

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 218: JUSTIN OSOFSKY

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide 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.

Before I introduce our guest today, if you haven't already, would you take a moment and leave a review on Apple? I continually receive emails from you telling me how useful these interviews are, and I am confident that others will find them useful too, but they can't listen to them if they don't know they exist. Your leaving a review signals to the algorithm gods and other podcast listeners, "Pay attention," and I would personally be very grateful.

Now, our guest today is Justin Osofsky. He's the Chief Operating Officer of Instagram, which has changed how we travel, turned flat image lays into a phenomenon, created social brands like Shay and Syd McGee, who we featured in Episode 187 and mobilized activism. All good things. But the reason I wanted you to hear from Justin is that his former colleague, Angie Balfour, now the Chief People Officer at Weave, a Silicon Slope's tech company. Angie shared with me that Justin makes it possible for people to do their best work. He helps people climb S curves. Justin builds A-teams. And I wanted you to hear his secret.

**Whitney Johnson:** Justin, welcome to the podcast.

**Justin Osofsky:** Whitney, it is great to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, let's start with a really easy softball question. But you're a lawyer, so you're prepared for this. Tell us about a crucible moment for you as a leader.

**Justin Osofsky:** You know, if that's a softball question, I look forward to seeing where we head from there. In terms of crucible moments, one that immediately jumps is I've, I've been the, the Chief Operating Officer of Instagram for

now nearly a couple of years. But I think joining the Instagram organization was definitely a leadership moment. That, as context, you had two amazing founders, Kevin Systrom, Mike Krieger, who had recently left the organization, and a new leadership team moving in. I think coming in in a way to, to really understand the culture, to connect with the people, to get a sense of what values drove an organization and to be credible as a leader was absolutely a crucible moment.

**Whitney Johnson:** How was it, though? What was challenging for you around that? So, you had this new contact. You had these founders that were very visible, very well known, very clear definition of who they were and what they were. Was the crucible figuring out how to fit in, how to make your way through that? What did that look and feel like for you?

**Justin Osofsky:** So, Instagram is a magical service and I think means so much to people who use it. And so, I think to walk in and understand what was the magic of Instagram? As an outsider it took a lot of work. We have three values. People first, craft and simplicity, but it's kind of easy to create posters and put values on the wall. The question is, what did that mean? And so, for the first couple months there, I was actually quiet. I remember being in my first product review. It was around testing a new feature where the first 20 minutes of discussion were not, "What are the impacts on our metrics, whether it's engagement or revenue?" It was, "Is this people first? Is this the right thing to do for people?"

And it was just fascinating and really important lens. So, what I started doing, I started doing one-on-ones. I probably did a hundred of them. I met with our sales team in Europe, our senior engineers, our executive assistants, our anyone and everyone.

And during that it was just simple. "What's going well? What's not? Where can I help?" And, you know, for the first 23 minutes of 30-minute conversation, it's just kind of getting to know in that last seven minutes you get your little nugget.

And so, then the question is, "Where could I add value from day one?"

And I think people often think of leadership is stepping in with big strategic insights. I think it starts with helping people out.

One thing was in our San Francisco office. The engineers would work a lot better if stairwells could keep open for two hours longer and haven't been at Facebook for a decade. Our stairwells were open for two hours longer within a week. And all of a sudden you walked up to engineers and they're like, "Huh, this person's adding some value."

Then the question is, how do you get to know people? And one of the challenges in San Francisco is we're working in this high-rise office building, which is very not, very techie or Facebook, but you never could run into people. And I found the only place you could find people was the elevators. So, I started doing an elevator office hours where I would ride up and down the elevator for half hour to 45 minutes at a time, just up and down. Then I started to bring a dim sum cart. So, I'd hand out dim sum with a pork bao or dumpling to people as they're on and just get to know people. And I think part of that was really important to building trust with the team and then over time, obviously, influencing strategy in more meaningful ways.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, it's so interesting to hear you say that. You know you're going to go into this new role and the most important thing for you to do was to get to know people, make yourself available, hear what they had to say. And I think it's fascinating that for many people, that big win was keeping the stairwell open for two hours more. They don't necessarily have to be big things that we do differently.

**Justin Osofsky:** That's something that I don't think I realized earlier in my career. You know, I think when you walk out of graduate programs, whatever, you think that leadership is about having this vision heading into that. And by the way, I do think that's an important part of leadership and galvanizing the organization. But I also think a part of it is, is having people trust you. And part of building trust is delivering something from day one. And often what you can deliver on day one is a sign that you understand some of the pain points in the day to day and you can fix those. And that gives you the credibility, I think, to fix other types of things.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, delivering from day one, including dim sum, right?

