

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 172: MICHELLE MCKENNA

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. A podcast where we provide strategies and advice for climbing the S Curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you can be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, and joining us today is a super special guest. The person who agreed to be my very first podcast interview in 2016, Michelle McKenna, the first CIO of the NFL. Where among other things, she oversees their technology strategy.

Before that, she worked with other world-class companies like Walt Disney and Universal Studios. I talked to Michelle as my very first interview because she is the perfect example of someone who has appended the status quo. Let's listen to a clip about how she was able to not only sell herself to the NFL, but also retool the job rec.

Michelle McKenna: You know it's a really...it's almost like it was meant to be. I was contemplating what to do with the Constellation/Excelon merger. The CIO position for the combined company was going to be in Chicago. I didn't want to move to Chicago. And, I was talking to my husband about it, so it was sort of in my mind that I needed to look, but I didn't want to look for another job. You know, I just, I loved everybody I worked with. But I was a huge sports fan. I was on the Fantasy Football site and there was a link down there 'about us', and then there was one for jobs and I opened it and it was the CIO position open. They didn't call it a CIO, but when I read the description I was like, 'They need a CIO.' They had it VP of IT, and that's because the person that had left was a VP of IT. So I then went home, I read the job description to my husband, he was like, 'That sounds just like you.' I said, 'I know. I just don't know anybody at the NFL. Do you know anybody at the NFL?' 'No.' So I started working my network and I got in the mix, and then I had to come sell, not just myself, but what they really needed was to upgrade the position—make it a CIO, make it a senior vice-president, give them a seat at the table. And so after six long months of coming back and forth to New York from Baltimore, they hired me and changed the title, and....

Whitney Johnson: So you had to sell them on changing the title first.

Michelle McKenna: Yeah, and Roger was really supportive, but what he said to me, over and over again, 'You know, you now have to sell it to everybody else. You sold me, but nobody else around here's going to know what that is, like, we've never had one of you before.'

Whitney Johnson: What a CIO is.

Michelle McKenna: Yeah, we've never had one before; we've never had one like you before, so...and sure enough they'd be like, 'Why are you in this meeting? Like you are supposed to keep the data center up and the phones running. Like, why are you here?' And then, you know, like, people ask, and then, you know, you find someone that really knew, and I found Troy Vincent, who's head of our football operations, and he was really trying to revolutionize how we interact with players, and player engagement, and retired players, and he had really no one to support him. And I was like, 'Okay, all these other people aren't interested in what I can do so I'll help Troy.' And we did amazing things in a short period of time. And then, you know, within about a year I had more work than I could do. So now we've grown the budget...Roger jokes I was the most expensive hire ever, not because of what they pay me, but because of what I pointed out to them that they needed to spend on once I got here.

Whitney Johnson: We're delighted to have Michelle back with us to talk about her S Curve and how she is continuing to disrupt herself. Michelle, welcome.

Michelle McKenna: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Whitney Johnson: So, when you pitched your expertise to the NFL, and, and this is something that it's been such a pleasure to be able to talk about in our book *Build an "A" Team*, you were obviously very much an unlikely candidate. Can you talk a little bit about what was the hook that you gave to them?

Michelle McKenna: Well, I talked to them about that digital transformation of sports and the fan experience was very similar to digital transformation and I guest experience in media entertainment and theme parks, which is what I had spent my entire career doing. And if you think about our amazing stadiums, they are very much an experiential place and they are very much like a big entertainment venue in addition to a sports arena.

So, that was the hook for me to explain that. Although I had not had a life on sports as a career. I was a huge sports fan and I had a really good understanding of the business and as it related to the experience that I'd already had.

So it's a great example of how you take responsibility for your own finding your own dream job and why companies do need to make sure they always present a diverse slate. Because you just never know who you're going to find and be open-minded. So, you know, credit and kudos to the NFL for shifting gears and choosing someone that was not traditional for them.

Whitney Johnson: We interviewed you in 2016, so it's been close to four years. What are some of the largest disruptions over the past four years that you've seen and experienced and maybe even instigated?

Michelle McKenna: One of the first and biggest was data driven decision making for players, coaches, and our business. Just, we had a lot of data obviously at our hands and at our fingertips. We think about all the stats that we capture on players.

We're also capturing and began to capture data from sensors that turned into models that you could end up using to determine, you know, the effect, you know, how effective a certain play was, et cetera. So just watching how we were able to begin to leverage data

and also the change management of getting teams and particularly coaches comfortable with sharing and using that data in a new way. That was a really, really a big one.

