

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 341: CHRIS RAINEY

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you grow your people to grow your organization -- because organizations don't disrupt, people do. The building block of that growth? It's you.

Human resources can be a funny term. What kind of resources do we rely on as humans? Food, water, shelter sure – but what about emotional resources? What about the resources to become a good person, not just a healthy person?

In a company, human resources are always comprised of other humans. We rely on them for everything from hiring to firing, remembering birthdays and helping us when we just don't know where our career is going. But how do we know we can rely on them? Who are these folks, that make up the spinal cord of every organization?

Chris Rainey's made it his mission to cast a light on the wonders of this profession. We can forget that HR has a hand in just about everything a company does, and Chris's podcast HR Leaders is out to make sure they get the credit they deserve. His story is just one of how people find the profession, but I thought it was important that you hear it today.

I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: I want to start with a pretty generic question, Chris, and just because I'm curious what you would say, which is when we hear the words human resources, what comes to mind for you?

Chris Rainey: The first thing I think is why did I call my company HR leaders? Perfect. Why did you? I think because the idea of a human resource doesn't spark the best, you know, reaction. Right. You know, it's one of the reasons why people are changing it to chief people officer or the people function. So I think the first thing I feel like is pretty, very outdated. It was it's from a very different time that we lived in as well. And I don't think it also reflects the function very well. The work that I do and the conversations I have every day are so rich and the impact that is having on people's lives and society. I hardly want that to be referred to as a human resource. So I feel like it needs to be there's a stigma

attached as well as, as you all know, right? If you think of anyone listening right now and you think of HR, they don't think of all the things that both me and you both know that they do. That's really changing the future of work.

Whitney Johnson: You know what's interesting, too, Chris, when you say that is even though I think about HR all the time, it had not occurred to me that that shift of chief human resources officer so CRO to chief people officer, what a profound change that was.

Chris Rainey: Yeah, huge. You know, I think they they realize like many functions, they had to go through a rebrand, but not just for a rebrand, but also the role of the HR leaders shifted right when I first started my job at 17 years old and I met my HR team, their role was to hire, to fire, to, you know, make sure they were sort of the policy police. They did payroll and a few other things, right. But that's what the role of the the leader was. Now, we look at, you know, if you just look at what happened during the pandemic, they're looking after the the well-being of their employees, not just their employees, but their employees in their families as well. They're they're they're rethinking and reshaping what work is. You know, work is no longer a place you go to, which is an interesting thing to think about, Right. When we when my daughter, who's five now, when she's older, she's probably going to think of the idea that you had to go to a place to go to work is going to be a foreign concept as well. And you also think about the the the the the experience, the employee experience and the fact that now we're treating employees more like customers and making sure that we can create an employee experience that's unique to them and their challenges and their life.

Chris Rainey: And also that that's going to shift and change at different inflection points throughout their career. Right? You know, what Chris requires now as a as a single single person is very different to when have a kid and have a wife and, you know, have a family. My priorities at work are going to change the different benefits packages. I'm going to want access to change how I'm motivated changes. So the role of HR is completely transformed. It's almost I made I had a podcast just before this and me and the crew were laughing at the fact that next week we have a Global People Analytics summit where we're going to have 4000 heads of People analytics joining us that didn't even exist. Yeah, that wasn't even a role or a function when we started. So the role of, of what it means to be a people leader is is is. Completely changed, you know, to to. And that's where when we first spoke to your work really resonated with me because to be a leader in this day and age, you have to be able to Disrupt yourself. You have to be you have to you have to have a growth mindset as well. If you don't, then you're not going to survive very long in the role of HR.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And so one of the curiosities I have, Chris, is that you're, you're deeply fascinated by and I think this is become your life's work of, of developing people and, and growing people. And I'm curious about do you remember a formative experience where you said when you first started at 17, it was higher fire benefits, etcetera. Was there a moment where you said, you know, this could be done differently or I wish it were done differently, or what if it looked like this?

Chris Rainey: Mm. I think the first time that that really hit me was my own employee experience working at the first employer. And it would make me laugh and cry. Where, where, where would think, how crazy is it that we run one of the biggest summits in the world and we talk about all these things, but we're not living and breathing it in our own business. Mhm.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm. What was the experience that you had. How old were you. What company. I was.

Chris Rainey: 17. Yeah, I was 17 years old. So my, my wanted to kind of start from the beginning if it's all right with you.

Whitney Johnson: Whitney like I was actually about to go there. So let's talk in the beginning, because you have such a great story. Let's do it.

Chris Rainey: Yeah. So? So my experience, I grew up with my mom, raised four kids on her own. We grew up in a very poor part of London, literally had the highest crime rate of the whole of the UK for context. So it was pretty, you know, tough. Yeah, very much became self-sufficient early on, kind of had to raise ourselves in many ways where our mom was out working and, you know, providing for four kids on her own, which is tough. Um, and then that kind of. It kind of bred a level of resilience and, um, growth mindset from a very young age because you had no choice. You know, if I wanted to learn how to cook, I had to teach myself how to cook. If I wanted to do a certain thing, I'd have to teach myself how to do a certain thing. And in school that really changed. And I've told a few people this story, and you're one of them. Um, I had quite a tough experience in school. I got bullied a lot. Um, it had a massive impact on my mental health. Was getting robbed every day, like literally every day at school. And I had this sort of breaking point where it's hard to even say it, to be honest. I had a moment where I sat down and wrote on a bit of paper like reasons I should be alive or reasons I shouldn't be alive. Right. It was that bad. Um, and. I. Obviously I chose the opposite because I. So here now, first and foremost.

Whitney Johnson: I'm so glad that you did.

Chris Rainey: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: And how old were you when this was happening?