**Justin Osofsky:** Yeah, I know. And then I actually got myself a cart. So, there were two floors which had more employees than the other floors like [inaudible]. So, I'd actually take the dim sum cart and go desk to desk. The first time you do it, people's kind of head jolts up. It's like, "Who is this new COO?" And by the way, by the third time you do it, they go, "It's Justin. And by the way, something screwed up here. So, while you're here, thanks for bringing me the dumpling, but let's also talk about the fact I need a couple more head counts to accelerate our commerce plans."

**Whitney Johnson:** Is food an oxytocin? It solves a myriad of problems, does it not?

**Justin Osofsky:** I really believe in it.

**Whitney Johnson:** You were formerly at Facebook. You were the number two to Sheryl Sandberg. You move over to Instagram to become the Chief Operating Officer and your plan was to make a clean break, but that did not happen. So, tell us what did happen and what you learned as you straddled those two worlds.

**Justin Osofsky:** I ran, and actually continue to run, operations for Facebook for many years. That's, that's the way we support the people that use the service from if you have an issue of getting onto our site, it's enforcing our policy, it's helping our, our advertisers and et cetera. And the notion was that I'd move over to be COO of Instagram and transition out of that role. But I think as part of that, there was an interesting moment where, as we think about how you best operate both Instagram and Facebook, I think there was a realization that having me work in both roles could be really helpful. This happens for a bunch of reasons. You know, one of the things that folks don't understand as well about Instagram is how much Facebook has played an important role in the Instagram journey. When I was running partnerships or media partnerships with Facebook and operations, I still was supporting Instagram. And Facebook has more people that work on our safety and security team than Instagram has employees total. And so, when you think about keeping Instagram safe, a big part of how we do it is we work with Facebook. And I think being able to build the bridges between organizations that have grown up a bit separately and building those trust and ties is really important. That's why I end up keeping both roles. And I think it's working out really well that, you know, one of the proudest things in my day is when you begin to see the sparks of new relationships forming, when you break down, as happens in any larger organization, things that erode trust, particularly in a virtual working environment where everything feels a little more fraught when we're on video conference than if you're just swinging by a desk and chatting for seven minutes with someone. It's been a really valuable role and a really valuable way for me to learn too.

**Whitney Johnson:** I think most of us struggle to live in a "both and" world. We tend to like to default to binary to it's "either this or that." It's "us versus them." You're saying "both and." It's more productive. You're able to get more done. You're able to build those bridges. What's one of the challenges for you in building those bridges across these two organizations?

**Justin Osofsky:** There are lots of challenges. One is that Instagram as a team tends to be just smaller teams with safety and security being just one example. So, I think just helping navigate where if you have a lot of people reaching out, how do you separate the signal through the noise?

But more fundamentally is I have found that teams are remarkably good at hitting their goals. The problem is, if you set the wrong goal, a team will hit the wrong goal and you wake up doing the wrong thing. And I've seen over the years all sorts of examples where we proudly hit our goals and then woke up and we're questioning whether we'd actually done the right thing. When you have different parts of an organization in a decentralized company with different goals, you will have people charging to hit their local goals, but often not understanding the goals of a different team and that can lead to tension and friction. So, I think a big part of my job is ensuring people understand what's driving another team, and then when you have places where you're misalign, clear it up. Often people will associate politics or "we don't work well together." It's actually not bad. I think you have people with good intentions hitting their own goals, but not understanding there's something broader and at play.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you're able to move up or zoom out and say, "All right, so I see this goal and I see this goal. Let's now step back and see what the broader goal that we're all trying to move toward and make sure that these, these secondary goals or these goals underneath that umbrella are all in support of the bigger goal that we have."

**Justin Osofsky:** Precisely. And I think one of the hardest things to scale in an organization is judgment. Like as you're growing quickly as an organization, you have, I think, leaders that imagine what the right thing to do is, but then how do you cascade that through an organization, through another set of goals?

Let me give an example of how I tried. When I had my first daughter, who's now six years old. I remember in that haze of being a new father. I'd get grocery deliveries. Over the past year, grocery delivery seemed a lot more normal. At the time, it was novel, but one day, I walked our front hall and I saw this big green bag from I think it was Amazon fresh. I had no idea what it was. My wife, Alicia, probably ordered it. And so, I opened the bag, and it was massive. It was about past my waist and in it was a styrofoam cooler. And so, in this big styrofoam cooler, I took off the top and I now didn't see anything, so I dug in. And all of a sudden, my hands were wet and cold at the bottom, wondering literally what was going on. And at the bottom of this cooler, I found two frozen lemons. Why do I have two frozen lemons? Because you don't really freeze a lemon. And it hit me that probably five to ten people worked on delivering this order.

