

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 235: LEENA NAIR

Hi, it's Whitney, and I have a favor to ask. We are seeking to better tailor our podcast to meet your needs, so we're conducting a quick audience survey, the first time ever actually. A link to the survey, which takes less than a minute, is in the show notes and as a small gesture of appreciation. When you complete it, you'll get a free PDF listing 10 podcasts that can help with career changes. Thanks so much. And onto the show.

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice, on how to climb the S curve of learning in your professional and personal life. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Our guest today is Leena Nair, chief human resources officer at Unilever. First female, first Asian and youngest ever CHRO at Unilever. In India, she trained as an electrical engineer, worked in factories, made soap and sold tea. But her true purpose was to empower other people.

As an HR pro, she has fused her engineering skills with igniting a spark in others, including a passion for DNI, which is diversity and inclusion. Leena Nair, is one of the smartest business leaders I've come across. I cannot wait for you to hear my conversation with her.

Whitney Johnson: Tell us about a Crucible moment in your career and specifically, and I suspect there are many, but what are one or two experiences that you look at and you say this helps define me as a leader and it might be something that happened when you were 10 years old, it might be when you were 20. But what was that experience that helped you really shape who you are?

Leena Nair: Oh, so many experiences and wondering where to start. But eventually, let me give you a little bit of, you know, story of my life in a manner of speaking. You know, I grew up in a very small town in India, which is like eight hours away from Mumbai. There weren't any sort of role models in my town. I don't think there was a single woman who sort of had a career or worked. So I grew up with the world telling me that this is not for girls. This is

not what girls do. Don't study so much, girls don't have careers. So in many ways, my life, you know, you're not supposed to wear trousers. You know, it's like that there were norms and norms of what girls could do, and not. So in many ways one of my crucible experiences has been the determination and the anger that many of these you can do this you can't do that has sort of brought into me, you know? And that made me a bit of a rule breaker, norm breaker. I want to do something. If somebody tells me no one can do it, you know, it's brought a little bit of my pioneering, innovative spirit because I feel, you know, I'm going to take risks. Yeah, you haven't done it before. So what? You haven't seen somebody doing it before. So what?

Then I went on to do electronics and telecommunications, engineering. Loved engineering, worked as an engineer, didn't like it at all. I was a lousy engineer, did my management studies in human resources and began to love the whole idea of being with people around people understanding people's motivation. And when I look back, there were enough to tell signs. You know, even when I was working as a telecom engineer at the time I look forward to was the time that I would meet other people and had a social interaction or a human interaction.

So probably that's another thing, you know, that has shaped me. I know that's what my purpose in fashion is. And when I look at my early experiences in, in Unilever and I joined as a management trainee in Hindustan Unilever in the last 30 years, I've been the first woman at every job I've done. Increasingly the first Asian, the first brown person, the first Indian and so on, so forth. But all of these firsts has meant an enormous privilege, and an enormous burden. Is the burden of having to sit off do well because I think everybody is going to judge how women will do in this role based on me. So you carry that burden of judgment, you carry the burden of visibility, you carry the burden and privilege of making it easier for those who come after you.

So you feel an enormous sense of responsibility because you've got all these opportunities that you want to make sure you're making it easier for those who follow you in your footsteps. And the first success... Again, another important lesson for me call a crucible moments of what have you. I really think doing grassroots roles in a business is so important. I mean, the first six years I was in a factory, I know how to make soap. I learned how to sell, I went and selling of tea in north India, then production of fine chemicals. What if I lived in a village for two months to learn about the consumers in India? So I think that's a lot of who I am. I really connect. I go deep. I believe in grassroots rules. You should know your business. You should know how you make stuff, sell stuff. You should know the commercial equation of everything you're doing and the people bits are enormous. You know, for me, listening to consumer voices, listening to employee voices is big. I don't reach a decision on anything till I really, really spent time with people and understood what's on their minds.

