

# DISRUPT YOURSELF

# PODCAST

## EPISODE 325: HRH AMBASSADOR REEMA BANDAR

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. And the building block of that growth. It's you. Representation is the basis of our political system, at least here in the United States. We can't get everyone's vote on every issue. Folks are busy. They can't just go to the Capitol and say what they want. And even if they could, that would take way too much time. So, we pick someone we trust. Have you ever represented someone else? It's scary, right? Because when you represent someone, you are their voice. You make decisions on behalf of that person. And those decisions could impact their home, their business, their whole way of life. But in that way, representation can be one of the highest callings a human can achieve. We can make the lives of tens or thousands or even millions of people. We can make them better. We can listen to what they need, fight for it amongst all the other representatives, and then come back with a brighter future.

Our guest today has put the representation of others at the center of her life. Her Royal Highness, Ambassador Reema Bandar is the kingdom of Saudi Arabia's representative to the United States. Her days are full of meetings with the White House, Congress, business leaders and think tanks in every conference room. She's trying to do what's best for the people of Saudi Arabia. But who are those people? Is she trying to get the best deal for the business woman in Riyadh? Is it optimal for the date? Farmers in Al-Hasa far to the east. How do you represent a nation of about 38 million people in her Royal Highness's case? You start small. You represent yourself when a museum won't have you as a curator because frankly, you're a woman. Then you represent other women helping them get into office buildings and soccer stadiums and helping them feel like they truly belong there. And, well, you'll hear how the rest falls into place for the ambassador. I hope you enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Reema, I am just so happy to be with you today. I heard you speak at Masters of Scale last October and was so impressed by how you talked about well, pretty much how you talked about everything, but in particular how you talked about the importance of elevating women. And because of that, I wanted to have you join us on the podcast. And we will absolutely talk about women. But I want to start by learning a little bit more about you. So, will you start by sharing with us a formative story, something from your childhood?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** Okay. Well, first, thank you for having me. It was actually a pleasure to meet you. And we were at the Masters of Scale. It was my first time there. Um, a formative story for me would have been, um, I was 13 years old in Washington, D.C. with my father. He was our ambassador from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States of America. It was 1988, and I will never forget this. I was in my bedroom. I had a small TV and I was actually watching *The Brady Bunch*. I had just come home from school. It was Channel 25 on my cable box. And breaking news came on that, um, the war had started, and it was the Gulf War, which was the world joining to free Kuwait from the invasion of Saddam Hussein. And I ran down the stairs of our home straight into my dad's office, and I said, Dad, war has broken out. And of course, he knew this is his job. This is everything he's been working towards. He's been in and out of the White House, traveling the world, trying to rally the forces around the world to support Kuwait because of this invasion. And he looked at me and said, yes, darling, I'm fortunately, I know. Come and have a seat. And I sat there, and I watched him watch the news of what he already knew was going to happen. At that time, he took my fear away because he was so strong and so calm in the moment. But I was petrified. My little heart was racing as

an adult now in the job and the situation. Being so mirrored to what he must have experienced. Then I will be sitting knowing something's about to happen and I reflect back and say, My God, how naive was I as this young girl in such a pivotal, critical moment of life to not realize the weight of what he must have been going through, watching what he knew was happening, but didn't know when it would start. And I reflect back on that because I live that moment almost every day in my current job, which is the job that he had. And the stakes are as high today as they were then. And I have so much respect now. When I reflect back on the moments where he was engaging with us and he was fun with this and playing with us as kids, knowing he actually had the weight of the world on his shoulder. And so, when I look back, it highlights so many moments where I appreciated and I do now appreciate my father so much more than I think I did when I was younger.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, as you're saying, that it brings tears to my eyes of the gift that he gave to you of not only being able to have the mental and emotional capacity to be able to play with you and to be a father to you, but also in that moment where he was able to hold it and still comfort you and have you still in a moment of terror, to still feel safe.