And I'm sure they followed their policies to the letter. That if you have a grocery order, you pack it in a perishable cooler with ice bags. You then put that cooler in a green bag, you then deliver the green bag. And so, in one sense, this worked perfectly from the handbook. But I also think probably five to ten people knew as they were doing it, "This was surreal. Why are we doing this with two lemons as opposed to put them in a paper bag and just delivering two lemons to a customer?"

And none of them, I think, felt empowered to raise their hand and say the rules, our policies, the way we work is broken. And so, what I did is I created a frozen lemon award for my operations organization, where every month I would give an award to the person who raised their hand and told me something that was broken in the way that we did things, where following the rules would be delivering the wrong things. I don't know how you scale judgment perfectly, but I think it begins with empowering people who do the work to raise their hand when they see the frozen lemons. And that was one of my bigger learnings in running operations for Facebook.

**Whitney Johnson:** Who won the frozen lemon recently and what did they discover?

**Justin Osofsky:** We've kind of evolved beyond the frozen lemons as we've scaled. Now, we kind of made lemonade, but we actually, I think, developed a much more robust process. We now do incident reviews every Friday. And what the incident reviews do is they take two places we have screwed up, globally, and in a blameless fashion, breaking down into a framework on why the screw up happened. Was it in our product? Was it the people who were working on my operations team? Was it our technology? But you can break down this framework rigorously and you typically find more than one root cause and then you fix it to help ensure we don't make the same mistake twice.

So, I think it went from a one-off frozen lemon award to a process. And this was learning from our engineering team that did SEV reviews. How do you bring it into operations? It was learning from the Marines who after action reviews. But I think how do you infuse in a culture a way to correct mistakes without pointing fingers and assigning blame, but in the spirit "that we can do better and there's nothing to be defensive about."

**Whitney Johnson:** In our work, we use the S curve of Learning™ to help people think about where are they in their growth. So, you're very familiar with it from a product standpoint. I've imagined it to help us think about how we learn, how we grow and how we develop. So, you've got the launch point, the sweet spot, mastery where you figure things out and it's time to try something new.

So, I want to talk about one of your launch points. Tell us a time when you were at the launch point of an S curve, brand new figuring things out. What was the situation and what did it look and feel like?

**Justin Osofsky:** That's a good one. I probably had about 10 different jobs over 13 years of Facebook. So, plenty of launch points and plenty S curves. I think one of the steepest was when I began running media partnerships for Facebook, where I didn't have a background in the media industry. And so, while I do think I had strengths to bring to bear to a role, my understanding of Facebook, my ability to work within it and grow teams, it was one of these moments where I also had to be where my own personal gaps and blind spots.

And so, what I did there is I tried to hire people that were better than me for what we needed to do. And I know one always talks about hiring better than you, but I think it actually takes kind of a real reflection of a leader of your own failings and where you need to improve.

So first, I hired a person from Newsweek or MBT, Nick Rudan, and he could bring that background from Newsweek and The Washington Post. And then we began working together. We hired Sibyl Goldman, Ryan Seacrest's right-hand woman, to run entertainment for us. She still does today. Dan Reed, the president of the NBA's Daily, because Dan knew more about sports than I did and he's still with us. Campbell Brown, a former news anchor who continues to run news partnerships. And then eventually I moved into a different role because we had built a team that was better than I was to work with our media partners. But I think that was moving up the S curve, but also hiring people to accelerate my journey up the S curve. And then when I hit the plateau, reflecting that in a way, you done what you were trying to do as a leader, which was to build succession, to hire a team better, and then in many ways to work your way out of a job.

**Whitney Johnson:** Like you said, we intuitively know, or we logically know we're at the launch point of the S curve, we need to find people who can help us move up that S curve. But there's this funny head game that goes on for many people, which is, "Hmm, I don't know what I'm doing. My identity is in this weird place because who am I if I'm not who I was? I'm worried that people will think I don't know what I'm doing. In fact, they already know that I don't know what I'm doing." But we start to try to hustle. We start to try to perform rather than learn.

Do you remember what you said to yourself? So, what was the script going on in your head that allowed you to be in this place of like, "I don't know. I'll figure it out. I'm going to bring in all these other people and we're going to figure it out together." Is there anything that you said to yourself to move through that stage of not knowing?