Chris Rainey: Oh, like.

Whitney Johnson: 14. 14. 14.

Chris Rainey: And wrote and literally wish kept that. No, it's kind of a bad moment, but wish I had that that note. And at the time, I was, you know, super introverted, very quiet, kind of stayed to myself. And I came up with this plan. So I was like, okay, these are the reasons that I should be alive and came up with this crazy plan where it was like, What could I do to stop being bullied and let me create an action plan? So it was like all of the bullies were part of the basketball team. So if I become a very good basketball player, then they will leave me alone. So that was my very simple plan as a 14-year-old kid. So I begged my mom to buy me a basketball hoop. She couldn't even afford the whole basketball hoop. So mean set. So I got the basketball but not the backboard. So that's that. So I had a brick wall with this metal ring and a basketball. My mom got it. And I spent at that point, to that point, I've never actually played any sports, but I spent the entire summer holidays, 12 weeks, every single day playing basketball over and over and over. Even my co-founder, he's my next-door neighbor, his mom still tells me the story of the summer that she hated me because all she heard every day was buying my old until the sun went down. Whitney was playing every day

because there was a level of just I have to do this because to change my life, even as that kid and then by the end of the summer.

Chris Rainey: I could kind of hit a shot from pretty much anywhere. I had like two two car park driveways and I could shoot it from the road. I didn't know any rules of basketball whatsoever. I had no idea, but I knew I could get this ball in that net, if that makes sense. Yeah. And I think the reason I say that because it kind of talks about the S-curve stage of kind of going into exploring and going towards things that make you uncomfortable and that scare the living daylight out of you. I was literally walking into that basketball changing room into the Dragon's den to walking into the room with those people that rob me every day to beat me up. Even the basketball teacher, I spoke to him years later. Mr. Harloff shout out to you and he's now a good friend of mine because I told him the story and he even he said, What are you doing? Because he knew I was being bullied by them. So he's like, Why are you here for basketball tryouts? What are you trying to what are you trying to do here? And they threw my they threw my bag in the shower. They pushed me around. Exactly how I thought it was going to go. But I was like, Don't worry. When we walk out onto that court, I'm going to be able to hit a shot from anywhere. Um, long story short, I became a member of the team. I was No, no, never.

Whitney Johnson: Don't want to hear the end yet. I want what happened during the trial.

Chris Rainey: Okay, well, during --

Whitney Johnson: Tryout is I am like, Yeah.

Chris Rainey: Oh, you want a -- you want a play? Oh, you want a play by play? All right. Okay. So play by play. He didn't get let on for ages because I think Mr. Ralph was kind of terrified to even let me out there, to be honest. And when I got out there, as soon as I got passed the ball, like I literally just immediately just had to took a shot, didn't even bounce the ball once Whitney because I was just terrified. So and immediately went straight in and everyone just sort of looked at me and they were like, okay, whatever. That must have been a fluke and carry it on and hit a few more shots. And then Christian, the guy won't mention his last name. He was one of the main guys bullying me. He was like, Oh, great shot. Chris That was really good. And I was like, What? Like, here's the guy that's been bullying me and terrorizing my life, and now he's talking to me as if he's my friend, um, as well. So that was a kind of a moment for me. The lesson learned from that, which changed my entire life was there's a process of a time of being really bad at something, but if you put in the reps and you continue to do that over time, it gets easier. And the sort of the, the, the time with where you feel like it's really difficult and challenging. I then changed that to any time I feel like that, I see it as progress. So anytime I get butterflies or feel anxious or feel worried, I smile and go, Ah, progress. I'm going, I'm going progress. Exactly. Whereas for most of my life up until that point, I saw that as a weakness.

I saw that as run away in the opposite direction to that, and that informed my entire life moving forward. So I joined the -- I started playing ice hockey and did the same thing. I started breakdancing. I started all of a sudden my confidence, my energy, my it just completely changed my world. And it's funny because like a few years later, my friend bought me a book and it was called How to Be Good at Everything. And it was like, You're so annoying, you're so good at everything. And I would always say like, No, it's not. It's just that I'm willing to put the reps in and fail literally, quite literally fall on my face, you know, ice skating, skateboarding, break bones to to achieve that. And that's

the difference between me and everyone else that I will keep going because I know that it just takes reps. And so it came from a bad place of where it an unhealthy, terrible moment in my life. And by the way, I was at my mom's house a few weeks ago and that basketball hoop is still there. It's all old and rusty and bent. And I said to my mom, I was like, Can I take that? Because I want to put that in my office and maybe create some artwork. Yes, absolutely. Within and stare at that thing. Because every time I walk to my mom's house, it gives me kind of sends shivers down my spine. I see it and I say that that summer changed everything. Yeah. For me. And then that also flowed into business, um, as well.

Whitney Johnson: So before you go on, you just want to like, okay, that story is so amazing. And you had shared this with me and I was hoping that you would share it today. So thank you so much. And I'm wondering, a couple of questions are coming up for me. Do you remember so you said you wrote on that piece of paper and one of them was, if I'm good at basketball, they will stop bullying me. Right. That was one of the things that you wrote down. And so an observation that I have is and we talked about the cover. You mentioned it a moment ago. And so you have completely flipped or reframed that experience of most people at the launch point of a curve are feeling there's a little bit of thrill, but a lot of terror. And I feel incompetent. I'm falling flat on my face. This is danger and what you have now taught your brain to do because of that very intense experience that you had at the age of 14, which I think was formative, you flipped your brain to say, I feel butterflies. I fell on my face. Good, good. Yeah, because I am moving forward. And so you have trained yourself to relish that and seek that out?