Whitney Johnson: You just said something really powerful is that you don't make any major decision without hearing what the consumer has to say. And I can't help but wonder how that experience of being a child and wanting to do something different and your voice feeling as if it weren't being heard in some way that has made it so that you are very keenly aware of the power and the importance of hearing a person's voice.

Leena Nair: Absolutely Whitney. You nailed it because I know what it is to be on the fringe of something. I know what it is to earn your way to earn respect and love at the table, especially when you're the first of many things. So I've been a huge champion and continue to be a huge champion for inclusion in every sense of the word. And it's probably my early crucible experiences that has made me so passionate about making sure every voice is heard, every voice is valued. Everyone's contribution matters. Everyone has something to say that that makes sense for the business of the world. Many of those beliefs do stem from that.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So Leena, as a child, so you had this driving force of you were going to if they told you you couldn't do it, you were going to do it were in addition to this internal motivator that you had. Were there any cheerleaders along the way?

Leena Nair: You know, I'm a big fan of mentors. I have benefited from so many people who reached out and given me guidance and counseling. I mean, my dad was a huge sponsor for me despite everything. He was the one who said, "No, I wanted to get educated. You know, it doesn't matter if she doesn't get to apply it, but she's going to get an education and she's going to learn whatever she needs." You know, when I was leaving to go to my management institute, which was 48 hours by train from where I lived. To my family, it was the other end of the world that I was going to travel to to do my MBA and my dad said, You know, you can go provided I get to choose your husband for

you. So as long as you marry someone I choose, you can go far away and do your MBA. And, and he did a really nice job because Kumar is an amazing spouse and a husband. But, you know, in many ways, he was my sponsor and supporter and really, really wanted me to fly.

I, when I was studying engineering, one of our professors, Professor Silver Lee, was a huge mentor who kept telling me, "You must do management degree, you must consider human resources because I think that's what would make your heart sing." So I have been very, very lucky to have so many mentors along the way who have given me great advice and who sort of nudged, supported, helped to get to where I am today. And I'm incredibly grateful for that. Especially when you're trailblazing, especially when you're always trying to pioneer new stuff, especially when there's no one ahead of you. You can say, How did that work? It's so nice to have sponsors, mentors, coaches who've been there for me. Now I've had reverse mentors, side mentors, board mentors, female mentors, name it. I've had it and I continue to have it. But I'm a huge fan of this constant learning. Not having the answers is okay because I know I'll figure it out with the help of people who I care about and who care about me.

Whitney Johnson: You said that your father chose your husband, and it sounds like I have to tell you as a quick aside, my daughter, you know, we live in the United States where arranged marriages are not typical. But my daughter typically says, Could you please arrange my marriage? I think there, I think, which is a huge compliment to us that she thinks that we would choose well, but I do. I am fascinated by that. It sounds like your husband has gone on to be an important sponsor for you in many ways as well in terms of a support, yeah.

Leena Nair: You know, it's different. Arranged marriages of the time I went through 25 26 years ago had already evolved. It was really parents helping to set up a meeting or, you know, and then you dated and then you decided if this was right for you. I always say, how is that worse than meeting somebody in the bar? I mean, how is it worse than me to say, you mean your parents have met someone they liked and they think you should meet the person? What's wrong with that? So. But you know, my kids say, not sure this is going to work for us. We'll figure it out. I don't need you meddling in our lives. So maybe it's not going to work my kids.

Whitney Johnson: One of the things you talk about your your key HR practices is that every single person goes through a purpose workshop. Will you tell us how that came about?

Leena Nair: Fabulous, Whitney, it's so close to my heart. You know, our business, Unilever, our purpose is to make sustainable living commonplace, so our purpose is not about make more profits, make more money. I mean, every business has to do that, but it is about making sustainable living commonplace. And as a leadership team, we came up with three beliefs that underpin that purpose.

