

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 219: SCOTT O'NEIL

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, will you take a moment and leave a review? Five stars, please, on Apple. You're kind enough to let me know that these interviews are useful. I'm confident others will find them useful as well, 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 grateful.

Now, our guest today is Scott O'Neil, CEO of HBSE, Harris Blitzer Sports Entertainment. They own the Philadelphia 76ers basketball team, the New Jersey Devils hockey team and the Prudential Center, a top ranked performance venue. He's also formerly the president of Madison Square Garden.

I wanted you to hear from Scott, because he's not only good at jumping to new S curves personally, he's expert at helping others jump and landing on their feet. Not surprisingly, he's written a terrific story-filled memoir, *Be Where Your Feet Are*.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Scott, you've just written a book called *Be Where Your Feet Are*. Why did you write the book and what is it about?

**Scott O'Neil:** Whitney, first off, thanks for having me, Disrupt Yourself should be the story of my life and not just the name of your podcast. I appreciate your work and all you're doing. So, my book *Be Where Your Feet Are*, it's a pretty complicated story, but the 20,00-foot version is that I wake up every morning and pop out of bed thinking about, "How can I help develop the next great generation of leaders?" And I typically do that in my space, in sports and entertainment.

On the other hand, I had some, like the world was going really well for me and it doesn't always... I live life on a roller coaster. And so, my life, if you're watching on video, looks like this. Up, down, up, down, up, down. And so typically, I've put people in my life that are a lot more steady and they kind of help me ground and even out my curves, if you will. I have always been like that since I can remember as a young kid, but I was having one of those runs in life where everything was going well. My relationship with my wife for 25 years was amazing. I was on this spiritual high, work was cooking, business was great. I was like mentoring some kids who I absolutely adore and that was going well. My children were on the rails, which having three daughters isn't always the case.

And then I just had a series of things happen right away and they kind of shook me to the core. And one was my, my dad passing away, which I think at my age, I'm 51, that's happening more and more to my, my friends. But he was sick, and he was struggling. I was praying for him to pass away. So, it was just a little jolt forward. And then David Stern, a longtime mentor of mine and former commissioner of the NBA, passed away. And that was another just kind of look in the rearview mirror like, "Wow, this is, this is like, I'm the next generation. There's some mortality here." And then my best friend took his own life, unfortunately, Will Cardon. And that spiraled me into grief like, I didn't even know what grief was. I was up on the, you know in front of a congregation, and I was speaking directly to his five kids who were in the front row and his wife, Nicole, and I got through it okay. I mean I cried through half of it, but I got through it okay. And then it just got worse. Like, I didn't understand how I was... I would be in a meeting and I would just someone would say something unrelated and I would burst into tears and just walk out of the room and I couldn't get out of bed some mornings and couldn't sleep others.

And so, I just was struggling and started to write to find my sense of hope or understanding or something. And as I wrote, Randall Wright who was a dear friend of my wife's and mine, but definitely closer to Lisa said, "You should publish this." And I said, "Nah, that's not really like me. I'm just writing to escape." And from there he told me some stories about him that I didn't know. And I started to reach out to friends of mine and it became really clear that the life that we see on Instagram, which is wonderful, or Facebook, which is terrific and all these wonderful things happening to people, doesn't really reflect the messiness that life is. And so that's what this is about. This is not a victory lap. This is not a "pat yourself on the back. Yo, I'm awesome" type book. This is really about the fact that we have this vision and version that the trajectory to however and whatever you define success as, whether that be personal or professional or financial or spiritual is not linear, and that all the learning and essentially all the fun happens in that journey when you trip and fall.

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's have you share some of these stories along the way, because you have a lot of great stories. So, one of the stories that you talk about, we're going to rewind the tape a little bit, is a formative moment. You're a young adult. You don't get into your dream school. What happened?

**Scott O'Neil:** I grew up in an amazing house full of love. My folks didn't have many rules. They never checked our report cards, never asked if we were doing our homework. Our rules were really simple, is don't hurt each other, don't hurt your mother, no girls in the bedroom. That was it. And we were all really, really driven. And so, school-wise, I worked really hard. I don't consider myself brilliantly smart, but I worked hard and did very well in school. I was president of the class, captain of three sports teams, president of the Honor Society, all that kind of stuff with straight A's through school. And I didn't get into... I wanted to Notre Dame. And so, I got waitlisted at Notre Dame and Georgetown and applied to some reach schools like Princeton, Stanford. They kind of laughed and chuckled at my application.

And so, of the ten schools, I got into two: Villanova and Syracuse. And as a young man, I will tell you like, and I think this happens to all of us, is like we're in the eye of our own storm and we have very little perspective. And that can be your daughter seeing her friends Tik Tok, making videos all together and she's alone and all of a sudden, her world is crashing down. Or that can be a young 18-year-old who thinks he has the world in the palm of his hand and is told, "No, you're not smart enough. You're not good enough. You can't make it." And it was probably the best thing ever happened with me. I mean, we have a saying in our house, "Bloom where you're planted."

And I remember that first semester, I got like a 3.4, and I was like, "This is a joke. Like, I'm better than this." I had a huge chip on my shoulder. But the notion was like, "You're not smart enough. And so, you're going to have to outwork."

And so, I did some things that were a little bit bizarre, like looking back. You know, I took like 12 credits of Japanese as electives. I took six credits of calculus as electives. I took a whole bunch of complex stats. Not that I was interested. I was trying to figure out what were the toughest classes I could take to prove that I could do it, to myself. No one cared. It was like I was fighting my own battle against myself.

And then I, I kind of settled in. I just took a breath. I don't know how to explain it, but I, I moved into what I have fallen into my whole life, which is like several leadership positions. I ran the... I was a in a fraternity council, I was vice president of school, and I was head of the Dean's advisory committee. And I got all these awards going through. And all of a sudden again, once again, I'm looking around. I'm like, "Okay, I'm, I'm okay. Like, this is going to be okay."

