

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 391: ASHEESH ADVANI

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.

Asheesh Advani isn't just the CEO of Junior Achievement—he was also a participant. In junior high, Junior Achievement changed his life. And now, as CEO, he gets to help change the lives of not just one, but 15 million teenagers a year. Operating in more than 115 countries, with more than 3,500 employees, 500,000 volunteers, JA's disruptive ripple of entrepreneurship is staggering—certainly one reason why it's been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for three straight years. There's a connection between the economic empowerment of youth and the overall prosperity and peace of their communities. As he shared, “You can't really get prosperity for everyone without young people believing they can own their economic future.”

I hope you enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, Asheesh. Junior Achievement has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three years running. This is...congratulations. And it comes, I think if I had to guess why people are nominating you, it's because there are thousands, actually, probably millions, if not hundreds of millions of stories of transformation in the lives of its participants, including yours. So, I would love for you to start by sharing with us a little bit. And I know we have this in our prior episode, but just for the people who haven't heard the extent of that episode, what is your story in terms of how Junior Achievement changed your life?

**Asheesh Advani:** Wow. Well, first of all, thank you so much for teeing it up that way. Let me start by saying the Nobel Peace Prize nominations have allowed us to bring attention to the connection between the economic empowerment of youth and prosperity of communities and peace, because you really can't have peace without prosperity for really everyone in a community. And if you can't, you can't really get prosperity for everyone without young people feeling they can own their economic futures, that they can actually create jobs for themselves or get employed or help their communities. And I think we see around the world where that's not true.

All sorts of bad things start to happen. So that's, I would say, what excites me about the Nobel Peace Prize nominations is we can talk about that and bring attention to that. With regards to my personal story, so I went through a, when I was younger than high school, I went through JA actually in middle school. Junior Achievement reaches kids in elementary school, middle school and high school. Many years ago, we were primarily known for our high school programing around the world. Since then, we've now moved both younger and older. So, in many parts of the world, we actually have great programs now for students, kind of after they finished their schooling, whether they're in university or not and particularly in the UK and the US and actually I would say probably in about 50 other countries, we actually have programing now for elementary and middle school.

**Asheesh Advani:** My experience was a middle school experience with a program that's typically known for, it's the one which we've been doing for decades now. It's called JA Company Program. It's where you build a business while you're in school. So it's really for most young people, the first time they've even leaned into this idea of being an entrepreneur or being part of a team where you're building a business and it's their first exposure to, you know, the idea of actually selling shares in something and collecting real money in exchange for goods and services and tabulating what revenue and, you know, gross margin are and, and each student wears a different hat. So, you get to be a CFO or a chief marketing officer or a CEO. And for me, I got to be CEO of this little student business in middle school. And in those days, you know, we didn't have all the great tech businesses we have today. That's my excuse for saying it was a t shirt business. So really, you know, nothing too glamorous. But still, no matter what the business is, you actually get to have that satisfaction that comes from building a real product that people want to buy.

**Whitney Johnson:** What was on, what was on the t shirts?

**Asheesh Advani:** The t shirts actually were the kind where you could silkscreen them and you could print anything you wanted on them, which allowed us to have this customization option. And which at the time felt like incredibly innovative. It was before you could get them in like stores in the mall, like we actually had the little machine which allowed you to create a design. So, it was it was a neat business, but it was definitely like what I see now for these students. It makes me embarrassed, frankly, that we had a t shirt business because the stuff that I'm seeing, like I was in Korea, and I saw these students create a knapsack that has these sensors in it. They got off a website where you can track where your friends are because they programed an app so you can actually track your friend's kind of in your little social network based on where their backpacks are, which I thought was just really brilliant.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh yeah. Wow. Okay. Yeah, it's a little bit of like, oh, back in the Stone age and you're like, and I'm not even that old. I mean, it just tells you how much things have advanced. Okay. So. All right, so finish your story of how it changed your life. So, you start a business. What did that do for you?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, for me, actually, it was less about the business. For me, it was leadership. And as I talk about in my book, you know, I had a stutter when I was young, when I moved from India to Canada, somehow, I developed a stutter, and it was pretty severe. Like I could not have a conversation like I'm having with you right now, because I would be stumbling on every second word. And if you know anyone who stutters, you know that one of the things that they do is, is you stutter on your own name quite often, and that's something which actually still happens for me. I have a difficult time sometimes saying my own name and that's, I think, universally true. I think one reason it's universally true is you can't change that word. So, a lot of people who stutter actually change words midstream to avoid certain sounds that they know they're going to stumble on. And for me, I went to speech therapy every Wednesday after school for most of my childhood. And that helped train me on how to do extemporaneous speaking. So, when I had this leadership role through Jay, it was really one of the first times I had a significant leadership role where I got to speak to students and kind of inspire them and get them behind something and be considered, you know, a leader that people look up to. So, for me to be able to use the stuff I learned in speech therapy to sort of apply it in this context was transformational for me because it made me think of myself differently.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay, so I know you've thought about this a million times, but it just has to be said. So, the fact that you had a stutter meant that you went into speech therapy and learned public speaking at a very young