One is companies with purpose last. And increasingly, all companies are beginning to buy into that. That purpose is a differentiated purpose is the right thing to do. A second belief is brands with purpose grow. Because we are a brand company, we have 400 beautiful brands and brands that are a force for good are more enjoyed by consumers than any other, and we believe our brands have such a big voice. We serve 2.5 billion consumers. We can do such. We can play such a big role in shaping societal values, perceptions, consumer thinking. And a total belief that underpinned this purpose was people with both us thrive. We believe that being connected to your purpose and knowing what you're passionate about, knowing what gives you meaning in your life helps you have an anchor to go through uncertain times. Helps you not just survive this unprecedented world we are going through, but helps you thrive, not just survive. So people with purpose thrive. That is the sense of my HR strategy. People with purpose thrive.

So what we started with, we actually put the top 400 leaders through purpose workshops about five years ago, and it landed really well because what it helped do, is examine their own motivation, strengths, beliefs, what gets them out of bed and then try and see how that's aligned to what you leave us trying to do as a company. Because when your purpose is aligned to what the company wants to do, then it's magic all along because every moment you're spending in the company, you're doing something meaningful that makes a difference to the company and makes a difference to you personally.

So that's how it started when it went really well for our top 500 leaders they had, they shared their Crucible moments, they shared what motivates them, they shared what shaped their thinking. And it's funny. Like you say, so

many of the values and perceptions are shaped by the time you are 12 or 13 or 14 really young. And people shared their life stories and it became such a powerful way to build connection and alignment the senior team. So we said, let's do it for everyone, and we said, okay, we're going to do this for all hundred and fifty thousand people. And I must say I had my fair share of critics who were like, what's all this? You know, what are we going to do? Bubba's workshops? It sounds like a soft, fluffy thing to do. People disappear for two days and look into each other's eyes. But the response was so strong, people who came out of the workshop said, "Wow, that's the most deeply human thing I've done in a long time."

People remember each other's purpose and said, You know what? I know Whitney cares about animals and pets and blah blah blah. They remembered each other's life stories. They remembered each of those puppies. So you build a deeper connection, much easier to have some of the difficult business conversations when you have a deeper connection.

Then interestingly, the engineering side of me started looking for data and evidence because now 60,000 people have gone through the workshop. First, people said, "Oh, why is somebody on the backing line in a factory going to enjoy a bogus workshop?" Guess what? They are going to do because they are human beings and they have life stories to share as well. And it became a movement, had legs of its own. People loved it. Talk to others. And before we knew it, people wanted more and more of these bookshops. Now we also learned how to run them virtually.

Now, more and more evidence comes in. In our universe, our annual people survey results. People have been through a workshop, have 92 percent greater likelihood of saying they'll put more discretionary effort at work. They're more engaged, more satisfied, more sticky with the company. So we said, OK, let's do more research, so we called London business school. London business school went around and spent time with 3,500 people who've been through these workshops and who are living their purpose at work. And they came back with again, stunning evidence, 45 percent more motivation, more job satisfaction, more belief in the power of what Unilever can do in the world. More courage to take risks. There you go. So now I don't need to convince everybody, the data speaks. The people experience speaks. And now it's just a matter of time before 60 heads have about 50,000 because we're not done yet. It's got a momentum on its own. And now really, the challenge has been to make sure we're able to do it through COVID times because people have been extraordinarily stretched. So but that's the bar of bringing a truly human process into the workplace. And I'll tell you one more thing Whitney.

The supplementary effect, which I didn't realize, is that people tend to learn more in areas that are purposeful and passionate about. Yeah. So what happens is I'm usually passionate about inclusion for all the reasons story of my life. But the reality is moments something pops into my inbox to read, which is something to do with greater inclusion and equity pop. I'm ready to read, I'm ready to engage, I'm ready to watch video. So what we've discovered is as we are driving up learning agility because, you know, the Half-Life of a skill is two and a half years. People have to learn all the time. They've got to learn, unlearn, relearn. The people who are more connected to their purpose, who really understand what gives them meaning and joy in life are so much better at learning, so they become active learners of the subjects they care about. So we're seeing lifelong learners are better connected to the purpose and feel like they're living the purpose at work.

