and what it did to your stomach?

Ilana: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It's hard. (Laughs).

Whitney: How long did it take you un ... until you got comfortable being in a plane?

Ilana: I think it depends on the type of flight. I don't think I'm very talented, to be super honest. I have a lot of respect to those who can fly F-16s, F-15s, all these like super, uh, fast planes that, you know. If hard G's, very hard on your body. If you fly low it's ... you're totally nauseous. So yeah, I mean I ... I have a lot of respect to people who are a lot more talented than I am. (Laughs). I'm glad I moved to tech. (Laughs).

Whitney: Do you ... do you fly at all anymore?

Ilana: No. No. It's too expensive here. (Laughs).

Whitney: Yeah, in the United States. Okay. Alright, so you have this experience, and it's ... it's unexpected in many ways. Um, you finish your service in the military and then you become an engineer.

So talk to us about, um, your career as an engineer, you first job, and what are a ... a lesson or two that you've learned a ... along that road?

Ilana: I left, um, the military after almost three and a half years, so I stayed there for a while because of the commander. Um, I traveled a little bit around the world, so, um, mainly in Asia at that point, um, Far East Asia. Um, so I think, you know, traveling alone again, I really think that was very, very important for maturing fast and ... and feeling more independent, more innovative about the ideas, etc.

But then, yes, I went to engineering school, um, electric engineering, um, in the tech end, and again, you know, we were pretty ... 300, you know, men, 9 women, uh, graduated that, you know ... from that, which is kind of interesting. I don't feel like, though, that I felt it's weird. I just felt like, um, it's interesting that nobody's interested in that.

You know, I didn't feel like it's anything to do with women or men. I just thought, you know, it's interest levels, um, but I was lucky because, um, due to my Air Force experience, I was actually the youngest student they ever hired into Intel at that point. So that was kind of cool, um, at least Intel Israel. I don't know about Intel Is ... uh, U.S., but, um, Intel Israel, I was the youngest. I got in right in my first semester, so I barely knew what computers are, um, but then I actually could see the theory that we were studying and the technia and ... and, you know, kind of grew up and ... and experiencing it in Intel.

And that is really, really interesting way to, uh ... to work. So it's not internship like in the U.S. where you just learn in the summer. I just worked throughout the school year. So I basically would study until afternoon, and I would rush to Intel and work until about 1:00 a.m., and again, go back, uh, sleep a little bit, and so it was a pretty crazy time, but I think just combining, the theory with the actual work was really, really interesting for me.

And I think I learned one of the key lessons that I learned, um, is they put me in Intel on something pretty futuristic maybe because I was so new, and couldn't add a lot of value immediately. They put me in a problem that was pretty clearly going to be one of Intel's interesting problems in the next two, three years.

So, you know, I had some time to explore different solutions and, um, while I was exploring solutions, experimenting is actually a lot of failures. So you go in one route, you try, try, try, try, try, and then you fail, and you try another route, and you try, try, try, try, try, and it goes nowhere.

And it's actually really hard because you need to sit with your boss, and you say, "Yes, I haven't done much in the last week and a half because I was spending time on the wrong route." And it's a very hard feeling. Again, I was lucky, and I had a really, really good boss, and he was very understanding of what it takes to innovate.

Whitney: Hm.

Ilana: And I think just by helping me focus if I need, but really letting me go and try all these different things, um, I think I got my first, you know, uh, real experience in innovation, and it was really, really interesting.

Whitney: What was the problem that he wanted you to solve?

Ilana: Um, so basically, we knew how to verify certain size chips, um, but the chips were getting more and more, um, uh, complex, and our verification tools were just not cutting it. So they

would either run out of time or they would, uh, run out of memory in the computers, and we basically knew that, you know, the next generation of chips will just crash.

Whitney: Hm.

Ilana: Um, and all our verification tools will be not be ready. So we were looking basically at what other ways we can do verification, and I was looking at academia, I was looking, um, in, you know, different startups, but again, we're talking about 1997, so there's not like a ton of startups. You know, it's not really there yet. There was a few, um, but I'm basically exploring and, again, trying different things.

