

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPIISODE 379: APOLO OHNO (ENCORE)

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you build teams of high performing people -- because organizations don't disrupt, people do. In just about a month, on the 26th of July 10 thousand athletes from all over the world will gather in Paris for the opening ceremony of the 2024 Summer Olympics. It's exciting! The flame bearer, the lighting of the cup, the parade of nations, all that French national pride and international hopes for gold.

Being an Olympian has a way of consuming a person's image - no small doubt, when you spend years training in one specific sport. Olympians dedicate their body and their mind to the perfect backstroke, or the perfect arrow release, or this year - even the perfect breakdancing routine.

So, when an Olympic athlete hangs up the towel... who are they? When you call it a day on your S Curve, when you recognize you're well past mastery... how do you leave behind the biggest S Curve of your life? Although he's better known for the Winter Olympics, Apolo Ohno has some ideas. The most decorated American in the Olympics' chillier half, Apolo is known the world over for his gold-medal talent at speed skating.

I wanted to bring back my conversation with Apolo, in light of the Olympic Games on our doorstep, but also as a reminder this summer that although we should honor our past, we are never tied to it when it comes to trailblazing our future. What did retirement look like - what did slowing down look like - for the man who built his career around being the fastest athlete on the ice?

I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: Apolo, you'll have to tell us, are you still the fastest man on ice?

Apolo Ohno: I don't know if I'm the fastest man on ice, but I had an awesome career. Very, very grateful and really grateful to spend time with everybody here today.

Whitney Johnson: Awesome. Ok, well, I'm going to give you a more appropriate introduction. You need to hear all his bona fides. He is the most decorated winter Olympian out of the United States. He is a New York Times best-selling author. He won Dancing with the Stars. He's an entrepreneur, an investor, an inspiring keynote speaker, and he is going to talk to us today about his book *Hard Pivot*, which comes out on February 22, my half birthday, which makes me love it even more. And he is going to apply lessons learned from skating to life. So, Apollo, where are you dialing in from and what are you hoping to get out of today?

Apolo Ohno: I'm dialing in from Florida and my intention for today is hopefully kind of reignite or continue on that momentous path that everyone has chosen to be on in terms of transition, reinvention, and adaptation. As we know, these past two years have been really uncertain and filled with a lot of, kind of, questions. And so the idea behind *Hard Pivot* is to help people just find alignment with their true north and stay close to the path and to remain focused on what we can achieve.

Whitney Johnson: Will you define for us what a hard pivot is? Because it sounds like it's a very powerful term. Tell us what it is and then talk to us about a time where you have made a hard pivot.

Apolo Ohno: A hard pivot in speed skating is an aggressive, high-speed turn that's executed on each corner of the ice rink. And so in a split second, a skater has to generate enough force, momentum, and pressure to carve a new path in the ice, heading in the complete opposite direction. We all face kind of critical hard pivots in our own lives outside of the Olympic space, outside of the ice rink, where we are preparing all that, we can for these particular moments in time. And then sometimes life has different plans for you. You are hit with something that you are not prepared for, and I think it's up to all of us to be able to compile these types of reactions and responses that probably best suit the real ultimate desire that we want, which is to be aligned with our purpose and true north. But during these hard pivots, unless performed correctly, we go crashing into the ice, crashing into the pads, and then from there, we can make the hard, definitive decision of do we stay down, or do we continue on? A lot of us here have been through some of these difficult times, and if you haven't, know full well that you probably will at some point in your life. And so, the hard part for me was my post-Olympic career, 15 years of identifying with this one soul persona of who I was, why I had purpose, and why I was put on Earth? To the next stage, which was what's next? What else am I good at? What am I passionate about?

Apolo Ohno: And so, I was married to the idea that what was on my business card defined who I was, and I forgot to realize that we're in the middle of these chapters as we're writing our own life book. And so, it's up to us to have this relentless curiosity of exploration to be able to polish and shine and hone the different facets of our personality so that we can go and explore.

