

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 135: ERIC SCHURENBERG

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

In anticipation of the re-release of my book, *Disrupt Yourself* with Harvard Business Press - available for pre-order now at [whitneyjohnson.com/disrupt](http://whitneyjohnson.com/disrupt) - we are continuing our look at the seven-point framework of personal disruption. Today our interview focuses on accelerant number seven - be discovery driven.

As you take the right risks and play where no one else is playing, you'll quickly find that you are figuring things out as you go. You're blazing a new trail, a new path, you'll need to pivot as new data emerges. It's okay to end up in a place you didn't expect.

To illustrate this accelerant, we're talking to Eric Schurenberg today. Eric is the CEO of Mansueto Ventures, the media holding company that is home to Inc. and Fast Company. Prior to becoming CEO, Eric was the president and Editor-in-Chief of Inc. magazine.

**WHITNEY** Eric Schurenberg, I am so delighted to be interviewing today. Welcome to the podcast.

**ERIC** Nice to be here, Whitney.

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

**ERIC** (laughs) I grew up in a suburb right outside Cincinnati, Ohio, and um, when I was asked that question in first grade, uh, it was the first time, really, I remember being asked that, was in a classroom. In the Catholic school that I attended, the nun asked everyone in the class what they wanted to be when they grew up, and everybody knew what the right answer was. All the girls said they wanted to be nuns, and all the boys said they wanted to be priests with one exception of a guy who wanted to be a policeman.

But I hedged my bets and said that of course I wanted to be a priest, but first I wanted to be a fighter pilot.

WHITNEY (laughs)

ERIC So, I was already bargaining with God-

WHITNEY (laughs)

ERIC ... and (laughs) that, that dream to be a fighter pilot went away, uh, the priest thing, uh, ended pretty much for everybody as soon as they got out of that, that nun's classroom.

WHITNEY (laughs)

ERIC And, uh, as I got into college I really fell in love with the theater, so I, so, uh, I don't know if anyone can say they want to be an actor when they grow up, because not growing up is kind of essential to that career choice. But that's what I did, uh, when I left college I went into show business for about six years, uh, and then decided I really did need to grow up and get another job.

WHITNEY So, did you study acting in college, or what did you study in college?

ERIC Yeah, I was a theater arts major, which meant there was a little bit of acting going on. A little bit of practical, uh, instruction, but mainly it meant I read a lot of plays. It was a literary course as much of an- as anything else.

WHITNEY So, Eric, what was your favorite role to play as an actor? What was your favorite, favorite part ever?

ERIC My favorite part ever was to play the boy in a play called Equus, which was a very big play in the 80's, and was revived on Broadway, uh, relatively recently about five or six years ago, with Daniel Radcliffe, the Harry Potter star in the, in the lead role.

And I saw the play when I was on a study abroad program in London, so it was set... an English play, and it was, uh, down on the West End big Broadway stage there, and I said I want to play that role. And it's not that often that the things that you want to have happen, happened in show business, but eventually I did get that role.

WHITNEY Wow! Okay, and so did you, did you, were you on a- were, were you off Broadway, or on Broadway in that play?

ERIC In that play I played that in a regional theater-

WHITNEY Okay.

ERIC ... in Milwau- in Milwaukee.

WHITNEY Okay, got it.

ERIC The other good thing about the play was that the, um, the, the boy, uh, has a girlfriend, and that, that actress ended up as my wife. We were married for 35 years.

WHITNEY Ah! That is so sweet. So she was in the play with you?

ERIC That's right.

WHITNEY Oh, okay, so acting did bear fruit for you.

ERIC Exactly, yeah, so you can't say I came away with nothing from show business. As a matter of fact, not only did I get a wife out of that play, but I also got one of the best cute meet stories of all time. And maybe you've heard this before but, um, because, uh, uh, our, our mentor, Marshall Goldsmith, usually, uh, wheedles it out of me whenever he introduces me to someone. But, um, Equus, for those of you are familiar with plays that were popular in the 80's, has a nude scene in it, and the nude scene is between the boy that I played and the girl that my wife-to-be played. So it gave me the opportunity to say that, I met my wife, uh, first time I saw her we were naked across the stage and it was love at first sight.

WHITNEY Oh my goodness, wow! Wow! Okay, you did acting for six years, you met your wife, you had some really great experiences, um, and then you had a moment where you realized you weren't going to be an actor. Do you remember when that was?

ERIC Yeah, a couple of things came together, um, one was that I was starting to have some success in, in showbiz and I was working a lot in regional theater so New Brunswick, New Jersey, Pittsburgh Public Theater, uh, the Philadelphia Annenberg Center, and things like that. And, um, I began to see what the life was really like, and it wasn't what I wanted. It was too much of a gypsy life, and I wanted to have a more conventional life with a, with a family and a career that had a more of a through line to it, uh, uh, more of a sense of progress. And so I decided it, uh, it was time for us to go, and my wife remained in acting, so, you know, we still had one foot in the theater, and um, you could say that our household was, was not big enough for two actors. And so one of us had to go and the, and the better actor stayed in the business.