So lots of good, good effects, and I would recommend it strongly for organizations. Because purpose is for the companies, not posters on the wall. Purpose for the company has been every person in that company feels it, lives it, and believes it, and believes that by them leading their living, their purpose at work, the contributing to making Unilever a better place. So I'm a huge fan of doing it more broadly. It's given me a lot of strength and courage to.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, one of the things I love is that you, you start with this very human centered approach, but then you're continually coming back to what is the data? Tell us. What is the data? Tell us. That builds the case so that for people who are saying, I'm not quite so sure about that, you say, here's what the data says and then it starts to persuade people. Question for you. What is your purpose?

Leena Nair: My focus is to ignite the human spark, to build a better business and a better world. I'm all about putting human resources at the center of both tables, business tables. You know, I'm constantly trying to bring the world of financial capital and human capital together to say human beings and their potential have the greatest impact on business and business hasn't valued that enough. You know, I'll give you a simple example the way the

PNL is today, people feature only the coastline of the PNL. We have to bust it. We have to recreate a new PNL for the 21st century. You know, even brands have intangible value, but people exist only in the cost line of a PNL.

So these are the things we have to challenge. So I'm passionate about getting people to be sparked. You know, when people are sparked and they feel they can do the best in a place like Unilever or others, that's when you get the best out of them. That's when the company becomes a beautiful place to be in. So I really want to see that spark in people's eyes when they feel they're doing their best work. They love what they're doing. They believe they're doing meaningful things and the whole joy that comes from it, and importantly, the difference that makes to business and the difference it makes to the world. So that's my purpose, and I'm out there always talking about it.

Whitney Johnson: And what I love is that our interview, not everybody can see this, but we're on video and Leena has fittingly read So Flame Spark Fire. I love it. Where would you put people on the PNL? It's not on the cost side. Where would you put it?

Leena Nair: I would say it's the tangible value that people can create. The incremental value that people can create, needs to be measured, needs to be put into place. You know, one of the things about being an engineer, Whitney, is that my data side is also well developed. So I tell the story about, you know, when I told my father I wanted to do a management studies in human resources, he was like, totally disappointed. But I was in electronics and telecommunications engineer who practically fought a number of battles to be able to do engineering, go and do an MBA, and that when human resources. Like nobody cared about human resources, it wasn't even called human resources. It was called personnel in those days. And he was like, deeply disappointed. Are you sure you want to do this? And I was pretty clear. Yeah, my mentors told me that I'd probably be good at it. It all made sense. I was going to do this. And my teachers used to ask me in class, why is an engineer in the, you know, personnel class? I mean, have you sort of stepped in normally it wasn't expected for engineers to do and go and do sociology, physiology, you know, psychology, et cetera. But the beauty is 20 years into my career started getting relevant because the head and the heart started coming together.

Suddenly, the power of data and the power of people started getting connected. So I often joke with my team that it took about 20-25 years in my career for me to finally get relevant and be able to tell my dad, don't worry. It sure is a front ending function. It's not a back end anymore. But the beauty of that is I have always pushed for data and evidence and everything we do in HR.

So give you a simple example we do some incredible work in well-being, physical well-being, mental well-being, emotional well-being, purposeful well-being of our people. You know, we have we do some incredible work because I believe post-pandemic the crisis on mental health and wellbeing we're going to have is going to be crazy. But when I go to the boardroom, I'm able to demonstrate to them that for every dollar I invest in the health and well-being of my people, I get a return of two and a half dollars. So, yes, it's an incredibly not great thing to do to put your people at the center of everything and look after them, and that's what drives me. But I also have the numbers to prove that is the right thing for the business to do because it's benefiting the business in every way that you can imagine better growth, lower costs, more trust, etc.

