

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 276: DANNY AINGE

Welcome back 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 Whitney Johnson. One thing before we start the show is if you find this podcast valuable, it would be lovely if you would share your favorite episode with one friend, family member, or colleague. We all have those moments. You finish reading or listening to something. I think my friend Rachel would love this. Well, if so, send her a note. We could buy a billboard in Times Square or a thousand Facebook ads or even a Super Bowl commercial. Not really. But none would be as powerful as you sharing something valuable with a friend. Most podcasters, including me, will tell you it's the secret to their success. So, thank you to everyone in our listening community who does this on a regular basis. Speaking of big plays and small details, this week's guest has had an illustrious career in the NBA as a star player, a coach, advisor, and executive currently with the Utah Jazz. To say that sports are Danny Ainge, life is an understatement. As he told me in our conversation, it's the work, the preparation, the visualization, and competition that creates a meditative focus for him. This applies as a player and a coach. Sometimes this was all-consuming and as a husband, father, and now grandfather, he came to a point where he had to take a step back. I loved talking with Danny about how basketball, a seemingly simple game has been disrupted multiple times, even during his career. There are some great lessons in here that I've already started thinking about in my life and work. I'm sure you'll find some as well.

Whitney Johnson: Where I'd like to start is to ask you about two or three crucible moments in your life, events that really shaped who you are.

Danny Ainge: So, I would say that my first year in the NBA was a very difficult moment of my life because I was coming out of pro baseball. I made a big decision to leave there. I felt like I had a promising career in baseball, and I chose to go play for the Celtics. And I had very high expectations. I was College Player of the Year. I got a new big contract with the Celtics. I just had a lot of expectations and they just, I just didn't have the opportunity. I showed up to a really good team in the middle of the season and there wasn't really enough reason that I had given the coaches to make any altering changes. Any alterations into how the team was playing. So, that summer off-season, I went to work and just really was determined on winning and determined to prove to the coach that I would deserve to play. So, the next year, the second day of training camp in the starting lineup. And I get a phone call that night and it's my father who's crying on the phone. And maybe you've heard my father cry twice in my life. And I knew why he was calling. And he was calling to tell me that my mother had taken her own life. And that was a pretty big setback. And I went to the funeral and went to do all the things I needed to do with my family for the next few days.

Danny Ainge: And it was a very trying time. But, you know, getting then like refocusing and trying to get back into basketball quick was challenging. But I think that that, you know, my mother, knowing what my father was going to tell me, was, you know, when I was in high school, my two older brothers were out of the home now. And I knew how dark and, and depressed and that and sick that my mother was. And so, it wasn't a surprise to me. It was just a sad time. That was a, you know, a changing moment for me. I had my oldest two children were born at that time. I think I was 22, maybe just turned 23. And it just gave me a different perspective on lots of things and just gave me more sympathy for people that were not in a good place, gave me more reason to reach out and be kind and nice to everybody. I think I always was. But, you know, it was more of a focus. And my mother meant a lot to me and that was just really hard to see her leave. And, you know, I didn't even really get that emotional at the funeral. It wasn't until that Christmas when I saw my kids and I just go like, this is what she would have loved if she could have just hung in there.

Whitney Johnson: That's a lot. At the age of 22 years old. You're a new father. Your mother has taken her life. You loved your mother. You now have had, it sounds like, the most difficult year professionally, because up until that time, things have been fairly easy for you from a sports standpoint, and you'd had to work harder than you ever had in your life. Is that right?

Danny Ainge: Yeah. I remember in New York the year before *The New York Post*, Peter Vecsey was a famous writer in New York at that time, and he wrote a headline when we came to, to play the Knicks said, referred to me as Danny Ain't, "Danny Ain't getting it done." Oh, and I thought it was kind of funny, but at the same time, it was true. But that was the kind of year my first year was, too. So, I think those two years were very challenging.

Whitney Johnson: So, they were crucible moments, they were challenging. Some people, those experiences would have just taken out. They didn't take you out. What happened for you?

Danny Ainge: I mean, I had a lot going on in my life. I had a lot of dreams that I still wanted to fulfill in my career. I was madly in love with my wife and my children. I was still very, very close to my father and my family, my brothers and sister. So, I just, I just had a lot, you know, that to, to help me through difficult times and nobody more than my wife and children.

Whitney Johnson: You had a lot to live for.

Danny Ainge: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: And like you said, your mother would have been proud to see you and your family and building this wonderful life together.

