

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 222: SUNEEL GUPTA

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.

Every time you want to jump to a new S curve in your career, there's someone else you have to persuade to jump as well. If you're starting a new job, someone needs to hire you. If you're starting a company, you may need someone to invest in you, more importantly, you need someone to buy from you. In every instance, the person is doing a calculus. "Is this a jump that I want to make? Is it a risk I want to take? Do I want to back this person?" That's what Suneel Gupta is going to talk about with us today, how to be backable. It's the title of his recent book where he shares the surprising truth about what makes people take a chance on you. His ideas have been backed by Greylock and Google Ventures. He has backed Airbnb and Space X. He teaches students at Harvard, and today he's here to teach you and me how to be backable.

**Whitney Johnson:** Suneel, welcome. So happy to have you. You have written a terrific book, it's titled *Backable*, which is an amazing title, and you talk about seven things that we need to know in order for people to want to back us. Can you share with us the very first thing that we need to know?

**Suneel Gupta:** Whitney, it is wonderful to be on. I love your show and thanks for having me.

The first quality is about convincing yourself first: how do we actually build conviction in our own ideas? The entire book is really rooted on the stories of people who are from lots of different backgrounds, people who I consider to be backable people, from Oscar winning filmmakers to celebrity chefs to founders of iconic companies to leaders within organizations. But there's one story in particular that I find to be the most inspiring, it's my favorite backable story, and it's about a woman named Damyanti Hingorani and Time magazine called Damyanti recently a trailblazer. And her story is so unlikely because she grew up on the border of Pakistan and India, largely in a refugee camp. No running water, no electricity. But she did something remarkable: she taught herself how to read. And the first book that she read from cover to cover was the biography of Henry Ford. And she loved this book so much that she decided that one day she wanted to become an engineer with Ford Motor Company. Now, this was the

1950s, living in a refugee camp. It was an unlikely dream for anyone in those circumstances, particularly a woman. But her parents got behind it and they saved every penny they had. They got her on a boat to the United States where she got a scholarship to Oklahoma State University. The day after she graduates, she drives to Detroit, Michigan, to apply for her dream job and she finds her way into a room with a hiring manager.

And so this hiring manager looks at her resume and he looks at her application and then he looks at her and he's like, "Wait a second, are you applying for the job of an engineer?"

And she says, "Yeah."

And he says, "Well, I'm sorry. You know, we actually don't have any female engineers working here right now."

Because at this time, Ford Motor Company had thousands of engineers on staff, but not a single one of them was a woman. And so, Damiyanti Hingorani in this moment is really deflated, she picks up her resume and she begins to walk out of the room. And then an almost just this last-ditch moment, she, she summons all of the courage, all the grit that she can find, and she turns around and she tells this hiring manager her story, about all the struggle, all the sacrifice that it took for her to be in this country, for her to be in this room.

And then she says to him, "Look, things are changing. And if you don't have any females on staff right now on your engineering team, then do yourself a favor and hire me now. Take a chance on me."

And it was in this moment that this hiring manager is so moved that he decides that he's going to go out and he's going to advocate for her. He fights all of the people around him and she becomes Ford Motor Company's first ever female engineer, 1967. And I love that story. It means so much to me, because it inspired all these different groups of people. Girls Who Code is an organization that exists today, and they attribute a lot of what they did back to her story. Immigrants Hoping for a Better Day, Women in the Workforce and, Whitney, me because Damiyanti Hingorani is my mom. And had a middle manager from suburban Michigan not taking a chance on a refugee from the other side of the world, then I wouldn't be here right now talking to you.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay, I'm crying. Does everybody cry when you tell that story?

**Suneel Gupta:** I almost cry every time I tell the story.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's just so powerful. Listeners, you are so lucky you just got to hear that story. I want to tie it back now to each, you and to me, and everybody who's listening. As I heard you tell that story, and I listened to it on Audible initially, I remember being so taken by it because I thought, "How often do we decide that we have something that we want to do, but we're not fully convinced ourselves?" And that was really an important wake up call for me as I was listening for myself is, "Am I fully convinced? Because if I don't believe it, you're not going to believe it."