Also how media is consumed and delivered. That media landscape continues to change for all media company. So, we were no exception there. And so long form appointment style viewing, which has always been our bread and butter, is still there. Luckily, we still have highest ratings of, of any tel... network television.

However, we have a whole other fan base that wants to consume media in a different way and in more snackable forms. And so that has driven a lot of transformation, not only technologically and how we deliver that, but also how we think about licensing and how to present a new business model. And a great example of that was what we ended up doing with the 2020 NFL draft, which is probably the biggest and fastest transformation that I've ever had to lead.

And then, you know, I'd say the sort of other big one that everyone is talking about in the world of technology is really how you apply machine learning and AI to make your business smarter. And so for us, we partner with AWS on several things including Next Gen Stats as well as something called the Digital Athlete. Which is really to drive our understanding around our players, health and safety. And how we can do predictive modeling based on data that we gather about a player, you know, injuries and health. And so, that's been amazing to watch and it's happened very quickly. I mean, it was like nothing existed and then all of a sudden all these capabilities came about.

Whitney Johnson:

Yeah. So as you think about all the, you know, the data driven decision making and the Digital Athletes and how the media is delivered in lots of different technologies, et cetera, that you're rolling out. Are there any sort of favorites or sort of interesting, unusual stories about some of these, some of the technological development?

Michelle McKenna:

Disruption when you talk about disruption and it being, you know, sort of technological disruption. Imagine making changes to a game that is a hundred years old, very steeped in tradition and very respectful of our past and want to make sure we don't lose some of that. So, any new technology. So for example, Next Gen Stats, was a project that we implemented that puts tracking devices on players so we can track their movements on the field.

And that created a lot of amazing data. We began to share that with our broadcasters, so that they could show cool graphics and things like that around how fast a player was running and what route they ran and all that. But that was all fine. But then when we started to recommend to clubs that, hey, you might want to use this data for your own game planning. We had some people that were really comfortable with it and others that were not.

And while we share the general stats, kind of the stats that we collect on every game day, with all 32 teams. So you get an entire stats readout. This kind of stat was kind of like, oh, we want our stats, but we don't want you to show those stats to anyone else.

So, the initial change management that had to be done to sort of get clubs comfortable that yeah, you know, you all should use this. And some have done really great work on, on the platform themselves and others have developed their own. But, that was an interesting discussion to have around.

It's something that I would've thought everybody would've wanted right away. And, you quickly learned that in the game of football and the competitive nature, you know, you

don't want to give anyone an advantage. And so if everyone doesn't do it and some do, it becomes an arms race, so to speak, in and around who does what with the data.

Whitney Johnson: So, what you have all these stats and you're like, okay, here you go. Here's your stats package at the end of the, of a game.

You deliver it to the clubs and you had some clubs saying, no, no, no, no. I'll take my, I want my data, but you give my data to anybody else. Is that, is that worth it?

Michelle McKenna: Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: That was the road?

Michelle McKenna: Yeah. In the beginning. Yeah, it was in the beginning it was like, it's okay if you give us how many yards a player rushed, we don't care. But the routes that we ran, I, you know, I don't want you to give data that's like X, Y coordinates of every player on the field. Which is essentially what data we're getting from those sensors. Because then you could run it through a simulation and sort of re-draw out really from a computer what basically they do by hand today.

So, when you see coaches whiteboard watching film and drawing X's and O's, that's literally what they're doing. And we were saying, oh yeah, but we can just give that to you.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Michelle McKenna: Like you don't have to go through the step of breaking down the film and then drawing X's and O's on a whiteboard. We can deliver it to you and then you can just display it.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Michelle McKenna: And we thought there would be like a, oh my God, that's awesome. But it took, you know, it took some leaders in the, in the league to say, hey, yeah, now this would be good. Now, some still do it the old fashioned way, but some definitely take advantage of it. So it's been really, I love working with the clubs as they, you know, develop their own platform and how they teach and develop their players.

Whitney Johnson: It's interesting. I remember hearing a story a couple of years ago about Bill Belichick and how he had, he got his start watching film and it was a job at the time that no one wanted to do. And, and but he was willing to do it. It was considered total grunt work, right?

Michelle McKenna: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Johnson: And then he was able to analyze, it became a competitive advantage. And then initially, additionally, no one was willing to pay him for it and then they started to pay him for it. And obviously he's a great coach.

Michelle McKenna: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Johnson: And so it's interesting hearing you talk about this, if you've got a team who has a competency of being able to look at the film and diagram what's happening, doing it as you sort of the old fashioned way, and now all of a sudden that that data's available, it's going to require a very different skillset. And possibly the competitive advantage shifts significantly.