Um, and Intel was really on the cutting edge, so it's ... it was hard to find things that will solve the problem, but eventually, I found, or you know, together with them, we found this, um, small Swedish company that was, um, actually working on trains and ... and heuristics of trains and, you know, in ... initially you would think trains and chips, they are not really related, but apparently the complexity of, you know, trying to time, you know, trains with different delays and routes and passes and things that can go wrong is actually somewhat similar to chips.

So I invited this Swedish company over and then I flew to Sweden for a few weeks and experimented, and eventually, we acquired the company. The code that we acquired is still used in Intel until today as far as I know and, you know, 20 years later, and I think just by realizing that, yes, you can try different routes, you're going to fail, fail, fail, but something eventually might work and this is the way to experiment and this is the way to innovate and this is the way to grow.

Whitney: Do you remember how you managed that with your boss? 'Cause I think it's an interesting question of, when you're working and your boss says, "Okay, go try all the new things and ..." And basically the only thing you have to share in any given week is, "We tried these 10 things and none of them worked."

So do you remember, um, how you managed that process and what would you say, from your experience as a flight instructor, helped you manage that process with him?

Ilana: Hm. It's a good question. I mean, I think some of it is definitely know your audience. And I keep coming back to that one just because I knew it's important for him, I knew what he needs to show to his bosses, and sometimes, you will give a little bit in order for him to have enough to show to his bosses, but then you're going to say, "Yes, but in this route, I'm stuck."

And I think, sometimes, when know how to navigate these, um, trading waters, it's ... it's a lot easier because if I just going to create a low presentation, so he can show this, but then, you know, I'm going to tell him that this is still areas that I've no clue what to do. Um, it's a lot easier than saying, "I did nothing."

I think sometimes, it's ... it's a lot about just understanding who is front of you, what's important for him, and he was a supporter. I mean, I have to say that he trusted me in a way that I don't know if I would have trusted.

Whitney: What was his name? Give him a ... give him a shout out.

Ilana: (Laughs). You know him, Ziyad Hanna, he was amazing.

Whitney: Yeah. I ... I do.

Ilana: And by the way, another on that was, um, right before, and he gave me a ton of independence is Johnny Srouji. You know, he's number two in Apple now, and he is a phenomenal individual, and again, he let a small, you know, second year student travel to HP and Intel on, you know, their first trip ever, and he trusted me, and I think just understanding that people trust you, helps you mature a lot. Um, so sometimes it's ... it's ... it's what I did, but I think sometimes I just need to give kudos to these people who let me do it.

Whitney: Okay, so for those you who are listening, we actually shared the story of Ilana working with her boss, Ziyad Hanna in the book, *Build an A-Team*, but this other story you're mentioning now, Ilana, about Johnny Srouji-

Ilana: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Is that right?

Ilana: Yeah.

Whitney: I'm pronouncing it correctly.

Ilana: Yes.

Whitney: So he was ... was he odds boss or was he another boss?

Ilana: He was another boss previously, yeah.

Whitney: Okay. Okay. Alright. And so he also gave you a lot of latitude, but I do think it's really interesting what you're saying is this idea of recognizing your audience and that you're boss has a boss, your boss has an audience, and how do you talk to them or feed them information in a way that they can manage up as well at the same time being open to getting their feedback, and their helps that you can actually move the process forward, and you're just talking about this like, "Of course, this is so natural. It's intuitive," but my experience is that this is something you actually do uniquely well based on lots and lots of other conversations I've had so-

Ilana: Thank you. (Laughs).

Whitney: It's interesting to hear you talk about that. Okay. So you work in Intel, you do that for several years. When did you end up in the United States? What was the trajectory for you to ... to now be in the United States?

Ilana: Funny enough, like many things in my life, uh, there wasn't really a trajectory, um, around 2002, um, I left Intel, uh, because I wanted to travel the world, um, again. (Laughs). You see a pattern. (Laughs). Um, and I went this time, I went with, um, my boyfriend, to be husband, and we basically, bought, uh, you know all around the world ticket and, um, left for a year.

And when you leave for a year, we, by the way, got married in the middle of it in Cook Islands, um, so yeah, not a lot of, (laughs), calculation in that point. But then we found ourselves, you know, landing in the U.S. Actually, I was born in Utah of all places, so I was lucky. I could, you know, try to find a job in ... in the U.S.

