

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 106: MAREN KATE DONOVAN

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

My guest is Maren Kate Donovan, writer and entrepreneur. Her first venture-backed startup, Zirtual, grew to over 400 people before she turned 30, but then, due to the perfect storm of missteps, was forced to shut down overnight. This very public and painful failure taught Maren a variety of lessons, most notably the importance of bringing the right people on board. She now leverages her unique experience as Managing Partner at [AVRA](#), a firm dedicated to creating a world where good help isn't hard to find.

Whitney: Maren, welcome to the show.

Maren: Thank you so much for having me.

Whitney: What ... This is my very first question for you. What did you want to be when you grew up?

Maren: So when I was little, I actually wanted to be a lawyer. Um, I even in college decided to get my English literature, uh, that was what I was going for my bachelor degree just because that seems like a good, uh, parlay into law school, but I never really knew what a- a lawyer did, I just remember reading John Grisham novels that my dad had, and it seems like they were bosses, so like that's what I want to do.

Whitney: John Grisham makes lawyering sound pretty fun, doesn't it?

Maren: Yeah, definitely-

Whitney: (laughs).

Maren: Yeah, he oversells it.

Whitney: (laughs). What was one of your favorite John Grisham books?

Maren: Uh, The Partner, which is I weirdly just recently read again, like a month ago, and I was like, mmm, not as engaging as an adult-

Whitney: (laughs).

Maren: But- but yeah, that was- that was what I wanted to be, what I thought I was going to do.

Whitney: The best plane reading ever.

Maren: Yes.

Whitney: Um, okay, so you want to be a lawyer, and did you remember ... So you studied English literature in college. So y- you were planning on being a lawyer for quite a while. Do you remember at what point you said, "Yeah, I don't think we're going to do this lawyer thing."

Maren: I think like my first year of college, um, I started my first business, and then I started actually looking into what being a lawyer qualify ... Even the test, the LSAT, I think I read through it once, and I was like, oh, no, I'm not going to be able to do this. So I got disillusioned pretty fast.

Whitney: So you said you started a business in college, what was- what was the business?

Maren: The business was actually selling jewelry on eBay. I first started by buying interesting pieces at antique shops, and yard sales, and flea markets, um, and then as the demand kind of grew, I started ... I've learned how to buy in bulk from Indonesia, and then, uh, resell the pieces, and I focused on silver, jewelry, semiprecious stones. On eBay, what most people would do is they'd throw some pictures that weren't super great and then they'd like put a basic description. As I started studying eBay in the closed auction that had done really well, I noticed the ones that did well had good pictures, which obviously now, um, but it wasn't super obvious back then, and had kind of engaging descriptions.

So what I did with my jewelry is I took really good pictures, and then I wrote really detailed, um, uh, explanations of what the jewelry were, and I focused on kind of things like, uh, I felt this little bit on the my- mystical side of the gemstones, even though weirdly at the time, like I didn't believe in it at all, but I would read about the you know, powers of Citroen or certain types of crystal, and then I would write up a entire description of, you know, these are the properties of X, Y, Z stone, and if you're looking for, you know, better health or you want some confidence, you should try this.

So built a little business and did that for about four years, uh, both, during college and after I- I actually dropped out.

Whitney: You're 19 years old and you start a business. Where- where did this entrepreneurial bug or bent come from?

Maren: Um, I'm not exactly sure. My mother's parents immigrated from Armenia and Syria, so on both sides, um, know that immigrant kind of super hardworking, very entrepreneurial, but you know in terms of creating a ... I think a candy shop in Brooklyn and things like that. I think maybe that's part of it, but honestly, I don't really know.

Whitney: Well, an immigrant is kind of the ultimate disruptor. It's interesting, Maren, because I remember ... I think it was after the first year of podcasting. I was doing a review of all the guests that I had on the show, and I thought, wow, I'm over indexing on immigrants. Like seriously over indexing on immigrants. I'm like why is that? And I realized, oh, because if you're an immigrant, you've disrupted yourself, like you ... It's the ultimate, well, not maybe the ultimate, but it's- it's- it's disruption writ large, and so, there starts to be

something in your DNA that allows you to- to be able to do things like become an entrepreneur, so it's interesting.