And so it requires people to disrupt how they're running their business or running their club and potentially needs new skillsets. And so like you said, there's a change management piece. I'm wondering, was there some sort of case that you made or argument that you made that got people especially excited about it? Was there some secret sauce that you can obviously disclose?

Michelle McKenna: Yeah, you know, I think what we initially did was we slow set, stepped in and in the beginning we only gave each club their own data.

Whitney Johnson: Mm-hmm.

Michelle McKenna: And we said, why don't you play around with it? We also designed some dashboards, interface kind of visualization tools for them so that they could actually, because when you give someone a big pile of data and you don't make it through a visualization platform, I really honestly, how do you know what to do with it?

So it wasn't just good enough to hand them the data. We developed some actual visualizations that would show the, you know, circles running on the field and that, you know, you would draw the diagram and things like that. And once we kind of opened sort of their eyes to the world of possibilities, they begin to hire new skills.

Whitney Johnson: Mm-hmm.

Michelle McKenna: And probably the person that's kind of running that now is the new version of the Bill Belichick of, you know, running what was known as video quality control, you know?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Michelle McKenna: Now it's analysts somewhere that's getting that ready for coaches and, it is a different skill set. So, they are looking for different kinds of people that, and that's exciting because you're getting new talent into the world of sports from all different fields, that are just not traditional, which I think is good for honestly any industry. If you think about any industry that goes through tremendous change, one of the biggest things are you don't know your own blind spots.

And if you've worked in the industry your entire life, you just don't know. And I worked briefly at Constellation Energy as their CIO. And I remember thinking, why would this guy hire me in an energy company? I know nothing about energy. And his answer to me, he was the CEO. He said, "I have a building full of people that know about energy, and I have no one in this building that understands consumer choice of energy, because it's always been a monopoly."

I think that's so true in the world of sports if not there more than anywhere because everyone's grown up in it. And you hire the same people that you know from the same coaching trees and anytime you can introduce a new skill that'll bring a new type of person, every organization gets better. So, it's been great to watch that happen in the NFL over the last several years. And a lot of that's been driven by technology.

Whitney Johnson: One of the things that's interesting for us in our research is we think in S Curves and people start at the launch point of the S Curve and then get to the sweet spot and then get to the high end and then they've got to jump and do something new. And you talked about sort of this idea of blind spots and the value of inexperience and being able to look at things with fresh eyes like you did at Constellation Energy.

Do you remember if there was one or two, probably way more than one or two, probably 10 or 20 or 30, but one thing that you got into the NFL as CIO and you were like, why are we doing it like this? Could we do that differently? Does something stand out for you?

Michelle McKenna: Yeah, I mean, two things stand out that were right away. One was one of the biggest challenges in our stadiums is, you know, the frequency coordination of all the communication systems that have to happen. So, you're talking player, coach to player and to coach, you know, the headsets that you see.

Whitney Johnson: Mm-hmm.

Michelle McKenna: And what I found was that they were managed by various different organizations. They weren't centrally managed by an engineering department. They were managed really by the business unit, and there were all kinds of radios on the field. There were medical radios, there were equipment manager radios, there were coaching to coach, play and coach to player. And it was constantly tripping over each other. And I was just like, why do we do it this way? Shouldn't we have it integrated and shouldn't we have some monitoring on it, so that we know when we're starting to have problems with frequency congestion?

And I didn't know anything about frequency coordination, because I had not worked in that field. And I really didn't know anything about radios and things like that. I just knew like it didn't make sense. And there was a moment where one of the guys that worked for me said, "I don't know why we do it this way actually.", and so we ended up consolidating that all and we're beginning to replace it.

And now we have a frequency coordination system that we built and put a patent on. And now I have organizations like the Secret Service saying you have a great frequency coordination system because when you come into our stadiums, we track down every device that is transmitting a radio frequency, so that you don't trip over each other.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Michelle McKenna: And no one did, no one had had to do that before or thought about doing that before. And so that was one that seemed like was out of my wheelhouse.

And the other one was, it was actually a question that had been discussed, but it was kind of a sacred cow and no one had gone after it. I didn't know any better was why are we printing out things on the sidelines of pictures of people on the field? Why do we not have tablets or computers or something? I mean, there's no reason why in this day and age you'd be printing.

We were like printing on old thermal fax paper. And I was watching players sit on the sidelines and look at these notebooks, and they were flipping the notebooks, the pictures back and forth to see the formations. And I was like, we just need to give them something on the field. So we did and started a project called Sideline of the Future, where we brought together everybody that touched the sideline. And that resulted in sort of a, a multimillion dollar long-term deal with Microsoft for the Microsoft tablets.