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah, it's so interesting because when I started writing the book, I was in search of what is it about these backable people? What is it about certain people that allows them to walk into a room and convince us to take a chance on them? And even when they don't have a fully baked idea, even when what they're trying to do is not obvious, we still want to rally around them. And what is that quality? And one of the things that I expected to find is that, well, those people are just generally charismatic. They're charismatic people. But I did not find that to be the case. The past few years, I've spent time now with hundreds of backable people from all different walks of life. And what I found is that, yeah, sure, some of them are more extroverted, more gregarious, but quite a few of them, in fact, I would argue the majority of the people that I studied were not. They were more shy, they were more tempered, in their personality and in their approach. If you want a quick example of that, go look up the number one most popular TED talk of all time. And what you might be surprised to find is a very unTED-like presentation. It's the late Sir Ken Robinson gives a brilliant talk education. He's got one hand in his pocket. He sort of meanders on and off script. It's just not what you would come to expect from sort of a TED, charismatic-style presentation. And yet you believe every word he says.

What I found over time is that it's not charisma that makes a person convincing. It's conviction. Backable people take the time to convince themselves first, and then they let that conviction shine through with whatever communication style that it is that feels most natural to them.

**Whitney Johnson:** Something you talk about in the book also is letting go of your ego.

**Suneel Gupta:** There's a story that I really love in the book, and it's about a famous primatologist named Dr. George Schaller. And Schaller was just exceptional with his study of mountain gorillas. And part of the reason that he was so exceptional is because he was able to get closer to these gorillas than really anybody else had and no one could figure out why.

And so, one day he's presenting his research at a conference and someone finally asked like, "Look, Dr. Schaller, enough is enough. We need to understand, what's your secret? How are these animals letting you get so close?"

And Schaller says, "It's simple. I never carry a gun. No matter what, no matter where I am, I never carry a weapon."

And that was baffling to the audience. And the reason that was baffling is because it's not like the other researchers were waving their guns around. They were hidden inside a backpack, you know, they were tucked away, so why would that make a difference?

But Schaller's theory was that you can hide a weapon, but you can never hide your attitude around a weapon. And what I have come to realize is that it's ego that is really the gun inside our backpack, right? It's the thing that I think in some ways drives us and motivates us, but it's also the thing that separates us. The desire to be the smartest person in the room creates a separation with other people that, that can never quite really let them in, and we can never really connect the way that we're trying to, even when our goal, our objective is to try to connect with that person.

When we have that ego, it's almost impossible to do because there's always sort of a sixth sense that we have when someone else is coming at it with that type of energy.

One of the I think most practical and yet powerful pieces of advice I ever saw given as I was writing this book was a communications coach named Maureen Taylor, who coaches a lot of people, but she also coaches a lot of people who are shy and introverted leaders, right? Unlikely people, again, who like, "Wow, they're leading large teams? I didn't think that that was the type of personality that leads large teams." And yet they were. And one of the things she says is that when you walk into a room, you know, we always, when we're about to give a pitch or a presentation or do an interview, we always sort of, I think, believe that the spotlight is on us. And in some ways it is.

But the goal as quickly as possible when you walk into a room is to take that spotlight and to turn it to something else: your mission, your customer, that other person that you're there to serve. Like just being able to ask yourself before you walk into a room, no matter what, even if it's a status meeting with your team to say, "Who am I really here to represent right now? Someone other than me."

One of the groups of people that I studied for the book, where were Hollywood agents, right? And think of like what comes to mind personality wise.... Right? Very loud, gregarious, sort of, you know, extroverted personalities. What I noticed is that they had far more conviction when they were in a room advocating for their clients than when they were advocating for themselves. When they were in a room talking to their boss about a raise or floating ideas by their team, all of a sudden that sort of Ari Emanuel, like that style, almost seem to take a backseat. I think it's human. I think when we fully believe that we're there for someone else, we bring it. Like that engine really turns on in a way that it can't if we're just there for ourselves.

**Whitney Johnson:** There's a paradox there, isn't there? Because on the one hand, you have to be fully convinced, fully persuaded, fully convicted in what you are talking about and it's not about you.

**Suneel Gupta:** Yes. Yeah. Because you're finding something that you believe in so strongly that is larger than you, right? And you're throwing yourself into that, and it's so hard to remove yourself from that. And by the way, that's not to say that, like, you can't personally benefit from it or that you need to be a monk about it. But what you're

there for is not your personal gain, which are therefore something different, that the rewards that come along the way are a byproduct of that.

**Whitney Johnson:** For our podcast listeners who are inside of an organization, they want to jump to the bottom of a new S curve of Learning™, the launch point, and they're trying to get buy in for their ideas, are there one or two things you would recommend that they do? You talk specifically about the cake mix. So, maybe start there, but maybe somewhere else. But that was pretty compelling for me is how do you get by in?