Danny Ainge: Yeah. So, you know, I grew up my father was a very good athlete in the city of Eugene, Oregon, where I grew up. And then I had two brothers that were very good athletes. And I remember being I might, I must have been 12 or 13 or 14. And my mother just thought that, you know, my brothers weren't able to live their dreams or my father, you know, tore his ACL and his freshman year college football and was like a three-sport star in Eugene as a kid. And she just to her sports was stress. I remember my brother had gotten death threats in high school football. He was a very good high school football player. And so, she would you know, I'd be sitting on the

couch with her in a dark room and she would be trying to tell me, like, are you sure you want to do sports? Like, I think and, you know, it was like I think that that ship has sailed, mom. I think sports is pretty much all I know and all I'm good at.

Whitney Johnson: All you want to do.

Danny Ainge: I don't want to do anything else. Matter of fact, just like find another sport for me to play.

Whitney Johnson: You know what's so funny about that is that so many children have to deal with the exact opposite of their parents, projecting all their hopes and dreams on them, of they want you to play sports. And you had your mother saying, are you sure you want to do this?

Danny Ainge: Exactly. You know, I think that, you know, she had just you know, she had been they got married very young. They were in high school when they got married late in their high school life. And so, she went through all the pain and suffering with all three of them and the ups and downs that come with sports and the stresses. It wasn't a stress to me, though. It was nothing but joy.

Whitney Johnson: What do you love about sports? Tell us. So, you just said that. But when I heard that in your voice, I heard this. Just it just sinks for you. So, what do you love about it? Tell us a couple of moments. Describe them.

Danny Ainge: I remember when I was in the seventh grade and like the great one of the greatest moments was my brother, my oldest brother, who was a hero of mine. He was a star athlete in Oregon who was four years older. And he came to one of my games, and I was in the seventh grade, and I was so excited. I went my pants and I like ran. I was shooting layups to warm up for the game and I like ran into the locker room and, you know, like, tried to do everything I could to cover it up and flip my pants around, like, you know. But I came out on the court and of course, my brother noticed it and he was just like teasing me for days on end after that. I don't think I lived that down for very long, but I just loved the, the challenge. I loved the, the work that you had to do to put in the hours I spent on a basketball court. Dreaming and visualizing myself being Jerry West or Pistol Pete Maravich. I love that time alone, and I love the preparation that it takes to in sports. And I love the competition. I love the competing, whether it was track or baseball, basketball, or football. I love that competition.

Whitney Johnson: You're currently the CEO of the Utah Jazz. For people who don't know basketball. Well, what, what does that involve?

Danny Ainge: Yeah, I'm not sure many CEOs I know in the NBA. So, it was, it was something that Ryan Smith had come up with. It wasn't a job I was looking to get. You know, I can say that about most of the jobs I've had in my post-playing career, but this one I truly wasn't seeking. Ryan and I are very good friends. He asked me many times to many questions about the NBA as he was looking to purchase an NBA team over the last few years. Him and I became friends over a decade ago, so, I knew him before he was a big shot. He was, you know, just trying to get me to want to get back into it. When I had just left a job, I really loved in Boston for so many years and had so many great people and connections and relationships with but and a great team also. And so, I was coming out here to be next to my grandchildren and my family and to relax and play golf and just unwind a little and not really knowing what the next chapter of life was. And he kept insisting that he needed me. And I said, I know you could use me, but it's, it's not really what I have in mind. So, we spent a lot of time over the next months. Just, no, I don't want to do that. I don't want to do that. That's too much. That's what I just left. I don't want 16 and 18-hour days and that's what that entails. And I'm not doing that. And, you know, my biggest fear is getting sucked back into that. Because it really is tempting.

Whitney Johnson: Because you love it.

Danny Ainge: And I also know what he wants me to be. And so, I'm here to oversee the whole organization. I'm his eyes and ears. He trusts me to, to give him feedback on what's good and what's not good and who's doing a great job, and things that we can do better in the organization. And, you know, that's what I've been doing for 40 years. I've

been in the NBA, and I feel like I have a pretty good eye for people that are doing good. And the good news is, is the Utah Jazz have some really good people working in it. They've done a good job.

Whitney Johnson: So, the way you describe it, part of what I hear is that you're, you're coaching him.

Danny Ainge: In some ways, yeah. That's what it feels like. That's what it feels like. It's been for a while, but it feels like I'm still doing that. I mean, Ryan has so many gifts, so many talents, and he doesn't have to be here every day. And I don't think he wants to be here every day. I think he wants to make a huge impact on the world than just running a basketball team. And plus, it's not his expertise. So, we wanted somebody that he could talk to for 15 minutes every night and get a recap of the day. And does he need to come to the office and show up and fix things, or can he continue to work in his office down in Provo and do what his great strengths are?