So it's combining that that's really helped me have an edge, [INAUDIBLE] are so attractive today. The number one employer of choice in 54 of the 75 markets we recruit and we are the fourth most followed company on LinkedIn. Fantastic. But I also have the numbers to show you because I'm so attractive. I spend a lot less on recruitment than I did. Over the last decade my recruitment costs have come down by 90 percent because it's so easy to attract people to come and work for you. And they believe in the purpose they think we're standing as a force for good because they love our employer brand. So the point I'm making is we have to constantly, you know, as H.R., people also marry the data analytics, the inspiration to give it real business and performance, which, you know, you can't go to a boardroom and say, do something because I think it's a good thing for people. Yeah, that's not enough. You've got to be able to show whether to create a better business and a better world.

Whitney Johnson: You've now been at Unilever for two decades. More than two decades? Yes?

Leena Nair: Yeah, it's going to be 29 years. It's scary. Whitney.

Whitney Johnson: Alright. Nearly three. Awesome. Alright. So you have jumped to a lot of new S curves, and I'm sure you're... Being an engineer, I'm sure you're familiar with the S curve, and we've reimagined this as this S curve of learning that every person is on an S curve in any given role and they start out at the launch point and they're not sure what they're doing. And they get into the sweet spot and everything is working. And then they get into mastery and they know exactly what they're doing, but they're a little bit bored. And so then the question becomes, how do we make sure that they stay engaged?

So one of the questions I have for you, in addition to the decision that you made to go into HR and your father was scratching his head, in your 29 years at Unilever, has there been one of those roles where you were on this S curve, you were at the top of the curve, you jumped to the bottom of a new one. You completely Disrupted Yourself and people are saying, "What are you doing?" Is there a role that you took that fits into that category?

Leena Nair: I do it all the time, but I mean, you know, for example, I opted for leading employee relations in one of our most difficult factories, which had a very union leader called the salmon the still famous in and around Mumbai. And, you know, I was keen to do employee relations in the factory to learn what it took to deal with unions, but it was not what every other management trainee did. You know, they took on other roles, ask for postings into corporate headquarters. And here I was commuting to us to get to a factory in the back of beyond handling employee relations for a thousand people with one of the toughest union leaders with a reputation to boot that he was the toughest one to negotiate with. So it's one of the things I encourage. Everyone is put out. Put your hands up for the most difficult roles because when you grow and succeed there, you get a surge of confidence. You hit your new S curve.

So I've constantly done that when when I was, you know, in India, running HR from the [INAUDIBLE] in Southeast Asia, then Asia, I took the role that my boss was keen to do at that time to be the leader of the Global Centers of Excellence, being based in London, running international centers of Excellence across leadership development, reward, et cetera, completely out of my comfort zone. Because I was an operation person, I knew how to run operations in HR and not on the innovation piece. Global innovation, multicultural innovation. And I picked that up. You know, I put my hand up to be the DNI champion for the company.

So all these experiences have grown me tremendously, and I'm always up for putting your hand up, try different things. You know, right now, I'm defining the next S curve because I'm saying, great, I love being teacher. It's been six years. What's next? And I've been thinking, what would it take maybe to run a business into it? And then, you know, everyone says, Oh, nobody, in HR really goes to CEO. It doesn't happen. HR guys don't run business, and I'm saying, "Okay. Note to self. then I'm going to do it." That's what everyone says. Maybe it's time to do it. So, you know, it's a little bit of that pioneering in a way. What the heck I want to do it kind of spirit that's got me going so far. I wouldn't recommend that for everybody because you have butterflies in the pit of your stomach very often because you take on things enthusiastically and then you realize, Oh my God, I don't have the skills for this. But I love it.

And then my personal life also, I set goals every year to learn something new. You know, last year it was Spanish. I'm still not enough fluent. This year is going to be golf and continue to brush up my Spanish, which hasn't, which isn't as good. Spanish is really complicated. And each you pick up something that challenges me, gets me to learn. Luckily, my husband's always up to learning all these crazy things with me, so it becomes a nice thing we as a couple do to learn something new.