**Justin Osofsky:** You know, I'm one of those folks that wakes up in the middle of the night when something's not going right. And I was waking up a lot in the early days of that role. And I think at some point the question is, "Why?" The wake up is a symptom. What's the cause? And to me, the cause was, "I'm not from this industry. I can put together a PowerPoint deck just like the next person." Where in 25 slides, you can pretend you understand what's going on, but you don't. And so that was, I think, a really insecure moment. But then bringing in people who've seen the movie before and can pattern recognize was just, it allowed me to start sleeping again. And a good sign [inaudible], in fact I've got two young daughters. When I can start sleeping again, that's a good sign that you've got there.

But sometimes it's not as simple as hiring externally, though. I think the media partnerships role in some ways was pretty clear what we needed to do, and I needed to do as a leader, which is hire someone and people that can work better in these verticals, entertainment, sports, news that I could.

You also can have moments where the problem is more ambiguous. Like a different one is after Cambridge Analytica, we reflected on where we fell short, fell short and our response to the company and what we could do to improve it.

I was talking with Sheryl Sandberg about it and we decided to set up a new function, strategic response. But then the question is who should read the function? And there was a person, Molly Cutler, who I'd worked with in a couple of contexts before. She was working for the company; she was in our legal department. And I said, Sheryl, "I don't know exactly what Molly does. She's worked at Instagram for a bit. She's worked on this, but I've worked with her on these two contexts in the past. Both were pretty high pressure, important for the company. She is the best I have ever seen at getting signal from noise cutting through and calmly moving through. And she's the right person, I think, to set this up is she'll do it."

And I think about 24, 48 hours, have my timing right, Molly had agreed to kind of take a new role at the company and set something up from scratch, but that was very different than how do you work with the sports industry with Dan Reed or the entertainment industry with Sibyl? That was, how do we set up something new? Recognizing people and what their strengths are and then creating these opportunities can be very meaningful for organizations.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, not only meaningful for organizations, but I'm just thinking about yesterday I was doing a webinar at a large organization where we're talking about the S curve and you get to the top of the S curve and it's time for you to do something new and there were so many people that were saying, you know, "I feel like I'm at the top. I want to do something new. And yes, I know I need to take ownership for my career, but also, it would be really nice if there were someone who would tap me and say, 'You know, I think you'd be good at that. I think you'd be good at this.'" And I think not only did you benefit the organization by bringing Molly in, it sounds like she's eminently capable, but you gave her this opportunity of saying, "We see you. We see your skills and you're over here, but we think you could apply it there." I mean, it's a supreme compliment in a supreme way of seeing a person and for who they are and who they can be.

**Justin Osofsky:** Well, one bit of advice I remember hearing years ago, which just stuck with me, I believe, was John Donahoe talking about his experiences at Bain, was the notion of what he called "repotting." And to me at the time was this odd metaphor and then it really stuck, which is about every few years. If you've got a talented person to take and put them in a different part of the garden and just create, in your framework, a new S curve for them, but intentionally create a new launch moment for them.

And so, I'm doing career conversations with people all the time, from folks early in career to very senior leaders. But there tend to be kind of two questions that I have, which is, "If you think about the next 18 months of your journey in the S curve you'd be moving on, are you excited? Do you have any kind of impact? Are you learning? Are you working with someone who inspires you, you're going to learn and stretch from? But then if you just think five to 10 years out, something longer, and where you want your career to go, is what you're doing now, at least directionally pointed in that place? And if it is, you're probably in a pretty good place. And if not, time to shake something up."

And it's scary and it's frightening, but the plateau is a dangerous moment in terms of taking people to where they can be.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. Plateau becomes a precipice.

The elegant solution, I have to tell you, when I first learned about the elegant solution from our, our mutual friend and colleague, Angie Balfour, I applied that in a situation the very next day, but I want for all of our listeners to hear what it is and give us an example.