Whitney: Oh, because you had a ... had a U.S. passport.

Ilana: Exactly. And so we were trying to think of, you know, what do we want to do and, um ... and, um, you know, we don't ... we left our jobs in Israel, we left an apartment. You know, I mean, we basically don't have much, um, and we're like, "Okay. So let's extend the adventure a little bit and see if we can get a job." So, that's what made me come to the U.S. (Laughs).

Whitney: Wait, okay. So, you're on this around the world trip during which you get married. You end up in Utah, you have ... Or excuse me, in the United States.

Ilana: Yes.

Whitney: And you have a U.S. passport because your dad, I think had told me was ...

Ilana: Right.

Whitney: ... working at the University of Utah, faculty. You happened to be born while he's at Utah.

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: And so you, and now husband, are saying, "Let's just stay in the United States a little bit longer."

Ilana: Right.

Whitney: And basically, you've never left.

Ilana: Exactly. (Laughs).

Whitney: So what was the job that you got and what was that job that your husband got?

Ilana: You know, immediately I reached to my Israeli friends from Intel and some of them left to a startup. Because I had the small experience of acquiring a startup, it ... within Intel, I got super interested in trying to get a little more customer facing, and if I can, join a startup.

So, I reached out to a few friends. Immediately they said, "You know what? There's this startup. It's growing in the U.S. We would love to have you on that side." And I got everything I wished for. So customer facing, and a startup, (laughs), just, you know, it was like bingo.

And I found it immediately. It's call ViriCiti and it was a phenomenal experience, was a great team, um, and, my husband actually declined, uh, a job at Google, which maybe was not a great idea. but he joined, (laughs), um, PayPal. So, um-

Whitney: That's a great idea.

Ilana: Yes.

Whitney: PayPal's a good idea too.

Ilana: Oh, he had many great ...

Whitney: I like PayPal.

Ilana: ... ideas since, yes. (Laughs).

Whitney: (Laughs).

Ilana: Yeah.

Whitney: Alright so you've ... you've stayed here, and if I look at your resume, you've, you know ... you were at ViriCiti and then you did Cadence Design Systems and then you founded a company, QualiSystems. Why don't you just tell us briefly about that?

Ilana: Yeah. So ViriCiti was acquired by Cadence, uh, for \$300 million, so that was really nice sell. We had to stay in Cadence for a while. Um, at that point, I actually went back to Israel, um, and met a company called QualiSystems. So I ... I wouldn't say I founded. I founded the U.S. side.

Whitney: Oh, got it. Okay.

Ilana: ... already, uh, a ... a company that was growing, uh, but it didn't have much in ... in the U.S., and basically, the idea was to start the operation in the U.S., and from scratch, which is very, very challenging. You have a product that sounds really, really interesting, uh, but it's interesting 5,000 miles away, and when you come here, it's actually ... what you actually need is a different product.

It was a very, very hard route. I ... I flew all my family back to the U.S. to start, uh, QualiSystems here, um, but I realized that it's just not right the match. We needed to completely pivot the company, um, which is a tough sell. You're 5,000 miles away, it's not too clear to the investors, and the executives that this is what's needed. It's a very, very challenging time, um, but then again, you know, and it's always a question. Am I failing because I'm not good enough? Or am I failing because our product is not good enough?

And it's ... it's a very, very tough emotional time for sure, um, but yes, we pivoted the company, um, and at that point, it was doing phenomenal, so a year later, we're two and half million, the year late ... a couple years later at five million, 15 million and we're growing, um, rapidly. So it was ... it was a great learning experience, um, but-

Whitney: And did you end up selling that company? Or what did you do?

Ilana: So, no. So the company's still ongoing. It's doing really good. Their latest raise was huge. I have no clue. I've ... I ... I lost count already, but I have all my options, so I hope they do phenomenal. Uh, since then, I left. I started another company. It was called Stea. Um, it was actually acquired, and then I decided to take all the know how's and the money and, um, focus on helping more Israeli companies move to the other side of the ocean.

Whitney: So as we start to wrap up, then tell us a little bit about what you're doing today with ... with these companies. Is there, um, a specific company that you've worked with that's had success? Or is it still too early in the process? Just what do you want us to know?