Maren: Yeah, I also think it has to do with just not having any other option. You know when you come over here, um, especially when my grandparents family did, there was just ... You know, you either did this or you couldn't get work. So I think that the forcing function actually can be helpful in the long run.

Whitney: Yeah, absolutely-

Maren: And that was similar to where I was at 19. I was like you know working at Target, working at coffee shops, and I just ... I didn't like the feeling of tying my work to per hour, and I- I got really interested in the idea of something working for me while I was in class or, you know, doing my job at Target and those were what the eBay auctions allowed.

Whitney: Yeah. So you dropped out of college, like how much time did you have left and what- what did that decision look like?

Maren: Uh, it was pretty random, I was a senior, and I had gotten all of my credits except one, um, I just didn't realize that I needed to do a Spanish requirement, and languages have always been kind of hard for me, and by this time, I was running my eBay business and I had also started building little online businesses exploring that angle, and when I realized that I'd have to do another year and a half to get these- these three Spanish credits I needed, I- I kind of was like, you know, this is ... I went to University of Nevada at Reno, um, not like Harvard or something fancy, and I was a mediocre student, and I just, eh, had a realization, I was like this isn't my path, no one's going to care if I got a degree, you know if I was a mediocre student at a state school. So this isn't going to do anything for me, why would I spend more time working towards this versus doubling down on my own stuff.

And I think that was the moment where I realized that I was going to need to carve my own path because no one was going to hire me based on my, let's say credentials, that wasn't going to open doors into a McKinsey or something like that. I didn't even know what McKinsey was back in a day, but-

Whitney: (laughs). But, but the proverbial, uh, McKinsey, um-

Maren: Yeah.

Whitney: Alright, so talk to us about Zirtual. I actually was a client at Zirtual at one point, and-

Maren: Oh, interesting-

Whitney: Yeah-

Maren: Okay-

Whitney: So tell us a little bit about how you got the idea for Zirtual, and what it did.

Maren: It kind of ties back to the jewelry business. So a few years in, um, the jewelry business, I started exploring other types of online businesses, again, the idea of repeatable, uh, income and things that could scale outside of just your own time. So I learned about outsourcing, I learned about delegation, and I began hiring virtual assistants in the Philippines and India, um, some in North America, based on different skillsets that I didn't

have. Like I couldn't code, I couldn't put together WordPress sites, and I thought, okay, I'm either going to learn how to do these things or I'm going to hire someone, and then use what my gifts are to grow the business. And I had a blog that I started when I was around 20 or 21. It was called, or is called, Escaping the 9 to 5. I don't really write on it anymore, but it just was where I documented my story, and how I was trying to escape the 9 to 5. And in my blog, I wrote about the different businesses I was testing out, and how I was using my virtual assistants to help me, um, do everything from SEO, to build the websites, to help manage like customer support queries- queries, and I got the most engagement from that, everyone wanted me to help them hire a virtual assistant.

So I launched a little product on my blog and it started growing, and at that point, I had applied for an incubator in San Francisco called, Founders Institute. I was still living in Reno, and I just kind of had this idea that I needed to go to San Francisco. I always knew that I wanted to do something, "big," quote-unquote. I felt like I needed to be around more like minds. Um, so got accepted kind of by the skin of my teeth, they rejected me at first and were like, "No, you live in Reno, and you don't ..." You know I don't know what it was. They pretty much didn't think I had what it takes, and I was like, "Well, I'll travel on a train. I'll stay the week in San Francisco and I stayed in a hostel for three months, and then I'll go back to Reno on the weekends."

So did that, kind of got a crash course in Silicon Valley. I didn't know what the word, "VC," meant. I didn't know what ... I didn't know what any of these, uh, acronyms, like IPO, it was all super new for me, and as this was happening, um, I had my blog, and I kept selling these like packages to introduce you to a virtual assistant, and one day it just ... At the end of this incubator, I was like instead of trying to find some business that I can go big with, why not I make this service that I've been offering on my blog into a company, and I had picked the name Zirtual, and I just decided to throw everything into that, so then I moved to San Francisco permanently.