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah. Yeah. So in the 1940's, Betty Crocker introduced instant cake mix to the market. And Betty Crocker had been around for a while at that point in time and they were pretty sophisticated sort of marketers. They felt like they understood what the market wanted and so they were very confident that instant cake mix was going to take off. So, they were stunned when they found out that no one was buying these instant cake mixes, and they could not for the life of them, figure out why. And so they ended up hiring a psychologist, this guy named Ernest Dichter, to go out into the field and start talking to customers. And what Dichter came back with was very surprising.

He said, "I think that you have made the process of making a cake too easy, too simple. Because all you have to do is pour water into a mix, pop it in the oven and you get this cake, but when it comes out of the oven, customers actually don't really feel like they had made that cake. They didn't really feel ownership over it." So, Dichter's recommendation was, "Why don't you remove one key ingredient and just see what happens?"

And so they do, they remove the egg. So, now as a customer, you have to go out, you have to buy the eggs. You have to come back and crack it and mix it in yourself and then you pop it into the oven and sales completely take off. Because now customers actually felt like it was their cake, like they felt like they had made that.

And this is something that's been unpacked over and over again. There's a group out of Harvard that called this the IKEA effect. The IKEA effect basically tells us that we place up to five times the amount of value on something that we helped build, than something that we simply buy off the shelf, because we made it ourselves.

And so, what does this have anything to do with creativity? And, you know, we've been told that innovation is, is a two-step formula, right? You come up with a great idea and then you execute on it really well. But there is a hidden step in between. In this hidden step is where we bring in early people. We bring in early colleagues, early teammates, early clients, early partners, early investors, and we bring them in early enough that they can actually crack their own egg into the mix, and by the time that we actually reach execution phase, by the time we actually pull the cake out of the oven, they feel like it's their cake, too. They feel like they were part of it.

And I sincerely believe, Whitney, that you can trace every successful startup, every successful initiative within a company, every successful political movement back to this hidden step. It was never just one person, never one person who came up with an idea and ran with it the whole way. It was always a group of early people who felt just as much passion about the idea as the person who came up with in the first place.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, let's bring this back to "let go of your ego." As I'm thinking about this...

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you just wrote a book. I'm working on my next book. I needed to send it out and have some people do some reading. And I remember talking to my husband and saying, "I don't want to send it out. It's not ready." And his comment was, "Yeah, but if you send it out too ready," so too fully baked, doesn't need an egg, "people won't give you feedback because they'll feel like it's already finished."

So, I think this goes back to the egg, the ego. Ooh egg and ego, something to do with that, Suneel. But it takes a lot of humility to let people see something when you're at the launch point, when it is messy, when it's uncomfortable, when you feel like, "I'm going to be embarrassed by this." But maybe that's the secret, as you do need to be a little bit embarrassed.

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah, I think you do, because if it is too fully baked, then there's no room for creative input. I love the advice that your husband gave you because, yeah, I mean, there comes a certain point where people are like, "Well, they already know what they're doing. I mean, they already, they already feel like this is what they're running with. So, all I can really say at this point is good job, Whitney, like there's a good book," right? But that's not very helpful to you, right? And so bringing people in early enough, I think, number one, it gives you the feedback that you need, which is sort of the obvious point. The point that was less obvious to me is now those people actually feel like they were part of your creative process.

And now the book actually comes out and they're not just like posting on Facebook or Instagram, like, "Hey, my friend, Whitney's, book came out." They're like telling all their friends about it, they're actually like they feel as excited about it in some ways as you do because they were part of the creative process.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Suneel Gupta:** That, I think is the part that we miss when we walk into a boardroom or a team room or get on a Zoom with our colleagues and we're like, "I've got this whole thing figured out. I'm presenting every detail to you." You know, backable people tend to have this phrase, which is, "Share what it could be, but not exactly how it has to be." And, and when you share what it has to be, you basically shut everybody out, right? And again, like, their only choice is to be like, "Well, okay, I'm with you, but I'm not really with you, not as into the idea. There's not a lot of room for my input."