Whitney Johnson: What has been one of your most counter-intuitive hires and or trades, and why was it surprising to others but not to you? And what happened?

Danny Ainge: I think that maybe the most I don't know if it was counterintuitive. I served as a bishop in, in 2008 in Boston, Massachusetts. And in that responsibility, I had, you know, had meetings continuously through and with some of the greatest women around. And I often wondered after that time, like, why are there no women in the NBA? And there was one in San Antonio. Gregg Popovich had a woman, Becky Hammon. I have no idea how good she was, but she was there, and I thought that was impressive. But my experience now as being a bishop, and, and just, I mean, first of all, my wife could do a better job than me at my job. So, I think that I'm just a big fan of women and there needs to be a woman's voice in our organization. So, I went to hire two former players that were women, and it took me three years to get one of them. I wasn't just looking to hire any women. Yeah. And so, I hired Allison Feaster, who played 18 years of professional basketball, and she's a Harvard graduate and was an all-Ivy League player for four years at Harvard. And I had known her through working in the NBA office and working in the G League.

Whitney Johnson: What's the G League?

Danny Ainge: The G League is a developmental system program for, so it's a minor league for the NBA. And she was working in the front office of the G League. I did get a lot of negative feedback from that. And, you know, do women have a place, you know, what about locker rooms, you know, all and like these are men. This is a different game than the women's game. But anyway, I went, went ahead and did it. And we also hired a woman named Kara Lawson, who.

Whitney Johnson: Before you go there, what did you hire her to do?

Danny Ainge: So, I hired her to be in our basketball operations. So, I hired Allison Feaster to be in our player development. So, she was going to be on, on-court and off-court development of players. And then I hired Kara Lawson to be an assistant coach. And it turned out to be, you know, the best hires I'd ever made. I mean, both of them were just superstars. And Kara, when I hired her, she said, if I ever get the offer to be the Duke head basketball coach, I have to take it. But right now, the Boston Celtics are a dream come true for me. So, she worked with us for three-quarters of a year and got the head coaching job at Duke. So, it was a segue way to get her. But what I saw in those two women and what I saw in my players was amazing. Like, I knew that a lot of players are raised by single mothers that are in the NBA, but I had no idea what the connection that these two women, they, they had a better connection than any of my men head coaches. But I also appreciated their perspective. Their perspectives were different than my men coaches who had been around my whole life.

Whitney Johnson: How long did it take before the pushback stopped?

Danny Ainge: Once they showed up. I mean, I still had I still had friends around the league that, you know, make making fun of me, you know, not I don't think seriously.

Whitney Johnson: But kind of ribbing you about it.

Danny Ainge: Yeah. Just ribbing me about it. I think that they don't think it's a bad idea as much as they make it seem. But if anybody was there, they would just go like, wow. And all of my people, like every person in the organization, could see it and feel it could feel their impact immediately.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. Just to clarify, you mentioned Bishop. So, that's bishop of just definitionally.

Danny Ainge: Bishop of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Ward, a congregation in Weston, Massachusetts.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So, responsible for a congregation of 250 300 people.

Danny Ainge: Right.

Whitney Johnson: Excellent. All right. So, in our work, we use a model called the S Curve of Learning. And it's a simple visual model to help people manage through change. All of our listeners are very familiar, but one of the major challenges that people have is when they get to the top of that S Curve, they know it's time for them to jump. It's time to do something different. But there's this huge psychological shift that has to take place to go from being a professional basketball player to not being one. How did you manage some of those major identity shifts that needed to take place for you? And what counsel and advice do you give people now as they're leaving the NBA, for example?

Danny Ainge: So, I would start off by saying that I didn't really plan my life. I didn't see myself as being a broadcaster, as being a, a head coach in the NBA, or being a general manager, for that matter, and certainly not a CEO. All of those stories are kind of unique. And I think that I got my, my first job when I got traded from Boston to Sacramento. I was there on my own. My family, I had four kids at home in Wellesley, Massachusetts, going to school, finishing up school. And it's February. And so, I got to wait, we wait till April to reunite. And so, they're in school and I move live in a Residence Inn in Sacramento, California, playing basketball. And I became very close with the 12th man on our team. His name was Michael Jackson, and Michael was a former player out of Georgetown University. And we just hit it off. We became very good friends, and you know, we, we spent a lot of time together in those few months. And then I was traded the next year to the Portland Trailblazers and Michael was out of the NBA and we really didn't keep in contact. So, we fast forward to my playing days ending. And I'm trying to contemplate, am I going to go play in Greece? I got a lot of big money off her to play in Greece. It's kind of intriguing.