WHITNEY So she stayed acting, so throughout her life, she stayed in acting?

ERIC That's right.

WHITNEY So you realized that this was not... the actor's life was not for you, and then you decided to go in and get a job, another kind of job, cause obviously you got paid to do that, but what was your first job, ex-acting and, um, how did you get that job?

ERIC I noticed, in show business, that the people who had a leg up in getting hired, were people who were part of an old boy network, was part of a network, and, uh, they had gone to Yale Drama School or Juilliard, or something like that, and so when I decided that I should get into publishing, I thought, I looked around and said, "so, where's the network there that I could get into by going to school?" And after some investigation it appeared that my best choice, uh, and most efficient choice would be to go to something called The Publishing Procedures Course, which was taught at that time at Radcliffe College.

So I went there, and, uh, it was indeed kind of a meat market for young talent, uh, professionals from New York or Boston would come to Radcliffe and lecture, and, and then people who did good homework for them would come away with job offers, and that's what happened to me.

So I ended up at Time Life Books, which was an offshoot of the biggest magazine company in the world at the time, Time Life-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC ... and, um, uh, it, the Time Life books was a lot like a magazine business, a new book in a series would be published every six weeks or so. And, um, there were a number of series that I worked on, but the first job that I had, was a science series for, aimed at teenagers, and that was fascinating and a great way to be introduced to what was really cool about being a journalist, which is the ability to learn something new, uh, every month.

WHITNEY Hmm. So, Eric, when did you realize that you could write? Because, I mean, had you written a lot in college? Cause I mean, like you, you come out of the... You're like, "I'm not going to be an actor anymore. I understand that in order to get a job that I want, I need to figure out where the networks are," and so you did that sleuthing. You figured out, let's go to Radcliffe, but how did you know you wanted to do something writing related?

ERIC All through school, people had told me I was a pretty good writer-

WHITNEY Ah!

ERIC ... so that's what I thought, uh, "oh well, this is a talent I can exploit, I hope."

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC And I turned out to be right.

WHITNEY I remember listening to you do an interview, and you talked about doing fact checking.

ERIC Yes, okay, yes. So my first, my first employment was at that science... Time Life Books, at the science series for kids-

WHITNEY Okay.

ERIC ... where I did everything, and when I finally transitioned from Time Life Books to magazines, I came in as a fact checker at Money Magazine.

WHITNEY Oh, okay.

ERIC So that was a job, few of which still exists anymore, but it was a- but it was the entry level job for journalists in those days, and, uh, you took a story that someone else had written, you recalled all the sources that that, um, writer had used-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC ... you know, live sources and documentary sources, and checked that what that writer said was correct. And basically by retracing the steps of a more experienced journalist, you learned how the craft was done, was a great way to learn.

So, from fact checker the career ladder was to go to writer. So you've checked facts and you can essentially audition for the role of writer by writing files for the writer who would eventually be by-lined. So, you do the research, you write a file and, um, the writer, if they're a generous person, would say that this was really well written and alert editors at the magazine that this reporter, fact checker, seems to have some writing talent and ought to be given, uh, some small jobs.

And that's, that's how it went for me. I, um, remember writing a file about a story on how to sell your house for, uh, a talented writer named Diane Harris, who later became the editor in chief at Money, uh, and a good friend of mine, and she immediately praised me to the editor who she reported to, and out of that came my first, um, my first assignment.

WHITNEY Mm. So, it was her generosity that really made a difference for you early on-

ERIC Absolutely, yes. Absolutely.

WHITNEY Yeah. Did she know that? Have you told her that?

ERIC No, I don't think I ever talked to her about it specifically, but she knows it. She definitely knows it, and I was able to pay her back when I became the editor in chief of Money, and she had been out of the business for a while. I hired her back as my deputy, and after I left Money, uh, she became the editor in chief.

WHITNEY Wow! What a lovely pas de deux (laughs).

ERIC Yeah, yes it was, wasn't it?

WHITNEY (laughs) Yeah, that really is. Okay, all right. So you did... You, um, so did Time Life, you went to Money magazine, then were... What did you do after that?

ERIC Uh, from Money, uh, I went to CBS Interactive and started a website for CBS called CBS Moneywatch-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC ... uh, and from there landed at Inc. as the editor of the website, uh, Inc.com. I got that job through, eh, the way most people do, through networking. Some of the writers who had written for me at Moneywatch were also writers at Inc, and, um, let, let the person who was the president of Inc. at the time know that I was in the market when he had a role to fill at, uh, Inc.com-

WHITNEY Wow.