Another way to think about it is like backable people tend to fall in love with the problem, but not necessarily fall in love with the solution, right? You have your book right now, it has all the components, right? You've laid everything out, but you're not fully wedded to the way it exactly has to be. You're not fully wedded to the solution yet.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. And so back to someone who has a new idea, they're inside of an organization. Also, when you're willing to say, "I'm not wedded to what it has to be, it's the equivalent of not bringing in a gun in the room, right?"

**Suneel Gupta:** I think so, yeah. I very much think so, because, again, I think the gun for me is the ego and the ego is, "I need to show you, right? I need to show you that I have it all figured out. I've got the full cake mix here, all I need is the water and it's done," right? But it takes some humility to walk into a room and to be able to say, "Look, I've got 80 percent of this figured out, I think, right? And here, I want to show you some of the things. And then for the other 20 percent, I really want your input because you've done this before. You've experienced this before; this is in your domain. And I would really love your advice and how to do it."

Now, one little trap there, though, is that it doesn't mean that you're unprepared for that 20 percent. You're not being laissez faire about the things you don't know. I think it was Charlie Munger who said, "I'd much prefer people who know what they don't know to people who are brilliant," right? And part of the reason for that is because if you know what you don't know, it actually takes more preparation.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes.

**Suneel Gupta:** You actually identify those things, and it takes more preparation to have a dialog than it does to have a monologue. Now you're asking the right questions, you're extracting information from other people, you're pulling pieces together. That takes a higher level of preparation than just walking into a room, reciting something, dropping the mic and leaving.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. When you know what you don't know, you've gone to the edge of your expertise and you're saying, "Here it is, it's murky. I don't know what to do with this."

All right. So, you've got people there in mastery. They're ready to do something new. It's a new job, funding of their start up, a new role. They need to persuade people that they're backable. Are there one or two tips that you would give, and you might want to tell a different story, but I love the story about you and Reid Hoffman and becoming a product manager.

**Suneel Gupta:** I love that one as well. Let me directly answer the question on the job, and I would love to come back to the story about Reid as well. And one of the people I spent time with was a guy named Brian Grazer. And Brian is a Hollywood producer, he has won over 130 Emmys. He's won dozens of Oscars, but he also invests in people. he invests companies, and he runs large teams. So, he's hiring constantly. So this is pre-pandemic. I'm in his waiting room in Beverly Hills and I'm surrounded by all these people who are there to pitch him on all sorts of stuff. And you could just tell that the anxiety inside the room is very high.

And so, I when I went back to see him, I said to him, I said, "Brian, you had this room full of nervous people out there. If I could have coached them, if I could have given them one piece of advice, one piece of advice before they came to see you today, what would it have been?"

And he thought about it for a second. He says, "Give me something that I can't easily find on Google. Give me something that is not easily Google-able."

And I thought that was so interesting because as I talk to more and more decision makers, more and more hiring managers, investors, gatekeepers.... What I realize is that these backable moments, these great presentations, inspiring interviews, they tend to be based on an insight. They tend to be based on something that's not obvious that you bring into the room because you went beyond Google and you found something and then you brought into the room. In the book, I call this an earned secret. You found an earned secret and you've brought that into the room.

Now, this doesn't need to be like a revelatory sort of thing. It doesn't need to be something you cooked up yourself in a lab. You know, like there was a, there was someone who had reached out to me right as the book was coming out who told me her story and what it was. She was returning to the workforce, as we're starting to kind of start to see the tail end of the pandemic, some light at the end of the tunnel. She's a mom and she's returning to the workforce, and there was a role and a social media company that she was really excited about, really felt fit her skill set. But the trick was that she didn't really use the product. It was very much a Gen Z, I'm going to say the name, but Gen Z focused product.

But she was like, "This role is perfect for me, but I don't really use it."

So, she did something really smart. She interviewed every single one of her daughter's friends, talked to every single one of them one-by-one. Asked them what they liked about the product, what they wish was different about the product, what were these moments that gave them the most joy. And then she had them send her screenshots of their experience, like these moments they really loved, or wish were different. And so, now she walks into this interview, which is over Zoom, with this hiring manager with this gallery of screenshots that she has gone out and she has collected.

And this hiring manager is so impressed that not only does she get the job, but in the middle of the interview, he patches in one of their UX designers to see some of these insights that she has personally collected. This is somebody who wasn't even using the product.

And I asked her, "How much time did all this take you, collectively? How much did it all take you?"