Whitney Johnson: So good. And we'll talk more about this later because I do want to hear more about that experience that you had as you were making that hard pivot question for you. When you're going that you're on the ice and you're making that hard pivot. How many miles an hour are you going going into that? Is it like 30 or 40 miles an hour?

Apolo Ohno: Yeah, it's like it's at the top-end speed. It's a little over 35, between 35 and 40 miles an hour.

Whitney Johnson: And then you stop, and you turn around?

Apolo Ohno: We don't stop. You continue. Yeah. As much in the game of life, there's no pause button, right? And the clock continues to move on. And so, with or without you, so to speak. And so instead of being in the passenger seat, get over into the driver's seat. You can't obviously control what's happening in front of the road. That's ahead, but you can respond and react in the best way possible.

Whitney Johnson: Got it! So, I love this idea of thrilling, important, and daunting. So, Apollo, do you have any quick thoughts?

Apolo Ohno: I think as we're starting to present these ideas to ourselves of like things that are important things that are daunting, the daunting piece is actually really, really critical. So, you have to set something that is seemingly somewhat out of reach. But you know, there's a chance that you can hit that you don't want to be in the green zone, continue on your routine, do the things you've always done because that's the normalcy state. That's the state in which you feel comfortable and from the millions of years of hard coding in our DNA. We know that when we get in these realms, it makes us feel safe and safe means secure. But growth does not happen in that safe zone. Just like when we're trying to break through new speeds on the ice and the Olympic path, we have to reinvent and have catalysts in our mind that say, how do I do things differently? How do I shake things up? And sometimes those things are quite shocking because our body's not used to it. It's in an unfamiliar environment. We're uncertain about the potential outcome. And then we start to question, I don't know if this path is for me, nothing is going my way. I'm not smart enough. I'm not attractive enough. I'm not good enough. I'm less than. These are all noises in your head to tell you to go back to what was comfortable because then you're safe and you're secure, but don't listen to that voice. You need to listen to the voice that says, I'm going to set forth these goals for myself that are big, that are audacious, and they're strong. And then reverse engineer them to say, how do I actually embark upon this path to make them a reality? Because the work ultimately is always going to be the shortcut.

Whitney Johnson: I love that saying the work is a shortcut. Daunting as you have to believe that you can believe that you can do it. So Apolo, you started to talk about this, but let's continue this idea. Which is identity. I think it's so fascinating because on the very first page of your book, you say the following, I'm paraphrasing. After the final Olympics, I was confused, adrift, without purpose. Can you set the stage for us and the experience that you were having when you were changing and shifting identity?

Apolo Ohno: In the book, I refer to it as the great divorce. And, you know, often you know, many of us will be married in our lives and some not, but many of us will be. And oftentimes we also have another marriage, and that is typically to our career or our self-identity that gets kind of hardened over time. And mine happened to be the Olympic space. It was the Olympic realm in which I thought that it gave me the guardrails of support when I needed them. It taught me discipline and sacrifice and hard work and all these amazing life lessons and insights. But then, at the snap of a finger after 15 years, it looked to me and said, even if you want to come back to me, you can't. No longer. No matter what you do, you will never have a spot here in my heart. This is what sport was telling me, and so I had to kind of cognitively come up with a way of figuring out like, what else am I good at? What else am I passionate about? And to be completely frank, I wasn't interested in anything else. I thought that I was put on Earth as part of this whole thing. And so, it was almost like I was starting over from scratch again. I needed to really understand what reinvention and transition was going to be. And so, you know, I talk about this often right between our own two years is the world's most powerful and greatest asset, or it can be the world's strongest prison. And oftentimes these self-inflicted and sabotaging thoughts or comments that we have to ourselves paralyze us in ways that restrict our actual growth and ability to be our truest, most authentic self. That's true for anyone. So I felt that feeling it was challenging. It was hard, and I knew one thing was that I couldn't sit still. I needed to keep moving even if it was erratic, even if it was in the wrong direction. I equated the motion to create my own emotion. That was a really important part of this process was creating momentum, having these fast, hard pivots, and fully embracing the fact that I would probably fail multiple times, but it's only truly identified as a failure if I decide to stay down. And that's what that process was.