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** Absolutely. And that's stayed with me, that feeling of safety that my father instills in me whenever I think of him, whether he's there or not, immediately, when I feel I'm in a crisis mode, that's where my mind goes. I literally feel like he's right there. And that was the moment that I go back to.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thank you for sharing that. That's. That's beautiful. Well, and it's just it's so it's so interesting because you started out saying we were watching *The Brady Bunch* and thought, yes, I watched *The Brady Bunch*, too. And then all of a sudden, you're like, "And then war broke out." And just the juxtaposition of the childhood and the war and the power of that is huge. Tell us about what you studied at university, what your plans were when you graduated, but then what did you actually end up doing?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** So, I studied museum studies and the goal for that Islamic art and architecture was my mother has the largest collection of what's called material culture. And material culture is the things and the objects that define the physical space of a society. And so, the clothing, the lived environment and her collection was based on the Middle East and particularly the root of where we're from in the central Arabian Peninsula. And her collection was housed at the Chicago Field Museum. So, I was always inspired by if I go home or when I go home, I really would like to work with this collection to help tell the story of Arabia and Saudi specifically through this material culture, because time is changing so quickly. The people that we were in the 1800s are really not the people who we are today. And I think it's important to always remember where you came from. And so, I graduated. And when we finally moved back to the kingdom and I knocked on the doors of the National Museum to say, Here I am, your experts in museums, and here's this wonderful collection, The answer was, thank you for the collection, but we can't hire you because you're a woman. And that was the first time in my life those words were ever said to me. No, because you're a woman. I've had many no's in my life, but not because I'm a woman. And I was in a profound state of loss because I don't understand what am I going to do with this degree, this magnificent collection. So, my mother decided not to give it to the National Museum and she collaborated with a few other collections and they created something called *The Art of Heritage*, which still survives till today. But I had to really think, What am I doing with my life? And I was asked to join a family business, which my mother's side of the family runs an organization called the King Faisal Foundation in the Middle East. It's very similar to the Nobel, where it awards the sciences and the learnings and the arts. And one of the businesses that supports the King Faisal Foundation was a retail business, and the goal was that all of the financial benefits and proceeds would go straight into finance the foundation's activities. So, I was asked if I would be interested in coming to learn about that business and perhaps apply my skills there. So, I spent a year on the board before being appointed to what is effectively the CEO role? But again, women at that point in I think it was around 2006, couldn't be CEOs of companies. So I was appointed as a board member with the executive responsibility. And that really began the first no. And then the entry into the retail sector began to expose me to the true narrative of a woman in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At that time where we were there, we were present, we were working. But the opportunities and privileges that we had were very, very restricted and limited. And I had to balance in my head how do I work within the norms that existed, but how can we try to open and broaden the opportunities where the law didn't necessarily say no, it was just known that a certain behavior was not accepted, but it wasn't legally a no. And one of those journeys and steps was hiring women into the retail space. The law just said can't work in sales. But that didn't say no makeup artists, no dressing room attendants, no receptionists. So, we hired everywhere that the law didn't say no to, which kind of flagged us to the Ministry of labor of what are you doing? And so, we ended up working with the Ministry of Labor, and we commissioned research on the obstacles for women entering retail. And that led us to understand that obviously transportation no brainer is an issue. Societal norms and perceptions of women working in retail were a problem, and that's simply because the retail sector is an entry level job in most cases, and then you move up very quickly. But if a family had to have their young ladies working in retail, what the signals it sent out to the greater society was this was a husband, a father or a brother who couldn't financially take care of their daughter, sister or mother. So why would we then allow our daughters to marry into this family that couldn't even take care of their own women? So, the perception societally was quite problematic. Training the ladies who entered into the sector said, you can't just throw us in there, you've got to train us. And the training is more than just the cash register. It's the ethos of the whole retail sector that we had to really come in and say, You're a part of a greater something greater than yourselves, greater than your department, greater than the cash register. Um, and then daycare was an obstacle. And when we look at daycare, it's still a problem for women. And we are talking That was 2006. We're 2023. Many women still struggle with the concept of paying for the daycare, the distance of daycare, the societal pressure of not taking care of this child you've brought into the world while you're in the workplace for an entry level job. Was it worth half your salary going to daycare? Is it worth the effort of not spending the time with the kid? It created so many conversations and being a part of those conversations and listening to them allowed me again to