Less than two hours. Less than two hours to get everything together, to have all those conversations. She went from not having any experience with product to being a semi-expert on the product. So, it doesn't have to be a lot. But we have to go beyond Google to go looking for these secrets. And half of the charm of it is the fact that you did the work, right? When you were able to say, like, "I went out and I talked to customers. I test drove competitor's products. I attended these obscure meet ups." Now you're conveying something more than just an idea. You're conveying an energy. You're conveying who you are and the type of person you are to work with.

**Whitney Johnson:** I think that when people are in the sweet spot of being able to communicate their ideas, we tend to think, "Oh, they're just a natural." You know, like I'm listening to you and I'm thinking, "He's really good at this. He's great at articulating his thoughts and his ideas," but from what I understand, you've had to really work at this.

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, I what I can tell you, Whitney, is that I am the product of lots and lots and lots of practice. And one of the things that I think that we can assume about anybody who, I think, speaks well generally or in my case, I always was stunned by people who came off as naturals, right? One of the things that always frustrated me is when I saw people who came off with this improvisational sort of nature, right? They walk into a room; they don't come off as scripted. Then at the same time, they're very compelling. And I'm like, "Gosh, I wish I was a natural like that."

And what I realized, again, by unpacking the lives of hundreds and hundreds of backable people is that they tended to be the product of lots and lots and lots of practice. In the book, like all these exhibition matches, which are low stakes practice sessions before they get into a high stakes situation. The mantra that I think backable people tend to adopt is that long-term success comes from short-term embarrassment, which, which, which in a lot of ways gets back to the story you were asking me about Reid Hoffman.

I was a product manager. I was working at that time at Mozilla that I had this product feature that I was working on and I was waiting for it to be really, really good before I launched it, right? Which I thought is what all people do. You want to launch when it's great. And Reid Hoffman, who at that time was the chairman of Mozilla, looks at me and he says, "If you are not embarrassed by the first version of your product, then you have launched too late."

That will stick with me for life. And I, and I think that it's not just a product development lesson, it's a life lesson, right? We wait to, to be perfect, but whenever we wait to a point where we're not embarrassed, we've launched too late, right? But the caveat, I would say, is that you don't necessarily need to get in front of the person who you're trying to pitch ultimately right away, right? And that's where these exhibition matches come in handy. Again, these low stakes practice sessions, before you get into the high stakes situation. That could be with friends, that could be with colleagues, but you're taking them through the real version of your pitch. You're practicing, you're building sort of the muscle memory around that.

Charlie Parker, great jazz musician. He was also a mentor to a lot of other musicians. And he was once asked, "How do you have such incredible stage presence?"

And he says to them, "Well, you got to learn your instrument and then you got to practice, practice, practice. And then, when you get up on stage, you got to forget all of that and just wail."

And that ability to kind of forget all of that, we sometimes think that that is the product of not practicing, right, of being somebody who's just kind of winging it. But as it turns out, this sort of natural improvisational style turns out to be the product of actually practicing and rehearsing over and over and over again.

And I found that to be counterintuitive. I mean, in fact, when I was studying backable people, I realized that the average person was practicing about 21 times, 21 times before a big meeting, a big pitch, a big presentation, 21 times. And I thought that was overkill. And part of the reason I thought that was overkill was because like, isn't that going to make you seem scripted? Isn't that going to make you come off as robotic? But what I found is that the reverse actually happens because when you know your material so intimately well, well, then you're able to walk into a room and not have to worry about that anymore. You're not tracing the outline in your head saying, "I'm going to go here and there are there." You can kind of be fluid and flexible to whatever it is that happens in the room. And most importantly, you can be fully tuned in and present with who that other person is, how they're responding, how they're reacting when they give you a little frowny face, typically, we'll kind of just move on, right? But now you can say, "Oh, I picked up on something. I'm going to pause there and ask them in this moment, "Do you have any questions? Like, is there anything we can run through?" And that's where valuable moments tend to be created.

**Whitney Johnson:** Twenty-one times people. The spontaneity is on the other side of the practice.

**Suneel Gupta:** Well put.

**Whitney Johnson:** What have you done when you've backed someone, and you realize you shouldn't have backed them? It can be a delicate situation.

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** That's happened once or twice.

**Suneel Gupta:** Oh yeah. Oh yeah. One of the things that I was noticing that investors would do, and I started doing as well, is that someone would come in with a pitch. And when you pitch an idea, of any kind really, there are different aspects of that pitch, right? So, there's customer acquisition, customer retention, there's, there's overall marketing strategy, team building, there's finance, right, projections. There are all these sort of different areas.