But I wish I had a little bit of a push or a little guidance. I, I remember I went to the shore, the Jersey Shore. I was living in Pennsylvania where Villanova is. I was living with a bunch of housemates, friends of mine, and they all had jobs. And here I am like, you know, "the one," if you will. You know, the "one" that people always look at, "Hey, he has high grades is so involved." And I hadn't even applied for a job. I was bouncing [inaudible] to Princeton and playing basketball twice a day and sitting at the beach.

And my mom, kind of a funny story. It's not so funny story to my mom, but funny to me. She finally, she's a leadership training consultant. And she said, "Hey, this is one of my biggest clients, ADP, which is a payroll processing company. I want you to see the regional manager. He's not too far from you. He's 90 minutes from you at the shore. Go interview and you will get a job." And I was like, "Mom, I'm not sure." She's like, "Scott, the interview is Tuesday at nine o'clock." I was like, "Okay."

So, I work Monday night and then got in my car, drove back to Villanova. I was going to stay at my friend's house. My car broke down, so I hitchhiked back to my friend's house. He's a big guy, played sports, and I put his suit on and I'm a 42. It was probably 48 and I have a 10.5 Shoe. He probably had a 14. So, I looked like a version of a clown, and my hair was sticking straight up, so like Don King, so you can imagine the sight. So, I'm going into this interview thinking like, "Paul is going to love me. Like, look at this effort I made. I hitchhiked 90 miles. I borrowed clothes. I'm resourceful. I'm diligent."

And like five minutes into the interview, he looks at me, like, "Scott, you don't want this job, do you?" And I was like, "Nah. I don't, Paul."

And he said, "You're not serious. You seem like you're a sharp kid, but anybody that worked for me would have been Nordstrom first thing in the morning, buying a new suit, and gotten here and gotten themselves together."

And I said, "Thank you so much for your time, Paul. I appreciate it. I'm sorry."

I'm walking out of there. And the only thing I can think of is my 5'2" Italian mom. "She is going to wring my neck." That's the only thing I can think of. And as I'm getting in the car, it was my first dose of reality I had had some time, which is, "Get yourself together and be prepared. And if you're going to commit to something, do it and do it right."

And everything that I've ever learned at every step of the way failed to carry with me on that moment. And I would say he was like, God, he passed away about eight years ago now and, and became like a mentor of mine. Like, I wrote him all the time. This is a pre-email. I would just write him letters. "Hey, I had an interview today. Amazingly, my suit fit. Amazingly, I got there on time and my hair was combed." And I said, "I just want to thank you for your, your contribution for everything you've done and give me feedback at time when I really needed it."

Now my mom's conversation was a little shorter and a little rougher for whatever it's worth, but that was kind of a good jolt. I think we have those jolts in life, and if we are just, just be open to listening and learning, you know, life gets better.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, we started with the formative moment of you didn't get into the college, your dream school. You go to that school and you kind of flounder a bit. You're doing well, but you're self-sabotaging. You're doing well,

but you're self-sabotaging. And it sounds like that moment, that interview at ADP with Paul was that "Hey, are you going to stop self-sabotaging effectively?"

**Scott O'Neil:** I think that's right. You don't know what's in the mind of a 22-year-old. Even now, I have a 21-year-old. I don't know what's in her mind all the time. And I'm not sure if it was consciously or subconsciously, but I, I definitely... I'm, I'm, look, um, I have a couple of qualities that I'm proud of. One is I'm very self-aware and I learn. And I'm a lifelong learning. Always have been and always will be. And those are two pretty good qualities when things go south, and things always go south. Yes. I as I think about your S curve, which I think is brilliant and I think about a lot in context of where I was, where I am and where I'm going, even now. And I think that it's okay to be 22 years-old and stumbling. I think, I look at my 17-year-old daughter Kyra, who seems to have the world at the palm her hand and she wants to figure out what she's doing when she's 40. I'm like, I can't even... It's just let life...

Live. That what you should be doing. Smiling, enjoying life, connecting with people, creating memories. But there, definitely the world is very different now. And, and it's a lot more pre-program. And I think some of that might take away some of the, some of learning along their journey.

**Whitney Johnson:** You started to talk about the S curve of Learning™ a little bit and you've talked about a number of launch points. There's one in particular that I thought was really, actually there's so many launch points that are compelling, but one was when you started business school. Tell us how you felt when you started business school and then what happened?

**Scott O'Neil:** Well, first off, I got married young by East Coast standards.

**Whitney Johnson:** How old were you?

**Scott O'Neil:** I was 25. And my wife and I were on a honeymoon in Maui and we decided on our first night that we were going to write down 100 things we're going to accomplish. One was going to Harvard Business School, which at that time to say that that was a reach at that time would be the understatement of the year. I was not... I think I was still an assistant at that point, a marketing assistant. I had on there that I want to be president of a team.

So, Harvard Business School is on my list for one reason and one reason only. My cousin went there, and everybody said he was really smart. And if you go back to my first story of having that chip on my shoulder and not feeling that I am okay, and for those people who know me, they'll laugh, because they would say, "No. This is a... This this guy is lacking confidence?"

I joke about our family quite a bit. I say, "Hey, what we lack in talent, we make up for in confidence." That's your outer shell. Like your outer shell is very different from that inner voice and what's happening in here.

So, my inner voice was like, "You're not smart enough." And so that was on my list for that reason only. And I applied to one business school and got in. And so now I'm thinking, of course, what is my inner voice saying now? "It was a mistake," which is ridiculous. Okay?