**Justin Osofsky:** Let me start with where I'm from. I grew up in New Orleans. My dad's a psychiatrist, my mom's a psychologist. I'm a middle child. And you can only imagine what our dinner tables were like growing up in that setting. But I think one of the things I learned to do from that situation is to really understand how each person approaches problems, approaches the world and be able to kind of hopefully reach solutions that work for people that come in with different perspectives on what the right outcome can be. Like, I do think one of the things I'm pretty good at in, not perfect at, but I can walk into a room at this point with various people from Instagram and Facebook. You could have Adam Mosseri to head Instagram, Sheryl Sandberg, our Facebook COO, Mark in time to time, Alex Schultz our CMO, et cetera, and I've got a pretty good, intuitive understanding of how each of them are going to approach a conversation that I think is, is really important in lots of different settings. So, some are kind of organizational. If you're thinking about, for instance, how Instagram and Facebook shouldn't work together, where can you leverage Facebook? Where can you not? And to me, for instance, they are, to me, often the elegant solution for Instagram is not to try to hold on to resources where you'll be subscale in some sense anyways relative to what you get from Facebook, but to move resources into Facebook, to leverage Facebook and to build those bridges together. You come with specific examples, but then you'd get into kind of our inside mechanics.

Some of them though, by the way, come to, to career opportunities for people. You often have a role come up within a company and you have people ask, "Is this the right role for me? Is that where I should take my career?"

That is an introspective question. Like, you know, occasionally you'll have roles that everyone wants, but that's not typically what happens. In running operations, they're some people... There's a person, James Mitchell, who joined us straight out of college and just made VP after about 15 years of Facebook, and that's to me an example of building a career within operations. And he worked in various roles for the whole time within an organization. That's been wonderful for James, but that's not necessarily the right answer for someone else where they want to kind of work across functions. In some ways a little more guided, where you have a bit of partnerships, you have a bit of operations and you've got this and you've got that, but that's understanding the person. And you can't come to the elegant solution until you understand what motivates and drives the individual.

**Whitney Johnson:** I don't know if you've heard of "the jobs to be done" theory where you look at like what's the functional job to be done and what's the emotional job to be done? This is how I'm interpreting what you're saying. You're not only looking what's the functional job, but what are the emotional job each of the stakeholders who are involved trying to get done and how can we make that is elegant and how can we do that job for as many people as possible?

**Justin Osofsky:** I think that's right. And then the question is, how do you do it at scale? Where if you're in the earlier stages of the company, there's obviously lots of flexibility in any role given how much there is just to get done at any given moment, and then as companies mature and organizations mature, the depth of what you need to get done in a specific role is actually in many ways much deeper. In some sense, the kind of role with a more narrow scope is bigger than the breadth that you used to have. And yet what motivates the generalist who loved the chaos of the early may motivate them to do a different role in a more mature organization or may create existential moments around own life and career, and I think you need to be open to those conversations.

**Whitney Johnson:** Ok, you just said something that I want to double click on. You said that in some ways, the narrower the scope, the deeper the role. Say more about that.

**Justin Osofsky:** When I joined Facebook, it was probably at about five hundred people and I naturally did all sorts of different things. Over the course of a day, you were probably on the one hand talking to a partnership because we didn't have any partnerships, so you've got to do that, and then you're creating a strategy deck and then you're going and trying to figure out a customer service issue. And, oh, by the way, the lights aren't working in some conference room, so you better figure out how the lights of the printers work.

And then all of a sudden, the organization matures. And so, I moved from that kind of fluid role. I mean, it was technically, I was first partner manager in the company to then a role more focused on media partnerships. Now, on the one hand, media partnerships at that time, you would say, would be more narrow in scope. I'm no longer running around doing operations or running around doing product marketing or whatever it is. On the other hand, the scope of what we're trying to do in that role was much greater than our aspirations, even a couple of years ago. You were having important conversations with partners across various industries, whether it's athletes in sports, whether it's entertainers trying to understand what motivated. And so, in some sense, while the scope of the role would be more narrow, the amount of work and complexity and organization building was much deeper. And I think getting to that mindset shift is really important because it's really important to help people in a way, give away some of their Legos to then build where an organization needs to be.

**Whitney Johnson:** You were in operations, obviously, and we have a lot of people who are listening, who are trying to stand something up, a project, a business. Tell us what's in your head when you look at something new that you've got to stand up. How are you assessing the situation? What do you look for? What are one or two things that you're like...? What does your brain do?

**Justin Osofsky:** I think it's really important to hone in on what you're trying to solve. So, when you're standing up a new organization, presumably there's a reason why, but understanding what the why is matters, because in the first question is, is "What are your goals? And to your point on what you're being hired for, what are you improving by standing up?" That actually often becomes easy at first and then complicated over time, because your initial hypothesis of what you're solving evolves over the course of a few weeks or months as you learn more. One of our strongest teams at Facebook has this notion of you understand, identify and execute.