Whitney Johnson: So, you felt adrift, bereft. What are one or two things you said you needed to just start moving? You thought you could potentially face plant? What are one or two things you remember doing very specifically? I've just I've got to move forward.

Apolo Ohno: So, for me, the one unique aspect was that I didn't know what other interests and passions I had in my life. And so, I needed to stop saying no so much and started to say yes to actually identify with what I could align with. What else was I interested in? And what I found was that looking at the Olympic path because speed skating is not like real life, although there are a lot of similarities. You know, me putting on a racing suit and skates and lacing up every single day doesn't exactly equate to me walking into a boardroom or whatever career path that I decide to do. And so what I found was ripping off the Band-Aid and then looking underneath the surface. My identity was not actually that of which the accolades and results presented themselves. Instead, it was actually the attributes that made up those things. And so those attributes I listed. What are those things that I saw within myself that were my strengths, the things that I had honed over those years that I do feel like are transferable skills? Not the things specifically, you have a great right leg in the way you turn the corner, and you pass on the inside, not those things. One of the things that led you to that element. What are those skill sets that you have? So, when you are trying to go through these processes, as I did, I started to identify with what are my strengths? And I understand my weaknesses because I'm very self-critical, but not paying too much attention to those weaknesses because I can only actually raise that bar a little bit. But instead harnessing the power of the things that both motivate, inspire, and encourage me, and then using that in a way to create momentum.

Whitney Johnson: What were one or two of your strengths that you listed?

Apolo Ohno: Some of the strengths that I have inherently is like, I actually love to work hard. There's something deeply fulfilling that I have. And so that's a great superpower, right? Is the ability to be hungry and say, OK, the work is the shortcut, I'm willing to grind, and I can take a lot of pleasure associated with this path. And the second part is, I notice that I'm actually quite adaptable to any environment, both good and bad. And so I started to have the zoomed out approach of saying if I was going to treat my life and utilize it with my personal board of directors right? If you were in a big corporate company, who are those people to really oversee and have your best interests in mind? And so I start to think like, what are some of the things that can actually help me and provide me with the most amount of support and best interests and those things that don't supply that and don't give those I need to stop spending so much time on them. And again, it's as simple as taking a piece of paper, writing a line down the middle, and then listing on both sides, what were some of the things that gave you the most happiness, pleasure, and fulfillment this year? And what are some of the things that actually do not subscribe to that? What are some of the things that detracted away? Was it yourself? Was it your own insecurities? Was it your family? I mean, sometimes our own family tells us we can't do things because maybe they're afraid to see us be let down. And so again, there's always these reasonings that are happening. But I think, most importantly, the biggest help that really helped me transition and upgrade, so to speak, was my understanding of having the radical transparency conversation in the mirror with myself and basically having self-acceptance, right? This is hard for me as an athlete because you're taught and conditioned all the time. It's never good enough. There's always more to do. Never be satisfied. And so, you kind of live in this weird world where you're relying on the past failures to motivate you, but then you're always looking forward into the future of what you were trying to be. Never being truly present in this moment, and it's a weird place to be right. Times are to spin out of control when you're in these moments. Yeah. And so, I like to have this open conversation with myself and say, like, I accept you for who you are. I did this actual exercise, and it was really, really challenging and hard. Like, who wants to look in the mirror and say, I love you for who you are? It feels awkward. It feels uncomfortable.

Whitney Johnson: You said something in your book like, well, don't think about having a good selfie, so don't even focus on looking good. And it is very difficult, even on your best days to say, I accept you. So, you've got work ethic, and then you've also made an effort to really focus on accepting yourself, which leads me to my next question. Post-skating so because you're your identity is shifted. What's one of your big failures? Something that you're ready to talk about. Because we all have failures, we're not ready to talk about yet. But what's a post-skating face plant?