understand this woman who is the foundation of our society, what are her obstacles and journeys? And in that I also began to understand because the women were not opening their own bank accounts at that time. They weren't in charge of their finances. Many times, husbands, fathers or brothers were putting them in debt. They were taking their money. And I, I began to feel the need to help these women understand. And What does financial self-sufficiency and literacy look like? So, I actually left my job as the CEO of the company to start a social enterprise around that very subject. And we are very, very I am very proud that the team that we coalesced helped us work with over two 3000 women and teaching them concepts of self-sufficiency. How to stand on your own two feet. Who are you as a woman, as an individual? How do you grow and scale, whether it's in the workplace or in your home? How do you save your money? How do you develop and thrive as an individual? Because once a woman is in charge of her finances, by the way, that's the first steps of liberty because she begins to think of herself as herself owning something and it gives her a value. And so, the critical thing is your value should not be financial. But when you do have financial literacy, your doors that you open for yourself open so much faster. And so, it was very important for me to make sure that women understood their personal value and the rights that they had over their finances.

**Whitney Johnson:** So how old were you when you had graduated from university and gotten that first? No, of no. You can't work in the museum. How old were you?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** I had graduated from university. I was 23, but I actually was in the US working with my mother's collection at the Field Museum for a couple of years more. We moved back to the Kingdom in 2005 and we had spent the year before. Moving back. Was the shutting down of the collection from the Field Museum, managing to get it back to the kingdom, setting up over there. It took us about two years and when I knocked on the museum's door, it was 2005 and I'd had the privilege to work a little bit here at the Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. I had the privilege to work a little bit at the Institute of the Arab World in Paris and then the collaboration with the Field Museum.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's interesting to me as I hear you talk, the collection that your mother developed about the material world and the environment in which people find themselves and not find themselves, but the world in which we inhabit the physical world. Yes. And it's interesting to me to reflect on how when you got the know to focus on the physical world, you went to the interior world of the woman and your life's work. At least one of the pieces of your life's work has become to help. Document and create a world for women.

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** And honestly, I will tell you, sometimes you have to accept the opportunity that the no gives you may have been better for you than the one you wished for when you If you had a yes, I would not be where I am today. In the job that I'm in today, being exposed to and talking to people around the world about my women from my country. Actually, had I stayed on that path of museum studies, I am a nerd at heart. I have an archivist mindset. I would have really gone so insular into the collection versus telling the story. And what's profoundly amusing when I sit back and reflect is I left here wanting to tell the story of my culture, and I've come back in an official capacity to tell the story of my culture. It's just in a different mechanism and a different way. And rather than objects, I'm representing people. And the beauty of representing people is they can speak for themselves. The objects need people to speak for them. The objects need somebody to tell heritage and story, whereas a human being carries their own heritage and their own story. And I actually think the human culture is actually so much richer than just a material culture because it's alive. And I love what I do. I love it.

**Whitney Johnson:** You're also a fierce advocate for girls' physical education and a board member of the Saudi Arabia Olympic Committee. Will you tell us more about that?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** Yes. So, again, the accidental journey. In 2015, I had worked with the Breast Cancer Association to try to think of a way of how could we get as many women in our country saying the words breast cancer, discussing breast cancer and learning about it. The Breast Cancer Association was founded by a phenomenal woman called Dr. Saad bin Amr, whose mother actually passed away from breast cancer. And she became an oncologist who founded the first breast tissue bank in a hospital in the Middle East. And she reached out to my mother when we moved back and said, I'd like you to help me create this entity. And so, the two of them set to work and they had a phenomenal group of 11 women who were their first advocates. And they asked me to join, to be honest. And my initial answer was no, because I was very focused on what I was doing. And I said, you know what? We're now back in the kingdom Fresh start. Let me have my own independent identity versus following my mother's footsteps, which when we were in the States, I was constantly following my mother's footsteps and I'm proud of that. It was a joy for me because I learned so much. But I thought, let me be independent. And two days after my mother and Dr. Saad asked me to join them and I had said no. I found out that one of my dearest friends was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I thought for a moment and I said, Dear God, you didn't need to give me that to encourage me to join this journey. But you clearly have. So, yes, I'm in. And so, I called them back and I said, count me in. But obviously not a doctor, not a specialist. I don't know how I can help you but let me try. And the ask that they had of me was to create stories and to create awareness. And so, in that journey of awareness was a campaign that we designed called ten KSA. And our question was, how could we include 10,000 women in the conversation around breast cancer and convene them immediately my mind jumped to a Guinness World record, began scanning the book, and we found that Guinness hosts events called Human Awareness Ribbons, which is the largest number of people that can stand in a ribbon. So, we said great pink breast cancer, 10,000 women, let's do it. The challenge with that became where are we going to host this? We contacted the Ministry of Health. They said, "Absolutely, we're going to support you." They gave us mobile mammogram machines. They gave us all of the learning that we needed to be