Whitney Johnson: One of the things that people listen to on the podcast is they want some tactical suggestions, so you've got a person that is on your team somewhere in the org, they're in mastery in a role. They're ready to do something new. What in your experience is an effective conversation look like? So that they can persuade their manager, Hey, I know that I'm really good in this role and I know that I'm being successful, but I'd really like to go try that other thing in your experience, what does that successful conversation look like or sound like?

Leena Nair: Fabulous. You know, one thing I would say is if you are not sure, about what you want to do. Try, you know, for example, in Unilever, we use something called Flex experiences, where you can say up 20 percent of time available, does anybody have an interesting project in inclusion because I'm passionate about inclusion or whatever else? And we've had more than 15,000 people do this kind of flex experiences and learn from it. Sometimes it's nice to get exposed to that, to be sure. Ok, that's what I really like. I mean, I have a beautiful story of an R&D scientist 18

years in R&D in Unilever came into the project in our DNI team and then has now joined the DNI team and wants to work at that because she's discovered a passion and purpose is more of that.

So I would encourage you to do as much as you can to figure out whether the age you are looking to grow in is something that interests and excites you. You know, one of the things we do at Unilever, and I recommend that as a tactical step to anyone. We create what's called a future food plan and the four elements to this future food plan. You broaden your purpose and what gets you out of bed and what gives you meaning, because that's the start of everything. We encourage you to put down your wellbeing score. How were you feeling? Are you feeling emotionally, mentally well? Because we believe that when you're getting on to the next disco or learning something new, we want you in a best possible mental health and wellbeing state that you are in because it's taking risks is doing different things.

Then we ask people to put down the skills that they need to learn and the experiences they need together to do the kind of role that looks exciting for them. And I always tell people never have one destination role in mind, always think more broadly. I think, OK, I think I would love to do, God knows, data architecture or data analysts or you know what a data visualize. I mean, don't think in one role, think about a family of roles that's appealing to you and think, what are the skills and experiences that will build you there? Because you have to take charge of your own career and learning? You can't leave it to anybody else you've got to see. Once you've created the future food plan, you have the basis for a better conversation because you've thought about the kind of destination roles you want to go to. You've thought about and it's not one rule, it's a set of rules. You've thought about the skills and experiences you have and the skills and experiences you don't have that gets you there.

So in many ways, you've defined your trajectory for yourself. Always have a trajectory conversation, not a destination conversation, have a trajectory conversation. This is what I want to learn is what I want to learn. This is experience I want to gather. This is the kind of mentoring I want to be able to fulfill my potential. Yeah, it is a conversation that you must do 70 percent of the work or 80 percent of the work because you've got to have thought through why, why you want to go on the next cycle? What are you prepared to do for it? And how are you going to equip yourself? How are you going to find the time to learn the skills and experiences to get you ready? So and once you create this future for plan, I'm a big fan of talking to mentors because it's always nice to get a different perspective saying good you've thought through, but you've forgotten this or you haven't thought about this. So prepare yourself every six months. You should be having a conversation with your boss on what's next with your line leader on what's next, what can I grow in, and what can I learn? You've got to have this relentless, restless curiosity and spirit of learning around you.

Whitney Johnson: Do you find Leena, that when people are having that conversation, if they're able to also say, and here's what I'm thinking as I go on and do this new thing, there's another person on our team that would be terrific at X, Y or Z. So they're thinking strategically not only for themselves, but also for their manager and their team.

Leena Nair: Absolutely. I think it's a great suggestion to engage your peers. And make it more open. And learn from peers, maybe who you've already seen on a different S curve. But, you know, if you're feeling, you've got to start before you start feeling bored in your job, you've got to start before you feel the plateau. When you feel you're taking decisions easily or you've seen this problem six times and you know what to do when you feel answers are coming easily to you, you know the whole piece we call unconscious competence just so competent you don't even know it. You're like, OK, that's what we should be doing. It's really time to pause and say, Hey, you know, I often ask this question, when was the last time you did something for the first time in your life? That was the last time you grew. When was the last time you did something for the first time in your life? That was the last time you grew. Ask yourself that question on the job. When was the last time I did something new on my job, which I hadn't done before, which wasn't a decision I've taken 16 times, which wasn't one of those things that I knew exactly what to do because I've done it so many times. You've got to challenge yourself. There has to be those new experiences you're doing in your day, that's the point in time you've got to push for the conversation. One thing I've learned is I never wait for that long. Six months into my job, I start thinking about what do I want to learn and do it. Every six months, I make sure I have a conversation with my leader about. What should I be learning more of?