Apolo Ohno: There's been many. There's been many businesses. There's been relationships, right? Where I wasn't able to meet the person who I was with because I was so focused in that almost that military mindset of being so diligent and also exporting that belief on my partners, friends, and teammates, and other business partners. Right. You can never believe that they see the world through your eyes because we all have our own unique experiences and conditions. And the more that you can realize that the greater levels of empathy and communication that get ingrained in what's happening. Most of the conflicts that exist are because of a miscommunication and

misunderstanding between two individuals that have their own micro-traumas that are being brought to light and they start to escalate.

Whitney Johnson: Give us a specific example

Apolo Ohno: If I am in a business meeting with two of my partners and we start to argue because I want and want to export my belief of them to give me the acknowledgment that I'm right. And I'm actually searching for that. I want the validation for some of these things. And so then I start chasing it. They're getting defensive because they believe that I'm attacking them and I'm berating them and I'm talking down to them. And then it starts to spiral down. Versus saying, wait, what am I missing here? And why are they not understanding what I'm actually saying? Maybe I'm not presenting it properly. Maybe it's my own fault. So, I think having that ownership over this is really important at the same time. And also, like the empathy side was a big part of me learning over the past 10 years of, 12 years of being retired.

Whitney Johnson: You said you start each day by journaling, writing down three things that you're grateful for. What else do you do at the beginning of the day?

Apolo Ohno: I try to take at least a little bit of time to, I think, just breathe. And what I mean by that is actual like focus and breath work that seems to have helped me tremendously. You know, oftentimes I think we become conditioned to kind of grab our phones and start the process of like email and text message and catching back up because all of us probably feel like we're behind schedule, which is probably not untrue. And what I found was that when I'm able to kind of set the stage, so to speak, as we did before, even we did this call was how do we set the intention for what I am and how I'd like the day to go? I may not actually become successful, but I'd like to be able to set the stage and at least cognitively align myself with. This is what I'd like to have happen today, and this is what success would mean to me at the end of the day. And then I go back to that towards the end of the day. So that's my kind of routine in the morning. It's pretty simple, right? I typically have a moment where I'm not on my phone. I usually have something to drink, either it's warm, whether it's coffee tea. And I typically just close my eyes and I just focus on breathing, even if it's for like five minutes or less. It seems to really help me set the stage for the chaos that will follow when I open up my emails. I see like the five hundred plus that are missing from that, from that, the missing responses that are there. I saw also in the comments here was something around kind of specifics around failures, and I think we could talk about this all the time. Look, there's been tremendous amounts of failures, both in terms of how I was with my own team, how I was with other and, previous businesses and partners, and then also on the relationship front and without getting too specific. I think I failed to be my most authentic self from the beginning. Right.

Apolo Ohno: That was the ultimate failure was that I wanted to be someone else because I was listening in my own head of this person who is the self-saboteur. And this imposter syndrome that exists, right? Not fully actually believing that we are worthy of being in this particular thing, whether it's this opportunity, whether it's in this environment, whether it's this chance, and it's not until we get the validation from our peers and other ones and head nods that we finally actually believe it. But that's not true, right? You're seeking external validation when actually the only validation you need is from the inside, and we can use the external as metrics and guidance for competition, right? How do I compare myself to this? But it's also a dangerous path. And so again, one of the failures and I like to believe that I'm working on this was being my most vulnerable and authentic self while also being really strong, mentally tough being prepared. And I think that you can do all of those things.

Whitney Johnson: I ask at the end of every podcast that I do what has been useful for you so far. So, it might be something someone said. It might be something someone thought. But what's kind of bubbling up for you is as picking your interest in useful.

