

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 198: MARGO GEORGIADIS

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Today, we're joined by Margo Georgiadis. Margo is currently the president and CEO of Ancestry.com and on the board of directors at McDonald's. She started her career at McKinsey, moved to Discovery, where she was an executive VP, and to Google, where she was president of the Americas, served as the COO of Groupon and before landing as the CEO at Ancestry, she was the CEO of Mattel. Margo's career exemplifies the power of the S curve and in particular, harnessing the power of the launch point of the curve.

Margo, thanks for joining us.

Margo Georgiadis: Well, excited to be here. Thank you.

Whitney Johnson: Will you tell us a little bit about where you grew up and just kind of a quick sketch of your life to date?

Margo Georgiadis: I grew up in Chicago, actually, the northern suburbs of Chicago, and I was lucky to be able to have a beautiful childhood growing up in the same town pretty much my whole life. And it was an amazing community. And then I went out east to school and then I spent most of the rest of my career really focusing on how to use technology and data to reimagine companies and businesses. So, I did that for a long time as a partner at McKinsey and Europe and the U.S. and then I decided to take the plunge into running companies versus giving advice. And that was really fun. It was a steep learning curve at first. But I was, you know, so pleased I had the opportunity to run a company called Discover Card in the Midwest, and run their US business. And then I took another plunge. So, I guess I'm right on being with your podcast, went out to Google right after the Great Recession in 2008, just saw the opening of the software revolution and wanted to be part of it. And then from there went on to thinking about how to use technology and data to reinvent other companies like Mattel. And now I'm at the CEO of Ancestry. So it's been a really fun journey.

Whitney Johnson: I love that this idea of using data and technology to reimagine business. When did you hit on that that was sort of your thing?

Margo Georgiadis: Well, I've been a lifelong data geek, I will confess. I, back in college, um, I, before, you know, computers were cool, um, I was an economist, but I was doing it very much from the econometrics perspective. How do you create general equilibrium models of economies? And so I had some amazing professors at Harvard, where I went to college, and Stanford that I worked with and we actually had a little advisory business of countries mainly in Asia and Latin America. And so it was, such an interesting... It's kind of got me obsessed about the connection points and how you connect the micro and the macro so that you really understand how it integrates together. And then I just took that into the business world. You think of lots of applications and businesses that are run by data, whether it's retail or telecom or financial services. And now the whole world is being reimaged with data and technology. So, it's super fun for me. I still feel like I'm on trend.

Whitney Johnson: Margo, you've gotten a lot of calls in your life. You got the call to be the president of the Americas at Google and the CEO of Groupon and the CEO of Mattel and now CEO of Ancestry.com, among probably many other interesting calls. Which of these calls was the most unexpected for you and why?

Margo Georgiadis: Probably the most unexpected call was to be the CEO of Mattel. That's probably the one that if you think about the pattern of being obsessed with data technology and ecosystems, wouldn't on the surface of it really makes sense.

And in fact, the reason, um, I actually received the call is I've worked with the board and the company back when I was a partner at McKinsey. And so honestly, I thought they were calling me for a reference for a really good friend who I had mentored for more than a decade. In fact, I had been his reference to take another job where I was on the board and then his reference to go back to Mattel. So, I had sort of previous contact with them.

But somehow they'd heard through the grapevine that, you know, after almost nine years at Google, I might be considering a new chapter potentially leaving Google to become a CEO. And they wanted to convince me that I could be that out-of-the-box thinker to help them drive the next step of the company's transformation.

And they kind of tapped into my lifelong passion for STEM education and all sorts of other things. And so it was really unexpected, but it ended up being, you know, really interesting. And I think sometimes, you know, I was always taught by some mentors, you always take the call on list and then just reflect. And the more I thought about it, I realized those iconic brands, Fisher Price, Barbie, Hot Wheels and American Girl, like amazing global platforms that you could reimagine with different kinds of experiences for kids and parents to inspire that next generation of creators and innovators. And at a time when I saw my own kids spending way too much time on screens and not enough time building and creating and just building some of those empathy skills you get just through roleplaying, these were some things that I thought could really make a difference, something that was totally unexpected and ended up being really interesting.