Chris Rainey: Yeah. We have been saying if you are saying the question, he'll tell you the same thing is we say it all the time. Seek discomfort is one of our things that we and anytime things are going really well, we get we get worried. Yeah. We're like, when? When don't when don't feel that way and I'm and everything's great and everything's going smoothly. I'm always like, what's wrong, Jane? What's wrong? It's kind of a weird thing. Yeah. I'm like, What we need when we're too comfortable Now we need to challenge ourselves, push forward. And, um, it's, it's, it's like whenever my friends always say, I'm not good at that, and I'll be like, Oh, okay. How many times have you tried it? Once? Yeah. How can you say you're not good at something? Yeah. When you've only tried it one time, it drives me crazy when I actually hear people say that, um, as well. Whereas it's like for me, it's like we're not good at it yet. Yeah. But more importantly, we, we, we always take the first rep and we, and we, we just keep rapping. Yeah. Until and.

Whitney Johnson: Keep rapping. Yeah. And yeah. Something else. I think there's another aspect of this that was on you but also this lesson that you learned where you went on the court, you hit the shot. This person who had been bullying you all of a sudden is friendly to you. Yeah. What are some. What was the take away that the psychological take away that you took from that? And how has that influenced how you interact with the world?

Chris Rainey: Um. How do I put this into words? I kind of had this moment where after when I reflected on it, where. For the longest time, I'd been seeking people's approval and acceptance. And when I finally got it, it didn't matter. Mm. And kind of realized that my self-worth shouldn't be connected. I say this in business sometimes, but my self-worth isn't connected to my net worth. Yeah, as a joke, Right. Because if you do that, you'll never be happy. So think in a strange way. I thought that moment would be a lot bigger than it would be. That I'd be like this aha moment. Like, everything's fine. And I realize that what I'm what I'm really excited about is the fact that I grew and I challenged myself and I did something I didn't think I could do. And so it wasn't really about them anymore. It was all about them before. As you as you heard, the strategy was to impress them. They'll leave me alone.

Whitney Johnson: And to serve you. To survive it and to survive.

Chris Rainey: Right? Right, exactly. But my takeaway was all of the opposite of that. It was how proud I was of me, of what I had achieved and that I'd put and I'd gone through that and I'd proved to myself that I do matter and that I do have a place in this world. And, and I am worth I am of value. And it's kind of quite sad to say but didn't feel of any value at that point. And then for then it was like, now I want to be the best teammate. I want to I want to help us win and I want to it was, you know, even though there were people that terrorized me and kind of was like, I'm going to let it go and just and not hold on to that. And just like, okay, how can I be the best teammate now? Yeah, and how can I help the team?

Whitney Johnson: It's interesting. Well, the experience that you had, if you think about self-determination theory, where you now felt this sense of competence when you were able to hit the basket, you know, make the shot from wherever you felt a sense of autonomy of I took control of this situation. Yes. And those two things kick in. And now you've got the relatedness because people around you are feeling connected and you're able to contribute in a meaningful way. So what a beautiful turning point. And that you had it when you were 14 years old.

Chris Rainey: Yeah, it was it was tough. It was because up until that point, I'd always been told, like, I never, um. I struggled to learn how to read. I didn't learn to read. And so I was like 12 or 12. And, you know, I was always I remember sitting in a school class with my mum and my teacher there sitting next to me, telling me, talking about me as if I'm not there about Chris's got learning difficulties. Chris is taken longer to do this. And so I convinced myself that I was a terrible at reading that am not smart and I compounded that for so long, which is also what led to my lack of confidence when I went to school. Secondary schools, I always felt that I was less than already. Now I'm being bullied. So it's kind of everything in one go. And guess what? After that experience, I learned how to read really well. Yeah. And I was really good at maths. And because it just unlocked a thing of this is all this is, you know, this is if I, if I think therefore I am right, if I think I'm bad at something, then I'm going to be bad. Shane's really clumsy and he knocks everything over. And I keep saying, stop saying that. You're very clumsy because it's the reason you keep knocking over and breaking everything as well. So the moment I gave myself permission to succeed, I suppose, is a way, a good way of saying it. All of a sudden it unlocked the opportunity I was waiting for so long for people's acceptance and for people's permission that when I finally got it, to your point, I was like, Oh, do you even need that? Yeah, It was up to me to give myself permission to be happy myself, permission to be great at whatever I chose to put my mind to. But forever, it was always about getting someone else's.

Whitney Johnson: Acceptance, that sense of self-efficacy. All right. So let's let's fast forward to you were working in in corporate I was going to say corporate America, but it wasn't corporate America. It was corporate UK. And you decide that you're going to start this business. Tell us about what HR leaders is today, because you've created this and you started with nothing and you've built this juggernaut. What is it? What does it look like?

Chris Rainey: Yeah, I'll be lying if said I woke up one day and said Love HR So I think it's important to let people know the real story. So I would love to hear, Um, I, I did. I got this. I got a job out because out of I needed to help my mum out, you know, she was raising four kids. So the idea of going to university and getting into debt when I already have no money, it just didn't make sense to me. I kind of remember all my friends were going to uni and I was like,

Wait a minute, we all have no money and now we're all going to take out loans and get into debt, right? So I decided against the, the, my mum did, my mum, of course, wanted me to go to university and college and stuff like that, but I just said, no, I'm not doing that. So what happens was firstly my first job was a, as a, as a chef, interestingly enough. So I did that for a couple of years. My brother was a head chef, so I got a job there. That was a really hard, high-pressure environment. Jobs. I'd even say to this day, the most difficult job I've ever had, even running this company is running the kitchen. And then I.

Whitney Johnson: Realized, what kind of food do you like to make?