ERIC ... and I got the job, and that was eight years ago, and, uh, so from the website at Inc.com I became the editor of both the website and the magazine, and eventually the president of the magazine, and eventually the CEO of both titles, uh, that are owned by the holding company, Mansueto Ventures. Both Inc and its sister, Fast Company.

WHITNEY Okay, so we're going to talk about those in just a minute. Um, uh, eh, cause that's quite a meteoric rise. Okay, so I have to just comment really quickly, I was doing some sleuthing, and you wrote this fun piece that, um, I want to just read because I think it's, it's, it's a piece that, uh, online, and it... And here's what you wrote, it's about if the market drops precipitously, which everyone thinks it's going to.

So, when the Dow drops significantly, your stomach tightens, your palms sweat, and you begin to envision yourself living your last days in a cardboard box. Do you remember writing this?

ERIC No, no, but it sounds great. Keep going -

WHITNEY (laughs) Okay, yeah. I'll keep going. With those thoughts dancing in your, you can do one or two things; you can give into the panic and make an emotional decision, which you will probably regret, or you can do something constructive with your time. And here's the first thing you say to do, which I just love, um; number one, go into your bathroom and grasp the edges of the sink with both hands, looking deeply into the mirror, and repeat three times: "I was ready for this, I can handle this." Why do you say this? Because bear markets are the price you pay when you invest in equities and angle for returns that you expect to be higher than bonds.

Do you remember it now?

ERIC Yes (laughs).

WHITNEY (laughs) It's so clever, and as a person who's, you know, been an equity analyst, I just, and, and also having invested, I remember, especially 2008, where I did something akin to this, but I just think it's so clever, the way just try to get people like, "get a grip, people," like you... This is something you, you, you knew was part of the bargain.

ERIC Yes. This is what you signed up for.

WHITNEY Yeah. So, so Eric, how did... Were you surprised when you were, started to really enjoy writing about money? Like is that something you expected to really take to?

ERIC I had a moment as the editor of Inc, in which I, I, I had a financial conference to attend, which happened to be in New Brunswick, New Jersey, which was down the street from the old theater where I had once worked. And I, so like, I took a- a quick break from the, the rubber chicken dinner, and walked down to the theater, and I don't know if this ever happened to you, Whitney, but I was absolutely gripped by laughter. It was a kind of philosophical laughter, it was like, "how on Earth did I get from there, that theater-

WHITNEY (laughs)

ERIC ... a George street theater, to this financial conference?" It seems so improbable, and if you had told the actor, Eric, uh, on stage playing an emotionally disturbed cockney kid (laughs) that he would be the editor in chief of a financial magazine, he would have thought you were totally crazy. You know?

WHITNEY That's so great, keep going. (laughs)

ERIC Anything that is, um, challenging and worth doing, and that has the potential to make life better for people, and that requires mastery can be turned into an interesting topic to write about. And the thing about money is that it's not just, how do you get 25 more basis points return on your bond fund? It's about the psychology of, of how you handle yourself as an investor, how you value money as a person and what you intend to do with it, and then to really gets down very quickly to your values and your character.

And that kind of is what I began to write about, and Money magazine, I get told by people, is not about, um, Wall Street, and it's not about analyzing mutual funds. It's about helping people realize their dreams and helping people manage their emotions, um, even if that means grabbing the edge of the sink, and screaming into the mirror. And it's about coming to grips with their values, um, so I- the mission of Money was not, uh, it, it, it is, as I tried to explain it to the, the staff was not about, um, making people richer, it's about making them happier.

WHITNEY      Hmm. I love that. You know, it's something, um, that I thought a lot about over the last couple of years, is we've had, you know, lots of... Well, you didn't know this, but I'm telling you, we've had lots of ups and downs financially, and, and really looking at how we feel about money, and what our relationship with money is, and, and then doing some family history, and discovering that we've had a number of people going back several generations who ended up in the poor house-

ERIC            Hmm.

WHITNEY      ... and how there're all these really interesting patterns around, um, around it, and our relationship with it and I think, um, it's just fascinating to hear you, um, talk about this and, and really trying to get people to go to the psychological aspect of it, and it is actually a very, very deep topic. And often times people are less, or more reluctant to talk about money than they are relationships, it's, it's like one of the biggest taboos out there. And so it's just fascinating that you discovered this, this interesting angle for i-i-i- into, into the human psyche and the human experience through money, and probably quite unexpected, I suspect.