And what I found is that in an hour meeting, what would happen is that investors, most of the investors I would watch, would sort of cover all of that at once. So, they would, they would ask a couple of questions about marketing, a couple of questions about finance, a couple of questions about team building, right? And so, as a result of that, what was happening is that they were kind of going almost, they were going shallow across all these different areas rather than going narrow and deep. But I started to realize that, that really sophisticated investors, even in the first meeting, would sort of hear the pitch and then they would pick one area. They pick one thing, right? One, maybe two, and then they would go narrow and deep on those one to two things.

Some people call this precision questioning, right? Just going really, really narrow and deep. Now, the obvious question is like what happens to the rest? What happens to the other areas? And the answer is like, well, you can always have follow up meetings and you can always get to those areas later. But the reason you want to go narrow and deep first is because you really want to start to get a sense of substance from this person, right? The reality is like it's easy to be shallow and broad, right? It's an easier thing to do, but it's actually quite hard to be asked "why" five times and to still have answers to those things. You're really getting a sense of conviction. You're really getting a sense of substance when you can go narrow and deep.

And I think that if you look back at some of the ways in which we've gone wrong, some of the ideas that were backed, you know, let's just take Fyre Festival, for example, right? It's this festival that this, this guy Billy McFarland created where he was like it was going to be like, you know, that the uber, uber rich, we're going to gather on this island for this massive, massive party. He raised 26 million dollars for this thing, and it turned out to be a sham, right? The whole thing turned out to be a bust. He didn't have any of the things that he was telling people he had, right? Even in those early conversations with investors.

And it's always amazing to me because when I think about *Backable*, just the topic of *Backable*, that you can use *Backable* for good and you can use it for evil. I wrote this book because I actually think that there are too many people out there who are backable who don't have high integrity. And I think we need more high integrity people in the world who know how to sell their ideas. That's, that's fundamentally why I wanted to write this book.

But it, but it all goes back to this idea of like, you know, when he was being asked these questions where people really going narrow and deep? Or were they just hearing sort of the buzz of the idea? Were they hearing the energy of the idea?

It's not to say that stuff isn't important, by the way, it is. But you also have to go narrow and deep. And I think that's where people missed.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, if you're willing to go narrow and deep to that precision questioning, you can't avoid backing the wrong people, but that's a mitigant.

**Suneel Gupta:** I think it's a big mitigant because I think now you're starting to really... You know, in some ways, you're removing some backable techniques from the process, right? You're starting to isolate style from substance so that you can shine the spotlight on the idea. I think personally, we need to be removing salesmanship as much as possible from the idea creation process, because not everybody who comes up with great ideas is a good salesperson, right? Nor should they be.

I spent a little bit of time working at the White House. We're making decisions for our country sometimes just based on salesmanship. You know, people who are the best spoken, who are the most convincing are sometimes the



people who are listened to the most, and that's not necessarily how it should be. And so I think as much as possible as decision makers being able to isolate style from substance and really put the sunlight on, like, what is the substance of this idea, what is it really about?

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you just said something I want to pick up on briefly is that when I read the book, I had the sense that you were coming at this as an entrepreneur and thinking about this from the perspective of an investor. But you also just said something that you felt like this is important because it helps you sort through people and ideas that we shouldn't be backing. And that was a secondary, it sounds like it was a secondary motivation for you, which hadn't occurred to me might be a motivation.

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah, yeah, it very much is. I'll tell you a story. One of the stories that I talk about in the book, and it's a haunting story, I don't want to dampen the mood. But like, you know, Bob Ebeling was an engineer on the NASA Challenger space shuttle launch in the 1980's. And Ebeling knew... He had all the data as an engineer to know that something was wrong with the challenger. And so he did what I think most people would do: he called a meeting, he brought all of his colleagues in a room, he projected his data and he said, "Look, the shuttle was just not ready. Something bad is going to happen up there." And he was dismissed. He was ignored. So, the challenger goes up, it disintegrates within 90 seconds, kills every astronaut on board. And Ebeling ends up blaming himself for that for the rest of his life. NPR did an interview with him and he said, "Look, God shouldn't have chosen me for that job, because I had all the data, I had everything in hand, and I still couldn't convince people. So, clearly I wasn't the right person for that job."