Whitney Johnson: I remember having a conversation with you at one point where you had talked about your mom and how she'd been a really big influence in your life. Can you talk a little bit about her and what you've learned from her about leading?

Margo Georgiadis: She was the classic, went to college, got married the Saturday after she graduated. She loved music. She was an accomplished pianist and a music major, and she thought she would dedicated her life to, you know, raising her kids, public service, and then she did a lot of volunteering. And one of the most seminal experiences for her was the fact that she would do music therapy to people in hospitals, particularly mentally ill patients. And she was so bothered by how the system worked and how people were being treated.

And the time, is right around the time where there was a lot of institutionalization and the care of the mentally ill was just not where it needed to be. And she just decided, "I'm going to do something about this." She went back and got a PhD and other graduate degrees and became a real expert in the field and actually spent three decades shaping all the policy on all these mental health care for people with developmental disabilities, care for the aging in the state of Illinois and actually served in three presidential administrations.

So, she was a real..

Whitney Johnson: Wow!

Margo Georgiadis: ... unbelievable role model. I learned so much from her because she taught me, you know, "Never be afraid to be different." You know, "It's OK to be the only. And just keep your own compass. It's your life. You have one and precious life to live and you have to find what you're passionate about. And the most important thing you should never do is fall into the trap of doing just what people expect you to do. Do what makes you happy and what you believe in."

And so that's just very much was ground into me from a young age. I think it's saved a lot of decisions I've made.

Whitney Johnson: I love that story, that is just amazing.

Can you think of a situation where when you reflected on what your mom had said to you, kind of drummed that into you, that it really made a difference and allowed you to turn around how you were showing up in that particular situation?

Margo Georgiadis: As I reflect on, you know, being a single woman in financial services, right? There were not a lot of women. You know, most of the conferences I went to were, you know, all men. And yet I had learned at a young age to create a strong partnership and mentorship relationships with whoever was there, because my mother always taught me to focus on people. And follow, follow really interesting people who are pushing boundaries and they'll never steer you wrong. And so I just focus on people as being people. I focus on, "What is it that I can learn from this person?" You know, "How can I better understand their point of view, an alternative point of view?" And then use that to craft my own and to find that way forward? If I think about an example, one of the most interesting experiences I had is when I decided to leave graduate school and go to work in London for McKinsey. I had this amazing relationship with a professor at Harvard Business School who was writing a book on the future of food from farm to table.

And of course, I was super passionate about food, given what I'd done early in my career.

And he said, "Hey, will you fly around the world and interview with me all these different CEOs of all these companies?" And I thought...

Whitney Johnson: Yes!

Margo Georgiadis: ... "Why not?"

And so I went to McKinsey and there are not very many women in the London office and I went to the office manager and I said, "I'd really like you to delay my start because I want to write this book with this guy. And I think he's just super interesting. And this will be unbelievable exposure and I will be connected to all these people." And of course, that was a little bit strident of me as this young person right out of school.

He said, "Great, why don't you do that? In fact, we'll, we'll fund you to do it." And so not only did I take the risk to ask, but in addition to that, it ended up being the most unbelievable experience, um, because this professor had some family health issues and ended up not being able to do the interview. So, I had to go by myself. So, here I was in my late 20s, literally flying around interviewing these people who were the heads of every company you can imagine. Nestle, Unilever, every company in Asia. In fact, I had to take my husband to Asia with me because they wouldn't meet with a woman alone. That was a really interesting experience in and of itself, especially in places like Japan and China. But, but it ended up being probably one of the most transformational experiences of my life. And it built such a deep understanding of what it really feels like to be a leader, how challenging it can be, the twists and turns and, and the, the loneliness sometimes people experience.

And, and so I, I was able to kind of capture so much knowledge early on by being willing to sort of take that risk to step out of the box and try something.