on site. We contacted the Ministry of Social Welfare, and we said if women are diagnosed or they feel something at our event, somebody's got to take care of them. We're not doctors. So, they came and brought along all of the NGOs that could support and help women should they be diagnosed or discover something. So, we can do this full circle. And the goal was these 10,000 women are immediately exposed to the ecosystem of breast cancer and support and can go out and be these advocates. We actually got over 13,000 women in attendance. And the thing that was important for me on that day is that the same day that women were first allowed to vote in the kingdom. So, we worked also with women's groups to encourage women to call an Uber because women couldn't drive at that point in 2015, take the Uber, go and vote, come to our event, and we hosted our event, by the way, December 12th. It was freezing cold, but we hosted it at the closing of the last polling station to make sure everybody could have voted and come to us. We know for a fact that over 4000 of our attendees who came in an Uber voted. So, we're very, very proud of that. And when I initially conceived of this, I went to the Ministry of Sports and asked, could we use one of your stadiums? Because it was a closed space. My thought was the women could take off their abayas, put on their pink scarves. And let's take this picture and let's do this. The Ministry of Sports initially said yes, and then we were informed later by another government entity that actually it's illegal for women to go into sports stadiums. But then my question was, why not? And when I spoke with the minister of sports, he's like, Reema, please, this isn't the time to have the argument, can we help you find another location? So, we went to a women's university and we hosted our event there. We broke a Guinness record. I think we still hold the record, if I'm not mistaken. If we don't, it means I'll have to do this again because I'm madly. But that was December 12th of 2015. January 7th, I received a call from the same minister of sports. He said, could you come and see me? So, I hopped in my car and I drove over to his office and he said, Rima, the government is doing a program called the National Transformation Programs. We as an entity have been tasked with female inclusion of sports, and we're looking to design the team that could lead this. And I thought he was calling me to ask me, can I help him design the team? And I said, okay, let's get our thinking hats on. And he said, no, I want you to do it. And at that moment, it is perhaps the only time I've ever cried in public. And I don't think I was crying, but I definitely got emotional, and I had a tear come down my face because in one moment I knew I was going to do this because he was giving me access to a nation of women. But I also knew it meant everything that I had personally worked towards. I'd have to shut down because I had come from a family who was always in government. And I know you cannot have private endeavors if you're joining government. And in the span of three seconds, I was arguing, should I, shouldn't I? And I knew the answer was yes. And so, I accepted his offer. And the very awkward thing is his wife called me when I left his office saying, did you just cry my husband's office? I said, I think I did. Please let it go. But it wasn't tears of sadness. I think it was a physical representation of today. Life changes. And the ask was originally simply how do we create a pipeline for women in physical activity? But as we studied what that meant, it wasn't just about getting girls to go to the Olympics. Yet to create the training programs, you had to create the onboarding programs, you had to create the feeder programs. And we began to discover things There's no in girls' schools. Women couldn't run, jog, walk, ride a bicycle in public spaces. Women couldn't go to sports stadiums. Women couldn't organize. Teams wouldn't. Women couldn't be in teams. Women couldn't join national teams. And every angle and corner we looked at, there was no. And so, our actual task was drafting the regulations that are inclusive of women in sports. So, we talked about not just And girls school legalizing of women's gyms, legalizing all of the jobs in the ecosystem of sports, from private sector to public sector, ecosystem education, learning, delivery of sports, retail, of sports, and doing this full mapping of the individual and then the professional and then the competitive athlete and building out around them. And then also talking about a woman can be photographed practicing sports. A woman can be broadcast practicing her sport. A woman can be a broadcaster. A woman has the right to enter everywhere. And remember every benchmark of when the Ministry of Education finally approved the proposal that the Ministry of Sports gave on and girls schools and how to include women. I remember the day that our minister declared As of Date X, women will be entering the stadiums. And I remember the day we entered the stadiums and I have these massive panels where we ask the women who entered the first football matches or soccer matches to sign this big billboard. And in Arabic it said, State your presence. So, I gave them all these pens and I'm like, please sign. And when I left the Ministry of Sports, I took them all with me because for my memory I needed and I do need to keep looking at those over three 4000 signatures of women who said, I'm here, I'm here, I'm watching, I'm participating, and I have a right to be here. And it was a profoundly magical moment. And I view our role as people who have the ability to open doors. It's not just about opening the door. It's widening it and stepping out of the way. It is not our job to keep leading the charge. We should be leading the charge in the way we know. Again, widen the door, step away and say, I think you might know better. Please go ahead. And so, the women today that are working in the sports ecosystem are the true athletes, are the true passionates are the true torch bearers. I'm an administrator. I did what I knew how to do to the extent I could do it and the boundaries that existed at that time. And I'm an ecosystem designer and we did it, but it's on the user to use it. And if you could just see what our women are doing now in the country, it makes me emotional, it makes me happy, it makes me proud, and it makes me proud to have been one of the storytellers of it and one of the architects within the ecosystem of all of my colleagues that allowed this to come through.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Reema, a few follow-on questions. Is there, as you were thinking about completely changing the mental maps that people had around women in sports, was there one change or one regulation that from an ecosystem perspective, was a keystone change or a keystone regulation? Does something come to mind?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** Yes. Honestly, I'd like to say it was the licensing of and girls schools, but that takes such a long time because it is training and capacity building of the teachers. It really was in order to get the kind of change impact, the shock effect of change, you need a visual image. For me it was two images. It's about 40 women standing with the vests that have the reflective it's like the security vests. Who are the women that were standing scanning people in men and women and children into the stadiums? I have a picture of the first female employees all standing there ready to receive everyone. And the second was this cluster of women who all decided to sit together to prove we are there en masse, rather than sitting interspersed amongst the