And it all comes back to this idea that creativity and persuasion are two different things, but oftentimes we make the mistake of treating them as one. If somebody doesn't present an idea well, we assume that's a weak idea. Could be a great idea, could be a brilliant idea. You know, like there's a guy named Alexander Fleming who was in World War One, and he was noticing that soldiers were dying from their wounds, but they weren't dying necessarily just from their wounds. They were dying because their wounds were becoming infected and there was nothing in his toolkit to save them. But he leaves the war, he goes out and he finds a solution to this problem. He discovers a mold that will stop the spread of bacteria. Well, this is like his eureka moment because hundreds of thousands of people are dying from infection every year at this point. And so, he goes out and he shares this with a group of colleagues and investors, and they dismiss him. They're like, "We don't think you have a solution here." Turns out that was penicillin. And it took 10 years for penicillin to be taken seriously. Ten years. To date, penicillin has saved nearly 200 million lives, and it was almost a solution that never existed.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Oh, I love this. I love that there is a sense of mission to what you are doing here. It goes back to something that we were talking about earlier, is that you want good ideas to be backable, no matter what kind of good ideas, and that if people who are brilliant and good and wise had these tools, then their ideas could get backed and more good could get done in the world.

**Suneel Gupta:** I think so. Yeah, absolutely.

**Whitney Johnson:** Of your seven steps, which is the most important in getting your loved ones to back you?

**Suneel Gupta:** Such a good question. One of the things that I try to talk about as much as possible is how I have failed. I teach at Harvard now, on faculty, and I try to just tell my students all the mistakes that I have made, all the things I've done wrong. And that's not just in business, but that's in life as well. And one of the stories that I think they tend to appreciate is that I ran for public office and I lost. But the story that they tend to appreciate is that in 2016, after the presidential election, I was living in San Francisco and I really felt like I had, you know, I was surprised by what happened and I felt like I was part of a bubble, of just like, "Wow, I guess I am very much out of the scene." And that really hurt me because I had spent the early part of my career working in politics. And so I really wanted to go back to Michigan and get involved. And my wife did not like that idea.

She was just like, "No. I mean, we finally have found our footing in the Bay Area. We have two little girls. We're not uprooting our lives right now."

So, what ended up happening was, you know, maybe something that I think a lot of relationships can empathize with, which is like, we fought. We went back and forth for months where I kept saying, "I want to do this." And she'd say, "No, I really don't want to do this."

I guess what I realized, Whitney, is that you're going back to the IKEA effect where we value something that we build up to five times more than something that we simply buy.

What I realize is that what I had been trying to do is sell her a piece of furniture. I was trying to get her to buy a piece of furniture that she just didn't want. And ultimately we came up with together was a plan and the plan was, "We'll move to Michigan. And ultimately the chances are you're going to run for office, you run for office. And if you win, then obviously we stay. But if we lose," then Lena, my, my, my wife gets to choose our next location. No questions asked. Doesn't matter. No questions asked. Close to her family, which is on the East Coast, wherever, but that's up to her entirely. Now, did that make her feel 100 percent great about the idea of moving to Michigan? Nope. But now she was part of the overall plan. We were building a piece of furniture together and I think that's so important in whatever it is that we do. Just getting back to the advice that your husband gave you about your manuscript, which is, "How do we start to make people part of the puzzle? How do we get them involved?" Because, because ultimately that I think that's what it's all about. And I think that really hits for business in life.

The other thing that I will say that I think is really, really important and I underappreciated this, is the importance of having a circle of people that you trust. When I started to interview backable people, it always came down to the conversations that they were having with people who are around them: people who they could go to when things were going well, people who they could go to, especially when things were going bad.

You know, a few years ago, I took a trip to Bhutan. And when I was in Bhutan, I was fascinated by the way that they measure progress. They have a metric that they use out there called Gross National Happiness. GDP and economic growth, they're all important, but they all roll up to something higher, this higher-level mission around the happiness of their people. And they're not perfect, but they have this North Star that I find very compelling and they've been using it now for five decades. And so when I was there, I spent time with the research team, people who actually go out to the field and calculate this metric.

And I asked them, "When you're out there and you're talking to people, is there a single question that you can ask, one question, that can really give you a good sense of someone's level of happiness?"

And they said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact there is."

And the question is, "If you are in real trouble right now, who could you call and know with 100 percent certainty, that person would be there for you?"

And they believe that people who have an answer to that question are just much more likely to be happier. But there was a twist, and the twist was, whose list are you on? Who can call you and know with 100 percent certainty that you will be there for them and they know that they have that information? They believe that. They believe people who can answer that question are even more likely to be happy.