ERIC            Uh, Jack Bogle, who recently died, he was the founder of the Vanguard mutual fund company, which is now a huge financial institution, but was uniquely positioned as one of the most ethical players in the market, and rightly so. And Bogle, in his book about money, introduces it with a story about Joseph Heller, the novelist who wrote *Catch 22* among other books. And, uh, Heller is at a party and some rich uncle [inaudible 00:24:55], and he is introduced to a hedge fund manager, and, uh, the hedge fund manager leaves the, the person who did the introduction says, "that man has more money than you will ever see in your life, Mr. Heller," and he says, "yes, but I have something that he will never have, and that is enough."

WHITNEY      Hmm.

ERIC            Recognizing what is enough is, uh, a real key to having a healthy relationship with money.

WHITNEY      Mm, that's good. What's the book that you were referring to?

ERIC            Uh, the book is called *Enough*-

WHITNEY      Oh!

ERIC            ... by Jack Bogle.

WHITNEY      Okay. It's called *Enough*, well there you go. Okay, so you leave Money, you go to Inc. Talk to us about how you landed there.

ERIC            I... Through networking, but what I realized when I, when I landed here, very quickly was that with what my, the reputation that Inc had, that I had noticed from, um, my career in, in journalism, was that Inc was a magazine where writing was valued, and it was considered a pioneer when it launched, uh, in 1979, as, um, uh, a business niche magazine, and it began a wave of magazines that were not general interest magazines, but magazines for people with really specific interests.

And Inc, as, as you would look, the listeners may know, is focused entirely on, on entrepreneurs and founders, so the people who wanna become that kind of business, someone who creates, uh, a great business where nothing existed before. And, um, that was, well that impression was, was all true. The novelty of a niche magazine had worn off by the time I got here, but what I was not prepared for was how remarkable the audience of Inc is. So these are the people who make

a free enterprise economy go. They're the people who start things, and my previous experience with business as a editor, and writer and editor at Money, was in the public markets. So you're dealing with companies that are giant, and that are already decades old for the most part, and, um, when people talk about investors in the Stock Market being the source of capital for, you know, innovation and free enterprise, and so forth, it's not literally true. The people who buy stocks in the, uh, on the public markets are contributing to the creation of value and innovation only indirectly by helping to set a price for, um, what equity is worth in a business. But the people who actually cause innovation and create jobs, and have break- bring to light breakthroughs in technology and, uh, in customer service and products are the entrepreneurs.

So suddenly, I had gone from being at this arm's length removed from the people who make the economy go, to talking to them directly, and at Inc events meeting them face-to-face. It was a weird change from writing about, uh, people who were sort of God-like investors and had returns that my readers at Money magazine could not aspire to, and shouldn't aspire to, to being a publication where the people you wrote about were also the people who were likely to read the publication. And where the people who read the publication had a real experience of learning things from the publication that helped make them successful.

So when you met people from Inc at Inc events, you realize they love this publication. They think that we helped make them rich, and they're- they may well be right, that we maybe gave them information that made a difference in how they ran their business. But even more importantly, we made them feel like they were part of a fraternity of really brave and, and innovative people, and part of a movement that was really important to free enterprise, and helped them get through the really tough times that every entrepreneur faces.

So we gave them a, I hope, and still give them, uh, a s- uh, stories that inspire them to keep going when, when things get rough as they always do for, for small businesses.

WHITNEY

You know what, Eric? I feel that when I read your magazine, I do feel that. I have the experience. There's this, this, this feeling of comradery and this feeling of, um, community and, uh, uh, uh, and I can absolutely sense that what you're saying... I know that you know this from all your research, but that it is really a magazine where people go to, to learn from and develop and grow, and also to find their tribe.

So, so yeah, I feel that. And so my question to you is, how does it feel to you that you get to be a part of this?

ERIC

Oh! It's great! Um, I, when I landed here and realized what was special about Inc, I thought I found what, "where have I... Where's? Where have I been my whole career?" Wall Street is, is fine and intellectually challenging and, um, the people who succeed there are, uh, very smart and well connected and always very well dressed. But entrepreneurs are, are where it happens, and the stories that they have to tell that we get to frame for them as, as writers are just so much more interesting, it's so much more important. And I just felt like, "wow, thi- I have, I have arrived."

WHITNEY

Yah. Yeah, so you have this interesting bird's eye view now of entrepreneurs, I mean you're constantly scanning the environment, and I remember hearing you talk, um, well there, actually I have two questions for you. Number one is, how does someone become an Inc 5000 honoree, because I think we have some people listening, who are like, "ha! I wanna, I wanna be a part of that club," so what does that look like, and how do I, how do I do that?

So that's my first question, but then the second one is, um, I remember hearing you say that you had done a, um, done survey with Gallup, and looking at what kind of distinguishing traits the entrepreneurs had that are on your list, and I would love for you to talk about that, so that

people can be thinking about, "okay do I have these traits? And, and if I don't, how do I get more of them?" So love to have you kind of riff on, on those, those different questions for a moment.