audience. This mass of women, 3000 of them sitting and cheering for the national team. That blew my mind. And I was sitting in there between them going, I can't believe we did it. I can't believe this has happened. And look at us. Nothing wrong happened. The world didn't come to an end. Everybody is safe. Everybody is secure. The game went on. But every single one of those women in her head was thinking I could be now, not just sitting in this chair. I could be playing that game. I could be refereeing this game. I belong here and I'm welcome here. And that sense of feeling that you belong somewhere and that it's your rightful place is a feeling. If you've never felt it. I hope you feel it. If you have felt it, you know what I'm talking about. Doesn't matter where. But that moment where you feel I belong, I am wanted, is magical. And I felt that with those women, and it was very exciting. My whole team was there. We were all seated, and I remember as the national anthem was playing, we're all holding hands and it's an emotional moment going, we did it. Yeah, we did it, you know? And the reality is we were enabled by a government that saw this is the time we have a population in that 70% of them are younger than 35. They are globally exposed. And why were they not able to have in their own country what everybody else experienced as normal? What they aspire to was just healthy engagement, opportunity and choice and to have been asked to come in to deliver that was a real privilege. And I know until today, my whole team, whenever we see each other, we pinch ourselves because we're the old generation. I know it was 2016 and 17. But we will be and should be forgotten because we were simply architects. The builders are building today.

**Whitney Johnson:** You said something really interesting, which is you want every person to have that feeling of I belong here. And if they haven't felt it, you want them to feel it. Do you remember a moment when you first felt that way?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** Yes. Growing up here in the States, I was always in by the way, I arrived. I was seven years old with my father. And we went into schools here and all of my friends were very American. Now, looking back, I think I was the odd one out back then in the 80s, but certainly not anymore. When I was around 14 years old. My father, after many years of us being here, began to click to the fact that we're not going home any time soon. So, it might be time for the kids to actually go into a more formal Middle Eastern type education. And so, I moved from the school that I was in, which was in Maryland, to the embassy school. And it was the first time I walked in and was surrounded by people who looked like me, had the same ethnic background as myself, had the same cultural background, where I wasn't constantly explaining, well, my mom's rules are this, and my dad said that. And really, in my country, we don't really do that. We don't eat this. The need to constantly explain myself or justify by the way, when you're a kid is very exhausting, and you constantly feel like another. And I walked into this room, and I said, My God, I think I belong here. I think this might be my tribe, you know? And the young ladies that I met there were also here because their families were diplomats. They were from Saudi, from Kuwait, from the Emirates, from Oman, from Pakistan, from India. They were from all over what I would call either an Arab or an Islamic diaspora from Lebanon, from Syria, from Egypt. And we had a cultural baseline. And the majority of those young ladies I'm still in touch with today. We've worked together. We're friends together. When I came back here, we connected again. Having that balance of having grown up in a very American context to tiptoeing into a dual cultural context, which was what that afforded me by going into the Embassy Academy and then going home to a Saudi narrative I feel allows me to do my job better here because I feel like I'm hearing everybody's voice versus just an American voice or a Saudi voice. And we were raised as expats here. We weren't we didn't go to prom. You know, we didn't go on dates. We didn't do the typical things that young American teenagers did. We lived a very Saudi lifestyle but lived the best of the 80s of America. The pop culture, the food, the music, every everything. The beauty of the 80s and the 90s I lived in America. So, my cultural references are actually all American. And I do tell people many times, don't let my tan fool you. Sometimes I think I'm a blond from Virginia. You know, it's just I grew up here.