Whitney: Now, how did ... You said that you got into this Founders Institute by the skin of your teeth, but you did get in. How did you end up getting in?

Maren: So it- it's ... Founders Institute is run by a guy named, Adeo Ressi, and when I did it in 2010, he was still actually running ... This is the last course he was going to run because it's pretty big, it's all over the world now, I think ... and I applied, they rejected me. So I found his email, and I emailed him and I was like, "Hey, you know, I have what it takes. I'm super scrappy, yada, yada." And he pushed back, he's like, "You live in Reno. You know, I don't think so." And I was like, "Listen, just give me the chance, I promise I'll prove it to you." So he was like, "Okay, fine. Like we'll give you the chance," and he told me, he's like, I thought you were going to washout like within the first week, and I made it all the way to the end, and I think like 30% of the class actually quit, and I didn't, so.

Whitney: Fascinating. Alright, so you start building this business, you go to Founders Institute, and you start getting smart really fast. What are some of the m- moments early on?

Maren: (laughs). That was really fast.

Whitney: (laughs). Where you're like, wow, this is exciting!

Maren: I think growing up ... So I grew up ... We moved around a lot as a kid. I grew up in Texas, and then Las Vegas, um, and then went to school in Reno, um, and just never was in ... I didn't know the world of entrepreneurship, like- like the venture capital, the glitzy, the scaling type of entrepreneurship existed. Like I knew mom-and-pop businesses, I knew things like that, but I just didn't realize this world was available to people that had not, I

guess grown-up rich, or didn't have some pedigree. The way I grew up I just didn't- didn't know it.

So going to San Francisco, one of the things that was incredibly inspiring was that I would meet people who were on paper, super successful, and then I would talk to them and I would hear their story, and some of them had stories like mine, where they grew up poor, and they didn't grow up with these opportunities, but they had just kind of through sheer determination, and obviously a good deal of luck, but just through being gritty and persistent, they had built these- these huge companies that did things that were at least kind of a net positive, maybe net neutral, and employed a lot of people, and were able to take care of their families, and I found that just awe inspiring. I didn't realize that existed, and I was like, oh, wow, these are my people. Like I always thought I was a weirdo growing up, that I had all these ideas, but this was actually ... It's a thing, like this is something you can do.

Whitney: Do you remember one person in particular that you really admired that really inspired you, a- a conversation or some moment?

Maren: Yeah, there was, uh, the CEO of a company that is called, uh, I think it's Climate Corp, or they might've changed their name. They sold to Monsanto for like \$1 billion or something, and I had met him through a VC, who I was asking just ... I wanted to talk to people that were smart, and I remember asking him like, "What is the one piece of advice that I should know?" because I was incredibly green. And he said, "To know what you don't know. Like focus ... Like over index on trying to- to understand what you're missing versus learning, or getting better at what you're good at," and that always stuck with me. So the idea of knowing what you don't know, and I feel like whenever I paid attention to that, I've done really well, and when I forgot to pay attention to that, when, you know, the humility goes away, when you think you know more than you do, that's when disaster strikes. So that was a really impactful little soundbite that always stuck with me.

Whitney: So at its largest, at its zenith, where was Zirtual?

Maren: So at its biggest we were doing, uh, we were on about a \$10 million run rate, and we had about 400, 450 people.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay. So when did you realize things were off-track? Was there a...

Maren: Really quickly, like it all happened very fast. And I probably realized it within the weekend that everything hit the fan, and again, um, as you know, that know what you don't know. I had not paid attention to things I should've paid attention to. The biggest thing was the unit economics. In San Francisco, there's a lot of good, but there's also a lot of, uh, groupthink in terms of grow at all costs, you know, you can always raise money if you're growing, and I think I kind of bought into that without really understanding what it meant. So we were growing, but we were ... Our unit economics were in the red. We were, you know growing, selling, adding more people, but every new user we added, cost us more than we made.