When I think about this year, right, which is probably the most unprecedented that any of us have ever seen with all the different changes going on, I really reflect on two experiences that I think really helped center and ground me as a leader.

I think the first is that I was in financial services. During the financial crisis of 2008. And that was a great teacher. I was running Discover Cards US business. We just spun out from Morgan Stanley, and it was a wild ride, right? Our stock price plunged to nothing. And I think those of us in the company were just looking at what was happening in the market, "Saying this makes no sense, right? We still have a great company here. But why is our stock price now like a fraction of what it was before?" And yes, we saw some rising charge offs as people struggled to pay bills with rising unemployment. But the business actually was quite sound.

And so what we really needed to do was really focus on that, like "What's the role that we play in people's lives and how do you take the long term view?" And we really got the organization through that to not paying attention the stock price, focus on the fundamentals of the company. And we had a better company coming out. And I truly believe in those inflection points is when you have to not get distracted by everything around you, but focus on the core.

The second real piece that helped me tremendously was as a leader. Google really prepares you as a leader for total ambiguity, because essentially everything we built at that company, it had never been done before. So, it was sheer vision and will that created these things. So, as a leader, you're so deeply trained in the importance of authenticity. I mean, I really always felt that I didn't really understand what leadership meant until I got to Google, because you have to be so transparent about what you know and what you don't know. And you truly have to build followership. People have to want to follow you because there's not all this other stuff, especially in the days, early days when I was there. And your success is all about empowering others at all levels to be part of that creation process and to realize that you're going to learn and adapt every day, every week, every month to something new. And so when I think about the pandemic, those two things really centered me. I've been through it before and I knew as a leader what my organization needed for me. They needed me to be open and authentic, right? To show real empathy for the fact that they were scared. But show them a way forward, one step at a time and just keep laying it out and then use this as a time to relook at everything, because in the inflection points is a whole new ways to serve and collaborate that you didn't think of before because boundaries aren't there anymore. And so for me, that truly is what helped me get through 2020.

I think the signature for me is giving them something to focus on. And I think in these moments, if you focus on the service that you give to your customers. And so I focus our organization on our mission, we empower journey of personal discovery, and why it's more relevant to people in this moment of time feeling connected to their family than ever before. And so the most important thing we need to do is find amazing ways to serve people that ability to focus on something that's really important and to do it together, I think really makes a difference.

Whitney Johnson: So, can you give us an example or two of what you've done this year that you would never have done otherwise?

Margo Georgiadis: Absolutely. We stood back as a team and we saw what was going on and realized that this was a moment where we could really make a difference. And so we thought about how could we use our assets for good? And so we started thinking about problems that we could uniquely help solve. So, we thought about all these parents at home trying to educate their kids without enough tools. And we had a great K-12 education program that we gave to teachers and we thought, "Well, we should provide this parents, because what a great way to teach your kids history and do something fun together at home. Learn about your own family story, but also learn about history." And so, we quickly figured out how to adapt that. And then we expanded that program and started doing more for the educators as well, which is really fun. We then realized that we are hitting really important remembrance events. The 75th anniversary of World War II, but Memorial Day was not going to be a person this year. And so we partnered up with veterans organizations, Department of Defense, all sorts of groups, and we put on the first virtual

Memorial Day parade and we got all sorts of incredible people to donate their time and treasure to creating a really, really special event.

In addition, we have the largest consumer genomics network in the world with nearly 20 million people. And we're seeing what's going on with COVID-19. And we thought, "Well, how can we help?" And so we created the largest ever live research study on the connection between your genetics and whether or not you contract the disease or have a severe reaction to it. And so no one's ever seen data at that scale before. And so we reached out to our members and we had over 800,000 people in just a few weeks participate in a really in-depth survey on their exposure to COVID-19, all sorts of related things. And we were able to then because of just the sheer scale of the data that we had to come up with really important findings around who is more at risk of exposure and all sorts of other things which we could then give for free into the medical community that was working on a lot of these new treatments.

Whitney Johnson: I am crying right now, this just brings tears to my eyes of just this goodness that you and your, your company have accomplished. I, I can only imagine that the sense of efficacy that the ancestry employees are feeling is just very, very high.