**Whitney Johnson:** Where can people find you? You've got this fantastic book. For people who want to engage further with you, where can they find you on social? Where can they buy your book?

**Suneel Gupta:** Yeah, yeah. Just come to backable.com. b-a-c-k-a-b-l-e.com. And, and we can connect there, and you'll find my information and more stuff on the book.

**Whitney Johnson:** Fantastic.

At the end of every coaching session that I do, I always ask this question... What was most useful to you in this conversation? What did you hear that wasn't being said? So, this isn't something I said, or you said it might be an idea that bubbled up for you. During our conversation today, what idea, what connection got made in your head that was useful for you?

**Suneel Gupta:** I love the story that you told about your husband. It told me a few things. Number one, that your husband is a coach for you. And I love that because sometimes we rely on our spouse in that way, and I very much love that because I do the same thing with mine, like Lena is my coach. And in the book, we talk about the four c's and the four c's are your collaborator, your coach, your cheerleader, and your critic. And those are the four people that I notice that backable people tend to surround themselves with. And it sounds like your husband is your coach. And I love that. I love the practical example of, like, sending out a manuscript before it's actually fully done so that people can put their fingerprints on it. They can be part of the creative process.

The second thing, Whitney, that came through clearly is that I see, and I listen to your other episodes and it seems like there's a difference between information and energy, right? And it seems like you're looking for the information, but you're also looking for the energy from the people you talk to. Yeah, you want the practical advice, you want the techniques. What I get from your other interviews is part of the reason I really love your show is because it also seems you're trying to get to the energy. Who is this person? What drives them? What's the mission behind it?

**Whitney Johnson:** That is true. I just learned something from you. Thank you very much.

All right, Suneel, any final thoughts for us?

**Suneel Gupta:** I'll leave you with this, which is that, during the pandemic, my two little girls, we're still living in Michigan now. And we love it here. In the beginning of the pandemic, when they were both doing home school, we started playing a little game and I would ask them two questions. The first question was, "What is the meaning of life? And they would say, "To find your gift." And then I would ask, "What is the purpose of life?" And they would say, "To give that gift away."

And it's based on one of my favorite quotes from Picasso, and ultimately, like this conversation, I think what you drive at with your show is, how do we give our gift away? And I think that there are three words that tend to really hold us back from doing that. And those three words are, "I'm not ready." "I'm not ready to step into that leadership role. I'm not ready to apply for that job. I'm not ready to run with that idea." I'm not ready to speak my mind. And if I could leave you with one thing, it's that I have now studied hundreds of extraordinary people at the top of their game and none of them were really ready. Like three friends from design school were not ready to start Airbnb. A mid-level talent manager was not ready to start a SoulCycle. A 15-year-old from Stockholm, Sweden, was not ready to build an environmental movement, and yet today, Greta Thornberg is Time magazine's youngest ever person of the year. And there were setbacks and there were failures and there were mistakes along the way, but they all tend to play what I call in the book "The Game of Now," and in "the game of now," the opposite of success is not failure, it's boredom. So, let's do things that make us come alive. Let's find good people to join us along the journey, because if no one has told you this, then let me be the first... You are ready.

**Whitney Johnson:** Suneel, thank you so much.

**Suneel Gupta:** Thank you, Whitney. Great to be on.

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Two major takeaways.

Number one. Conviction. We have to believe in our own ideas. As I was reading his book, prepping for the interview, we had just had a conversation about our S curve insight tool with a prospective client. After the conversation, my business partner, Amy Humble, she gave me some feedback. She said, "If you believe in something, including in yourself and why you're the right person for a job, don't, out of fear, that they won't believe in it as much as you do." Pull your punches. Connect your idea to something bigger than you are, and then have conviction.

Number two. Include people. You need to do the work, you've got to be 100 percent prepared for an interview or a pitch or whatever it is that you want to be backed, but then be open to letting people help you create something better. Maybe the job could be better. Maybe the product or the company or the book could be better. I love that he said, "If we wait until we aren't embarrassed, it's too late." Right now, working on my next book, preparing to send it to Harvard Publishing, there is a whole lot of embarrassment going on. Finally, to me, this is such a money shot, it takes more preparation to have a dialog than a monologue.

Thank you again to Suneel Gupta for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. And thank you to our team, Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe, and Steve Ludwig.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.