ERIC Okay, all right good. Well, the, to answer the first question about how you get on the Inc 5000 is you build a company that grows rapidly. It, the Inc 5000 is a strictly quantitative ranking. You, you know I hate to, hate to say it, but, um, you can't get on the Inc 5000 by taking an editor out to lunch, or, or sending them mass notes, um, by email. That-

WHITNEY That's a good thing!

ERIC (laughs)

WHITNEY That's a good thing!

ERIC It is a good thing, it is a good thing, except for my lunch budget.

WHITNEY (laughs) You don't have people taking you out to lunch. (laughs)

ERIC I would like to say I never have to pay for lunch, but that's not true. The Inc 5000 is strictly by the numbers. So it's all your company's growth rate over three years-

WHITNEY Okay.

ERIC ... and, uh, that's it. And you have to verify it, um, companies that you apply-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC ... you let us know, and you have to, you can't, you can't just tell us what the numbers are, you have to verify it by showing us your tax returns or some other method of verification.

WHITNEY Okay.

ERIC So it's rigorous and quantitative. And, um-

WHITNEY Meritocracy for the win, we love it!

ERIC Yeah. That's right, it is. When you, when you get on the Inc 5000, you know that everyone else got there fair and square.

WHITNEY Yeah.

ERIC Uh, and, um, the, the traits that we found when we had a Gallup survey of Inc 5000 honorees, uh, which we repeated, uh, in last year's Inc 5000 by the way. Uh, and got the same result. Our, well there are about 22 different traits that Gallup had decided were important traits to, um, success in business and, you know, the included, um, salesmanship and networking, and other things that you can well imagine. And in most of those categories, the Inc 5000 honorees performed much better than average business people. But there were three in which they performed extraordinarily better by a factor of four or five times than average business people. And those were; willingness to take risk, business focus and, um, resilience. So to the- the pneumonic that I use is guts, focus and grit-

WHITNEY     Hmm, okay.

ERIC           ... on top... Now, about guts, uh, it's obvious why being willing to take risk is a, a, a handy attribute for entrepreneurs, but I, you want to distinct between reckless risks and calculated risks.

WHITNEY     Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC           Um, you can't innovate, you can't start a company without putting your finances, your, your family, your, your sleep patterns at risk, but, but entrepreneurs who succeed tend to be very calculated about it, and weigh the upside against the, risks that you're taking.

                  On, um, um, however, it, speaking as a journalist, I have to say that the guts part is the part that gives you the best stories, because there's always some near-death experience that entrepreneurs go through that they bounce back from.

                  There, there's one that I, I tell a lot, uh, which was one of the first stories I encountered as an editor at, at Inc, and it just stuck with me. It's the story about a company called J. Hilburn-

WHITNEY     Hmm.

ERIC           ... which was based out in Dallas, and made, uh, bespoke shirts, which had sold over the Internet. Um, it's... The company's still going strong, it's, but it, it's not by any means a household name. It was founded by a former Wall Street bond trader, uh, and he, uh, you know, had done his research and decided that he, you know, this was, uh, a market opportunity. But like anyone who goes into, um, uh, it, uh, you know, a startup situation, things just didn't work out that well. Like the shirts he made, um, the supplier had been not quite forthright about the quality of the clothing, so they didn't survive a couple of washings, buttons fell off them, and, you know, in the first years of his business, he, his returns outpaced his revenue, and things were going pretty badly, it-

WHITNEY     So his losses, his losses were greater than his revenue?

ERIC           Yeah, uh-huh (affirmative).

WHITNEY     Yeah.

ERIC           Yeah.

WHITNEY     Okay, okay.

ERIC           And he was, um, uh, the bank would wanted to foreclose on his house, the school had, the private school where his kids were attending, was, was threatening to kick, kick the kids out, cause he wasn't making his tuition payments. And as all this stuff was coming to a head, he got a call from his old Wall Street firm, and they were offering him a contract. They wanted him back, and they offered him what's called a 3x3 contract, which is a guaranteed \$3,000,000 and a three-year commitment, and he looked at his wife and he said, "no."

WHITNEY     Wow.

ERIC           Wow! This, these are the people I wanna write about.

WHITNEY     Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC I took guts and it took confidence in his business model, and the sense that he would eventually turn things around, and eventually he did. Money came through, he got a new supplier, the business thrived and, um-

WHITNEY And he made the Inc 5- 5000?

ERIC And he made the Inc 5000, and he sold eventually to a private equity company.

WHITNEY Wow. Okay, so you talked about these three traits; grit, guts and focus-

ERIC Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

WHITNEY ... so can you talk us through how you, how, um, the Inc entrepreneurs over index?

ERIC Uh, well, the, um... The, the survey, which was conducted by Gallup asked a lot of questions that led the Gallup poll-takers to conclude that these were characteristics the poll respondents possessed. And the degree to which they, you know, exhibited strength in these things, is how the, the poll was measured.