Whitney Johnson: Huh. So, you're coming up with a lot of innovative ideas and, and you know, this is, you're constantly thinking through new ways to do things. And it sounds like one of the ways that you're getting ideas is you just see things and question them. Why are we doing

it like this? Now you've been at the NFL for several years, so you don't necessarily have, you're not, you're now potentially blinded, but through familiarity.

So, how do you get inspiration now? What, how do you go about getting new ideas at this point?

Michelle McKenna:

You know, that's a great question because it's something that I think is the lifeblood of every company's long-term survival is to never stop being able to innovate and get new ideas. So, I can use the best example I can give is the story I can tell is really the 2020 draft that just went off. It ended up being the first ever virtual draft. And the inspiration behind doing it and doing it the way we did it came from the fact that we were at home and we weren't in the office.

We were all on these big video conferences. There wasn't this traditional gating of ideas that would typically happen. So, before I would hear an idea from a very junior person, you know, it would have worked its way through several layers and certainly by the time it got to the commissioner it would have worked its way through several more.

But I got really inspired listening to people, I frankly, I didn't know their name, I had seen their faces, but I didn't know who they were. And so this video conferencing was allowing me to put a name to a face. And they would not have been as courageous in a conference room setting. But on these video conferences, they would either throw out an idea, either verbally or sometimes they would send a group chat to ask something that they were sort of afraid to bring up. Because it would seem like a, you know, maybe not such a good idea.

I was so inspired by how much talent we have that I just started a whole new process of listening to everybody. And frankly, what was great was we were in such a crisis mode, that there was no time for senior leadership to sort of resist it. We had to solve the problem and we had like two weeks to solve it and it frankly seemed not solvable. And ESPN had said to us, we don't know how this, we just can't do this.

And so, through listening and being inspired by really young talent that isn't, isn't jaded, they haven't been there too long, they haven't become too indoctrinated. You just have to make a point of making sure you never get comfortable and you're always listening and listening from ideas, no matter where they come. So, I would say young talent is one place I draw inspiration.

And then the other is I'm always trying to go into a new area that I've never done before. And just because I liked doing things I've never done before. And I had never been a broadcast producer before. Never thought I could be, but, and the NFL Draft, that's ultimately what I ended up doing and being was, you know, along with our great producers at NFL network, and myself and our events team and ESPN, you know, we all produce this amazing event. So just keep trying things that are uncomfortable. And if you're not uncomfortable, you know, then you're, then you should really ask yourself, are you pushing yourself hard enough?

Whitney Johnson:

Right. And is it time to, to, to disrupt yourself and do something new. So, one of the things that I think is interesting that you're saying is that because of the pandemic, it really, it changed the game in terms of how people interact with one another. And so the, there was sort of a democratizing of information sharing and it emboldened some of the junior people in a way that they were willing to say something because the risk probably felt lower.

Like if they don't like it, they're not going to, you know, glare at me across the conference table. It's just, they won't pay attention to me. So I might as well just throw it out there. One question around that is as we go back to normalcy, whatever that's going to be, how will you continue to encourage that kind of bubbling up of ideas from, from some of the more junior people on your in your organization?

Michelle McKenna: You know, I've really thought about that a lot because we were on a sprint for three weeks, literally 18 to 20 hours a day with these gigantic calls, with these little tiles of people's faces for hours at a time. And I was literally looking at these same people for three full days that I really began to miss them when it was over.

Whitney Johnson: Mm-hmm.

Michelle McKenna: And one of the executive producers, from our event staff says, welcome to the world of live television production, Michelle, you're a change junkie. You will never find it anything as exhilarating as like walking with, walking a live television production without a net. And that's what you just did and you're going to want to do that even more. And I have found that to be true.

So I'm taking some of that and now I'm trying to solve some problems around, okay, if we're going to come back to work, how are we going to trace sort of our employees, health and ability to return to work and what kind of tools and technologies are we going to use?

And there's so many ideas, so many new vendors coming out of the wood works to do it. And so I've put together a new working group. And I invited a lot of the same people that figured out the NFL Draft that have no idea, no background in health and wellness software. And so I'm going to do that. I think going forward I think I'll kick off every new project with ideation like that, not in a conference room where we all are.

I think it's really good for innovation. And I think that's why you see a lot of the tech companies in Silicon Valley saying, you know what, we're not going to come back to work for the rest of the year. And even Twitter announced today that they're not coming back at all in some cases. I think they're seeing what we're seeing.

And I think they're seeing innovation be faster and ideas getting to the top faster. And that's a positive for every organization.