I often think folks get it backwards. You see a problem and you immediately go to the tactical solution that would solve the problem, but without understanding the depth of the problem. You can understand that people on Facebook have a customer support issue. So, you then can get all sorts of tactics on how you would address the customer support issue without understanding why you're even having this issue, because it might look very different if you're on an Android device in India than if you're on an iOS in the US. So, let's like really understand what's going on.

Then you get into what I think is critical, which is around, in a way, your people and your process. Naomi Klein, one of our longtime product readers at Facebook, is one of the best operators I've ever seen in my career. But I think setting up a process that is as lightweight as possible, yet robust enough to get the job done. Big process I don't think are good, and if anything, when I walked into Instagram, I went into our planning processes and I asked the team something very simple.

"Rather than having a 20-page document or a presentation, could we get it down to one page?"

And it turns out it's a lot harder to make a one-page document that cuts the heart of the issues than is create a really nice 25-page PowerPoint, but it gets you to the heart of the discussion. And then making sure the people you have working on it are in roles that play to their strengths and addressing hard on even when it's challenging, when people aren't. I actually really do believe in strength-based talent management that I just think all of us have different strengths. I'm good at some stuff and I'm weaker on some stuff, and I think through the years and roles, I've shown that.

Being clear on the people in the process and ensuring you have the right leadership team, you're building the right organization, you've created the right incentives. And then, by the way, revisiting it roughly every six months to a year, organizations change, and problems change. And one of the most interesting things I saw over a decade plus at Facebook is often a person who is fabulous in one role at one stage of the company could struggle a year and a half later in the next role because, you know, it turns out being a great individual contributor in IC can be a very different skill set than managing.

And, you know one of the hardest leaps in managing? It's not managing a team, it's managing managers, because all of a sudden you have people doing things differently than you do it. And the question is, what battles do you pick and, "micromanage" potentially to make sure you get it right? And where do you give operational latitude and accept the different people have different approaches and that's fine. And then how do you keep a culture through it?

**Whitney Johnson:** So, when you see a new situation, you've got to stand something up for anybody who's listening and saying, "All right, I want to operationalize," you, first of all, so launch point of the S curve, you ask yourself, "What problem are we actually trying to solve?" So, you start there.

**Justin Osofsky:** Sure.

**Whitney Johnson:** Then you go to a process. Once we decide what we want to solve, you think about the process. But like you said, you try to get it down to one page. So, you have a process, but it's very loose. It allows you to be flexible. It allows you to be agile. And then make sure you've got the right people knowing that it might not be the right people, because some people are, like you said, have real strengths and you want to make sure that you have the right fit, the right project with the right people. And that's the assessment that you do when you go into a new project to stand up.

**Justin Osofsky:** And the one thing I would add is what's your escalation path to speed things up, particularly if you're in a larger organization? One of the great things being a big organization of all sorts of resources, but one of the challenges is the coordination cost, particularly as you operate globally.

So, one of the things I try to do is create informal escalation paths, which takes something that may be waiting for a meeting two weeks out and just do it in real time. So, I probably and I turned them off for this podcast, have all of these work chats of different groups of, of folks. But they can always know you are one casual message away from a



response within ten minutes later to unblock things, because I think one of the things that slows organizations down is either not having the right decision makers in the room. You can have meeting upon meeting, but it turns out this is a call we're going to take to Sheryl, and you better get that off to Sheryl and get that steer or you can have the work that goes towards meetings that are weeks out when all you're really looking for is just a quick steer, which is directionally, "Is this a good idea or not?" Then we can run for a couple of weeks and figure it out. How do you create the right escalation processes and then how do you remove the barriers to using it? Because all of a sudden, instead of it being a fraud escalation, it's just a way of working and kind of we're all in a team together, even if we somewhat different roles on the team.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you try to respond to people pretty quickly and remove the choke point.

**Justin Osofsky:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** OK.

**Justin Osofsky:** In a senior role, it's one of the most important things you can do, because in many ways, if something sitting in my inbox or work chat or whatever and is not responded to, you're slowing down a team. And when you compound that across a series of leaders in a global organization, I think it can be one of those frustrating things of working. You're ready to go and you just can't get the guidance you need.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. I remember reading research that was quoted by Dan Pink in his book, *When*, that one of the key metrics of job satisfaction is how quickly a manager responds to their emails. And so being able to remove those choke points allows people to feel responded to and a sense of being able to be productive and efficient.

**Justin Osofsky:** And you feel like you matter.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Justin Osofsky:** So, I think one of the things if you're just sitting there, there's a question that goes on, "Is this not important? Did I just fall down a Q?" One of the things I think when you get a response to something within the same day that you send it, as you know, this was important enough to merit a response, which is important.