Um, I think it's easier to sort of talk about, uh, stories-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

ERIC ... that illustrate, um, the characteristics. In the category of grit, um, one of the stories is, um, a story about, uh, a company called, um, Rebel Athletics.

WHITNEY Hmm.

ERIC It made, um, and still make, uh, uniforms, so performance uniforms for competitive cheerleaders. Now, I had never heard of competitive cheerleading, but, uh, in places like Florida and Texas everybody knows what it is-

WHITNEY It's a thing.

ERIC It's a thing. It's a, it's an immensely competitive thing, and, uh, it's reflected in the, uh, in, incredible athleticism of the people that participate in it, but also reflected in the incredible competency- uh, competitiveness of the companies that provide the uniforms. And Rebel was a challenger in that field, and, um, the way that uniforms are sold is at, um, cheerleading meets. You don't go to a store and buy it, you, you know, there's a shopping center set up at the meet. And Rebel's incumbent competitor bought the rights to all the meets, so Rebel-

WHITNEY HmMMM.

ERIC ... basically had no outlet-

WHITNEY Wow.

ERIC ... to sell its, its clothes. So what they did, talk about resilience and refusal to be beaten, was that they went to the meets in a tractor trailer with a big trailer, and the trailer became their storefront parked outside the meet. Now the problem with that, the obstacle that they had to overcome to do that was that wherever this meet was being held, I forget, might have been San

Diego. San Diego will not allow you to park that big, uh, vehicle on the street outside the meet, unless you're making a movie.

WHITNEY (laughs)

ERIC So Rebel decided that they would make a documentary movie-

WHITNEY (laughs)

ERIC ... and film it partly out of this tractor trailer, which also has all their goods on display. And the movie, by the way, was about how to defend yourself against bullies.

WHITNEY Wow. What a great story. So that's grit.

ERIC That's grit.

WHITNEY Love it! Okay, so in the interest of time, I'm gonna move on, but those are amazing stories of guts and grit. And maybe we can include it in a show notes a story of focus, um, for people but wow. (laughs)

ERIC (laughs)

WHITNEY That's so good, okay. Um, all right, so question for you is, how does one move from being the editor to the CEO or publisher? I mean, those are really different jobs, right?

ERIC They're very different jobs, and it's an unusual path for someone to take. Um, usually a CEO comes up from the business side, was either a publisher, salesman, circulation director, something like that. In this case, the owner of Mansueto Ventures, Joe Mansueto, who's the founder of Morningstar, the independent financial, uh, analysis firm, liked the idea of having an editor be the person in charge.

WHITNEY Hmm.

ERIC Um, whoever was the CEO of Mansueto Ventures would still be in charge of the editorial side, of course, so as Joe saw it, it simply sent a message about his belief in the quality of the, of the product and the journalism, and he had faith that I would learn the business side-

WHITNEY Hmm.

ERIC ... and, uh, I hope, um, I hope I've proved him right.

WHITNEY So what's been the biggest surprise for you, in terms of moving to the business side, that, "ah! I didn't expect I was gonna need to learn how to do x?"

ERIC I think the biggest change in me was getting over the prejudices I had from being siloed as an editor for all those decades as a editor and writer, and there's an immense amount of creativity going on, on the sales and, uh, digital promotion, and marketing side of the business that I, that I find remarkable and admirable, and, uh, and I am so sorry that I had, was so arrogant as an editor, thinking that we were the creatives, and they were the... and people on the business side were not-

WHITNEY interesting

ERIC ... [crosstalk 00:43:59] it was a, definitely not an honest, or, or, uh, informed idea of, of where the talent lay in the business. It is evenly distributed on both sides of the aisle.

WHITNEY Hah, interesting. So just appreciating the i- sort of the game keeper turned poacher, you just completely appreciate something, walk in that person's shoes unexpectedly.

ERIC Yeah.

WHITNEY Fascinating. So a very wise person once said, upon losing his job, "I've seen..." well, yeah, he said this. "I've seen better days. The first salvo of this restructuring is now public, and the salvo kicked me right in the chest."

ERIC Hmm.

WHITNEY So, at one point you lost your job, and I have this really hypothesis, um, and I want you to talk for just a minute, is that sometimes we lose our jobs, cause I've lost my job as well, been fired, and, um, and, and I have this hypothesis that, it, that happens because we're at the top of our learning curve and it's time for us to go, and we knew it but we wouldn't go. And so the universe gave us a little nudge, and so I don't know if that jives with your experience, but wh- and if it does, would love to hear or not. But I'd also love to hear from you, what would not have happened for you in your life, as of today, had you not lost that job?