Whitney Johnson: It's so positive. All right let's continue to talk about the draft, I should say. So, you still want to head with it? I have to say it was so fun to see on television, people with their children sitting alongside them that was just so charming and I think, you know, something exciting for kids to be able to experience this in a way that they wouldn't have experienced otherwise.

So that was really fun for me as a spectator. And I, I'm just wondering, would you share one or two behind the scenes, behind the curtain experiences that you had as you were producing this and just some possible vignettes for people that they would never get to hear of or know about otherwise?

Michelle McKenna: I personally, along with a few of my colleagues met with every head coach, every GM on a video conference. Describe to them what was going to happen and how it was going to happen. And we listened to them and many of them, we listened to them not want to do it this way. And, we had to talk through why and things like that.

And there were always some really interesting questions that that came about and we saw them a lot. But, one good one that I think everyone was Twitter was ablaze about was coach Belichick. His only question to me was, do I have to sit in the chair the whole time? And when we told them we're going to have a camera on you at all times, and I said, of course not. You can get up if you need to and go to the bathroom, still like that. You don't just sit there the whole time.

Whitney Johnson: You're allowed buy a break.

Michelle McKenna: You know when you're on the clock, when you're on the clock is when, you know, were that's more likely when the network will cut to you. And so he didn't say anything else. And then when we saw him on his live camera training his dog before the draft even started to sit in the chair with a treat, I was like, oh my God, he's going have his dog sit in the chair.

And to watch that then come to, we would have never been able to script something like that. That, you know, he came up with that in a way that it would cut to him and the dog would just be sitting there like so well trained and, we got a lot of, laughs out of that and it was special to see the families. And I think in the beginning, both the coaches and GMs were worried about doing this in their home first. They were worried about the health and safety of their family and where we going to be bringing people in and how are we going to set this up.

Once we gotten them comfortable with that, they were like, yeah, but I won't know if I'll be able to concentrate, if my kids will, you know, I won't be able to keep them off camera. And we're like, well, don't keep them on, you know, just this is real. We're not going to overproduce it. And, the night one, we didn't see as much in the beginning, but then as the night wore on, we started to see more kids. I have heard so many comments back from GMs and say, you know, I spend my entire life away from my family most of the time because of football.

And to be able to have shared this moment with them sitting right next to me, they loved it. And they didn't expect it. And it made for such great television because it was real, and it was authentic. Any other, I'd say just other behind the scenes was we had an advance of round one. We had the commissioner and our head of football operations and I facilitated on video calls with all the top prospects.

And so they were in their homes and we were talking to them about what it was going to be like. And, I would get them on the phone and then the commissioner would join. And I had Jordan Love who, went in the first round as the quarterback was a great funny guy. I saw his setup in the background, his cameras that we sent him, and I said to him, oh you already have everything set up.

And he said, yeah, I got it set up right the first day it arrived and everything. And I said, oh good, you get a gold star for being the first person to set up their equipment. And then the background I hear his moms say, "He didn't set it up, I set it up." And he looks at it, he gives her a look like, mom, I'm on with the NFL.

And I was like, this is, you know, these guys are about to be like, their lives are about to change. It's something so simple is, you know what, they've all got moms that are going to keep them in line, you know?

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Michelle McKenna: Or they have someone that's going to take them down to their place. You know, you might be a big first round draft pick, but I'm your mother and I put that kit together and I'm not going to let you take that advantage. So, there were just lots of moments like that that I'll never forget, that had absolutely nothing to do with technology. So, you know, that was what was really special.

Whitney Johnson: I have to say when you were just telling me that story about some of the coaches having their children in and how meaningful that was for them. I just felt myself very emotional. It's just, I just think it's a lovely thing. And again, one of those unexpected silver linings of, of this pandemic and this crisis that we're living through.

So you just, you said that one of your producers said, Michelle, live television, you're a change junkie. You're never going to be the same again. So what else are you going to do around live television? Do you have something in the, in the works?

Michelle McKenna: I don't, but he's right. I absolutely loved it. The adrenaline rush of, oh my goodness, it was so stressful. And I don't know how they do, like the people that have lived only in doing live television. Oh my gosh, I have such a respect for them and how they do it. But I did love it. So, what I hope to do is be more and more involved with our own owned and operated media ops as well as, you know, the NBC's Foxes, CBS's and ESPN's of the world and how we can augment our regular broadcast with sort of peek-ins at fans, or peek-ins to backstories and the things that, you know, sort of humanizes it more and makes it additional layer of content. Even if it's a second screen or if it's an augmented first screen. So I, I'm just something that I'm passionate about now that I've done this, and I want to continue to learn a new skill. So talking about the S Curve, I have found something I know very little about, but very interested in bringing what I do know to an industry that has sort of been done the same way for forever with satellites. And you know, broadcast technology is, it's certainly evolving very quickly.