And that's most San Francisco, uh, that's most venture backed businesses for a time, but the problem is to do that, you have to have a pretty hefty war chest, and we didn't. Um, we kept just trying to get profitable, we didn't raise a lot of money considering how many people we had. So we literally grew broke, we got to a point where even though the demand was high, we ... our unit economics were upside down and when we realized it, we needed a bridge round, and the investors were kind of like, eh, they all got cold feet at

once, and because of that, we had to- to sell the- the assets of the company and let everyone go. So it was really unfortunate, but again, you learn a lot of things in retrospect.

Whitney: You learned a lot of things. You in- in, *The Hustle*, you said ... I'm going to read this quote, "Founder CEOs can often become a single fault point for their entire start-up, and when you mess up as a CEO, hundreds of people can lose their jobs."

Maren: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: "Have safety mechanisms in place, surround yourself with experienced advisers and don't be afraid to ask for help. Fake it till you make it works, until it doesn't."

Maren: Yes, agreed.

Whitney: So you did something unusual, um, after this happened is that you made sure that every employer received their due once the company folded. What did that look like?

Maren: Well, that's why we laid everybody off so abruptly, because we had about exactly enough in the bank to pay everyone what they were owed, um, we could've you know kept going for a few more weeks and taken the chance that we wouldn't have that. Tried to sell our self or tried to, you know, raise a down round, and you know some people said we should've, and maybe we should've. I don't know, but my thing was I didn't want to risk people not getting paid for the work they had done. Um, so yeah, that's- that's what that looked like. It said, "Hey, don't clock in tomorrow on Monday, we don't know if we can pay you. We can pay you for everything you've done up to this point, but we don't have any more than that, and we can't guarantee, you know, that there'll be a Hail Mary."

I mean so many times in the Silicon Valley stories, or you know there's the- there's the growth, and then there's a- a- almost disaster point where everything almost falls apart, but then at the very last minute, the protagonist kind of pulls through, and we obviously hope that was going to happen, uh, I specifically did, but I didn't want to risk people not getting paid for that.

Whitney: It's very admirable, and it's interesting as I listen to you say it. I was going to ask you if it was a hard decision, but as I listen to your voice, it sounds like it was a very easy decision for you to make. It hurt, but you knew what you needed to do.

Maren: Yeah, yeah, I mean it was, uh, one of the hardest decisions I've ever made, um, and even that, you know people were furious, and understandably so, but it- it seemed like the- the best of a lot of options.

Whitney: Yeah. What did you do, Maren, to recover from this? And- and just how did you feel, uh, what- what were those next few months like?

Maren: It was me and my co-founders, and a few of our- our OG people, um, kind of just I mean worked for free to get everything as wrapped up as we could. We wanted to make sure that there were unemployment claims, there were all this stuff, and to be able for those to go through, you still had to process those. So we stayed around to clean things up for the next few months, and the next few months were just a- a fog.

And then after that, um, I started kind of just reading a lot, focusing on, um, getting my- my mental health in a decent place because it was, you know, obviously pretty dark times there, you lose everything. Um, you lose your entire community, um, but I also had two ...

My mother and my brother, both worked for Zirtual. So uh, knowing that I let them down was also incredibly painful and my co-founders. So yeah, I think I just spent a lot of time getting into a decent head space mentally, and then from there, uh, I got a role where I was able to travel, and that was a godsend.

I was the COO for a- a remote co-living company, and so, I traveled around for about nine months to a year, helping them, and that just really helped kind of put my head back on straight, seeing different cultures, understanding that everything is not ... The world isn't you know start-ups in Silicon Valley, and that there's a lot of things going on that are harder than what I went through was helpful.

Whitney: So removing yourself, getting that perspective-

Maren: Totally, totally.

Whitney: You know as I'm listening to you talk, how many years ago with this now? Was this five years ago?

Maren: Mmm, it was August 2015, so-

Whitney: Four years ago-

Maren: Yeah, three and a half, four.

Whitney: It sounds like you've told this story many, many times. So it- it's something that you've- you've walked through, but I- I hear a lot of resilience in your voice, and anything that you learned from your parents or thoughts for people because you know resilience, this ability to just get pounded in the face, like major face plant, and get back up-

Maren: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And start over, and we're going to talk about your new business in just a minute. Any thoughts for people on what to do when they take a face plant, because when you're willing to disrupt yourself, when you're willing to do hard things, you are going to occasionally face plant. So any any advice you'd like to give to people?