ERIC Uh! My gosh, Whitney, the way you categorize it is so apt. I would never have become web savvy if I hadn't lost my job at the top of the magazine, I would have ridden the, uh, sinking ship that was Time Inc through much, much tougher days than I saw. I, uh, I was correct in, in describing what was happening as the first salvo of a restructuring that eventually, uh, brought Time Inc to the edge of dissolution, and, uh, so I got out at a good time.

And, um, and I would never have ended up where I am now, serving entrepreneurs, uh, who are-

WHITNEY Hmm.

ERIC ... fascinating to write about and, and very worthy of, of help. So much would not have happened to me, it was really, at the time I was, well, brokenhearted and embarrassed and all the negative emotions that come from being fired, but it was the best thing that happened to me.

WHITNEY So this was at Money, right? It's so fascinating cause I'm gonna guess, and, I, I, I, I think this actually could be a really fun article that you probably thought about, right? Is like finding out how many of your entrepreneurs actually become entrepreneurs because after they after they have lost a job, other than laid off or fired, I think it be super interesting to do some kind of study around that, so (laughs).

If you want to talk about it, let's talk about it but I just think it's a fascinating thing, because so many good things come out of that moment of being in the [inaudible 00:47:10]. And then you're, you, you rebuild your life and there are these wonderful, wonderful things that happen as a consequence.

ERIC I, uh, would certainly say that, that every entrepreneur goes through some hardship. Some moments where they have to face the reality that they screwed up, that, um, their... Something that they did was very wrong, and they have to distance themselves personally from that mistake, realize that that was not, that's not them, that doesn't define them, and it's just an opportunity to grow. Every, every entrepreneur, I think, has that mindset. In the Gallup survey

that we were talking about it, it registered as grit, resilience, determination, but I think it's, it, it's also sometimes defined as a growth mindset - the setbacks as opportunities and not defining shortcomings in your own makeup.

WHITNEY Yeah, such an important distinction, I think that's... yeah, an- very important. Okay, so as we start to wrap up, um, there was a story, an essay that you wrote in, um, a compilation of essays by Marshall Goldsmith and Francis Hesselbein, and Sarah McArthur. And it was something that you wrote about George Washington, and I would love it if you could just share that story briefly, and, um, and yeah, just share that story briefly and, and some of what you've learned from that story.

ERIC Well thanks, Whitney, I [inaudible 00:48:51] but the challenge that we're asked to meet f- in writing these essays was to look at your window and s-see what you saw, in a figurative way, and so it happened that my window, uh, my office window looks out over the Hudson river, and up the Hudson river is the George Washington bridge.

The George Washington bridge is kind of ironically named because it commemorates not one of Washington's great triumphs, or one of his worst disasters, the thing that, uh, he probably least wants to be remembered for. But the bridge connects Fort Washington and Fort Lee, which are called forts because that's what they were during the revolutionary war.

Fort Washington, on the Manhattan side river, was the last foothold of the patriots in the revolutionary war, and they had, with George Washington as their general, had been beaten up, um, one defeat after another. One humiliating defeat after another, uh, by the more disciplined British and Hessian troops, and basically chased off the island of Manhattan. Their last foothold was Fort Washington, it was on, uh, a promontory, it was, it was a defensible position, perhaps, with better troops.

George Washington's favorite lieutenant was a general named Nathaniel Green, and he urged Washington to hold on to Fort Washington, that it was defensible. And, so Washington listened to his, to his, um, second in command. And when the Hessians finally attacked Fort Washington, the patriot troops held out for about an hour and a half, and then were ravaged and many of them were executed by the Hessians because they were rebels.

So Washington, watching from across the river, having been evacuated by boat from Manhattan, having lost the last foothold in New York, and then watching his troops be executed, was at the lowest point of his career as a general, and legend has it that it was the one time that people saw Washington cry. His troubles weren't over, either, because with the defeat at Fort Washington the patriots abandoned Fort Lee in a panic, and retreated through New Jersey with the British and Hessians only at, you know, at a few steps behind them.

But Washington, what was remarkable was that Washington continued to be a leader, that he positioned himself at the tail-end of his troops so he was closest to the enemy. He led them away, and never let the troops see how disconsolate he was.

It was a measure of true leadership and then, as the history books will record, especially American history books, uh, within a few months he rallied the troops cross the frozen Delaware, surprised those same Hessians who had routed his forces at Fort Washington at the Battle of Trenton and turned the war completely around.

WHITNEY Amazing. Lots of thoughts that I have, um, so here, here's, as we wrap up, just a few final questions. One is, you have said that you wish that when you were in college, you had sought people you could learn from, or you had sought out more mentors, and I think I know that you now have sought out mentors. You have a mentor like Marshall Goldsmith, my question to you

is, if George Washington were to mentor you from, you know, 300 years ago today, what would he mentor you? What would you be learning from him as you lead, lead your organization, which is by many, many counts, very successful, but how would you allow him to mentor you?