Whitney Johnson: What are you going to learn more of in the next six months then?

Leena Nair: You know, I am encouraging myself, given, you know, the aspirations I have to learn about business, et cetera. I've been doing more work with the finance expert on understanding P&Ls, balance sheets, think across the whole, you know, remembering all my old finance management that I learned during my MBA, but getting it back. I've been spending some time on learning about strategy even more deeply. So, you know, I've set some of those goals to understand, you know, I'm trying to spend more time with a digital expert, digitally selling expert to understand how e-commerce is changing for my industrial sector.

Whitney Johnson: So you can get ready to jump to a new S curve because, like you said, six years, that is a long time. So change management, major new initiative, you've made the decision, you're going to spend the money, but you've said there's often this snag in organizational readiness. It's done well five to 15 percent of that. That initiative needs to be spent on the people side of it. What are your thoughts on this and what role should HR play when you're launching a major new initiative?

Leena Nair: You know, one thing I have learned is all change initiatives. The thing it feels is not the hard way. I mean, you want to launch a new system, you want to launch a new technology, you want to do digital transformation. It feels because the people side is so not thought through. And my advice is to really spend time on change management and on thinking, culture and behaviors. In my experience, you've got to think about four things as you drive change. One is, what is the role modeling by senior leaders? What behaviors do you want them to draw observable behaviors because people don't listen to what leaders say, they listen to what leaders do. So let me take an example. If we want digital transformation, then we have to see leaders engage the digital technologies. Leaders have to be seen to upskill themselves. Leaders have to be seen to think, you know, displaying more and more interest in digitization and everything in it's a role model where senior leaders is a big one. And as HR, we've got to show the mirror to our leaders if they're not displaying the behaviors, they're asking the rest of the organization to demonstrate. The second thing that is an impact is to think about making it personal. What's in it for people? Yeah. Nobody is going to do something because a leader tells them to do it if they think it makes sense to them, if it talks to them, if the whys clear for them. If the what's in it for me is care for them to spend time making it personal for people.

The other thing that drives people is. The how you provide them the skills. To be able to do the new things you're asking them to do. Many times we tell people, you know, Fourth Industrial Revolution is coming, everyone is going to lose jobs. Robots are going to go and take over, go and learn new skills. People won't, because that's not enough to know that the world's going to change and robots are going to take over. You've got to work with them on them will as well. And the mindset, which is where puppies workshops are beautiful because you've got to get them to embrace and adopt the change, do it because they believe it makes a difference. So invest in that skill building. But you know, investing both in the skill and the will of the person. And last but not least. What are the consequences, what are the incentives, what do you measure in a change program? Because KPIs measurement has a role in helping nudge an organization forward in terms of experience. So let's say you've got to do this work when you launch any change initiative. Others, you're going to feel like 70 or 80 percent of change initiatives fail across the world. There's going to be deep thought that goes into making this happen. So take the human dimension seriously, invest in it up front and change efforts will be magnificently successful.

Whitney Johnson: I suspect there are some well, I don't I don't suspect I know there are some HR professionals that are listening to this conversation, and you've talked about how this function needs inspiration and self-belief and swagger, and they are likely listening and saying, We hear you, Leena, but they don't have a seat at the table. So for people who are hearing you, they're inspired and they they know that they can be helpful in making decisions that will guide a firm and an organization to be more successful. What are one or two tips that you would give those individuals?