Ilana: Well, I'll tell you what we're doing. Um, so, um, first of all, it's Golan Ventures. I did invest in a few really interesting companies, but I actually wanna also talk about Homrun a little bit. So, um, what we did is basically found that one of the hardest things for Israeli

companies, being a founder, even in American founder, is just really hard. Right? In general.

There's just so many unknowns and so many hurdles, but when you actually try to also cross the ocean, you don't have the network, you don't have the language, you don't have ... You know, there are just so many barriers, you don't the market fit, and I can go on and on, and you're actually starting with such a disadvantage that it's almost unfair, and the idea was to make the playing field a little easier and a little more fair to that extent and use a huge network of phenomenal business leaders that can open doors, can help with strategy, can help as advisory, can help with investment, and can really help those startups grow here in North America.

And what we did is we mapped phenomenal business leaders, um, all across different verticals and they were in different territories, so definitely not just Silicon Valley. The idea was to really map that we have people in Montreal and Toronto and New York and Florida, etc. etc. The idea was really to map a lot of the U.S. and North and ... and Canada with phenomenal business leaders that can help those companies, and now was basically like a, you know ... a database. We can send them companies that I can't necessarily help them, um, but now, with the power of a network, we can actually help them a lot more. Um, so-

Whitney: Hm.

Ilana: So, um, I'm really excited about Homrun. I think it's something really, really innovative that I'm putting a lot of focus on and, you know, and ... and, um, in one of the companies for example, that came to us called RMS Next. It's doing automation to, uh, security cameras, um, to see a lot more data than anybody, you know, any other security cameras can give you, and it was actually phenomenal because, you know, within a couple of months, we already got the meetings with like, you know, Subway, McDonald's, Five Guys.

You know, the things that I could never have achieved, and two things happened. One is that it really accelerates their growth. B, I want to invest in them. So it's ... it's ... it's an amazing due diligence platform as well.

Whitney: Yeah. That's fantastic.

Ilana: Yeah.

Whitney: And you know, something you said earlier that I thought was really interesting, and I don't wanna let that drop is you ... you were talking about it, QualiSystems, and I think this is ... goes to the work that you're doing now is that question of, is this company succeeding or failing because of me? Or because of the product? And ... and it sounds like what you're trying to do is help ... help solve for that or be able to help people figure that ... that piece of it out faster.

Ilana: Brilliant. Yes.

Whitney: It's really interesting.

Ilana: Thanks. Thanks for making the connection. You're right. Yeah.

Whitney: Um, okay, so last couple of questions. Um, so you're participating in Ironman competitions.

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: So that ... that tomboy in you just does not want to die.

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: You want to continue and I ... I ... I think, you know, we should say, "Iron Woman competitions," now. Right? Because I'm assuming that now in the Israeli Army, women can be fighter pilots, I suspect ...

Ilana: Yes.

Whitney: ... that has changed. Is that correct?

Ilana: Yes. (Laughs).

Whitney: Okay. So, um ... so what kind of Ironman, Iron Woman competitions? What are you doing and why are you doing it, I guess, is the question?

Ilana: I love adventure races of all sorts and adventure things, um, so you're right. I think the power of mind versus body is something that I find, um, super interesting.

I think that you learn so much about yourself and I ... and ... and you learn so much about your ability and your brain's ability to influence your body, to influence the surrounding, to influence people. So sometimes I tell a story about the power of a smile.

So that Ironman was ... it's a long ... it's a long race. Right? I mean, it's like swimming, uh, you know, a pretty long time, and then you're biking for 180 kilometers, and then you're a marathon. Right? So it's ... it's ... it's ... it's ... it's a grueling thing.

But, you know, I trained well, and I knew I was ready for it, or in general, I was ready, I hope, um, but what I wasn't ready for is that we ... the marathon was actually two loops of half marathon each. And the end of the first marathon actually ends, um, and you see the finish line on one side, so some people are already turning to towards the finish line, but I actually need to do a whole new half marathon. And what I didn't prepare myself is the mental, um, influence of seeing the finish line, seeing people celebrate, eat, drink, you know, whatever, and turning my back on it and doing another grueling, whatever, two, whatever hours of running, and I think psychology wise, I was down. After about more than 10, what was it, 11 hours of running or of exercising at this point, and I'm done. I'm really, really done and to make it even worse, the volunteers give you a stick light, so that it kind of hints you that, by the time you'll come back, it's going to be dark and, you know, I was at the bottom of my barrel and, um, I wasn't really sure how I'm going to finish it.