Maren: A few months after, you know, Zirtual had collapsed and I was still just kind of recovering, I also went through a breakup of my- my long-term boyfriend, we were living together. So at some point, I was just like, oh, my gosh. I literally am at zero. It's like I have hit the bottom, like there is nothing else, and I went to LA, and was like staying in a friend's condo, and just kind of like laying on the floor.

I remember it one day, just like staring at the ceiling, and I realized, I was like, you know there's- there are two types of people in the world, and it sounds super corny to say this, because like there are people ... and you meet them every day, that are broken for a really big reason, or for maybe a reason that you don't, you know, you find silly, but there are people that have had experiences in life, and they've let it break them. And then there's people that no matter what they've gone through, you know, small or huge, have used those experiences to make them stronger, and they have scars, and you know, it doesn't mean they didn't happen, but they refused to be broken by what's happened to them, and they just you know keep getting back up, and I realized that I didn't want to be a person that was broken by things, and I just wanted to be a person that no matter what came at me, I would always get back up, and if you make that choice and kind of take that

ownership, even when things happen that are completely outside of your control, it gives you more control in a weird way.

Whitney: Yeah. You know one of the things I- I'm thinking as you're sharing this with me is- is some of my moments where, you know, I've had businesses blow up, and I've been fired, and- and those moments where you just feel and- and I might be projecting onto you, but just feel completely bereft, just-

Maren: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Just desolate, um, is the word that comes to mind. I know that there were times where I felt like, I just had people who were willing to listen to me talk and tell the story, and I needed to tell the story a lot of times just to kind of have a, you know,

Maren: Process-

Whitney: Thought. Yeah, psychologist call you in to have someone to bear witness to your story-

Maren: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Did you find that you had a number of people who were just willing to listen to you talk through and process what had happened?

Maren: So I did have close friends and family that were super supportive, but I would say when things happened, I don't tend to talk about them as much, uh, in terms of like repeating it to friends, repeating it to other people, I like to process it internally. So I wrote a lot, and I wrote things that I never published. I wrote some things I did publish, and that is what really helped me, kind of coming to my, like that bearing witness is a great, great sentence because repeating something over enough until I understood it, and I was like, oh, okay. And I think one of the biggest things was taking responsibility, um, and it probably only took me maybe a few weeks, but for the first few weeks I was like these forking investors, like I cannot believe they didn't stand up. Like I looked at other companies that have, you know, made way worse mistakes and they've always funded them, and I was like, if I had have been a guy, someone told me to my face, like you would've already had your B round, it's sad the way the world works, yada, yada.

But after a few weeks, I was like this isn't going to serve me at all, and instead I was like, what did I do? What are every mistake I made? And I outlined that, and I wrote that, and I thought about it, and after, that helped me heal and move forward, so again, kind of that idea of extreme ownership.

Whitney: Mmm. Very wise, Maren. Very, very wise. Okay, so you went through this experience, it's 2014, um, you have time, you're processing it, you're journaling. You're taking, as you just said, extreme ownership of it. You are the COO for a company, and you have this opportunity to travel and help, and serve, and- and remove yourself from- from the, um, the pond that you're swimming in. And then in August 2017, so a year and a half ago now, you moved to New York City and you launched AVRA Talent-

Maren: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Tell us about this business that you've launched, um, how you got the idea, and what it- what it does?

Maren: Sure, um, so as I was doing a- a few interim COO roles for Roam, for a company called roam.com I was testing out different business opportunity ideas, and I had always fallen into businesses without doing a lot of due diligence, and this time I was like, okay, I have the time and bandwidth. I'm going to look up four businesses over pretty much two years. So put six months into each of them.

As I was doing that, and I was doing some consulting, um, the interim COO work, and then uh, replacing myself and looking at what am I really good at? And as I needed to make money, I was like okay, well, I'm pretty good at hiring. So I would work with people and build hiring systems, and AVRA started just as a consulting opportunity, but then I started to realize, even though I was ... I hired 6, 700 people in my life, I was like, I have a lot of experience here. I wasn't good at every aspect of the recruiting, like what the recruiter role, and I started breaking out that role into b- these five distinct disciplines, and hiring people who worked remotely to augment me.