**Whitney Johnson:** Did start this conversation with The Brady Bunch after all.

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** There you go. There you go. Jenna Marshall.

**Whitney Johnson:** We were talking about girls and sports. I know you said, you know, it's not a big thing for you, but do you have a favorite sport that you like to do? And specifically, what do you do to be physically active?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** We grew up skiing, so I do ski well. I don't necessarily enjoy it, but I do it because my children love it. I, I have really embraced my Arab roots. If God wanted us on the mountain and snow, he may have placed us there, but he didn't. So, my affinity is much more on the beach and water sports, and that's where I draw my most healing moments, I would say. Um, but to be physically active is something that I have learned in the job that I'm in. And as I get older, I'm 47. It's so critical for a woman's health. And when we had launched the Women's Self-sufficiency Program, we really spoke a lot to women about their health and being because if you are not doing preventative care as you enter into retirement, you really will have the kind of physical health issues that the cost of them is so exorbitant in retirement that women end up in cycles of poverty. So, we're not asking you to maintain your weight and exercise for the vanity of it. We're asking you to do that to avoid osteoporosis, back problems, knee problems, surgeries, hip replacements. These are all costs that could be avoided if when you're younger, you're fit and you're exercising and your bone density is good and your muscle strength is good, it's not about being a size two. It's about you for yourself being the healthiest version of you, for you. Because if you are on any airplane, they tell you, please take the oxygen, apply it to yourself before giving it to others. We seem to do that on an airplane, but not in our 24 hours. So, when we're asking women to focus on their health, it'll be wonderful. If you're a size four and that's what you want to do. I don't advocate for it. I advocate for a healthy woman's lifestyle, sleep well, eat well with the right nutrients, the right amount of movement to help you de-stress, to carry Yourself for your sake and for the sake of others through your life without the physical challenges. And so, while I'm not profoundly physical active, I found this magical machine that's a. Grower called

Hydro that in 15 minutes a day I'm done, and I sleep better. I feel better. My back is straighter, my core is held. But I'm not a size two. I'm not, I'm not I don't aspire to it. I don't ever want to be. I don't think it looks good. And I really if I could call out to women and say the hollow cheeked look and the emaciated look, the older you get makes you look frail and weak, own your strength, own your shape, own your health. Just be healthy for you and the vessel and shape you have. Do not aspire to be this ideal. That's really, it's not true. It's not healthy and actually leads you to more health issues like osteoporosis and, you know, muscle density issues, teeth, right. Weight for your body, your height, your lifestyle, not for an image in a magazine that's unattainable. It's not good for any of us.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, building on that, what does your morning routine look like and how do you prepare for each day?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** So, I, um, I sleep very well. I'm very fortunate to be able to manage my sleep, to have eight hours. I wake up, I have a cup of mint tea, which is just literally boiling water with tea leaves, and I'm typically up by eight and I do about two hours of work at home catching up on emails and messages. And I'm in my office by 10 a.m. in office. I typically will do in office meetings. I schedule my work really involves three pillars the State Department, who are my colleagues and contemporaries. As a foreign ministry appointee, I work a lot with the White House and the National Security Office there and also on Capitol Hill with the senators and the congressmen. So, this morning, for example, I was on Capitol Hill meeting with a couple of senators and their teams, explaining the political changes that have happened in the kingdom over the past 2 or 3 weeks and what's going on right now. Obviously, there's the crisis in Sudan, but there have been some major political steps that kingdom has taken that it's my job to make sure that all of our friends on Capitol Hill are aware of why are we doing this and what's our intention and where would we like to go. I followed that with a quick trip to the National Security Office in the White House, and then I follow up with, if not personal meetings at State. Today, it was just a number of calls and then speaking with you.