And suddenly, this group passed me and I started walking, and I was doomed because, if I didn't walk, it's going to take even longer, but then a group passed by and, you know, they started, you know, chatting, and I said some kind of a weird joke, with a fake smile and they said something with a fake smile, and suddenly, we start faking smiles, one another, and that fake smile turned to an actual smile, and we started jogging, and let me tell you, there was no energy left.

So it definitely wasn't an energy thing, but the smile definitely did something, even though it was fake, and ever since then, and yes, I finished and, you know, I was really glad we finished, and I ran the entire way and, you know, and I think that the lesson that I got of

faking a smile, even when you're down as a leader and when the company is not doing well, you can ... you have two options.

You can come all gloom to the meeting and get everybody, you know, feeling horrible, or you can come, even if it's the fakest smile you have and just motivate the people at ... and, you know, and they, with their motivation, they'll make you motivated and smile back, and the whole atmosphere will be better, and no matter if it's your business or sports or wherever you are, that's huge. So I learned a big lesson there.

Whitney: Yeah. Wow.

Ilana: (Laughs).

Whitney: Last question for you. What are you reading right ... right now? Reading or listening to or you're excited about?

Ilana: Hm, um, so I'm just at the end of *Bad Blood*, which is a phenomenal story about Theranos. Um, and I'm super interested in what happened there. You know, I was following the story of Theranos, relatively closely, but, um, you know, I was always very supportive of Elizabeth Holmes. She was sort of a role model for a lot of us and, um, I was wondering if people are just giving her a hard time or not, and I'm glad to read it because, you know, it's a really honest book about fact, and the facts are gloomy a little bit. So it's ... it's not a happy book, but I think it's important to know the truth.

Whitney: Hm. Hm. Interesting. Any other thing that you're reading right now?

Ilana: These are the main ones. Um, I'm definitely, you know, looking at starting *The Startup Way* from Eric Ries, um, about innovation within corporates, so I've always kind of been on that futuristic, um, area and it's super interesting for me. I love experimenting, um, and I love, you know, trying new things, so it's ... it's a big read book, but I'm not there yet. (Laughs).

Whitney: Yeah. Well, Ilana, this has been such a pleasure to be able to interview you and hear about your story. Are there any final words that you'd like to share with us?

Ilana: No. First of all, it's an honor, Whitney. I love what you're doing, and for everybody listening, dream big and make things happen.

Whitney: Great way to close it up. Thank you, Ilana.

Ilana: Thank you Whitney! Bye, bye. Thanks everyone.

Whitney: Bye

I've thought a lot about military service in Israel since having this conversation with Ilana. Mostly around the role that aptitude testing and placement plays at the outset of your career. As I watch our daughter decide what she wants to study in college and as she launches into adulthood, there's something appealing about being guided to a starting point based on your aptitude instead of having to deal with the overwhelm of choosing well just, whatever you want. Sometimes constraints are a gift. They certainly helped Ilana.

The other takeaway from our conversation was the importance of recognizing what others need. When she gave feedback to that high-ranking general, she was technically doing the right thing, but the true gift of feedback comes in the specificity. Understanding where people are coming from and what they need. To take it a step further, when you're working to get buy in from your stakeholders regardless of the context – at home, at work, at community - it's important to understand and focus on how your idea is of use to them. [Bethany Quam also talked about this in Episode 94.](#) You're more likely to achieve a win if you can articulate what the win is for the other person. It reminds me of a favorite quote from Napoleon Hill. Paraphrasing – He says, (you say this to yourself) "I will not enter into any transaction unless it benefits all involved." Wise, wise words.

Practical tip:

What are you trying to get buy-in for right now? A promotion, a raise? You already know how it's going to benefit you. Now sit down and really articulate how it will benefit the person on the other side of the table.

If you'd like to hear more about Ilana and some of the great bosses she's worked for, be sure to pick up *Build an A-Team*, my book with Harvard Business Press. In the meantime, you can download the first chapter for free at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Ilana Golan 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.