Chris Rainey: Uh, so at that time it was like posh pub food. Whitney. So nothing special. Okay. Yeah, it's like, yeah, yeah. It wasn't like the most fanciest food, but it was, it was like the oldest pub in London. So we had like every hour you have a tour bus of tourists pull up. And so the, the, the pressure to get the ticket machine would just be pumping out thousands of tickets. And it was the most stressful job I've ever had. And you're juggling, you know, 20 orders at one time. And of those 20 orders, I'm having to think about the timings of each. Yeah. Thing that's being cooked. So your, your, um. Yeah, you're super stressed, but also you have to be able to manage a million things at once, which taught me a lot from that journey. And also you had to learn a lot very quickly as well. But that was the first thing. And then, but then I realized I literally Googled one day. What are the most highest paying jobs because didn't know what to do and it came out. Sales. And I'll say, okay, what sale is about? Let me have a look at this. And it was like the highest paid people in most corporate companies are sales executives. It's like, okay, cool. So I was I was at a bar playing pool with Natasha, who's my now, my now wife. We were 17 years old and there was a table of people playing pool and they had these really fancy suits on Whitney. And I was like, Oh, I bet they make good money.

This is how young and just, like, naïve. Yeah, yeah. So I went over to the table and I said, Hey, if I beat you at a game of pool, you have to give me a job. No. Yeah, it's a true story. You can ask my wife. Yeah. And got nothing to lose, right? Like, literally. And in the UK, like when you want to play next, you put a pound down and when it gets to you, you play the game, right? So I played a game. I lost a game, which is so I lost the game. But then like two weeks later I got an email from a manager, Jemma Denton. I remember her name still, and it was and I'd completely forgot about this. And it was like, Hey, if you want to use to come in for an interview and I'd like for what? Right? And all I had was a website address. That's all they provided, nothing else. So it was a global conference business called the World Trade Group. They did conferences all over the world and different industry verticals. I go to the meeting, I research the company. I learned about, acquisitions they made. I learned about all the different products. They had had no idea what the role was, but I knew everything about the company, so that was quite well prepared going into. I realized I don't have a suit, so it's kind of funny for anyone listening. I had to borrow my brother's suit and he's six foot four.

Whitney Johnson: How tall are you?

Chris Rainey: So I was basically not even I was five foot five, eight maybe at the time. So. So the sleeves hanging over my hand, it was awful. It's like a clown suit. And this is a real story. And I remember walking into the reception in London, it was in London Bridge and the reception is just looked at me and I and like, What are you doing here? Basically as well? And I was like, you know, super young as well. So it Desi So I've worked with her for a long time after that. But anyway, so I go into the interview and this is kind of important. I think it will kind of you'll probably take away some insights from this. The hiring manager and the manager hadn't been informed about how I got the

interview. So the first thing they said to me is, you know, you need a degree. For this job and was like, Well, I don't have a degree. And they're like, You also need two years sales experience. I also don't have that set of like, why are you here? I'm like, You invited me to the interview. Right. And they were like they were so confused because no one had told them about the bar and how context. What didn't realize Whitney They were the founders of the company that played against. So it was the see, the founders, the CEO, the basically the board, the board members. And they were so impressed that the fact that I just walked over and just asked them that. So yeah, that they were like, this is give him a chance. But no one told the hiring team this. So they made me go through this kind of written assessment and I failed that because I had no idea what I was doing.

And then they were like, Hey, you know, this is not the right job for you. You don't have the degree, you don't have the experience. And I was like, okay. Can you explain to me why you need a degree to be great at sales? I wasn't trying to be flash. I just generally didn't understand the link between degree great salesperson, and they looked at each other and it just didn't have an answer. They were like, Uh oh, no, but you just can't remember what they said. But they didn't really give me an answer. But and then they were like, No, but you just this is not right for you. And I was like, okay, one more question. If you mentioned earlier that you provide sales training. They're like, Yeah, we provide. So why do I need two years experience? If you're going to give me all of the tools I need to succeed. Yeah, we do. So why do I need two years sales experience? And they still didn't give me an answer, right? So I was like, okay, so if I don't need a degree and I don't need sales experience, then you can hire me because you've just told me that I don't need either of those to achieve success in this job. Oh, Chris, you're not getting it. You know, like, they just wanted to get me out of the door and said, okay, last thing, I will work for free because it's the summer at the end of the summer. If you don't think I'm going to work out, then you can let me go.

I was there for ten years. Whitney in that company became the global sales director of that business, built multiple teams. And the reason I say that to the point of your is a long story to get to the point. I launched a conference and launched a summit and as punishment as the new kid, I was given the portfolio because no one wanted to work on it. So that's how it all happened. They had all these like oil and gas supply chain manufacturing and like, Oh, give it to the new guy. And for me, the moment within the first few weeks, I realized that the leaders that I was speaking to were the heartbeats of most organizations. And it was a center of everything, because without people there is no organization. It doesn't exist. And also, one of the thing that's unique about is they're interacting with every business function. Yeah. Unlike all the others, right? And they know everything about everything that's going on across all parts of the organization. And it was just fascinating for me to realize that that product doesn't come to life, that business doesn't make any money. This doesn't change unless you have people and it's how you build. You hire, develop, grow people. It's directly has a relation to every single outcome. And it kind of blew my mind that no one was really talking about that. I was like, Wait a minute, why is no one focused on this stuff? Because the work that they're doing here is the business, and the business is the business and the business is. HR yeah. Um. As Yeah, so good.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So a couple of observations and then a question. So when I think about disruption theory, one of the very first accelerants for it is to play where no one else is playing or to take the right kind of risk, take market risk. And that is an exact example of what happened. You didn't take the market risk, but when you were hired, they said, Oh, we'll give him HR. No one wants it, so we'll let him go play where no one else is playing. Yeah, by doing that, you created a market because you had no competition. No one else in the company wanted to do what you were doing.