And as that began to happen, I realized like, oh, man, like this is a pretty big business opportunity. And then I was talking to an advisor in, uh, New York, and I was telling him about all the different businesses I was looking at, and my recruiting consulting, he made an amazing point. He's like, "Listen," he's like, "You've got a \$5 million MBA in the human capital space, and he's like it would be a pity to waste that on something that you don't have a lot of experience at, and you don't necessarily have the same passion." He's like, "You've always had passion for helping people find work, and you know, how could you leverage that now?"

And that just hit home, I was like, oh, my gosh ... This is the space. Like this is the space that I can spend the rest of my life trying to figure out, and I'll be fascinated by. And that's- that's kind of how AVRA started.

Whitney: That's so interesting. I ... There are a few things that you said, this idea of ... I mean here you are, you're, uh, ... I'm not exactly sure how old you are, but you're either in your late 20s, early 30s, and you've hired 700 people you just said, that's some serious expertise, so that's really interesting. And then your advisor's suggestion to you that ... or indication to you that you've- you've gotten a \$5 million MBA, so why wouldn't you go out and leverage that? So really-

Maren: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Interesting stuff. Alright, so talk to us a little bit about how does a company engage with you, that has decided, um, we want to get better at hiring, and which part of the hiring do you feel like is really your sweet spot?

Maren: So we focus on growing companies that are hiring their first few people, whether it's sales, operation, marketing, product. We don't do any engineering roles, um, that's something that is a completely different beast, and I think there's people that are great at it, and I tip my hat to them, but it's- it's a different kind of thing, and so, we handle about 80% of the hiring process, and the way we do that is, like I mentioned, it's typically a recruiter does full cycle, which is everything. We break up the recruiter role into these five distinct disciplines, and those disciplines are strategy, domain expertise, interviewing, sourcing, and coordination. And that allows us to have a full team of 3 to 5 people running in tandem on any role, and it makes the process more thorough, it makes the- the process faster, and it also allows us to cast a wider net, and then the really big benefit to these companies that are hiring their first few people, the first few ops people, their first few salespeople, their first head of product is that we have these domain experts who are experts in their field.

So, someone who has 15 years in product and has been a VP, and is now building a- a company in the healthcare space, but knows product from you know end-to-end. They will actually meet with our clients, with the team and say, "What do you think you want?" And the clients will tell them, and they'll be like, "Alright, this is actually probably what you want, or this is the type of profile you're looking for," and because ... and I- I suffered from this with Zirtual. I tried to hire a few roles, like the CMO, and a COO, and I did a terrible job in it, and it was because I didn't know what I didn't know.

I didn't know what- what success looks like? If I had to have domain experts who had come in and say, "Hey, Maren, you have a B2C company, this is what a great marketing person looks like. This is what they should be doing in the next 12 months, that would've been a game changer for me, or you don't need a COO, Maren, you need a finance person and you need a head of operations." And that's what we- we do with our clients. We look to partner with them and help them fill those critical roles from, you know, where there are 5 or 10 people, getting them to 50, and then handing off to an internal talent team.

Whitney: So which is your expertise? You said there are five different pieces of that, which is yours?

Maren: Mine is strategy-

Whitney: Strategy.

Maren: So our strategists are people that have really had, uh, I would say, a lot of experience hiring across a variety of functions, and a variety of stages of company. So that's just like, you're setting the- the strategy of this is what the employment climate looks like, this is what the city looks like, these are what we need to think about, this is how- how ... where the balance of outbound versus inbound.

Whitney: Hmm, fascinating. So, um, you've been in business for a year and a half now, and- and you work with companies that have about 10 people, and are setting them up to grow ... or maybe even five, setting them up to grow to their- their 50, um,

Maren: Yeah, I would say it's usually ... We're usually working with companies that are between 5 and 25 people, and getting them to, you know, 50 to 75, and then usually at that stage is when it's really good to bring on an internal talent person. We love hiring for internal recruiters, and then kind of handing off the processes to them.