And so, I go up there and here goes another self-sabotage moment. During orientation, I went skiing. That's not a good decision. So, now I was clearly, I was probably feeling really anxious. My wife loves to ski. There was a huge snowfall in Vermont, and we went skiing. And so, you miss orientation, you miss your study group. So, now I come back to school, I have no study group. Everybody's in the group. I tried. I tried to weasel my way. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Awesome.

So, I go to sit down the first day of school at lunch and I am. To say I'm anxious would be quite the understatement of year. And I don't get anxious around people. Like that's, that is one of the places I'm much more comfortable. I can say "Hello." I'm comfortable in front of a group. If you put me on the spot, I love to debate. And so, I sat down at a table between two people who looked lovely.

And I looked over to one and I said, "Hey, what's your name? I'm Scott."

"I'm Susan."

I said, "What were you doing before school?" Because that was the question everybody asked.

And she said, "I was working for a consulting firm helping the Russian government restructure their economy."

I'm like, "Oh no." I'm like, "What am I? Do I..." I don't even know what to say other, "Than that sounds fun."

And she asked me what I did. I was working at the Philadelphia Eagles at the time. It was a director of sales, a very young director of sales. It was kind of a prestigious job in my, my small corner of the world. And I told her that I was a popcorn vendor, at Veteran stadium during games. And I straight-faced deadpanned it.

And then I turned to the guy to my left, who seemed lovely as well. And I said, "Excuse me, excuse me." And his dad was the king of Liechtenstein. And so, I'm like, "What the heck am I doing here?"

And so, I had no study group. I had no confidence, and I'm walking into a room. I assume they're awful sharks. And it was quite the opposite, like it was every day, it was such an incredible team building experience and such a brilliantly run school in that every day they told you one thing and one thing only. And that was, "Look around this room. These are the smartest people you will ever be around. They are wonderful. They'll help you and they will be part of your family and your story forever, ever and ever."

And they kept saying it. Every professor said it, every administration. The dean said it. All I heard it over and over and over is "Be a teammate. Be a teammate. Be a teammate." And I kept saying, like, "No, I can do this." And finally, it kind of clicked in like, "Okay, I got it. I... This is basketball, it's not golf." Like I love team sports.

And you look... You figure out... You're looking around the room, you're like, "No, she's, she's brilliant. You know, she worked at Goldman Sachs. She's going to be a lot smarter than I am when it comes to the finance class. And oh yeah, he worked at McKinsey and he's going to be able to put this stuff into models a lot better than I can."

And you start to figure out like everybody's good at something. And I was just trying to figure out what I was good at, where I could add value as opposed to compete, which is just the wrong word. And there were some people that the grading system there is so funky. It's like ones, twos, threes. Eighty percent of people or whatever it is, 70 percent of people get, get twos. And so, who is the dumbest person in school? Is the dumbest person or the smartest person, the person who gets the highest or the lowest one?

I played a lot of basketball there. I met incredible people. I loved my experience. I have lifelong friends there, but the one thing it taught me more than anything else was that whatever dreams I had, whatever aspirations I thought were reasonable, weren't high enough. And it's like it's a great lesson. It's, it's a lesson my dad taught me and he's a, a young boy who grew up in a two-bedroom house with six kids sharing a room with his five siblings in Bayside, Queens. And all he said to me, every single day in my life was, "Anything you set your mind to, you can achieve. Don't put a ceiling on yourself. Think big, think bigger. I mean, you can do anything you want." And I love that message. And I loved getting it reinforced at such a high level and such an institution I have so much admiration and respect for. So, it was pretty life changing.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you start there, you feel like this massive imposter.

**Scott O'Neil:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** When you graduate, you are chosen by your classmates to speak at graduation out of hundreds of people. You said earlier that you are a quick learner. What did you learn that caused you to go from that launch point to a very successful mastery along the S curve? What are one or two things that you learned?

**Scott O'Neil:** Well, I learned, one, to be interested instead of interesting. I spent most of my time asking questions to people, because I was, in my soul, interested in what their story was, who they were as a person, not how smart

they were in the macroeconomic class or [inaudible] or whatever, all these classes, but I wanted to get behind and know them.

I also was so fascinated... I hadn't traveled a lot internationally and so, I had a connection with a lot of the students who were from out of the country. And then I was fun I did things that were not very traditional at school. You know, I hosted a chili cook off. I had a pumpkin carving contest that I hosted. I, I one time dressed up as our crotchety finance professor and I put like baby powder in my hair and he dressed kind of a funny way, so I dress the way he did. And I read a poem about him. He didn't think was very funny, but the class did.

And I was just engaged and involved. Anything I could get my hands on, I did. And so, I don't know if that was like a secret sauce or a defense mechanism where I just, an intrigue and loved people.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, interested, and then you had fun and it sounds like something you said earlier was you stopped, you know, you said, "Okay, popcorn vendor," not really, but pretending. You're going to not try to compete with anybody but create with them. And what, I actually, I know you said the popcorn vendor and I might be pushing this way too far, but there's something about eating popcorn where you're willing to spectate and to enjoy and to appreciate the people around you. And so, I wonder if there was some element of that, if people felt like you genuinely appreciated who they were.

**Scott O'Neil:** I love that. I love the notion that I hadn't thought of it in that context, but it makes perfect sense. I was not threatening to anybody. And I told everyone, "I'm going back. Like, I love the sports world. I have fun every day. I don't want to compete for your job at JPMorgan or McKinsey or Bain or wherever you guys are all going. I'll be on the backside. Hoping when you buy a team, you can hire me". It was the dotcom boom era. Everybody was going to the valley and I rooted for them and they're all my friends. So, I think that was part of it, too, is I had the luxury that a lot of people didn't have.

You're in school. You learn to be interested; you learn to have fun. You then go to the NBA. So, you jump to a new S curve. And it sounds like when you first jump to that new S curve, this thing that you would learn in business school, you unlearned, and you had to relearn it. What happened?