**Whitney Johnson:** That's a busy day. It is. And it's only and it's only 3:00.

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** And when I'm not doing that, I'll fill my days with meetings with business relationships between the kingdom and the US business sector. I also meet with universities. I meet with different chambers of commerce, world affairs councils, affinity groups. Um, one of the roles that I have been really actively playing in is interfaith conversations within the United States to help explain to them what does a modern, moderate view of Islam look like and what the kingdom's view of how we can comport ourselves and engage and collaborate because faith is meant to draw us all together? Unfortunately, many people use it to draw us apart. And so, I have met with many Christian groups across the Christian spectrum. I've met with many Jewish groups across the Jewish spectrum. I've met with many Muslim groups across the spectrum here to just try to have that conversation, because the kingdom is the custodian of the two holy mosques, which is Mecca and Medina. And so, um, try to just demystify a lot of what's going on.

**Whitney Johnson:** That's wonderful. Thank you for giving a bit more detail around your day. It's very interesting. I think we the idea of a day in a life we don't ever really know what people do in any given day. And so, it's fun to hear people document it. So, thank you for that. Rima, was there a moment when you realized some of what would be required of you in your life where you said, oh, I'm not going to have a life like Marcia in *The Brady Bunch*? Did you – do you remember when that occurred to you?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** There were three moments. The first was when I got divorced. Um, and that was in 2011. I knew very consciously by making that decision, the social structure of my life would now be very different because I was very, very close to my ex-husband's family and the social construct of their life. And having not grown up in the kingdom, they were my social lifeline. They were my connection to events, activities and people who I just wouldn't have known because I returned to the kingdom. I was 30 years old, and I adored his family. Um, I still do. And I knew by breaking that relationship, by default, everything changes. But at that moment, I had to recognize that we were both lovely people. But didn't belong together. And I don't believe in self-torture or torturing someone else. He, I felt, had just as much a right to go find someone that would make him happier than me as I had to find someone that would make me happier. And so that was the first moment where I said, oh my dear, my life is over. And then I said, Is it over or is this an opportunity to create a new one? And that was an interesting conversation that I was having with myself. I was a mother of two at the time and in a very male centric environment, so many things changed. It wasn't just my social engagement with his family, but the decisions I could make for my children, the ability to be mobile, the permissions I had to ask ended up no longer being my husband. I started to have to ask my father, even though I was a mother of two, CEO of a company, asking my father if I could travel for permission to come to go and do things. It was very humbling. But again, I had to live through it to understand that's a true struggle for all women in the country. I'm not unique in this, but when you feel it yourself, you become more passionate for others. And again, knowing I had a voice made me feel that obligation. So that was one moment. The second was sitting in Abdullah Dad's office, who was the chairman of the Sports Authority at the time. When he asked me to leave everything I'd worked for to do something that was actually good for a nation, that was dizzying for me. And I knew I was moving from being a private citizen and private person to now being a part of a very public entity. I just didn't realize how much of myself I would have to give up. But it was a lot, and it was absolutely worth it. The next step of massive break of me to what I'm doing was when the Crown Prince asked me to represent the nation and come to the United States of America as our ambassador because that meant 100%. I am no longer my own being. My opinion is the opinion of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I represent that the words that come out of my mouth are the words of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. My actions are representative of His Majesty and the Crown Prince. And so, moving out of private sector mindset

into a government where actually when I was at the Ministry of Sports, I wasn't leading, I was a cog in a machine with a very specific task. And we delivered and we were so proud of ourselves. But at the end of the day, the minister was presenting our work because we are the ministry, and it was wonderful. You get to hide behind that. But in this job, it's me. I you know, you're the tip of the spear in Washington for everything that it represents. And. That was truly a very empowering moment on one end and frightening on the other, because I am no longer myself and it is a pride and a pleasure. Profoundly humbling, very frightening. But it has truly been the most inspiring job of my life. Really, truly has been. I speak on behalf of millions. I represent millions. It's almost like that Whitney Houston song, I'm Every Woman, but I'm not every woman anymore. I represent the young boy in the kingdom. I represent the minister. I represent the employee. I represent the schoolchildren. It's a nation. And you have to be a little bit more thoughtful and mindful when you do that than when you're just yourself. It's beautiful.