Chris Rainey: No. And also what did which was I got told off by this, but I thought it was pretty smart at the time. Is anyone who had previously worked on it and gave it up had given up. They had all of the boxes full of the paper leads. So you had thousands of pieces of paper. Each one represented a lead for a person, right? And all of the people that had given up over the years or who worked on it previously had just because back in the day before computers, we had boxes for the paper kind of age and even this is a long while ago as well. So I had this rich. They like, you know, you know, have to go for it manually. But had all these phone numbers, had all these names, had all of this, all of this previous work that had been done and it was discarded, it was literally ready to be thrown away, um, as well. So for me, it was like a treasure trove of opportunity to go through it and really treated that as if I owned it, like I managed that event as if. It was my business. Yeah. You know, so.

Whitney Johnson: So those people that you had the interview with, did you ever circle back and have a conversation with them?

Chris Rainey: 100%. So we. Yeah, we laughed about it, you know. Do not do one thing that still frustrates me to this day. And you, you'll be like, I can't believe that. Chris They still didn't change the policy. No, really? So crazy, right? So like. Um, I became the most successful delegate sales executive in the history of the company. Then manager, then director had multiple portfolios and still didn't. They still didn't change the policy that you need a degree and you need experience. So Shane, who you know, who is my co-founder, he did go to university and when he left, the only way I could hire him is I waited until our HR director was on holiday. Then I hired him in without and was like, You used to get a deal before the HR director gets back, so then they can't let you go. So I was hiring people like behind the scenes to get into the business to avoid this sort of this outdated process.

Whitney Johnson: Did you get your hand slapped when you did that?

Chris Rainey: Of course I did. But I knew I had the leverage that I was bringing in millions of pounds into the business. So I was somewhat untouchable. It sounds a little bit arrogant, but it was just. Yeah, it is. It is what it is. There was a there was a level of I could do I could get away with certain things, if that makes sense because I was bringing in so much revenue. Right, right. Um, and also those people that I hired were performing. Yes. So I had, I had one that was an ex Israeli military that became one of the best salespeople in the whole business. He would never have gotten through that process had Shane, who, you know, is now my co-founder. Yeah, you know, I hired a lot of people that would never like a lot of people like me that just would just wanted a chance. They just they wanted they had a growth mindset. They were willing to learn. They're willing to do the work. They need someone to give them an opportunity.

Whitney Johnson: I was going to ask you that, Chris, is how do you identify someone who you think is going to be a good hire? So you just said, yeah, you know, someone who wants a shot, someone who has a growth mindset, but how are you able I mean, you were willing to work for free for a summer so they were able to test, you know, try before they bought. Yeah, but how do you are there any tells for you that you can say, okay this person is worth betting on?

Chris Rainey: Yeah. In the beginning it was just like things that I could like for example, I hired a lot of athletes because I knew that if someone like or I'll give you an example, if someone if I if I said someone come into an interview and they were in good shape, I'd immediately can say that that person has discipline. And this is a small one,

right? Because I know that person has to go in. They literally have to do the reps. Yeah. To my point earlier. And they have discipline. They have the determination, they have a structure to be able to get to that. So I knew that those principles are transferable into sales. Similarly with sports, I hired a lot of people from sports backgrounds who also bring similar traits. And also you need a competitiveness that in sales also to to achieve. So I would kind of relate two different stories or moments in their lives that I could see that those principles can then transfer into a sales environment. Military had a lot of people from the military because, you know, Omri or Omri said this to me in, you know, in the in the interview was talking about resilience and, you know, how, you know, it's tough, right, to work in a high-pressure sales environment that he was a medic. In the Army. It doesn't get much more stressful and high stakes when you're saving lives. So the idea that he would be stressed out because the client says no on the phone, he actually found it funny, you know, because he had a level of resilience and that he had built in that role. Right. And also the discipline to learn all of the stuff he had to learn. So kind of I'll just see like whether it's sports, military, like moments in their lives that I could relate and say, okay, they've never they've never done any of these things before, but they have the print, the they have the principles and the growth mindset that can be applied into a business environment. Hope that answers your question.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. And have you ever hired any chefs?

Chris Rainey: Uh, no, no, no. I mean, maybe because. No, no chefs were ever looking to get into sales. I don't know why. Don't think that's a I don't see a big career trajectory from chef to sales executive. Yeah. Um, in there as well. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Um, okay, so let's go now to your current act. So you did that for ten years and now you have your, your own business. You've talked about Shane, your co-founder. What is your business look like now?

Chris Rainey: Yeah. Um, one last thing before I get to that. Yeah. So the way it transitioned is for, for many years, Shane and I were pitching in the same business. I was just describing a lot of the ideas that now is leaders. Um, so for years we was knocking on the door. Knocking on the door, you know, listening to customers, listening to executives about what they want, what their key challenges are. And we'd always get the same response. You guys are too young. You don't get it, you know. You know, it was a lot of backing us away and there was a lot of lot, a lot of things that we did internally over the years that kind of got us into trouble in a good way. So Shane and I built our own because we weren't getting results from our marketing team. We built our own marketing strategy and our own commission bought a marketing suite and did marketing for our events without anyone in the business knowing. And we, we built payment gateways because we were tired of not getting paid our commission because the company was doing invoices. So I built a Worldpay payment gateway on our website in conjunction with it without telling any of the executive team so we could get paid on time. And there's a lot of things that we kept doing because they weren't listening to the point, honestly, that when the company got purchased by the private equity business, we kind of had that Starbucks conversation at lunch saying, Hey. I've had enough of running my head against the wall, hitting my head against the wall. If all of these leaders keep saying this, we need to go and just we have to get we owe it to ourselves to give it a shot. And we also did the same scenario, by the way. We wrote on one side of the piece of paper all the reasons we should stay. And on the other side of the of paper, all the reasons we should leave.