**Scott O'Neil:** Yeah, well, I was on the heels. I ran a company into the ground, so I was emotionally not in a great place, nor was I financially. And so, so when I got a job at the NBA, I again came in, the chip on the shoulder, kind of got a little bigger. And I was like, "Just the one thing I know I can control is how hard I work." And that has never, that's never been lost on me. And so, I worked, and it was the coolest job in the world. I, there were two of us, Dr. Bill Sutton, who was somewhat of a legendary figure in sports marketing education, and then me, this kind of young kid who nobody knew. And I think it was 29 or 30 years-old and they split up the league. And David Stern, the commissioner at the time, his vision was to create this group that would be the McKinsey of the NBA. And so, we [inaudible]... It was as close to a PhD in sports marketing as you could ever get, and we got to work with new owners of teams all the way down to sales reps and everybody in between. And we were trying to build a best practice library as to how to optimize the team business. And it was fun.

And so, there were fifteen teams. I was going to two or three teams a week as was Dr. Bill and I was working, working, working, working, working, working, working, working. And I remember I volunteered for this, this thing in the WNBA, which is our women's league just celebrating now its 25th anniversary, but at the time it was a struggling league, fledgling league. And I jumped in because I like fixing things. I like things that are broken. I'm intrigued by women's sports and I walk into my first meeting it's all women and kind of me and they're like, "Hey, we've got to hit the teen girl market. And I think that's what will explode this business." And I was like, "Hey, my friend runs NSYNC this boy band at the time, and it's the hottest band in the world right now. So, I can help set this up." And it went really badly, like they, we took the promotion, but nothing with NSYNC ever had failed. Like, they are, they were selling 100 million records. And it was an insane time. They did shout out videos, ticket promotions, radio. It was unbelievable and it failed. And I was blaming, of course, everyone else.

And I just happened to get this call from the head of H.R. Jeff Robinson, who was doing a six-month check, and he said, "How are you doing?"

And I said, "This place sucks."

He's like, "Excuse me?"

I was like, "This is a terrible place, I mean, you guys don't you don't want to be great. You don't want to do extraordinary work."

He said, "Whoa, Scott. Woah."

So, I'm going.... I'm running through all the things that are wrong, everything that happened to me. "Woe is me." I get the one finger pointing out, these three are pointing right back at me, but I hadn't noticed them yet.

And he said, "Well, well, tell me tell me about your role in this failure."

I was like, "Me? Are you serious? Like, I'm leveraging my relationships. Nobody wants to help."

He said, "Okay, well, tell me about what you're doing. Tell me about work."

I was telling them what I'm doing. He said, "Huh? Well, do you know the folks in marketing?"

And I said, "No, no, I don't. I don't know anybody in marketing."

He's like, "How about NBA entertainment Is like me entertainment in [inaudible]?"

And I said, "You have us a [inaudible]?"

He said, "Well, how about the digital folks?"

I'm like, "No."

"Communications?"

I said, "I know someone in communications."

He's like, "Do you know her name?"

I'm like, "No."

And he said, "Well, hey, listen. You can continue to be right and that's the way to go through life or you can be effective."

And I said, "Okay, I got you. Tell me more. I have no idea what you're talking about."

And he said, "Well, this is the matrix here and I want you to think about investing your time a little differently."

I said, "So, you mean like relationships?"

He's like, "Yes. You're a salesman by trade, right?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "I bet you can figure this out, Scott"

So, I came off the road two days a week, fast forward, and started taking people to breakfast or just popping in to check in and started to build relationships. And amazingly, my life got better and my ability to move the ball went

exponentially better. And my, my reputation in the sports world and in the sports business and in all these different places around the group where so much so that when my boss, Bernie Malone, left to go on the Hawks and Thrashers, David Stern, who was notoriously difficult after a few expletives, said, "I can't believe I'm doing this, but I'm going to give you his job."

And so that was like an 18-month, you know, holy mackerel, going from... Talk about a fast road up the S curve. I went from struggling, barely grasping to starting to figure it out to by the time I was ready to leave, seven years later, I was as close to mastery of a job in a place as I could have possibly been in. And so, it was incredible advice. I was not too stubborn to actually hear it. That was a gift that I'll always be thankful for.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know what's interesting? Just an observation. And you can tell me if you disagree, but so you'd have this great experience at HBS. And then you went and started a business, and it didn't, and it foundered. And so, you were emotionally and psychologically in this place of, "I've got to prove myself." So, you kind of forgot what you knew. But then you go to the NBA, you default to something that is not you at all, you have to wake up, call from a boss, and then you go back to your muscle memory of, "Okay, this is how I want to operate."

**Scott O'Neil:** Yes, I think that's one hundred percent right. And the world... I was telling you before, there are a lot of things that I don't do very well but connecting with people is my gift. Being interested is a gift. And so, to tuck that away and just hard work over that, it's a travesty. But yes, it's nice to have... By the way, it's nice to have a reminder, it's nice to have people around you who love you enough to tell you the truth and whether that's a home with your partner, or whether that your, your BFF or whether that's a boss or someone who works for you, what a gift. And so, if we can create environments or more environments or better environments where we're comfortable seeking out feedback and the folks who we love the most and love us the most are comfortable delivering to us, the world gets better very quickly.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, I've been thinking about that a lot, Scott, is when we are willing to give someone feedback, it means, because giving feedback is somewhat uncomfortable, it means we care enough about them. We're invested in them because we're willing to overcome our discomfort, to give the feedback. And then, as you just said, I've been thinking also the more feedback we get, it's actually a signal that there are more people invested in us.

So, you talk about your dad deciding to be right instead of effective, you talked about a moment where you were very publicly fired and then you shared that one of your favorite books is leadership and self-deception. I'm going to ask you to take those three pieces and put them together and riff for just a moment.