Whitney: You said something a minute ago, I just want to clarify. So you talked about the domain expertise, and you'll get a product person sitting at the table. Do you have a full-time product person or do you bring in experts and do sort of an ad hoc model-

Maren: We bring in experts-

Whitney: You do-

Maren: Exactly-

Whitney: Interesting-

Maren: Yeah, so I think it's really important for a domain expert to be someone who's actively in the field. I'm a domain expert for let's say, uh, distributed operations. I can come in, I can look at what a company needs and say, "This is the kind of person you need to hire." That being said, um, we'll have Tamara who's a domain expert in product, or someone who's a

domain expert in B2B sales, which is totally different than a domain expert in B2C sales. And it's because they're not only ... They started you know at the bottom of the totem pole, like all of us. And then they've had that 10 or 15 years expertise, they really have a holistic understanding of what a founder needs in those first people, those first hires.

Whitney: A- Again now, these are people who are not working for AVRA full-time, they have another day job, and then they're moonlighting for you. It's a- it's a side hustle, where you bring them in as- as part of a SWAT team.

Maren: Exactly, exactly. So they're doing consulting, they're giving us a few hours, uh, you know, here and there. And then they are either founders themselves, or they are expert consultants, or they are you know directors or VPs at a growing company.

Whitney: Really interesting, really interesting business idea. So you talked ... you- you alluded to this earlier. You- you used the word extreme ownership, and I think this is something ... This is a term of art. So could you say to us specifically what you mean when you say extreme ownership.

Maren: I mean just taking ownership for everything in your life, whether or not, you directly caused it. So if something happens and it's out of your control, not beating yourself up about it. You know, if there's a hurricane, you can't blame yourself, but you can say, "Alright, this is now the situation and I'm going to own as much of it as possible, and I'm going to own rebuilding my home, and I'm going to own the- that this is going to be, you know, this was financially disastrous, and now, my plan of you know saving and buying X, Y, Z, I'm actually going to have to double down on my work."

It's like whatever happens, there's ... At the end of the day, it's just there's not an excuse. It's even if something happens that outside of your control, it's still not an excuse, and extreme ownership is actually one of the core values at AVRA, where that something, or you know something can happen totally out of our- out of our control. It can be a client, it can be you know the job market, but it doesn't mean we're going to come at excuses, instead we're going to come at it from a place of here are these solutions, here are the opportunities.

Whitney: What does AVRA stand for? Where did you get that name?

Maren: So, it's kind of the four stages of hiring someone. It's attract, vet, reference check, and then acquire. And those are all very distinct stages within the hiring process, and usually people leave out like either one or more. They don't focus on creating a good employer brand that will attract people, they don't do the vetting process to really run people through a thorough understanding of not only their motivations, but their skills and their personal qualities, and then there's reference check. Most people don't do reference checking, it's such an amazing you know easy win, and then really courting someone when you're trying to acquire them, selling them on the vision, selling them on how this aligns with their life and their goals.

Whitney: You're a big journal writer, and you've mentioned in certain, um, public domains that you're working on a book. How is that coming? Are you still going to pursue that? Where are you on- on writing?

Maren: Yeah, so I'm still in the midst of that. I've been outlining the framework and it's been evolving. Now, it's kind of been a process where it's breaking down how to delegate because I think before you hire or grow a team, understanding the art of delegation is so vital, and it's a lot more intensive than I think people realize, um, it's just a different shift, it

really is a mind shift to go from doing it yourself, to who's the best person to do it, and then delegating in a framework that works, and then from there, being able to hire people that can fill those roles. The, you know, the right person for the right role.

So I'm still in the process of it, and one thing I really want to make sure is, I want to be interviewing people, and I've already started interviewing people who are experts at their field to see what delegation hiring looks like for them. I don't think any business book that doesn't take into consideration other people's opinions is ... it's like a little bit self-aggrandizing because we're not reinventing the wheel, and the- the most people you can pull from to see the- the actual specifics, usually, you know you triangulate to something that's- that's good.

Whitney: Alright, so you're writing a book then, uh, you said it's the process of delegating hiring, that's what your book's about?