Whitney Johnson: Which is exciting and in some ways brings you back to sort of why you got the sort of how you sold yourself to the NFL in the first place. Is this idea of experience and you're being able to now use your technology in your live production, in your understanding of the NFL to bring more of an experience for people and the fans that are watching the game.

Michelle McKenna: Yeah, for sure. Like that is if there's one thing that underscores my entire career has been a customer focused and always customer centric experience centric. I mean I got that hammered into my brain at a very young age at Disney. And, if you start with that and work your way out, you fix things that, you know, industries will always be evolving and changing.

Look what's happened to retail, look what's happening to, you know, movies, theaters and releases and stuff. All of that stuff has been under change for a long time and it's going to, it's only going to be accelerated now. And in many cases people are just going to go out of business, it didn't react soon enough. But I'm always felt like if you always stay very grounded in the experience and you move with where and even in many times lead people in your fans and guests to where they don't even know they want to go yet, which Disney was great at, you'll be ahead of, you'll always be ahead of what big changes on the way.

And so that's one of the things I love about working in the NFL because we are very fan centric and it's all about our fans. So, it's easy to apply those principles in an organization like the NFL.

Whitney Johnson: So, two disparate ideas that are coming together for me. And I'm just wondering what you would, what you would say. You talked about this idea of being very customer centric because of Disney, very fan centric at the NFL. Then you've also talked a lot about change management and the ability to stage changes, whether it's the technology sending, you know, the game footage, if you will, out to the clubs, et cetera.

Any thoughts for people who are listening to this and saying, you know what, I have these ideas. I'm trying to implement them. I'm trying to get buy in for the change that I'm trying to effect in my organization. Do you have one or two suggestions or thoughts around how one goes about doing that effectively?

Michelle McKenna: Well, the first thing is you have to invest time in relationships. I think that's true in any job. But if you are a change agent, you can't go in and just push change through. You have to have spent years building the kinds of relationships that you need to build.

So first off, if you're not already just spending time getting to know your colleagues and your clients and your customers within your organization, you better start doing it. And if you're not good at it, you better hire someone that is and really began to make it a top priority. Because at some point you're going to need to go to them and ask them to do something that's going to make them uncomfortable and they're going to need to trust you to do it. And I think a lot of people give up before they get to that phase.

This is a long game, change is a long game, and for the most time it's a marathon, not a sprint. The draft had to be a sprint, but I would not have been able to do the draft in a sprint fashion had I not had years of relationship building with clubs and coaches and GMs and owners and my colleagues at the NFL. So that's first.

And then when you are good at that, you have the ability to see shifts. You, if you listen, you'll hear them tell you things that bother them or worry them. They won't describe it in a, I need this technology way. They'll just be describing something that frustrates them or they wish they could do better. And, then it's up to you to come back to them and say, hey, what if we can do this?

And you also, if you're the CIO or CTO or you're in a place where you can see the whole organization if you're good at dot connecting, you'll often find two or three lines of business asking for something very similar. They won't call it the same thing. It won't be the same technology, but at its root it's the same process.

So just getting good at that, and then being able to distill that, I think the secret sauce is to be that person, but also then be able to turn to a team of engineers and go from 50,000 feet to 3000 feet, and describe to them what you want them to build because, or buy.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, you develop the relationship, then you listen, listen, listen, and then you translate. So that the, yeah. Interesting. And, one of the ways that I think about this is from an S Curve perspective is any time you have a new idea you're basically saying, I want to jump to a new S Curve. And you're talking to this person who's on the other side of the table and say, hey, do you want to jump to this new S Curve? They're like, no, no, no. That looks scary. That looks risky. Why would I do that?

Michelle McKenna: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Johnson:

And what you're saying is, okay, well let me show you that S Curve, but here's how we could jump to it. And here's the parachute. And oh, by the way, you know what, why don't we just create this S Curve together? In fact, I think this might be your S Curve. And so you're, you're making it so that it's completely de-risked and then they can take ownership of it. But I love how you described that so elegantly.

You are obviously continually disrupting as an organization, at the highest level. And I'm wondering how you're helping people, your team disrupt themselves. I know the last time we spoke, you talked about John Cave, and we'd love it if there's any update to that story, how he's continuing to disrupt himself. Or if there's someone new in the organization where you've been able to say, you know what, you're at the top of the curve. You're really good at this. We want you to try something new. And what has that looked like?