**Scott O'Neil:** Ok, so leadership self-deception. I'll start there because I think they all connect. Leadership and self-deception are about treating people like people and kind of removing the notion of judgment and all of your intricacies and difficulties and biases and all that stuff and just being what we call in our workplace "palms up," meaning, "I'm not cross to learning or listening, I'm 'palms up.' I want, I want to love you for who you are. And I'm truly engaging as a person."

My dad was an incredible man, at his height, and he grew from, from nothing to something to nothing again. And what I loved about him was his charisma. I didn't even know what charisma was, but whenever people talk about my dad, they talk about him being so charismatic. And he was. He just had a gift to light up a room and he made people laugh and made people feel good. And he was an entrepreneur at heart. And it started a couple of businesses and one fell off the map and one was doing really well, and one was a growth company. So, it was growing, but needed cash. And he got sideways with his partner and his partner held him up for a chunk of equity. And, and this was all playing out. We had family dinners and family meetings, regularly. Like this... This was a different type of house to grow up in.

And I knew I could see it. I could see my mom... My mom and dad were partners. So, my mom's like, "Mike!" And they very rarely argued and very rarely disagreed. And she said, "Mike, you are taking this whole family down with you. Stop being so stubborn." And my dad was so fixated on beating him, John, the guy's name was who had taken all the records and all the top executives, that my dad was took all the money from the business that was doing well



and took it. And he was like, "Okay, I don't I don't care anymore. I'm taking this guy down." And he did. He took our whole family down financially, unfortunately.

And, and the big, the big, my big takeaway there, which I unfortunately, it became a lot of who I was at MSG, which is where the connection is, is, is the focus on my dad was right, like John did not do him any favors. John was not an honest broker. John took records and hired executives and made it very difficult on my dad, and that's not right. And so, my dad was right, but was there an effective solution? Sure. Could he have effectively walked away? Absolutely. But he didn't, because he was insistent on being stubborn and right. It killed him. It took his heart to the soul and actually took his life. It's sad to me.

MSG was different, although same anecdote. The grandness of the brand is indescribable. It's, it is like nothing you've ever seen in the biggest stage in the world, in the biggest city in the world, with the most grand venue in the world, and you're around the leaders of leaders, the titans of industry. And I was there in 08, 09 during the financial crisis. And we were setting crazy records in terms of deals and we spun the company off to a separately traded public company and then put a billion into the building and to do these crazy deals to pay for them, and the world really should have been our oyster. And I had some fundamental challenges and issues with one my bosses and, and I just I did not... I went back to, I went back to the grind, and I was like my dad in a nutshell, like I became my dad. And I had this incredible leadership coach. I've had great leadership coaches over time. [Inaudible] was one, at the time. And since Rich Hill and Brendon Bouchard, three people who have transformed my life and at the time, Tricia's like, "You were in the warrior phase, Scott."

And I was like, "That's right." Can you imagine me as a client? "That's right. I'm in the warrior phase."

And she's like, "Right, you want to go for the kill."

I'm like, "Yes, I want to go for the kill."

She said, "Right. You need to evolve. You need to [inaudible]."

I'm like, "But I don't want to be in the [inaudible] phase. I want to be the warrior phase."

She's like, "But you can't be a leader in a warrior phase."

And I thought that was such an interesting, like anecdote for me at the right time. And by the way, she's talking about meditation. I'm like, "Meditation? I'm in New York City. I'm an adrenaline junkie. Like, I don't, I don't need to meditate."

She goes, Oh, you need to meditate."

And so, all her lessons kicked in about ten years later. And I often times think about if I actually headed her advice, how different my experience would have been there. The result might have been the same. I was fired four years later and I'm still friends with Jim Dolan, who's the chairman there, and many of the CEOs, good buddy of mine [inaudible]. Great, wonderful people. It was a tough time in my life. I was running so hard and I forgot to hop off the subway every once in a while, and look around, take in the birds. You know, look at the incredible city I got to work in, and look at, take in all the amazing people I was meeting, appreciate the team we had built there, which is like I mean, it was one of those talented teams I've ever been around. They were fun and driven and could accomplish anything. And instead, I was just grinding.

And I remember like one... I'll give you one example, which I thought was ridiculous. And the ridiculous example was I had this thing about being a purple water buffalo, being a teammate, goes from this YouTube video. And, and so we had buffalo nickels as, that was like a token of appreciation. So, if somebody was an extraordinary teammate, you would take this buffalo nickel, which cost about three bucks, and you put it on this card, tape it, write why there are buffalo nickel, stick it outside of my door. So, it became like wallpaper outside the door, which is really cool. And then and then you take another one and the young folks would just put them out there and it just became a symbol of who we want to be. Like, I want I want to be extraordinary teammates, because that was that was one of

the things I was lacking when I got there. And my boss at the time, he believed in tenure awards and I didn't. And so, I didn't want to give out the blanket, I don't want to give out the apple, I don't want to give out the logic, I didn't care. I don't care how long you been there. In fact, the people that are there longest were the ones that give me the most trouble. And instead of... Here is a perfect example of being effective versus being right. Like I was like, "No, you don't reward people. That's, that's being... I'm right. The best way to reward people is not for how long they've been there. It's for the contribution that they get. I will go to my grave knowing that."

Being effective would be like, "Hey, great idea. I would love to recognize people of tenure, because they're the very fabric of this organization and the institutional knowledge they have will actually help lift us to great new heights. And so, at my staff meeting, I would like to bring up the people that are five-year, 10 year, 15 or 20." That's effective, right? I couldn't do it. I wish that were the only example, there are probably 50, but I was in hockey. We have this expression like, "You're squeezing the stick too tight." Just means, "You're not letting the game come to you. You're not letting the skill take over. You just, you're uptight." That's what I was doing. Squeezing that sticks so tight every day that I don't think I could see the forest through the trees.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, let me see if I can pull these three together. So, you've got leadership and self-deception, which is this idea of really seeing other people. And when you're seeing other people, it's not about being right. It's about being effective. And it's something you learned from your dad. But then you were also having your own real time laboratory experience at Madison Square Garden.