Margo Georgiadis: It makes all the difference. I think, you know, people want to feel part of something that's having a real impact on others around them. And I think, you know, we live in a time where people are very aware, you know, that we all have a collective responsibility to each other.

Whitney Johnson: So, I have this thesis that the fundamental unit of growth in any organization is the individual and, and if you will disrupt yourself, if everybody in the organization is willing to step back from who they are to slingshot into who they can be, that that will impact over time the organization. Which of course sort of sounds like, "Duh." But I would love to hear if there's a way that you have personally disrupted yourself over the last nine months, that you're starting to see that ripple effect of your personal disruption is impacting, influencing your organization.

Margo Georgiadis: I think we've all picked up a lot of new ways of doing things as part of COVID because our lives just had to change. The habit that I love the most is the fact that I've been getting on a ton of Zoom's with people that I've known for a really long time. So, my family, friends of mine from college and business school, people that are working on similar issues and at a velocity that I would have never otherwise had time to do.

And I think because people aren't commuting and they're not traveling, they have more time, like just to connect. And so for me, I guess I've always had a leadership philosophy that leaders should lead heads up versus heads down, which for me means you should not walk into the room trying to check what people are doing, but you should come in thinking about how you bring oxygen. How do you bring new perspective? How do you move roadblocks out of the way? And so I think that's enabled me to find a lot of great new resources that our teams need, needed. And with places I never would have expected to find it. But we ended up bringing in new programs and speakers on mental health and emotional agility, which is just an enormous issue. And that came out of me participating in a group of leaders in the health space, and they were talking about the single biggest rise. And I thought, "Wow. What is our program for that? What are we doing to help people?"

In addition, we found whole new ways to partner. One of the most interesting things we did as a company with partners outside of our program research, but we also participated in an X Prize contest, which was about how can you get dramatically low cost testing to people? So call it like [inaudible] dollars, right? Or two to three dollars and so we could get people back to work, back to school. And we were able to use a lot of knowledge that we had around test kits and direct-to-consumer testing to really try to help people break through. And so there are just so many great people, great thinkers and great ideas. And I don't think I'll ever go back to that, you know, that level of intensity of knowledge gathering continuously, because I think it just makes you better as a leader and as a person.

Whitney Johnson: Our a mutual friend and mentor, Alan Mulally, likes to say, "That when something doesn't work, it's a red. So if it works, it's a green. If it's kind of not working, it's a yellow. But if it's really not working, it's a red." And he says, "That's not bad. It's an absolute gem." You're so accomplished and have been able to really perform at a very high level. It's helpful for people to hear... When did something not quite work, when did you not have it be green, but was a red? And what are some things that you've learned?

Margo Georgiadis: Well, I think it's so easy to look from the outside. People.. But they're never a straight line and everyone has a lot of reds. And I think, as you said, it's what you do with that and how you approach it that you get the best learning.

I'll just take a really recent one. When I came to Ancestry three years ago, the entire strategy that they'd bank the future of the company on was the runaway growth of DNA kit sales to consumers and literally the month that I started with Golden State Killer, then the Facebook privacy. And so that market just unraveled and the entire strategy was based on that.

So that was about as big a ride as you can get as the new CEO.

And there really wasn't a Plan B because it had just been going on for like three or four years. And so they just thought it would just keep going. And so for me, that was as I said, not just a red, but a red hot red. And it was a red hot red within the organization. And I think organizations are like people, right? They're, they're emotional. And people were really emotionally invested in this path, our team, our investors, everything we did in the company because it grew so quickly. And yet I knew looking at the numbers that I had to move fast to get to a Plan B and blunt the trend. And so I guess it's back to the "never let a good crisis go to waste." And how do you do that in a way that has humanity? Because when it's emotional for people, you need to go back and tap back into that emotion. And so, you know, Ancestry is an amazing 30 year old company. We've innovated for three decades. And so what I really focused on is, "We'll just create another." So, I got this history team together of all these extraordinary people that have been at the company for a really long time. And I said, "When we were really great and at our best, what did we do well and how do we create a mission and values that could anchor people, right, on to that sense of identity?" I have to give them a new sense of identity. Identity was no longer just winning with DNA. It had to be winning for another reason. And we went back to the core of who we were at Ancestry: We empower journeys of personal discovery to enrich lives.