Danny Ainge: I have other opportunities in the NBA, and I get a phone call from Michael Jackson out of nowhere. And he is the person that is hiring the talent for TNT, and he offers me a job on the spot. He said we're offering you; I want you to become the number one. I said, what do I need to come and audition? Or he goes, No, it's your job. And I just took it, and I was going to make more money there than I would be playing in the NBA. I was in the NBA. I knew all the actors, the players, the coaches, the plays. I feel like I would have had a huge advantage. So, I didn't really feel like I jumped off an S Curve but I'm continuing. Having all the knowledge that I had in my NBA playing career is going to be is going to launch me into a new career of broadcasting. The next year, I was offered to become the head coach of the Phoenix Suns and I feel like that relationship had grown. Jerry Colangelo was the owner of the Phoenix Suns and he had signed me five years earlier as a free agent, and I didn't have an agent, which is very unusual in the NBA. I did my own negotiating, and we negotiated a contract at midnight on Free Agent Night in about 10 minutes.

Danny Ainge: And I had to have trust because he didn't have the wherewithal to give me the money that I was asking for. I needed to trust him. He needed to trust me that we had a deal and he needed to have time to work out, work the deal out. And we developed a relationship and I played there for three years. And at the, at the end of it, he wanted me to be his head coach. And then I did that for four years. In the fourth year, I had six kids at home, like I said, and it was too much to manage for me to try to be both. And so, I feel like I left the team in a good place. We had a good backup coach; we had a really good team in place. And I went back into broadcasting because of my relationship with, with Michael again. So, I did that for another few years when the Boston Celtics came calling and they had new ownership that was going to buy the Boston Celtics. And they wanted they went to ask Red Auerbach,

the legendary general manager of the Celtics, who should we hire as our general manager? And Red, said Danny Ainge. And so, I had talked with Red for 20 years, so they listened to Red's perspective.

Danny Ainge: They came to me on, and I said, no, I'm not ready to get back into the game. But by this time now, three of my kids were out of the house, so I only have three at home. My three youngest are still there and but I wasn't, wasn't ready for that. And so, they came back a second time and said. You know, we've gone to look at the people that you've recommended, and we want you. And I said. Yeah, let me, let me take this to my wife. And so, we went, and we thought about it. And eventually on the third time, we, we actually accepted the job with them. But I never dreamed of being in these positions. It was just. But I didn't really feel. I felt like each, each jump from broadcasting to coaching while I was in broadcasting. Not only did I have the knowledge that I had learned as a player and, you know, been very close to my coaches, had great coaching throughout my career. But now in broadcasting, I meet with the coaches of all the other teams, get their game plans to prepare for each broadcast, and that taught me a lot and prepared me. And I think that I had a little bit of an edge going into being a head coach without any coaching experience whatsoever.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Danny Ainge: So, even though, you know, I certainly learned a lot, I was much better in my second year, much better in my third year than I was as a rookie coach. I feel like, you know, I was preparing for those without really knowing it.

Whitney Johnson: You know, it's interesting. So, so, I asked you about this identity question, but part of what I hear you saying is that from an S Curve perspective, you're a player, and then you have this opportunity to go into broadcasting and you're able to it's, it's jumping to something new. But there's this vast store of experience that you're building on to do this new thing. And then you move up and then you become a coach, and then you move up again. And so, so, it's not you're stepping back, but every time it slings shooting forward and, and you're building on what you already know.

Danny Ainge: Right? But at the same time, I don't have any idea what I'm getting into. I mean, I'm doing my first broadcast. I don't know what I'm doing. I have no idea. I've never done it before. So, there's a lot to learn. Yeah. And the same thing in coaching, right? Coaching more than anything. I mean, there are so many things that go into coaching. And coaching was the only part of my life where I couldn't, I didn't feel like I could balance my life.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting.

Danny Ainge: I was obsessed.

Whitney Johnson: So, it just consumed you.