**Scott O'Neil:** Yes, that is the strangely woven tale that you just told, and it is painfully accurate. And you think about the stuff he does, like, you know, you just want to wring your hands, because I know better than that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, and I was actually going to say, though, one of the things that I love reading your book and love hearing your stories is that and I would love to hear you riff on this because I'm suspecting you don't have an answer, is that we all, like you said early on, we all make mistakes and fail all the time. All of us do. And most of us have some shame attached to it, in varying degrees. You somehow magically are able to tell all these stories of all these things that didn't work. We not only don't pity you, we like you more. So, here is the question. And I want you just to riff on this. What's the secret? So, for everybody who's listening, who wants to figure out a way to talk about the things that haven't worked, because as you said at the very outset, the reason you wrote this book where you started talking to people about what isn't working and as you shared, it made a difference. Any thoughts on what we can do to just extricate the shame so that we can start having those conversations that make us more relatable and therefore likable?

**Scott O'Neil:** Well, that is such a complex question, and I will try to untangle it, it's very much who I am at my most authentic self. So, I'm very comfortable. I'm very comfortable in my skin. I'm very comfortable going for it or falling down or trying to be first and tripping right at the starting blocks or falling right before the finish line, just carry through another bad analogy. I get strength from people and stories. I have like such a love of people who are self-reflective, who learn from, from life, and I don't have the porcelain China doll Instagram, whatever that life is that everybody wants to be or want to see or whatever. Andy Warhol said, "15 minutes of fame," it is probably more 15 seconds of fame now. And I, it's okay, but I want people to be okay with life. It's like that saying, "Everybody has a plan to get punched in the face." I have that in the book. I just love that quote, because that's life, and that's parenthood, that's marriage, that's being leader of an organization. Can you imagine like being in a marriage and it not being okay making a mistake?

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, well, that would be... That's hell on earth and there are people who have that.

**Scott O'Neil:** Can imagine working for a boss where it wasn't okay to make a mistake?

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, we all have. We all have.

**Scott O'Neil:** Yeah, I just have such a different philosophy. I, I love people stretching and I sometimes just move executives from different groups. You do?

**Whitney Johnson:** I do. Give us an example of when you did that.

**Scott O'Neil:** So, Brittany Boyd, we hired her from the Barclay Center, she was running guest services. Brought her over to run guest services at the Prudential Center. And she quickly distinguished yourself as a pretty incredible human being, like she had these gifts with people that most people don't have. She can seem to reach people in a different way. She's now running marketing for the Sixers, which is our biggest brand. Now, that was that's quite a leap. Another gal, Katie O'Reilly, who was in her job, was running marketing, is now our Chief [inaudible] officer. Now, Katie can do anything. I mean, she's brilliantly smart. She is one of those leaders where people follow up the hill. And she had some kind of revenue background in her past, but not at this level where you're responsible for hundreds of millions of dollars, and she is. We have another gal, Jill Snodgrass, who is running our ticket service team, doing tickets her whole life, and now she's running our partnership activation team, completely different job.

So, these are three recent moves we've made. They all go through their struggles, because it's, you know, you'd have to start over and figure out the team and build the team and reshape a team and reshuffle team and learn on the fly. And you're changing a tire in a moving car. I love the notion that these are three extraordinary women who can certainly be in my job, in my seat, at any point along the way, yet they're going through their struggle right now, like all three of them are just trying to fight the fight. And I love it and I love watching them learn and try to figure it out and trip and fall in a meeting and just pop right back up and they know they have a runway, and they know they have love and respect of everybody in an organization. And they're going to do it and they're extraordinary and they're great and they're going to be fantastic.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I have this image of all these curves, and you get people who are at the top of an S curve and you're like, "No, no, no, you're not staying there. In fact, we're going to push you off that S curve."

**Scott O'Neil:** Because on your S curve, on the on the top of your fancy S curve that you have, you get bored. But like, I've been there. And what happens when I get there? I'm out. Like, life's too short, I want to be challenged. And so, these are three stars, like they are bona fide stars, this is a constellation of stars. And so, we either move them or lose them, in my opinion. Now, I would never, I guess that they listen to this that will be really awkward because they'll know the secret sauce, but I want people challenged and hungry. I do. Life's more fun. Business is more productive. You get more creative and think about that. Like you hop on these projects and that's what you're focusing on. You're on the treadmill. Just go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go. How creative are you?

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Scott O'Neil:** What if you came from another, totally unexpected, completely empty headed? There was a great sales trainer named Dave Rubenstein and he always said, "Be empty headed." And I love the concept of that. And at first it sounds insulting, but actually to think about it, if you walk into a challenge empty headed, that just means, "Okay, I'm actually going to take in the data. I am willing to ask the right questions. I'm willing to have my mind changed." And I think these three women, who happen to be extraordinary executives, are the perfect people in their new role. And when they master these, they will probably move to another one.

**Whitney Johnson:** Absolutely. I love it.

It. So you in the book talk about trusting the process, but it's a little opaque, it's like, "What is the process exactly?" How does that work with the Sixers? Can you just talk through that briefly?