ERIC

Um, that's a great question, and I actually think about this a lot. Uh, one is the lesson from his retreat from Fort Washington, which is to, is to remember that your demeanor is really important, is looked up to by the people who report to you, and the fact that, well, some of this lieutenants saw him break down. He quickly gathered himself and became the, the charismatic leader that the American cause needed at that time.

The second thing that I learned from him was, in the, in, in the, after the battle of Trenton, in which he restored the, the momentum of the revolution, he, he had found himself, uh, with his troops camped at Trenton, and with the British camped, with the British who had rallied to come to Trenton and, and pay him back for their defeat of their Hessian allies. Camped across the creek, uh, Washington h-h- was of a mind to defend the ground he held, and the British, uh, opposing him were confident that this would be the end of the revolution.

Washington's and, well, some people in the British camp were thinking, uh, Washington may escape the gener- the general in charge there, um, uh, was u-unwilling to listen to any of his lieutenants. Washington, on the other hand, pulled together a council of war, the people warned him that it was too big a risk to stand and fight the British, and that someone knew a way around the British lines, over a frozen creek. And so that night, while the British were camped, planning their attack that would be decisive, Washington and the Americans slipped away, uh, around the flank of the British, the British woke up to an empty camp across the creek from them, and the sounds of Washington routing their rear guard at the Battle of Princeton.

So Washington was a charismatic leader who exercised self-restraint when needed, but he was always willing to listen to good advice, and didn't let his ego get in the way like his British opponent did at that battle.

WHITNEY

Hmm. Well that's... All right, I think it's fascinating, you know, it's, it's interesting, they... it's been said in resources 70% of all successful in businesses end up in a different place than where they started in, and certainly, if I look at you, (laughs) you've been out of college for, you know, over 25 years, and I'm sure you've never... You're successful, but you never could have imagined that you'd end up being the CEO of a holding company for two of the most popular influential magazines for entrepreneurs. It's just, it's just fascinating.

Um, okay. So very last question for you, Eric. You have said that when you're writing, even if you're writing about money or entrepreneurship, you're creating a story about happiness, success, security, overcoming fears, or being the steward of your own perception. We've just had a conversation today, and so my question to you is, what is the story that you told in talking to our listeners today?

ERIC

What is the story of this conversation with me?

WHITNEY

Yes.

ERIC

Um, I would say that it is that you are the master of your destiny, in the sense that you are the master of how you perceive what's happening to you, and that if you could find the opportunity to make the most of the things that seem like setbacks, um, you will be the master of your destiny, and, and good things will happen. Um, at the same time, it helps to be unwilling to lose-

WHITNEY

(laughs)

ERIC ... and it helps to remember that, um, that the responsibility you have to others.

WHITNEY Hmm. I love that. Eric Schurenberg, thank you so much for this, um, conversation today.

ERIC Whitney, this was a real pleasure. Thank you so much.

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Stories like Eric's are fascinating to me. We often hold this linear narrative for success--the child prodigy who goes on to become a concert pianist, or the brilliant wunderkind who becomes the brain surgeon, but the reality is--few of us follow a strictly linear path through life. We meander.

Interesting that Eric decided that taking on the competitive risk of being actor wasn't for him. But because of his background in theater, Eric has a deep love of storytelling that led him to writing about the entrepreneurial journey of others at Inc. The theater is also a very collaborative and community-driven experience, so it's interesting that those things have been guiding values for him in his current role. And, because Eric is an experienced journalist who respects editorial, he's uniquely positioned to be publisher, to manage the business aspect of a magazine. He's perfectly suited to be in the role he currently fills. But it certainly wasn't a linear path.

If your path feels like it's taking you in a million different directions, take heart. Embrace the idea of being discovery-driven. We talked about this a little bit in our episode with [Rita McGrath \(episode 126\)](#). When you don't know what is coming around the corner, instead of becoming paralyzed with uncertainty, know that you can plan to learn. That regardless of where this path takes you, you'll learn skills that will serve you as you continue to play to your distinctive strengths and take on market risk.

Practical tip:

Take a few minutes this week to consider or write down the answer to this question - how has your life and career been discovery-driven? What lessons did you learn that are serving you in your life and career today? These insights will help you as you continue to make discovery driven decisions, remembering that if something feels scary and lonely, you're probably on the right path.

Finally, my book *Disrupt Yourself* re-launches next Tuesday, November 12. That means you have one more week to pre-order and take advantage of the chance to sign up for the special private webinar we are having for everyone who pre-orders the book. This is unlike anything we've done before, and we want you to be part of it. For more information on how to sign up, please visit [whitneyjohnson.com/disrupt](http://whitneyjohnson.com/disrupt)

Thank you again to Eric Schurenberg for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Ruddy, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.