Michelle McKenna:

Yeah. You know, for John specifically, he's continued to do that. He was a primary architect of how we delivered the draft. He didn't have a background at all and broadcast technology, but he had built for sports betting. He and his team had built a real time video stats feed for a sport radar who manages our official data feed for sports betting. This was something that didn't even exist, just a year ago, when developed it.

And he was the first one to say, hey, you know, the thing we built for sports betting, I think we could use that same platform across AWS to deliver the 2020 draft. And he and his team designed the cameras and all of that. So, he is constantly now disrupting himself. I don't even have to push him towards me.

He comes up with, I mean, he disrupts me all the time. He'll come in and on my white board and just come up with some, what might sound like a crazy idea and he'll say, hey, I got a crazy idea and I think, oh, this has got to be a good one and I can't wait to hear it. So, I'm really proud of him. There's another guy on my team named Aaron Amendolia. He started his job at the NFL on the service desk, believe it or not.

So, he has worked his way all the way from the service desk to the VP of all IT services. And he was very much the kind of data center guy, and he was very comfortable in that world. He was very good at making sure the ops were up and running and the lights were all on and all those things. But he didn't have a lot of exposure to strategy and I felt like I needed someone else to help me with strategy and particularly as it related to new sponsors and partners like Microsoft and Verizon and AWS and Extreme Networks, all these tech partners.

And so I had to take away some of his responsibility and give it to someone else in order to make room for him to become a bigger architectural strategist. And he didn't like it in the beginning because I shrunk his role, or he thought I was shrinking his role. And now he's like the go to person for every major tech sponsorship and has done a great job.

He founded something we called I was, I branded it, but he really took it and ran with it. We needed an architectural review board, which no one wants to attend. And no one wants to be a part of. I said, well, let's call it something different. So we call it the tech-collab.

And we branded it and it's an architecture where we aboard, but we gave it a new name of fun and he ended up, he runs it. Now and it's not a reporting line. It's more of an influence and relationship kind of way to put forth new architectural ideas. So, he's another one that I've have a lot of pride in. And there are several others that, you know, you asked me earlier where I get my inspiration as that's what I love doing is finding the

strengths in people and letting them soar with them and getting them to trust me, when I want them to try something new.

Whitney Johnson: And where can people find you?

Michelle McKenna: I mean, I, you know, I'm on Twitter at, @nflcio, and, you can find me on LinkedIn as well.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, excellent. You've had a number of personal disruptions over the last few years. And would love to have you share a little bit about what those were and what you've done and what you've learned as a consequence of those disruptions.

Michelle McKenna: Yeah. When you sent me the request to do this podcast again, it was frankly a few months ago, and I wasn't at a place where I would have been comfortable answering this question. So, I'm really glad that it got delayed and now it's, I think it's very good for me to be able to talk about this. Yeah. The last, since I talked to you last, I went through some really tough personal times.

My husband passed away suddenly in 2017 of a massive heart attack. I found him and I didn't think I would ever recover from that. And then in 2018 just as I was getting back on my feet and back to work and beginning to feel normal again, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. So, then I got knocked out again and I learned a lot about myself.

I learned that I've always had people tell me that I'm resilient. But I have not always been my biggest fan. I have always been extremely hard on myself, and I think most people that are top performers would probably say they're the same - perfectionist, hard yourself kind of person. And then when you go through something where you absolutely have no control over what happened, how it happened and what happens from here, you just learn to give over a part of yourself that you never thought you could. And it, you learn that you are resilient and you are strong and you've developed such a sense of self through it all, that I think it just makes me a better person. It makes me a better mom. It makes me a better employee.

And the NFL, what I, I learned through these two tragedies that the NFL was more than a job to me. It was a family. And I know people say that about their companies. I know people that do feel that way. And I used to feel that way about Disney. But you know, the day that my husband passed, and word traveled quickly to the commissioner. He didn't send someone to my house or send food. He just came and I opened the door to find him standing there. And I had no one, I didn't have any family in New York.

And it was a moment where I said, you know, there was a reason why I love this place and I give as much as I give to it, but it gives back to me as well. And so I think when you are going through tough times personally, and you can link them to how you can be better in your career, you have to work somewhere that'll give you a chance.

They had to be patient with me because it was hard for two years. I was in and out of the office. First on leave, you know, grieving and then on leave for breast cancer. But I never stopped working, I never stopped trying. I had a great team in place. They kept working and I was resilient. So, out of that I just look, I learned a lot about myself. I learned to take better care of myself, give myself a break. And I also learned how to ask for help, which is the thing that I wasn't very good at doing.

And, I think if you're going to ever make a big S Curve change in your life, you won't do it without help. So, just save yourself the time of beating yourself up and not asking for help and, you know, ask for the help you need is, is sort of what I, I took out of that as along with you're stronger than you know.