Whitney Johnson: And what did it look like? Pros and cons.

Chris Rainey: The -- it was there was a many, many, many more cons I mean, sorry pros of why we should go. You know the ones the ones of why we should stay were more outside of the business. You know, how are we going to pay our mortgage, you know, Tasha and want to have a kid soon, you know? So it wasn't really about the business of why we should stay. It was more personally, what are the stakes if we leave financially? And that that also told us something? Well, hey, not once have we said here that we're staying because of the business. It's because of actually we're only staying for the paycheck. And that was also a sign to say we definitely need to leave. Yeah. If these if they're the only reasons that we're staying is because of the golden handcuffs, we have to go. So we, we, we had three months of runway. We had enough money to survive three months. And we, we, we kind of just put together all of the challenges that we were hearing from the community when it comes to how they upskill and reskill themselves and how they network and benchmark. And then we reached out to a couple of the metros and said, hey, we're thinking about quitting our jobs. This is our idea. What do you think? And that was our business. You know, rather than writing a business plan, we just picked up the phone and spoke to chief people officers that knew us and said, this is what we're doing and we got amazing feedback from them.

And then we handed in my resignation and started HR leaders. So the first thing we did was launch this show, the HR Leaders Podcast. So for me, I realized there wasn't really a true, authentic voice for the community they were operating in, in, in in the dark. No one really knew about all of this amazing work that was taking place in these businesses. No one took no one spoke about the personal toll that being a leader took on them themselves, their family, their marriages, the stress that comes with that. I would hear this in confidence right behind closed doors in my conversations. So I wanted to create a podcast where I could celebrate and shine a spotlight on the amazing work that was being done in these organizations and how that was really shaping the future of work in people's lives, whilst also talking about their personal challenges and what it means to be a leader and how they can overcome that as well. So that started in my bedroom on Skype back then as well. And yeah, so, so 600 episodes later we're still going. But that was sort of the first thing we did and that was the first purchase.

Whitney Johnson: What was what year was this?

Chris Rainey: Whatever seven years ago is from seven, whatever. Okay, seven years? Yeah. Seven years ago, um, we had just bought a house, so we, we had to pay the mortgage. So it was pretty scary. As I said, we had three months' worth of runway.

Whitney Johnson: That's not a lot of runway.

Chris Rainey: No, it's really, really not. But I think the way we looked on the piece of paper, one of the things we wrote down was. Worst case scenario, they'll hire us back. Yeah. We make so much money for the company. That worst case scenario, like what is the worst? Because think what one of the things that Shane wrote down, which was really cool. He said, What's the consequence of not doing it?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Yes. You employed loss aversion theory. Yeah.

Chris Rainey: Like, what's the. And then that was even more scary, right? The more scary, the more scary is. Ten years later, I'm still here. Don't do it. I'm still. I'm still moaning, complaining. I'm still feeling anxious. Because for me, at the time I was struggling with my mental health, was having a lot of anxiety attacks, was feeling overwhelmed because I was just I just hated doing what I was doing or just feeling stuck and wasn't growing. So that was an interesting question for anyone listening. Right now, whenever you're thinking about things like that, ask yourself, what's the cost of not doing it? Yeah, exactly. It's it reframes it very differently in your mind to do that. And then we decided that the model and a business model of how we make money was that rather than doing these large conferences and events is that we would host a small group of 30 chief officers and host it at the HQs of Global Brands. So our first event was with Coca Cola, called up Coca Cola. You know, I knew that, Hey, I've got this crazy idea. Would you be open to having 30 chief HR officers in your office? And, and we'll build a two day program based around all of your investment plans. They were like, Sure. Sounds amazing. And within the first two months, we'd made enough to pay our salaries for the whole year. Yeah. Which was just, yeah, a game changer for us. We were like, we've made, you know, you know, yes, we've not made as much money as we used to make, but it's on our terms, in our way, our vision. And it was that even that first deal meant more than any deal did in my entire career. Yeah, because.

Whitney Johnson: I was going to ask you that some people that were formative leaders for you and I'm wondering, it sounds like a few of those people that were willing to take a bet on you when you were starting this business. Is that accurate?

Chris Rainey: Oh, 100%.

Whitney Johnson: Do you want to give them a shout out?

Chris Rainey: Yeah, shout out. Shout out to Wendy Murphy. She was a manager at LinkedIn at the time. Now. Oh, sorry. Director of HR at LinkedIn at the time I'd known her since she was a manager, so she kind of spoke to me earlier in her career. Later in her career, she, she, she gave us, um, gave us a chance to bet on us. We hosted our second event at LinkedIn, talk about 0 to 100, you know, Coca Cola, LinkedIn, you know, like we were I remember we, I had a panic attack at the at the at the event that before I went on stage to say hello to everyone because it was too overwhelming to know that we had this idea a few months ago. Now we're here at LinkedIn about to do the event and Shane had to kind of take me outside and calm me down. I was like hyperventilating, being like, Oh my God, this is this is I have this. We're actually doing this. Like, this is real. Like we're here. Like there's no going back. So we're not ashamed to say I had a full-blown panic attack, you know, on that day.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, but it went well.

Chris Rainey: It went well. It went amazing. As soon as I started speaking, I forgot about everything.

Whitney Johnson: But yeah. Wendy, anybody else you want to shout out? Yeah.