And we do that because we're customer obsessed and we pioneer relentlessly and we empower each other across this crazy mix of skills of this historical content experts to geneticists to machine learning and AI people, right? It's this beauty that's in the blend. And so how do we look back at that core and how do we transform our product and our market to make it better than ever? We really refocused back on the customer and we said, "Well, gee, we really serve wonderfully that power genealogists that's really into this. But we actually make it really, really hard for the person who really doesn't understand this craft to fall in love with it. And so let's do that, because DNA showed us the way." It showed us there's millions and millions of people that want to go on this journey. They just don't know what's in store. And so that's just been how we pivot as a company. And, you know, it was not always a straight line. And we have a lot of ups and downs as we quickly made that know, we took the company to 100% to the cloud and we had to build a data model and transform everything about our product and experience. But it was that relentless focus on that mission and all the additional people that we could serve that gave them a new emotional center and a new way to think about collaboration. You know, I think that's really what reds are about. They're not about that. They're about learning and failing forward. And when something is red, it just means you have an opportunity that's not yet discovered.

Whitney Johnson: I love ancestry.com. I use it all the time. And everybody who's listening, if you've never done family history, you have to go on ancestry.com. I mean, you will love it. It's like this detective game.

It's so, so fun to figure out who you're related to and where they're from and, and their various stories.

You get to the top of an S curve, how do you know when it's time to jump?

Margo Georgiadis: Early on, I remember reading an article from Ray Kroc, who's the founder of McDonald's, talked about, "When you're green, you grow. And when you're red, you rot." And I've always had this philosophy that if I was getting too comfortable in a job like it felt like I had it in the bag or whatever, I don't think any of us ever felt like we really have in the bag. But if we were feeling really comfortable, you know, then that was the time. Even if it wasn't obvious from the outside. I guess a really good example of that would be when I moved from Discover Financial Services to Google. When I announced that I think the team was really surprised. I'd been at the company

for over five years. We've had this amazing turnaround of the company that was very successful. We reshaped everything, our products, our customer experience, our team firing on all cylinders, we'd just taken the company public. We'd done really well in the recession of 2008 because we were much better positioned. We didn't have all that subprime credit, so everything just looked great, right? You know, and but we were going to just keep going. But somehow I just felt like there was more that I wanted to do. Maybe it was, you know, my obsession with data and technology. I just felt like there were, there was a place that would challenge me to reimagine even more.

And a close friend of mine and a couple of them from my McKinsey days and gone to Google. And they've been pestering me to go there for a few years, but I just couldn't do it for family reasons. But then I said, "You know what? There's never a good time." I still remember my grandmother when I told her I was interviewing with them, saying, "Honey, I think that sounds interesting, but that company even make money?" You know, I think people just saw that it's like a search box, like is that really a business? But when I went on campus, you know, the company, was, you know, less than 20. So I think we're 17. At the time, I met the boldest thinkers I've ever known. I mean, these people were so purpose driven, they didn't see any boundaries. They were looking at everything through a new lens. And even though it was going to be unbelievably, personally and professionally disruptive, I just somehow felt like I need to be part of this. I'm going to be totally uncomfortable, but I need to do this. I think it's really hard to realize that you have another S curve to jump if your objective is to feel comfortable in place. And I think that for a lot of people, they strive to feel comfortable like they're an expert. Right? And they gain comfort in that security. And I think that's exactly when you limit yourself.

Whitney Johnson: So, you're at Ancestry where people trace their family history. Have you done yours or has someone done it for you? Maybe you haven't done it yourself. And have there been any surprises as you've looked at your own family history?

Margo Georgiadis: Well, of course, I've done my family history. That's why I took the job!