Danny Ainge: It consumed my mind. I'd listen to some of my favorite talks and people's in trying to inspire my team. Like I wasn't inspiring my children, inspiring myself and my, my wife. It was like my team was everything. But one day I'm reading in the scriptures, and it says, you can't serve two masters. And that's what I was trying to do. I could not be a good father and a good coach under my circumstances. I couldn't, I didn't feel like I could because there aren't any adjustments, I can make to make it work. And I just didn't feel like I could.

Whitney Johnson: So, that was that the only job that you felt like you couldn't?

Danny Ainge: Yes, I felt like I could, I could balance my life as a player. I could in my professional job in Boston. And yes, I think that every other part of my life I could.

Whitney Johnson: Was it hard for you to make that decision of like, oh, I'm not balancing this? Like, how, how did you figure that out? Was that something that a conclusion you came to? Was the conversation that you had with your wife? Like, how did you figure that out?

Danny Ainge: I think it was just, it was, it was my own decision. And I think my family liked me being a coach. They liked going to the games. They liked my boys liked playing basketball with Jason Kidd and Rex Chapman in the gyms. They liked being ball boys on the bench. Yeah, I mean, there was a lot of perks that they got that they loved. But in hindsight, as I looked at it, I went. You know, like my family needs me at home was just an instinct and a feeling that I had. And as it turned out, my family really didn't need me more as much as I needed them. And I was missing out on all of the important things in life. And so, that was a really good lesson. So, when I got into Boston, you know, like, that was always on my mind. And I didn't want that to happen again. I wanted to be involved in my children's lives a lot more because I felt like I was missing out on everything. When, you know, at the time I made the decision, it felt like my children could use me. My wife needs my help. But they really didn't.

Whitney Johnson: You needed it. You need it.

Danny Ainge: I needed it more. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: I want to circle back to a comment that you made about Red Auerbach. Am I pronouncing that correctly? You said, you had worked with him for 20 years and he said, I want Danny Ainge. What did he say he saw in you?

Danny Ainge: Well, one thing you said I know, because I asked him about this later. He's when I think Wyc Grousbeck and Steve Pagliuca were the two new owners coming in to Boston and they said, well, you know, why is Danny the guy that you want?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Danny Ainge: And Red says, he's the luckiest guy I know. So, I asked him to clarify that at one time. And he really didn't have a lot to say in clarification. I go seriously, Red. I'm just lucky, that's why you're going to hire me?

Whitney Johnson: You're like, what about all that discipline? All those years?

Danny Ainge: Yeah. What about all these other characteristics you could have listed?

Whitney Johnson: Lucky. He's our lucky charm. All right, so you have performed at the highest of levels throughout your entire career. What are two or one or two things that you do when you are off your game, when you've got this negative mindset going, how do you disrupt that and get back to where you need your head to be?

Danny Ainge: Well, there's two there's two things. I mean, I think of that as a player and as an executive. I think that they're similar in that I either go to work in focus and really concentrate on what's the task at hand. And that means as a player, I go to the gym at midnight and there's nobody else in the gym. And I'm visualizing and concentrating and focusing and preparing for all the different scenarios that I might face and just getting gaining confidence through hard work. And the other way is just get away. And so, that would be the second thing I would do would be I need to go play a round of golf or I need to go on vacation with my wife. Or I need to just get away and just get a break and, and then like while I'm at work and I feel like things are getting too much and I'm not on my game, oftentimes I would just leave my office and go for a long walk. And just get away with my own thoughts and listen to a podcast or listen to a good talk from somebody. And but just try to get my mind off of it.

Whitney Johnson: You've talked about visualization a few times. What does that look like for you? How do you visualize visualization?

Danny Ainge: It's a good question because I remember making fun of my college coach when I was at BYU. We used to be we were required to take naps. And so, we would go into the nap room and there was like 14 beds.

Whitney Johnson: Like in kindergarten.

Danny Ainge: Yeah. And except we're like laying in beds and we all have headphones on and we're listening to Psycho Cybernetics.

Whitney Johnson: Maxwell Maltz.

Danny Ainge: Yeah. And it was, you know, I used to tease my coach and I got in trouble often because I couldn't sit still. We had a game in two or 3 hours, and I'd be out on the court jumping on the trampoline for where our mascot Cosmo used to do his dunks that I'd be dunking, and my coach would see me. What are you doing? You're supposed to be sleeping. Anyway, it was. I made fun of him often for that, but I learned something in that. Like when I actually did try it and did try to visualize, I think there was some benefits. And so, I spent most of my most of my career about 15 minutes before every game that I played, I would try to visualize myself with all the preparation I had done on my opponent and, and put myself visually through the game, the situations that I would be in that game. And I think it's beneficial. I've tried to share that with players of this generation. Some have received it really well and really liked it and some haven't been able to do it as well.