Maren: Process of delegation-

Whitney: Oh-

Maren: The delegation framework, and then from there, how do you hire, uh, I like to call it "10 X'ers". Like how do you hire people that when you handover work to them, will 10X the- the input? So either they'll 10X their salary from sales, they'll 10X your productivity, uh, you- you hire a designer full-time and they're 10X better than the consultant you work with.

Whitney: So this is a, uh, a manifesto of sorts?

Maren: I mean I like to think of it just as putting down all the stuff I've learned over the years, and hopefully it's helpful to someone.

Whitney: Is manifesto to grand for you?

Maren: It seems, yeah-

Whitney: (laughs). Well,

Maren: It's like when people call themselves gurus-

Whitney: (laughs).

Maren: I always just shiver-

Whitney: I'll call you a guru, and I'll call you ... I'll call it a manifesto, but you can call it just writing down what you know. So any other, uh, thoughts that you have for us that you would like to share?

Maren: No, just I think it's always important for people to keep getting back up. Uh, it's you know if you go up to bat often enough, you'll- you'll hit something, no matter how bad you are at baseball (laughs).

Whitney: Two last questions, uh, what are you reading right now or listening to that's interesting and engaging for you?

Maren: I just read a book that was fabulous called, *The Business of Expertise*. And that is very specific to expert consultants, and uh, companies that are you know expert consultant firms. I loved how- how niche it was.

Whitney: Hmm, interesting. It sounds interesting, and- and what's fun about it is it's a book that I've never heard of. So maybe other people will not have heard of it either.

Maren: Yeah, that one is excellent.

Whitney: And for your business of AVRA, um, what will in ... Two years from now, what will success look like for you? You're- you won't be done, but what- what do you want it to look like in two years?

Maren: Instead of two years, I'll go- I'll go a little bit farther. So where we are right now is we're an agency that works with start-ups. What I think about all the time and what gets me up in the morning is the idea of solving the matching problem between people that are looking for work and companies. I- I have this idea of like a universal matching platform that becomes an equalizer in terms of talent and where you are in the world, um, and so that's my big vision, and that's what I'm always slowly working towards, and then I know kind of my 3, 6, 9 months, um, but it's hard for me to guess two years. I kind of can know the next year, and then end goal.

Whitney: That makes sense, that's logical. Maren, or Maren Kate Donovan. Thank you so much for being with us, it's been a- a real treat to hear your experience, and thank you for being so candid, it's- it's much appreciated, and I know people will really learn and be inspired by you.

Maren: Absolutely, thank you so much for having me.

It continues to fascinate me that in many cases, the grit and work ethic that we see in entrepreneurs and disruptors has its genesis in people who are first or second generation immigrants. The constraints that come in having limited options, as Maren said, force you to get scrappy and when founding a startup, there really isn't a better quality.

We recently talked to Tasha Eurich about self-awareness and I see so much of what we talked about in Maren. The transition from asking "why" questions to asking "what" questions. As Maren talked about how she processed all of the things that happened with Zirtual, she did it in a way that aligns with what Tasha recommended - What went well? What didn't go well? How can I be smarter next time?

That self-reflection and self-awareness is coming into play in such a beautiful way as Maren now helps companies find the right people to help companies grow. And she has the self-awareness to know she doesn't know it all, so she brings in domain experts to make sure her clients get clear on what kinds of jobs they actually need done before they start hiring. It's a fantastic idea and plays directly to her distinctive strengths, leveraging her \$5 million MBA in human capital.

Practical tip:

Has there been a time in your life or career where you've taken a risk and felt like it was a face plant instead of a success? If you haven't yet processed it, take some time in the next couple of days and answer these questions - What went well? What didn't go well? How can I be smarter next time?

If you like or love the podcast, and want to get better faster, we have a free mini-course based on some of our episodes that will help you do that. You can sign up by visiting whitneyjohnson.com/change

Thank you again to Maren Kate Donovan for being our guest, thank you to Ralph Campbell for connecting us to Maren – thank you Ralph for being a loyal listener! Thank you to sound engineer Melissa Rutty, 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.