Leena Nair: You know, each other as a function spends so much time worrying about, am I relevant, am I not relevant? Do I have a seat at the table? Don't I have a seat at the table? You know, there's such an opportunity today because everyone is worrying about culture. Everyone was worrying about capability building. Everyone's worrying about health and well-being of people. Such a beautiful opportunity to get your voice heard. I've seen with H.R. people, the critic is much stronger in them because they evolved. They are the critic of saying what you're going to say doesn't make sense. So much bigger an HR person. There's so much more self-critical of themselves. So my advice would be just suspend that little endeavor for a bit and allow yourself to express what's in your mind. You see

and hear so much in HR person because they send stuff they listen to stuff. Have such a clear point of view what's going on in the business. Use that voice to tell the story. Talk to leaders. It's hard sometimes I know it needs courage I know. But talk to leaders about the impact of the leadership. Get them to listen. Because you truly know, literally, know.

Whitney Johnson: All right, so Leena, at the end of a coaching conversation, I always ask people the question of what was useful to you today. So, I've been asking you lots of questions, but you've had this opportunity to be processing and listening and and as you've been talking, probably made a new connection or two. So what was useful for you in this conversation today?

Leena Nair: Whitney I loved, I loved talking to you. You know what? The couple of things that you made me think about. One was connecting so much more directly between my childhood experiences and how I'm experiencing work and the way I'm showing up. You sort of know it, but it hits you harder when you're telling the story to someone else and they're listening and pulling back and saying, you just said that I love the way we will. Jumping into the role of data into what H.R. does, and I was connecting that to the swagger question, saying the more people have skills to be able to show data and evidence the more they can grow their confidence. So it's it's been wonderful because you've helped me make some new connections.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. Hmm. Lovely. All right. Any final thoughts?

Leena Nair: Ha, my my final thought would be we had such a beautiful moment. I mean, 18 months of this pandemic has taught us so many things personally and professionally. And my sort of plea to all leaders, to all HR leaders everywhere is, let's not waste this moment. Let's use this moment to reimagine and reinvent things. To reimagine a work should be done, to reimagine how people should be looked after, to reimagine the impact of people and in the business. Let's not miss this moment. Let's not go down the language of let's go back to what we did in 2019. Let's have the language of we're moving forward to a better world. We're moving forward having learned some really important things and bringing the best of our old world and our new world into a world we're going to create together. So let's reimagine, reinvent. Let's not miss this moment to create something new.

Whitney Johnson: Let's not miss this moment. Well, said Leena Nair. Thank you so much.

Leena Nair: Lovely talking to you.

I hope you enjoyed Leena as much as I did. Four major takeaways.

Number one, purpose matters way more than you think. People are more productive, learn more and are happier when they are connected to their purpose. In general, but also at work. Purpose is not posters on the wall, which goes to point number two.

Marry data and inspiration. Leena is obviously passionate about the human spark, but she also brings her engineering background. The data shows that if you invest one dollar in employee well-being like mental health, like purpose workshops, you'll get two dollars and fifty cents in return. Helping people thrive is always enough, but it also makes financial sense on the spreadsheets.

Number three, have more than one destination role in mind. When you're thinking about jumping to a new S-curve, get exposure to many different things. Look for a family of roles. Have a trajectory conversation, not a destination conversation. And remember, 70 to 80 percent of this conversation going well depends on you and your preparation.

Number four. When was the last time you did something new? That's the last time you grew. When you start getting bored or the decisions are easy, that's when you should pause and see if you're still learning and growing, asking yourself, Am I in mastery? And as Leena said, so perfectly put your hand up for the most difficult job. That's where the next s curve lives.

If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to check out episode 233 with Jacqueline Novogratz. Both of these leaders talked about the importance of flexing your courage muscle.

Thank you again to Leena Nair for being our guest and to you for listening. And friendly reminder, remember to fill out the survey so that we know what's useful to you. You can find a link in the show notes of the episode and thank you to our team, Matt Silverman, Producer, Whitney Jobe audio engineer and Editor Steve Ludwig, assistant producer. And Maddie McDaniel, production assistant.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.