**Whitney Johnson:** And then we feel that we are important.

You have become an ally for underprivileged groups and so I want to just put that out there. And we also know from the research that it is hard to see unfairness for any of us unless it's directed at us. And the more senior we become in an organization, the more privileged we become, the harder it is to see. So, we've got you're known as an ally. We know it's hard to see. Do you have a crucible experience where you said, "I need to become an ally?"

**Justin Osofsky:** I think I have a couple. Let me go one professional and then one personal.

First, I very much agree with the premise, which is that it is very hard without having a lived experience to understand, to empathize, to support. And as a white male of privilege, I think it's incumbent upon me to try to understand the lived experiences, even if I'm not personally having them.

One experience I had professionally a few years ago was we have a notion of authentic identity on Facebook. You have one identity that reflects who you are, but I think the way in which we develop this policy and we're enforcing them, we're creating really painful experiences for members of the LGBTQ+ community and particularly the trans community. And through engaging, sitting in rooms, understanding the pain that we were causing was, I think, the way to begin understanding a lived experience that I had not had, but where we had to do better as a company and finding a strong kind of member of that community, in this case, Howard Schultz, who's now our Chief Marketing Officer but a gay leader of our company, was hugely important as a partner for me personally, moving up the curve.

But a second lens I've had is in watching Alicia, my wife's career, that she's a prosecutor and has long worked now for, for a couple of decades in a male-dominated part of the profession. And I remember, back when we were in law

school, she got a great summer associate position at a top law firm in Boston. And we went into the reception where they invited partners and I showed up in the reception and she had a blue badge because she worked for the firm. I had a white badge because I was a significant other. And we walked up to a group of three male partners and they all turned to me and they asked, "Justin, how's your summer with our firm going?" And I said, "I don't work here. She does." But it was realizing just the implicit and an just unconscious bias we all bring.

And then I've seen other moments. She was in her second trimester, several months pregnant with our younger daughter. The prosecution of the appeal of Brock Turner, the Stanford rapist, was being assigned in her office and it was initially assigned to someone else. And she raised her hand saying, "I think I'm the right person to prosecute that case." And she did a kind of consulting with her friends from Wellesley where she went undergrad and me, but it was only by the act of actually raising the hand she got the opportunity and then she was working nights and weekends. I was taking our older daughter out to every sporting event she could, from women's volleyball to the Giants to the A's, and then came off maternity leave to argue the successful appeal.

But I remember even there, while walking out of the courthouse, I was carrying a bag for her. I went to the argument and was dressed nicer than I intended to and was wearing a suit and I think the picture in the newspaper was the three attorneys walking out of the courthouse. And then that bag I was carrying was her pump parts because we were in the middle pumping, but like there's all of, I think, the biases we bring. And I think being a partner to Alicia has helped on a personal level, understand some of my gaps there as well.

**Whitney Johnson:** Building a team. What are one or two suggestions you have, or you have found to be useful that are allowing the people who work with you to do their best work?

**Justin Osofsky:** Well, I think there's a couple of different dimensions of it. Some is what we've discussed, which is ensuring that what a person is doing is lining up to their passions, interests, strengths, excitements, the S curve they want to move up, because I find when you do your best work, all of that clicks. And when you're not doing your best work, there's an impediment, which is it tends to be something going on. I focus a lot on managers, because I think for anyone who's ever worked for a great manager or versus just a good manager versus a not so good manager, it makes all the difference in the world. And when I reflect on people I've worked for, I learn different things from everyone I work for. I learn different things from Sheryl than I do from Adam Mosseri than I did for Dan Rose than I did for [inaudible].

And I think giving people the opportunity to have those experiences working for different managers is really important. And then I actually think it's having a candid conversation without blame, without judgment on what's getting in the way. What is stopping you from doing your best work? And by the way, sometimes it's controllable. And by the way, sometimes it's harder. As we've lived the pandemic together, life is hard, and it can be really hard for people. And I think giving people the space to be there first for their family, for their loved ones, for their friends, and realizing where work fits in the context of a broader life journey is important. It's important as a leader to model that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Where can people connect with you? What's your Instagram handle?

**Justin Osofsky:** My handle is @justinosofsky. Then, you know, like I'm around, like Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, you know, I'm here.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. We're going to start moving into having some fun. So, I went on your Instagram account in preparation for this interview. One could say I was stalking your Instagram account and discovered that you love food. You are a foodie. And so, I recently interviewed on our podcast Ellen Bennett, who founded a company called Hedley and Bennett.