**Whitney Johnson:** Um, all right. So, two final questions are in my coaching work with CEOs, and in these interviews, I asked the question, what was useful to you? What's something you would like to take away from this conversation?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** What's useful for me from this conversation is to see that even though the experience of a woman from the Middle East is so radically different than the experience of a woman in the United States of America, that you as a woman, you're not judging me. You're not judging my experience. You're not minimizing either my struggle. But equally, you're not over glorifying my experience. You're just recognizing it for what it was because my struggle might not actually be relevant to you. But it was mine. And you. You heard it and you accepted it. And you allowed me to express it without judgment of what that means. Actually, about my society or my culture. And your lack of judgment is something that I. I appreciate it just was the circumstance we lived in, and it's the circumstance we worked to change.

**Whitney Johnson:** Any final thoughts?

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** I'm humbled that you gave me an opportunity to speak, and I hope that your listeners understand I am not an anomaly. There are so many women either equally or more qualified than myself, and I don't say that out of extreme humility. It's just a sheer fact. There are profoundly talented, outstanding women. I just happen to have been asked to represent them here. And I hope and I encourage. People to look for them, to find them and engage with them and recognize the Saudi woman's journey is not singular. It's not unified. Some of us have way more advantages than others. Some of us had a much more difficult journey and paths that were painful, and we have to recognize and honor their painful path as much as we recognize and honor and celebrate those of us that were able to thrive and shine at the same time. Because all of our journeys are valid and all of our journeys are true, whether they were painful or whether they were pleasurable, they just it's the chapter of the world and life that we were in, and we have a responsibility to keep doing better and to keep making sure that as we design the rights and privileges that we aspire to today, that we design them open ended because the next generation will expect more than we than we did, because they know better. And so that's something that's true for a Saudi woman and for a woman anywhere that is in an opportunity to build and design regulation open ended because the future has different expectations, leave it for them.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thank you so much.

**HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar:** Not at all. Thank you. I really, really appreciate this.

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Turns out being a good storyteller is a huge part of being a successful representative. Take what she said about the soccer ecosystem, for example. Her Royal Highness understood that it takes a good story to get women playing professional soccer in Saudi Arabia. It's the story of the youth leagues that got a young girl interested in kicking a ball. It's the physical education classes in school so she can run and jump. The opportunity to actually go watch a game in person. Once she makes it big, it's the story of getting television networks to broadcast women. It's a national team that is funded and supported by the Saudi government. What isn't a good story is a three month, quote unquote initiative that goes nowhere and wastes money that isn't a story. That's a couple of loose pages. The ambassador writes stories, and that gets to one of my other takeaways for today. Her archivist mindset. Like she said, objects can't speak for themselves. They need someone else to do the research and write the plaque to do the work of understanding what the object wants to tell us. Likewise, as a representative, you don't impose your own meaning and narrative onto people. You listen and you listen some more. You archive what they need and then you figure out how to get that for them. I see how that first experience with giving objects their voice set the tone for what was to come. And I just want to highlight this quote of hers.

Architects should be forgotten. In her view, as a representative, the praise doesn't go to the person who sets up the youth leagues and gets the sponsorship funding. It should go to the women who take advantage of that opportunity. The architect should fade into the background until it seems like we always had women playing soccer. We always did. Right. To be a representative is to be an architect, a listener and a storyteller to do those things both visibly and invisibly. After hearing from Princess Reema, I'm wondering how can we be better representatives moving forward for those people who have entrusted us to be their voice? For more on incorporating feminine thinking into the workplace and playing to your unique strengths, I'd recommend you check out my talk with Harquail **Episode 130**

On the topic of actually doing the work. When it comes to making your workplace a more inclusive space, there's **Stacy Gordon 319** And lastly on inheriting a family responsibility and growing into that role, there's my recent talk with Robert Payson, CEO of Radio Flier. That's **episode 320**. Thank you again to Her Royal Highness, Ambassador Reema Bandar. 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 Turk, production Assistant Ange Harris and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson

and this has been Disrupt Yourself.