Chris Rainey: Matt Burns. He was at Walmart at the time. Yeah. Hi. And Kannappan was the center of ING. There's so many. Yeah, so many people that but so many people that we that took a Stephane Charbonnier of L'Oreal. He was episode one of the podcast so that the fact I remember him replying to me saying yes and I was terrified. Yeah. I was

like, what the hell am I going to ask? What am I going to talk about? Like what? What am I? Because remember, I've never I'm a sales person at that time, right? I've never, I've never not an interviewer. I've no idea. And then very quickly I realized the art of interviewing is also the art of selling. It's about asking great open questions. It's about delving deeper and deeper and deeper. And I was like, oh, this is the same thing. And also, I think one reason people love the show is that they could tell I was learning with them. Yeah. And wasn't afraid to say. I have no idea what you just said. What does that mean? Yeah. Like. Yeah. And. And. And be vulnerable. And they were like, oh, okay. No worries. Like and break it down. Right? So.

Whitney Johnson: So that's so good. The art of interviewing is the art of selling. That's fantastic. Um, so, um. I want to ask you a technical question. Then I want to go back to something you said earlier, which is. Sure. Based on the work that you're doing now. So. So what is your company look like today? Are you still doing.

Chris Rainey: Sure. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So what does it look if.

Chris Rainey: Pivoted a lot? We've pivoted a lot, right? So in the beginning it was the podcast, and the podcast was never to make money. Yeah, the podcast radio was how again, how do we shine a spotlight on the profession and celebrate the great work and also share, democratize access to that content? Yeah. So in the past you'd have to pay a Gartner subscription or, you know, pay whatever you need to pay to get access to this. Wanted to really just throw a spanner in the works and say, Hey, you get all this for free. So that was also great. And then so we made money from the events. You know, people paid, you know, 1000 pounds to 1500 pounds a ticket to come to our events because they're very high level, senior level executive meetings. We realized very quickly that that doesn't scale. So we could do 12 events a year, but there's only so many dates in a year that you can do events. So our our revenue model hit a ceiling very quickly. And then we also realized that it wasn't convenient for everyone. So not everyone can jump on a plane or not everyone can come to an event. So we also started a virtual series where we had leaders coming on virtually and talking about great case studies and what they're doing, and we had thousands of leaders joining.

It was just on a Zoom call in the beginning. Yeah, it's crazy, right? That idea. We hit a revenue cap and I came up with that idea the night before. The next day, I sent an email to 12 VP of People Analytics and said, Hey, would you speak on a particular case study or topic once per month on Zoom? They said Yes, I've created a web page. The next day I said, Here's a 12 month program. Every month you're going to learn from one of the best people. Analytics leaders sent out a mailshot and we made over 100 K the next day and people signing up for the series. So idea execute just for a zoom call. Yeah, you know, but they were learning from the best people leaders every month in the world. No community element no nothing just the access to a zoom link. So those are the days where we're pretty scrappy about how do you just make stuff work? And then the pandemic hit. We lost 99% of our revenue, which was pretty scary, as you can imagine. Yeah. When that happened and at that moment I had to sit in front of the team who all thought I was going to have an answer and said, I actually don't know what we're going to do, but together we're going to today we're going to come up with a plan.

So I gave them the choice. I said, Do you want we can have a furlough everyone? Or we can come up with something together and run into the headwind. And it was unanimous that we're not going to wait around and let other people

dictate our future. We're going to take it into our own hands. And that's when we did the unthinkable of investing and building a studio during the pandemic, when everyone's, you know, batten down the hatches, we were like, actually, let's build a live stream studio so we can stream and broadcast to the world when they're at home and invested Every bit of money we had left in this studio I'm sitting in right now and close to ten our revenue during the pandemic. So we did our People analytics summits, we did our leaders summits. These are eight-hour live streams. 60 Souichiro speaking, you spoke on our Future of Work Summit, if you remember as well. And we had thousands of leaders tuning in from all over the world. And then we basically opened up the opportunity for sponsors like Microsoft, Google, Oracle, SAP to sponsor the summits.

And all of a sudden we went from, you know, charging 1,000 pound a ticket to an event to charging 200, 300 for a sponsor per event. So all of a sudden our revenues quadrupled just on just and is virtual now. So we also get to serve a global audience. So that was crazy journey. So we do a combination now of face to face. Now we're back open again. So we've got events at L'Oreal, Lego, Walmart, LinkedIn all over the world. We travel and do those events, but then we have the virtual events that we stream and all of that goes into an app that we have. And we're launching a new version a few weeks which will be using generative AI. So now you have the leaders copilot, you can say, Hey, I want to of all of Whitney's episodes she's ever done, what are the top ten ways to disrupt yourself and it will go through every single one of your podcasts Whitney in real time and in 10s bring you back the answer. And it will also, if you click on one of the answers, it will take you to the moment in Whitney's podcast where she talks about that.

Whitney Johnson: And this is on your app that you're doing this.

Chris Rainey: Yeah, not your podcast. I'm giving an example of how you can do that.

Whitney Johnson: Right? Exactly.

Chris Rainey: Yeah. So, so, yeah. So now even when we're live, so even when we're live streaming, you can say, Hey, I missed the last ten minutes of the live stream. Can you recap what the key takeaways were from those speakers and using will give you that. So the challenge for the modern show is that they need just in time answers. They need answers in the flow of work. They're just about to walk into a meeting with their CEO. They don't have time to listen to Chris's podcast. They need to ask a question in our app and it will scan through the five 5000 hours of content across all of it, and it will immediately give them an answer and it will show and it will take them to the exact second in that podcast workshop summit where that leader says, This is how I did it and this is what that means. So good to be able to do that. So that's kind of the future of HR leaders. We're moving from a media business to a tech business and we're putting the power in the hands of every leader around the world to get the answers to their biggest challenges when they need it. Yeah. Um.