Whitney Johnson: In the sport of basketball, who have been some of the great disruptors.

Danny Ainge: I think Red Auerbach was a disruptor, and I think that's why he's legendary. He was like, nobody really liked him. All of his competitors. He played a fast tempo of basketball and was one of the first to really do it. Just get up and down the court as fast as you can. And he preached, run, run, run. And the Celtics obviously had amazing success. I think Phil Jackson was a disruptor. I mean, he won 11 championships and he did it with what's called the triangle offense. And in the triangle offense, it slows the game down a little bit, and everybody touches the ball, and it builds unity among the team and gets everybody involved in the offense. And it was not an offense that Michael Jordan received well, and Michael was not happy about, and neither was Kobe Bryant when he was coached by Phil Jackson. They were not happy with the triangle offense because it limited how much they could do individually as the game slowed down and there was fewer possessions in the course of a game. But he won 11 championships with those great players.

Whitney Johnson: Because it promoted cohesion.

Danny Ainge: Yes. And there's a lot of floor balance and including everybody on the team needed to do their role and their spot and be in the right place. It wasn't a star-driven offense and but that was a little different. And I think he was a disruptor, and he had a little bit of coaching experience in the minor leagues and was surrounded by coaches that knew that offense and, and helped train him in that offense. A coach by the name of Tex Winter. But I think they were disruptors and then I think of players that might have been disruptors there's, there's a lot of players that were just unique and different. And Dennis Rodman was a disruptor in a lot of ways. But I think that sports is fun that way because it's always changing. It's always evolving. Basketball is nowhere near the same today as it was five years ago, let alone ten, 15 years ago. The game is continually evolving and so, it takes disruptors to change. Mike D'Antoni was another coach recently who took a team of smaller players. The team in basketball has always been predicated on size of success if you have big quality players. But D'Antoni took small guys. He took Steve Nash in his thirties, in his mid-thirties, and Steve was the first player in NBA history to have his best years in his thirties of his career. And I think that a lot of it had to do with Mike D'Antoni system and play 7 seconds or faster basketball with smaller, more skilled, more athletic players.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting. You said earlier you want to win, you're highly competitive. And I'm wondering, how have you learned to walk the line between winning a game and helping people win, meaning not treating people as objects?

Danny Ainge: Yeah. I think that that is. Something that you just grow into. I think through maturity as you get older, and you realize that you don't win all the time and you still have to live with the people that you're, you're playing with and playing against. And there will be another day to fight. But I think that the competitive nature is it's, it's hard to get that out. I mean, I think that's why to this day, I'm 63 years old and I still love to play golf because, like, that's competitive. I can go play against really good players and feel like I have a chance. But knowing that I'm not I'm not going to win all the time. I think when you've been at it playing and competing as long as I have, you know that you're going to lose. And, and so, that's I think that that just gives you maturity and understanding and how to deal with it. And it's much, much easier, but it doesn't take away with how much you want to win. Yeah, I've always said

that in sports and professional sports that losing is harder than. You remember the losses much more than you remember the great wins.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting.

Danny Ainge: Those losses, those big losses, those season-ending losses that prevent you from a championship or getting you from an NCAA tournament, final four, like those are the losses that you remember. And those are very painful.

Whitney Johnson: And humbling.

Danny Ainge: Very humbling. Yeah. Sports will humble you for sure.

Whitney Johnson: Who are the stabilizers in your life?

Danny Ainge: Well, I think that I mean, for sure my wife is, is my stabilizer and my children. We had children at a very young age. So, my oldest daughter and my oldest son have been through almost my entire career. My oldest daughter was with us when we were playing pro baseball. And I feel like their experience with our life are just more people that and they feel very comfortable giving me the honest feedback that I mostly need. So, but they're my stabilizers. You know, when I think of stabilizers, I think of like help me balance. And I think that they have been fantastic to have them involved so much in my life and all my children, for that matter. I mean, now even my youngest children have been so involved with my second half of my life and the second half of my career. And, and so yeah, I get plenty of feedback from them.

Whitney Johnson: It's funny that you say that. I find with children that our children, on the one hand, they see our underbelly. I mean, they see us at our absolute weakest. And so, they will, and they will tell us they are the ultimate truth tellers. But there's also no one on the planet that wants us to succeed more than our children do.