**Scott O'Neil:** It's somewhat like a movement. You know, when I was at the Knicks, we had and insanity where Jeremy Lin came out of nowhere, this incredible story. And then when I got to the Sixers, we had just made the worst trade in NBA history. We had two first round draft picks over the next five years. We were, had our plate. We're paying at the salary cap. We were paying a lot of money and we weren't very good. So, we did not have a story to tell and we did not have a path to being great. And we had this incredible general manager, young, young man named Sam Hankey, who is teaching at Stanford right now and start to, start his own venture fund. And there are not many general managers in basketball that go to teach at Stanford and have their own venture fund, but longtime friend. And he's there's as a young guy and he says, "It's going to take nine years privately. And if you want to go to the moon, don't bring a ladder." And he said that, "There are no shortcuts to the top, only into the middle."

Okay, so with that backdrop, we kind of loved everything you said, okay? Then we are talking as a team and we're saying, "Do we have the stomach for this? And the this is that we will take the long-term view on every decision we make and that while we will make some bad decisions and we make plenty, we will make the best decision we can with the information we have every time in the interest of building a championship team."

And so that trusting the process is simply taking a long-term view, blocking out all of the extra the noise. So, in our business we're in a fishbowl. So, you have the media, you have the league, you have TV networks, you have your neighbors, you have your family. Everybody's telling you what you can and can't do and why you're doing it and asking you questions and putting pressure on you. And we were just going to stay the course. We're going to trust the process. And you fast forward to now and we're sitting in first place in the Eastern Conference as we walk into the playoffs. And so, someone asked me once, "If you win your first place, is the process over?" "The process over? No, you don't understand the question." It's like, "We'll always make the right decision."

Now. In our business, if you have a team that can compete, you won't make a long-term decision, you make a shorter-term decision because you're going for it, which we are, but we'll always have that lens of continuing to look out on the horizon and, and making the right decisions over time.

Now, how does that apply to life? Which I think is the most applicable question next and I hope is going to be your follow up, but I'm going to answer it anyway. Say that we had a little bit of a longer lens, and I particularly find this in my, in my Millennial's, my Gen Zs. Typically, they have a really short lens, and what I want them to do is I want them to think about who they want to be, what they want to accomplish, what does life look like, what their dreams look like in one year, three years, five years, whatever that horizon is for them, and then I want them to commit some amount of time every day to achieve it. And if they do that and make fewer Tik Tok videos and stop watching a show, playing a video game, and doing your homework at the same time, they have the opportunity to do anything that they can possibly do.

I love this next generation. Love, love, love, love, love, love, love. They are smart, they are connected, they understand brand, understand their brand. They want to make a difference in the world. They put so much pressure on us as leaders to, to stand for something better than the mundane jobs we have. This group will change the world for the better, and I love them. I just want them to just stand right at that tree every day. And I just want them to pull back, take a look, set the vision to what they want to accomplish and then commit to the work to get there,

**Whitney Johnson:** I understand the process. Now, you if you think about coming back to this S curve of Learning™, you're hiring people for potential. That's, that's the theory. There are times when people are not fulfilling the promise of their potential. What does that conversation look like for you?

**Scott O'Neil:** Am I firing them or am I just telling them they have to get together?

**Whitney Johnson:** You're, you're firing them. You're firing them.

**Scott O'Neil:** Okay, so I have a I have a really different philosophy on terms. And for better, for worse, I've terminated hundreds of people in my life and I'm oftentimes in change environments and they're not oftentimes for the faint of heart. And so, while my reputation is, "He creates great culture, he's a wonderful boss. He's this leader." I'm like, "Yeah, I, it's a very high accountability culture." And so, there is no softness here. In fact, my company I've been here eight years. There are only 12 people here from when I got here, just to give you a sense, we have over 500 employees. And so, so it's definitely a turnover, and I'm comfortable terminating people.

Here's how the conversation it looks something like this. "So, Whitney, I really love you. I think you're amazing. You are every bit as smart, bright, talented, hardworking, creative and incredible as you were three years ago when we hired you. Somehow, this is not really working here. And so, whether it's circumstance, you, your boss, your department. I don't know. It's somewhat inconsequential to me, but your opportunity for future growth here is zero. And so, what I would like to commit to you is that I would like to spend the next six months. Is six months a reasonable time frame?" You say, "Yes." "And I would like to help you find a spot where you can thrive and use your incredible skills and gifts. And this is between me and you. It doesn't have to go any further. And as long as you, you

honor my contract where you work and do your job and be a good citizen here, you won't have any problem from me. And let me know how I can help you. I will call anyone. I will navigate for you. I know how incredible you are, but we've got to move you out of here."

That's how the conversation looks. And in most cases, no one ever knows. That's treating people like people, right? That is like 100 percent how you want to be treated as a human being.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, when you describe it that way, the way I think about it is this... I actually have this hypothesis that when a person loses their job, as you're describing, they actually know that they're on the wrong S curve, like they know it. They can feel it deep in their gut and their soul. And they just need a little bit of a nudge. And what you're saying is, "It's not the right S curve. There is a right S curve for you. It's not here. I'm going to help you find it." It's so much dignity to that. It's just fantastic.

You talk really openly about your spiritual life. And for people who want to talk more about their spiritual life, it's interesting because we had Hubert Joly originally, who is the CEO of Best Buy on the podcast, and Harry Kramer, who is the CEO of Baxter Health Care, both of whom are friends, and they talk openly about their spiritual life. I think a lot of leaders want to, but they're reluctant. And so, I would love to hear any thoughts or encouragement that you would like to give people who are thinking, "I want to show more of this side of myself. I'm reluctant to." What are your thoughts?

**Scott O'Neil:** So, first off, I know your mentor, Clay Christensen. I was listening to him speak and I was in New York at this S & P conference and there were 75 CEOs, and Bill McDermott, the former CEO, was a friend. And I'm looking around and there's a bunch of sports people there. And so, then Gary Bettman effectively luminaries from around the country, 75 people, and they're rolling in. And Clay got up and halfway through his talk, he starts talking about when he was a missionary in South America.