Whitney Johnson:

As you think about what's happening in the world right now, I mean, you've, you went through to get really a one-two punch. And I remember, I think we spoke briefly right after your husband had passed away and, and just the depth of grief that you were feeling. And I probably only saw the surface of it, but like you said, you, you had, you made this discovery about your resilience.

And so I'm wondering for people who are listening right now who are dealing with very difficult things because of this crisis and different things and difficult things in very different ways. Any words of, of consolation or encouragement that you would want to share?

Michelle McKenna:

I think the word that just popped into my head is you know, just perseverance to just stick with what you're doing. I mean, it, look, when I was in the depths of grieving, I was doing everything my grief counselor told me I should do, but I wasn't seeing any results. And frankly, I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I wanted to just hide. And then I decided instead of hiding, I wanted to run. So, I would run around and be very, very, very busy and keep my mind off of it. But it was always waiting. The grief was waiting just around the corner.

And I think what this pandemic thing has done is people run every day in their daily lives to run away from, whether it's grief over the loss of the loved one or you know, loss of a relationship in some way or people run from things all the time and all of a sudden this pandemic stopped every way you could possibly have to distract yourself and put you right smack in the middle sometimes of the very thing you might've been we're running from, which is the be your family or someone in your close household.

Whitney Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Michelle McKenna:

And so, stopping running and facing something, even though it's scary, is better than just avoiding it for the rest of your life. And so, you can use this time to reflect and, you know, think about what it is that you want to work on for sure. But also with things that are out of our control, we simply can't control.

And I am a control freak. So for me to be able to say this is, and I have to look, I have to practice what I preach. I have to tell myself at night sometimes when I would try to go to sleep, that I can't control this. I don't know when I'm going to be back in New York. I don't know when my life is going to resume normal. I don't know when I'm going to meet someone and you know, I want to have a partner for the rest of my life. I don't know when that's going to happen.

But I've kind of just stopped trying to make it happen, and just let life unfold in a way that I never had before. So, maybe that comes a little bit with age and having gone through the two things I went through. But, I think all of us have a chance after living through what we're living through right now to sort of fast track any change you might've been thinking about, you know, this is an opportunity to maybe reinvent yourself, reinvent your skill, reinvent how you feel about something. So that's sort of a, you know, some of the ways that I'm dealing with the uncertainty.

Whitney Johnson:

Hmm. So, well said. Any final thoughts, Michelle?

Michelle McKenna: No, just I'm, I've been so excited over the years to read stories about other people that disrupt themselves and I, I'm just glad to be a part of this community and continue to, to help that, you know, people embrace and move forward in their own journeys and keep trying new things. And so I'm always happy to talk anytime you want.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, lovely. Well, it's wonderful to have this conversation with you and to be able to touch base and I'm just so delighted that people who are newer to the podcast are going to get a chance to, to meet you and know you and discover how delightful you are. So, thank you again.

Michelle McKenna: Thank you. Take care.

Though the name of this podcast is Disrupt Yourself, so much of our disruption is done within systems. In our workplace, in families. So, I want to double click on a couple of the things that Michelle and I talked about when it comes to disrupting and innovating within a system.

First, wasn't it fascinating to hear how our new way of working, of working remotely, gave a more junior member of Michelle's team permission to suggest doing the draft remotely? As a leader you make the effort to hear new ideas and encourage those at the launch point of the S-Curve to speak up, but there are systems in place that still may keep those ideas from reaching you. It was having a Zoom conference call where people could speak up or chat their ideas that made the remote draft a possibility. What invisible systems might be in place in your organization that make it hard for launch point ideas to be heard? How can you adapt your systems so that they are?

I mention this quite a bit, but when you're in the process of introducing something new to others, it's critical to pack a parachute for them. When Michelle was talking about the data the NFL started providing the different clubs, it was interesting to hear how they slow stepped that process. Michelle's team gave each club their individual data and presented it in a way so that they could use it and visualize it. Only then, did they start to introduce additional data. Rather than just shoving this new way of doing things into a well-honed process of drawing Xs and Os on whiteboards, they gradually opened the team's eyes to new possibilities.

Finally, I really appreciated Michelle highlighting the importance of building relationships. Change feels like it happens all at once, but as Michelle said, it's a long game. If we can build relationships and get to know colleagues, clients and customers, we will be able to recognize and capitalize on shifts and changes because people will feel comfortable asking for what they need. They'll know they will be heard.

Thank you again to Michelle McKenna for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, producer Melissa Rutty, manager Sarah Duran, and content contributors Virginia Kivlighan and Jennifer Richardson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.