Danny Ainge: Right. Yeah. It's fun. I'm in, I'm in the middle of a draft. My grandson is 14 years old, and I get a phone call and right in the middle of the draft and I look at my phone and I pick it up. He's like expecting only NBA calls. And I pick it up. And I said, Dre, what's up? And he's saying, like, my grandchildren call me coach. And they say, Coach, what are you doing? Like, why did you draft that guy? Why didn't you draft, you know, A, B, C and D? And it was like, Dre, I think it's going to work out. I think it's going to be a good draft pick. We'll see. But I got to get back to the draft. Thanks for calling and I'm glad you're like that excited about the draft. But it's so fun. It's so fun having them all so excited about it and so into it and get their honest feedback. And I've always tried to do that at work. I've always tried to work with my employees the same way I work with my children and my grandchildren. Like I want their honest feedback. I don't want them sucking up to their boss and always trying to just move up the ladder by being agreeing with all my opinions. I love those that I that will have a good argument or will try to persuade me in a different path.

Whitney Johnson: Is there something that you want to get better at right now that you're working on?

Danny Ainge: You know, listen, I've been married for 43 years, and I still want to become a better husband. I have the greatest wife in the world. And I want to be better. I want to be a better father and a better grandfather. I want to be better at my job, at mentoring players and be a better influence and people I come in contact with. So yeah, I remember I get a talk I heard from our prophet, President Hinckley, and he was 90 something years old and at the end of a conference, general conference, he said. I want to become a better husband, a better father, a better friend, a better. I'm going. He's the prophet. Like.

Whitney Johnson: He's the best man on earth.

Danny Ainge: Yeah. And he wants to get better at everything that he does. I feel the same way. I just feel like. I have bad days. I wish I were better. I wish I were more consistent. But I just wish I could be better for those people I love.

Whitney Johnson: All right. I wanted to ask you about two or three people that you admire and why. And I think I know one of them. You're going to say President Hinckley. But who are some who are some people that you have just really that you admire?

Danny Ainge: Yeah, of course. President Hinckley, and President Nelson, of course. I admire my 19-year-old granddaughter who's serving in Poland right now on a mission. Serving Ukraine immigrants and spreading the gospel the best you can under crazy circumstances, difficult circumstances for a missionary. I admire people that dedicate their lives to serving others. I admire a woman that I met in Honduras, building homes, and shelters, and she was there as a working in a nursery of lost children, basically of, you know, unclaimed born children. People like Mother Teresa. But they just dedicate their lives to serving other people. I really admire all of them that do that. And I've been surrounded by many in my life, also I also admire Clayton Christiansen.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, let's talk about Clayton.

Danny Ainge: I love Clayton.

Whitney Johnson: What do you admire about Clayton?

Danny Ainge: Well, I mean, so Clayton was very good to me as a young professional in Boston. And. He was just a great influence. His books on missionary work. Later in his life, I had a chance to serve on the high, on the high council in my church, which put me over the responsibility of missionaries in my region. And so, Clayton was kind of the whole area, the whole New England area missionary leader. On top of all of his other responsibilities at Harvard and his businesses. But he, he was just so fun to work with. He was so inspiring. And he was such a great missionary in his life at everything he did. But he was just so kind and so willing to lift you when you were down and trying to always be positive. I loved his positivity and his wife, Christine. They were they were very good mentors to us.

Whitney Johnson: Do you have a favorite memory?

Danny Ainge: We're going to church. One day they're driving us in their small car, packed, packed car with their kids. And, you know, there's it's just chaos, a lot of chaos going on in the car. And, you know, I'm kind of frazzled. And Clayton and Christine goes, Clayton, could you please get my bag out of the trunk? And, and I'm just thinking, like, seriously right now, like, there's traffic and the kids are going crazy. We're going to be home. And Clayton goes, oh, sure, Christine, I would be happy to do that. And pulls over to the side of the road and gets out. And I went, oh, my gosh, that is an amazing human being.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Danny Ainge: So, I have had many Clayton and Christine moments and memories. And, you know, my wife has reminded me a few times.

Whitney Johnson: Honey, will you pull over to the side of the road and get my bag out of the car? Oh, that's a wonderful memory. One of the things that I always ask at the end of an interview is what are some connections or observations, thoughts that you had as we were talking.

Danny Ainge: I think that when you were talking about when you asked me the question of the S Curve and moving throughout the different things in my career, you know, I had a lot of thoughts going on in my head of like what this S Curve is, because I really don't know. I'm very sorry that I don't know what you're S Curve is.

Whitney Johnson: No, you do not need to know.