Apolo Ohno: Well, look, I think every one of you as authors has spent a lifetime cultivating these lessons and insights that many of us perhaps have difficult time having similarities or putting down on paper. And the beauty of all these tech enabled devices that we have today is these are your tools to access information points to actually make your life better. To give you the best possible chance of winning as many seconds per day as possible in the eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds that we are gifted every single day. And so it's up to the driver and you are the driver. And when we do these types of things, just look at the title, Begin, Grow, Pivot and Learn, rinse

and repeat. This is the story of life, right? When you begin, you're pouring out the cup of knowledge that that gives you all of the resistance to why you should start growing means going into the yellow zone, not in red, where it's so chaotic you can't absorb anything. And not in green where you're in this kind of smooth, easy state, but you're in that yellow zone. And then embracing the fact that pivots are not designed or supposed to be easy, these things inherently, like life gives you, are supposed to be hard. Good timber does not grow with ease. The stronger wind, the stronger trees. All of us have that ability to do so. And then when we learn, we learn by doing. Sometimes we have to just go out there, don't get stuck in this world of paralysis because of your addiction to perfectionism. It's never going to be perfect, right? There's always going to be room for improvement. But unless you start, unless you dive in, you don't know what that environment is going to get. You don't know how you're going to react and respond and then we can relearn. We go back to the beginning, and we grow, we pivot and we learn.

Whitney Johnson: Well, said.

Apolo Ohno: Something that I think that we see often, people ask, like, how do you actually bounce back from failure? After failing for so many times you become conditioned, and you start to normalize that process and you almost forget what it's like to get enough momentum and get the taste of winning. The first thing to do because this comes directly from the sport world is you need to stop being married to the result, an outcome instead, reverse engineer that process and focus on the actual process versus the prize. And what I mean is, how do I actually win the day before noon? How do I win the day before 10 a.m.? Smallest of incremental changes and improvements compounded over time will always result in the greatest amount of yield and outcome as we go through life, and many times we try to hit the target and we fall very short. How do you reinvent from that as society has told us and distracted us that you are what your results speak of? And that's not entirely true. It's how you respond to those types of things. And so look, when you approach the world with the lens, it's going to be challenging, it's going to be volatile and it's going to be chaotic. But if I can have the perception that these are opportunities for growth to help me become a more fortified and stronger person, I may actually just attract some other person who's on the other side of the room was watching their own interest in saying, hey, I can do that too. And then the flywheel begins all over again. So don't forget you're so close. It feels so far at times. But after you've tried that one hundredth door and you just assume after trying to open, it's locked that the hundred and first the next 100 are also going to be locked. It could very well possibly be that that one hundred and first door is the one that's open and then you can begin to walk through.

When we're watching those athletes on TV next month, it's easy to forget that they're human. We see these feats of strength and determination, and we assume they're... untouchable. These are the elite. But when we do that, we're really comparing them to ourselves. There is the superhuman – here is me.

Apolo's vulnerability during our conversation is a reminder that no one goes through life without conflict. Even when you're America's top Winter Olympian, you're not safe from that moment when you slow down and realize – I don't really know myself at all.

Apolo mastered the hard pivot on the ice, but it goes to show that success and stability are two very different things. How many other guests have we had on the show, who reached the top of their S Curve, just to realize – I haven't been home for dinner in months. I don't really know what my hobbies are anymore. I don't know how to keep going without the crutch of climbing this S Curve.

But in listening to his struggle, we remind ourselves that no one is superhuman. The speed skater on the TV, that's you, that's me. In a way, Apolo's vulnerability gives us the strength to approach those moments of doubt, and fear, and tell ourselves – this is not something wrong with me. This is a universal experience. If anything makes us superhuman, it's vulnerability.

If you're looking for a primer on how to nurture that emotional muscle for the inevitable hard pivots of life, there's [episode 157](#) with Susan David. On learning how to step back from the thing that you thought you loved, there's [episode 276](#) with Danny Ainge, from the Utah Jazz. And if being vulnerable feels like an S Curve too steep to climb, there's my talk with James Clear about Atomic Habits, [episode 190](#).

Thank you again to Apolo Ohno, and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. If you want to know more about how DA can support you and your organization, whether through executive coaching and leadership workshops, you can reach us at workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com. Thank you to our producer, Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King and production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.