Whitney Johnson: So yeah, yeah. You're able to move through your s-curves really fast and yeah, I mean, you're able to iterate and so people, you know, if you think about like what, what sometimes people will say, well, I want to be in the sweet spot all the time. And it's actually no, the sweet spot is the ability to move through an S-curve quickly, to move through the launch point quickly to be in the sweet spot as long as possible. But as soon as you get to that mastery place to say it's time to do something new and you have perfected iterating and moving through the curve quickly.

Chris Rainey: Yeah, I love that. And my favorite part is like, obviously you get to the Mountaineer stage starting again, but it's like, I like the struggle of starting again. Yeah. For me, it's actually that's the that's the part of the journey I enjoy the most, which people like. That's just weird. Like for me, it's the really hard beginning part where most people will just give up and they don't want to do it. Yeah. Is that when I succeed, I get bored, right? I'm like.

Whitney Johnson: I'm sorry.

Chris Rainey: You did? Yeah. I'm like, Well, I'm not. Yeah. I'm like, well, people were like, Why don't you just stay there? My friends always say like, just stick with what you're really good at. I'm like, Well, that's boring, right? Because. Because I'm not learning anything new.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, let's go to, as we start to wrap up, what is a new S-curve that you're on right now? What's something.

Chris Rainey: New? So the new S-curve is obviously is generative AI okay. Right. So generative launching the app. And that has been, I probably would say, the hardest thing I've ever had to go through. Really desire is so technical. It there's a lot of challenges. There's hiring the right people for it, finding the right investor, the people challenges because I'm having to now restructure the team. Yeah. Oh it's really hard I'm enjoying it but it's and I'm also having to upskill myself along to understand everything in the technology along the way whilst I'm, I'm kind of like learning as you describe it as the, you know build your parachute on the way down. Yeah. Like I'm literally doing that right now where I'm, I'm it's the future of the business and I'm literally learning it as I'm doing it because that's I think that's one of the secrets a lot of people think they less learning out how to do it all and then execute. That doesn't work because as soon as you execute, you have to pivot anyway and you and you learn so much along the way. So for me, as soon as the moment I have an idea, I just start executing.

Whitney Johnson: What was useful for you in this conversation?

Chris Rainey: I think. This is the first time I've had in a long time I've had an opportunity to actually say what all of those things out loud. Mm. Now, I said to you before, don't go on many podcasts. It's not because I'm afraid to go on podcasts. It's because I make the excuse that I'm too busy most of the time. Back to that point earlier. Um. It's not often we take time to reflect on the journey of what it's taken to get to where we are. So think saying I've said things out loud today that I've never said before, and hearing that and actually processing some of those things that we've spoken about today is just giving me a good opportunity to kind of reflect and be grateful for. The things that we've achieved and the journey that I've been on today. So I think that's what's been most useful to me is the opportunity to look and look internally, look, look internally and also verbalize it. I've never had to say a lot of the things that I've said today out loud, if that makes sense. I've said it in my head. It's been hard. You've asked me questions and I'm like, I've never even had to say this before. How do I even say these things? So I think that's been really, really helpful for me. Um, yeah, I'll just say that to be honest.

Whitney Johnson: It's beautiful fun too. It's so fun to hear the journey. Any final thoughts that you'd like to share?

Chris Rainey: Um. I'd -- I think if anyone listening, one thing I would say is, is be kind to yourself. I think we all give ourselves a hard time. Um. So be -- just don't forget to be kind to yourself. Give yourself a break as well. One of the things I've always struggled with, I've put so much pressure on myself to be everything, to do everything to. To always be. So be kind to yourself is the last thing I'd say. And. It's important.

Whitney Johnson: Chris, thank you. Just lovely.

Chris Rainey: I appreciate you and always have. And ever since we first spoke, I've always appreciated what you've done, and it's one of the reasons why I wanted to get all of your work in front of the global community we have. I feel like it impacts everyone and all of the employees that they serve as well. So keep up the amazing work and I'm looking forward to chatting again soon. Saying I've said things out loud today that I've never said before. And hearing that and actually processing some of those things that we've spoken about today is just giving me a good opportunity to kind of reflect.

One summer really did change everything for Chris. I was thinking about that question I asked in the beginning, about how we can be certain our HR folks are people we can genuinely rely on. And then I was thinking about sherpas -- you know, the Himalayan guides that show the path to Everest. What would you ask, if you were trying to vet a sherpa for your climb?

One of the most common things, I imagine, would be -- how many times have you been to the top? We trust guides because they've been where we're trying to go -- AND, crucially, they came back. In that same way, it's easy to trust Chris as an HR person, having heard about the summer where everything changed. It was easy for Chris to trust the athlete or the army medic when he was hiring for his growing company, because he knew where they'd been. Both mentally and physically, they were uniquely strong people just looking for someone else who'd recognize that.

How many times have you gotten knocked down, and picked yourself back up? Picking yourself back up is a skill that can be trained, just like any other skill, with enough reps. You just have to be willing, like Chris is, to get knocked down here and there. The launch point is never without its difficulties.

For more on learning that leading with anxiety is not a contradiction, there's my episode with author of the *Anxious Achiever*, Morra Aarons-Mele. Our talk was in episode 314. On laying the emotional groundwork to better connect with yourself, there's episode 239 with John Tesh. And for another example of a person playing where no one else is, there's Sarah Feingold, episode 220. Thank you again to Chris, and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

Thank you to our producer Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Ange Harris, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson,

and this has been Disrupt Yourself.