Danny Ainge: But. And how you know, throughout my life, you brought up the fact that from jumping to career. I was bringing up the fact that jumping from position to position that I actually had. But you had brought to my attention that I probably hadn't, or at least you made me put that thought in my head. I probably I was there was a

lot to learn in each one of those new positions, even though initially I said that, you know, it didn't seem like I was jumping from career to career.

Whitney Johnson: So, you okay, so when I asked you the question of, like, identity shift and psychological change and you're like, no, I just did this. And then when I said, well, you're jumping from one curve to the next, you it sounds like as you were replaying it, you realized, oh, there actually was a lot that I learned.

Danny Ainge: Yeah, they were huge differences. Yes.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting. But now it's been such a long time, from the broadcasting, it's kind of pulled it all together and you see it as one big whole.

Danny Ainge: Yeah. And I mean, at the time I looked at it was like, it's basketball. I know basketball. But at the same time, there was so much to learn and there's so much difference between being a basketball player and a coach. Yeah, a broadcaster and a coach. Coaching is so complex. There's so much going on. You've got all these players, you've got all their agents, all their mothers, all their entourages, all their strength coaches. I mean, coaching is so hard.

Whitney Johnson: Very difficult. Any final thoughts?

Danny Ainge: I think that, you know, most of my life I've spent you know, you use the words of stabilizers and disrupting. I think most of my life I've you know; I use the word balance. You know, I just want maybe a stabilizer as the training wheels that balance you when you need it. But I learned at a very young age in life, my father would always preach to me, balance. And I remember one day my father said to me, he said. You know, Danny, you need balance in your life. You know, sports is, is not all you can do. And there's, there's many other things I don't think he said sports, he said. But there's many other things that you need to, to improve on in your life. And I said, Dad, I am balanced. I play basketball, baseball, football, golf and track. But I understood what he meant. And that's been a lifelong thing for me, is to try to remain the best to obtain that balance. Christ had that balance, and I have tried to maintain that balance in my life. And like the one time that I couldn't was a very challenging time of life and coaching.

Danny Ainge: And to this day I'm still sympathetic with coaches and I always side with coaches, and I think that's why I've had success as an executive, because I understand how hard their job is. I don't want any part of that job, and I just want to give them encouragement and give them support all that I can. And it's the same thing as a player we talked about earlier in the interview when as a young player, how hard that was to not play and to have all these expectations. We have a young player right now, Jared Butler, who was College Player of the Year, national champion, Baylor University. And he's not getting to play very much, and it's been really hard. And so, we've had a lot of great talks, but I can actually feel his pain still to this day because what I've experienced, and I've had many more many other players in my in my career that I've been able to sympathize with in those situations. But yeah, those challenging moments of life have brought great experience. And with that experience, I try to share that experience with others that are going through the same thing.

I'd like to share three game changing takeaways from my conversation with Danny. Number one, the games you have no chance of winning are still worth playing. Danny played basketball against Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and more of the greatest NBA legends of all time. Did he outmaneuver them on the court? Not a chance. But he said those games were some of the most fun he's ever had. Think of how much there is to learn by just being in the presence of greatness. Don't shy away from it, even if you know you don't have a shot.

Number two, diversity pays off in unexpected ways. We've covered this many times on the show, and I loved hearing Danny's stories about it. Despite the NBA being a men's league, he felt there was something missing and actively sought out the perspectives of women coaches. Despite the pushback, even in 2016, Danny says those

were the best hires he's ever made, and notes that the team had deeper connections and better performance with their leadership. The pushback quickly stopped once the new coaches got results.

Number three. Sports like life and business is an evolution. I was fascinated by Danny's observations about how basketball has changed over the years. The game speeds up. It slows down. The triangle offense that Michael Jordan didn't like until it started winning championships. There will always be superstars on any team, but consistent winning requires cohesion, collaboration, and a deference to innovation, or you risk being left behind.

For more on the business of basketball, you may want to listen to Scott O'Neill, former CEO of the Sixers, [Episode 219](#). And thank you to Scott for introducing me to Danny. If you want more on the importance of the feminine perspective in business, listen to CV Harquail, [Episode 130](#). And if you're curious about the evolution of the game of golf, listen to Steve Bullock, [Episode 237](#), who wrote *Out of the Box Golf*. Basically, it's *Moneyball* for golf. Thank you again to Danny Ainge for joining us. Thank you for listening and for sharing. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman, audio engineer and editor Whitney Jobe, and production assistant Stephanie Brummel.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.