**Whitney Johnson:** It was Korea. He was in Korea.

**Scott O'Neil:** Oh Korea. I wasn't even close.

**Whitney Johnson:** He was in South Korea. It's close.

**Scott O'Neil:** So, he was telling the story. And I went up to him afterwards and I just said, "Hey, I just want to tell you, I'm just a recent convert to the church, and how amazing it is that I think you talk about your mission." He said, "I do that every time I speak." And that was all I said. And I was like, "Got it."

That was the first time it actually dawned on me that you have this platform for life, love, and the pursuit of happiness. And if you're comfortable speaking about it, I think it's for the good. I, I talk about the concept of soul a lot, like my body soul. I don't jam religion, if you will, but I do talk about spirituality a lot. I talk about stillness quite a bit, finding your peace. My sense of the world right now is that we need more leaders. We need more spirituality; we need more centeredness. We need more connection. And for me, the church has been a great vehicle for me to get there.

I say this a lot when I'm talking to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and, and that group is a proselytism church. So, they go out and hunt, and my counsel to groups, young people, missionaries, is that I want you to love people. You know, it's not our job to convert. It could be our job to invite, but our job is to love. And I think part of, of that emanates for me is through my faith. I do the best I can to be the same person. I'm the same person talking to you as if when I'm in church or when I'm at home or when I'm at work. And am perfect at that? No, no, no, no, no. But that's my aspirational best-self. And I think to the extent that the line has continued to thin in many ways, through COVID, evaporated between life and work and work and life and home and work. You know, where I see your dog or your kids or your house or your whatever I see of you, you in your bathrobe, I mean, we've seen it all, right? I think if we can capture the best of that, as we begin to emerge and create this new normal, I think we'll be better together. And part of me is my spirituality. And I don't want to jam anybody, but I do want to tell them that there is solace and peace in a higher power, that people should explore. Church or spirituality, it gives

you purpose, it gives you meaning, it gives you direction. And I think we're in a world where we need all those things.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good.

At the end of every conversation that I have, every coaching session, I always ask the question, "What was useful to you?" Another way I could say that is, "What did you hear that wasn't being said?" So, what thoughts came to you as you were processing, talking out loud... What was useful for you today as you were talking?

**Scott O'Neil:** Ok, the most useful thing for me was leaning into your S curve and hearing you describe it, because obviously I have read it. That was one and the notion that we both hit on in terms of the boredom at the top of the score, which scares the life out of me, which is very intuitive, but to see it in practice was really helpful.

The second thing was, you painfully pointing out my repeated flaws, that I keep hitting on the same, the same, the same notion. And, and it was like, it was really helpful, like I had not tied the connection between my dad and MSG. And that was like really, really rich for me. It didn't feel good, but it was really helpful to understand how you saw the clear connection and then the chip on his shoulder stuff would seem to be kind of a natural. I think you use the words like "repeating your behavior again." I think you said that twice, unfortunately. So, I love, I love, I mean, I don't enjoy that. I didn't enjoy hearing that, but I love the notion that that was something you picked up and that I can learn from.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, okay, well, that is fantastic. And although I do apologize for that, sometimes I get a little too involved in absorbing your story.

**Scott O'Neil:** I absolutely loved it. That's the kind of insight that makes it so amazing.

**Whitney Johnson:** Shout out to Chester Elton and Morgan Jones and Sophie Bicol for all of this connection.

So, final thoughts?

**Scott O'Neil:** Final thoughts is this... Take care of yourself, do something for your mind, something for your body and your soul every day, Get the right amount of sleep. When I was growing up, everybody said, "Sleep four hours a day. Sleep six for the week. Money never sleeps, blah, blah, blah." Sleep. You need, your body needs rest. And the last thing I'll tell you is gratitude. That's my five-point plan to mental health wellness. It's like do some of your mind, some of your body, some of your soul, get the right amount of sleep, and tell somebody today how much you appreciate them, why you appreciate them, why you love them and what you learn from them. And you might make somebody's day, you might reach out, you'll get that prompting every day, I promise you, if you listen now. I just want you to act on that prompting and make somebody's day.

**Whitney Johnson:** I'm speechless. Scott, thank you so much.

**Scott O'Neil:** Whitney, you're incredible and I will continue to be one of your best listeners.

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Number one. When Scott gets some pretty tough feedback after the job interview his mom told him to go to, instead of hanging his head in shame, he thanks him, he stays in touch. "Hey, my suit fits," which goes to the human element we talked about in episode 201 with Jennifer Aaker. But also, the person who gives him the wakeup call becomes a mentor. Scott O'Neil has figured out how to become mentorable.

Number two. Popcorn vendor. He said it in just when he started school, but I think it's a great metaphor. Scott discovered he is at his best when he's cheering others on, he's interested, not interesting, eating popcorn. I think that's true for all of us.

Number three. Whatever dreams you have, they're not big enough. Listen to that, friends. It's true. If you don't believe it, go back and listen to Bob Proctor and episode 208. Also, notice how Scott has coaches. We all need coaches. We need in-person coaches, but you can also hire these podcast episodes to coach you.

Number four. When it comes to executing an S curve strategy, Scott is a great role model. He makes it possible for people to jump to new S curves. He makes it safe for them to be at the launch point, stretches them in the sweet spot, and when it's time to jump to new S curve, he allows for a soft landing.

Number five. I appreciate that Scott brings his spiritual side to work. For another great example of this, go back and listen to Hubert Joly in episode 165 or watch him on our LinkedIn live episode. We'll include links in the show notes.

Number six. I'm reflecting on the title of his book, *Be Where Your Feet Are*. Be present, no matter where you are, whether you're at the launch point, the sweet spot or in mastery, wherever you are in your growth cycle, be where your feet are. Be where you are.

Thanks again to Scott O'Neil for being our guest. Thank you to all of 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.