**Justin Osofsky:** Oh, wow.

**Whitney Johnson:** And I have a little gift for you, which you are going to open right now on camera.

**Justin Osofsky:** I'm going to open right now on camera. This is going to be quite a reveal.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes.

**Justin Osofsky:** So, we cut open this. Oh, this is amazing. This is one of the nicest aprons I've ever seen in my life. The fabric is phenomenal, the pockets. Thank you so much, Whitney. I will put this to good use. I assure you it will. This is the cleanest it will ever be, I assure you.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. Right. Well, I have to say, as I was watching your account, I was like, "I think Justin needs an apron and I think Justin might have a restaurant opening in his future." So, this is just a little perhaps someday you might decide to do that.

**Justin Osofsky:** I assure you, if I open a restaurant, it will be in this apron, but I very much appreciate it. And I'm kind of an amateur home cook and my Instagram gets kind of the better things. You miss the outtakes, whether it's the Kraft Mac and Cheese, which is really all my three-year-old aspires to ever eat, or whether it's you make a dish and then you order Chinese takeout so you can actually eat some dinner.

**Whitney Johnson:** At the end of every coaching call, what I do is I ask people to tell me what was useful for you. So, as you were talking, as you were processing, as you were thinking, what came to mind? What idea or something that you're like, "Oh, yeah, I want to do that. I want to act on that." What came to you?

**Justin Osofsky:** One thing is I think it's hard as a leader in the day to day when things are moving so fast, which is to take a step back and be intentional. And I think I'm realizing that I need to be even more intentional right now about some of the leaders and people on my team and specifically where they are in their S curves.

Like one of the things that we didn't quite get to but was in the back of my head as we were chatting, is what happens to an S curve in the middle of a pandemic? Because there's all of the normal things you do to move up and then you have this exceptionally strange period of time. Does it mean plateaus have now lasted longer and we really need to be more aggressive? Does it mean that the slope that you are moving up was a different slope?

So, I'm going to be reflecting a bunch on that as we hopefully return to something that I don't think is going to be the same work environment before the pandemic but is going to look quite different over the next six to 12 months and how it's over the past year.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mm. So good. All right. Any final thoughts?

**Justin Osofsky:** I just want to thank you for having me in, a part of this conversation that this apron I'm already now thinking, "What should we inaugurate's cook in it?" But it's just a lot of fun, Whitney, and thank you for everything you're doing. I'm a big fan of your work.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thanks again for being with us.

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Five key takeaways.

Number one. Day one on the job, launch point of the S curve, talk to people. Lots of people. What's going well? What's not? Where can I help? Then deliver something. It doesn't have to be big. It can be small. People just need to know you heard them. That develops trust. On the launch point of a new role, you need to develop trust.

Number two. Sometimes, the top of the S curve is about working your way out of a job, which doesn't mean you will lose your job. In fact, if you work your way out well enough, you'll have job opportunities multiply. If you haven't already read, Give Away Your Legos and Other Commandments for Scaling Startups that Justin and I talked about, we will include a link in the show notes.

Number three. The elegant solution, which I think is a job to be done question on many levels. A, what problem are you trying to solve? B, is it the right problem? C, what job is everyone on your team trying to get done, both functional and emotional? And D, is there an overlap between all the jobs that need to get done and the jobs that people want to and can do? Which brings us back to day one on the job, talking to lots of people, including those S curve conversations of where are you and your growth and how can I help you make progress?

Number four. Side note, but not really, because this is going to go back to people doing their best work. Did you notice how Justin gave many people on his team a shout out? Also, remember in the podcast with Ellen Bennett, episode 213, where I asked her, "What do you look for when you're hiring people?" She said, "Well, when people start telling me where they went to school, it's a no." Justin never recited his credentials. And yes, he's gone to some pretty good schools.

Number five. Respond quickly. Not only will you not become a choke point, slowing down the work, people will feel like they matter which speeds up the work.

So, summarizing.

Number one. Know where your people are in their growth and what jobs they're trying to get done. Number two. To make sure the job your team is trying to get done is the right job. Number three. Give your people a shout out when they do good work and respond promptly. And number four. Remind the people you work with every single day, by your behavior, that their S curve matters to you because it matters to them.

That this how Justin Osofsky builds an A-team.

Thank you again to Justin for being our guest. Thank you to Angie Balfour for making this introduction. And thank you to you for listening. Finally, thank you to my team, Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe, and Steve Ludwig.

I'm Whitney Johnson,  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.