My family on both sides of my mother's family, my father's family, they're just obsessed with passing down information and stories. My dad has a big Swedish heritage and so, they have books where every single person has a description all through the generations of big farm family reunions.

And my mother's side, they're from the south and came to the country very early on. And one of the most amazing things for my children, we have three, is that my grandmother came to live with us for 10 years when our kids were growing up. My grandparents have been married for 65 years and my grandfather passed and I thought, "Oh my gosh, what are you going to do?" So I said, "Why don't you just come live with us?" And she said, "Yes." And it was like the greatest gift because she was born in 1912 and she lived to a 100.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Margo Georgiadis: And she was just like a walking history textbook for my children. And she loved to share history. But not only did she love to share it, but she saved everything.

She had the prayer books carried in the pocket of our ancestors during the Civil War so that they could be identified.

And she had saved ration books from World War II so that we would know what it was really like in that era. She even had, in her family, passed down the actual physical money from before the US was even a country like this, like from the different states, had their own money.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Margo Georgiadis: And so my kids can imagine because they were learning their history.

And so this is just like so embedded in who I who I was myself, but then also for my children. But my grandmother was a lifelong member of all these kind of legacy societies, and she was very proud of that. She kind of war on her shoulder a little bit sometimes. And she kind of felt like her family had always been the first to come to this country.

And after I was delving into deeper and deeper family history exploration, after joining ancestry, I actually learned that my father's family came to this country first [inaudible] my maiden name... in 1600. It was very funny. She had passed by then, but I just thought it would have been a hoot to be able to share those records, you know, and she would have enjoyed it.

So yes, definitely found some fun surprises and really enjoyed it.

Whitney Johnson: Wow. The money from the 16-1700's is just astonishing. I love hearing that.

So, Margo, if people are like, "I want to do some more family history," where should they go?

Margo Georgiadis: They should absolutely go to ancestry.com. There's also some fantastic videos that we've put out on YouTube. There's a really great story from some really interesting people that we're putting out that I think will inspire anyone to go on their family story.

Whitney Johnson: Margo, any final thoughts, sort of closing remarks that you would like to share with us?

Margo Georgiadis: I think the most important thing that I always want people to think about is, to always think about what's most important to you and what makes you happy. And do that. And do it with people that will challenge you and stretch you, and then when you get a little bit too comfortable, you know, try to challenge yourself, to take a risk, to step out and explore something. And don't be afraid to consider something that's a very different vector from what you've done before, because sometimes trying something totally different might surprise you how much you love it. I certainly found that to be true for myself.

And I'm always focused on the next adventure. And I think for me, that's, that's what keeps a spring in your step.

Whitney Johnson: Margo Georgiadis, thank you so much for joining us.

Margo Georgiadis: Thank you for having me.

Margo's career has been a series of curves, this continuous pathway to her potential. Every S curve jump has been a risk. No guarantees, no promises of success, just an opportunity for her to practice personal disruption, to step back from who she was to slingshot into who she could be. Beginning with her bravely asking her McKinsey office manager to delay her start. Notice, the opportunity, it was there. But she had to ask. She had to show up to the opportunity. She had to take the risk to step back. Only then could she slingshot forward.

Like right now, for instance, Margo ended our time together, sharing how she's always focused on the next adventure. That was in November 2020. Just a few days ago, she reached out to tell me that at the end of this month, with Ancestry having been acquired and COVID presenting an inflection point, it's time. She can feel it. And you do feel it. You know when it's time to jump. It's time for Margo to disrupt herself and pursue her lifelong passion of reimagining health care, which I love on so many levels, including that she'll be extending her mother's legacy.

If you're thinking about jumping to a new S curve would like some help personally and or with your team to evaluate what you learned this past year and how you can leverage that into this year, go to our website, Whitney. whitneyjohnson.com/insights for downloadable PDF.

Thank you again to Margo Georgiadis for being our guest. Thank you to our team Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe, Steve Ludwig, Melissa Ruddy, and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson and this is Disrupt Yourself.