age, which most kids who don't have a stutter don't get. So, you were getting all sorts of incredible training that you would never have gotten if you didn't have a stutter.

**Asheesh Advani:** It is probably the most important element of my education, certainly in retrospect, that I look back upon and think, geez, how lucky was I? And to be able to even reframe that in your head to take all the negative stuff of having a stutter, of which I will tell you, there was quite a few, experiences. I have some quite traumatic, but to put all those in a box and to really think of the positive of what I got out of the experience and the I mean, I really do think now I went from, you know, public speaking being something I detested to something I tolerated to something I celebrated to, something I love. All in the journey of these weekly sessions, and I have to do a shout out to the hospital. It was a hospital for sick kids in Toronto, and it is one of the world's leading hospitals. And I'm so forever grateful. In fact, when I graduated from grad school, I made a little donation to them, and they were shocked. People apparently don't donate money to their speech therapy clinic. I'm like, what? This is like super critical work. Why is not everyone giving money to this thing? So yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. You know, so basically, I think what I'm hearing is that Junior Achievement changed your life because it gave you a forum or a or a laboratory to practice being a leader.

**Asheesh Advani:** Yes, absolutely. And it does for a lot of kids around the world. In fact, we hear that all the time from kids, even if they're not the CEO of their student business, they could be chief marketing officer, chief human resource officer. They all play an important role, and they have got to get their team to do things that is on top of their schoolwork, and that takes persuasive skills. It takes all the usual socialization skills, and you know, and kids get this in different settings. They can get it through athletics. They can get it through other student clubs, of course. But for me, and certainly for some of the entrepreneurial kids, I know, the experience is transformational.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, since you're educating 15 million students a year. So, I started by saying there's, you know, one, possibly millions. There're probably hundreds of millions of these kinds of stories. And at this point, is that right?

**Asheesh Advani:** It's really amazing. I wish I wish there were a way to, like, summarize them all in a way that shows not only the impact on individual people, but the impact of scale, because there's separate impacts, right? In some communities, we reach more than 10% of the population. And when you reach that many young people, you actually don't just change individuals, you start to change communities and society. Right? And that's very exciting to see. And I've got story after story, of course. And while 15 million sounds like a big number, I have to tell you, Whitney, it's not a big number. I mean, there are many, many, many more million kids we don't reach, and there's really no reason why we can't. We have a scalable way to do it. We know what we do. And I mean, our goal is to get to 100 million kids by 2050 per year, which would be about 10% of the world youth population. So, in some places we've already done it. So I feel, you know, sometimes you share these big numbers and they feel just numbers. But we are already in places where we reach 10% or more of the student population. So why can't we do it in other places? And then we'll just be able to hit even more kids.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you want a ten x, basically ten x your impact, but because of the contagion effect it won't be ten x. It'll be much more than ten x.

**Asheesh Advani:** And that's the point. I mean, our research shows that when you actually reach 10% of any community, any population, any school, the ripple effect is quite substantial versus just reaching a few kids. And there's some great organizations, by the way, out there that do a phenomenal job of going deep with just a few young people. We just happen to be one of the organizations that has leaned heavily into the benefit of scale and the benefit of actually reaching entire schools, even if we can.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. So good. Okay, so let's go back to your schooling. So, you studied economics and finance undergrad. You have a PhD in economics for development. How does this technical training that you did influence and inform how you lead?

**Asheesh Advani:** To be honest, I don't know if it does that much.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, come on.

**Asheesh Advani:** Really? I'm telling you, I, I mean, like any education, I'm sure there are ways that it really has stuck with me. But to be really honest, I've learned so much more from the people I've met, the colleagues I've worked with, the mentors I've had after my schooling, compared to the leadership skill sort of oriented things I learned during school. Having said that, I couldn't have got the roles that I got without the schooling. So, I'm not saying education isn't important. In fact, there's a whole chapter in the book which talks about education being an investment return, not just an investment, because I really think you actually get so much out of learning and focusing on your own learning, even beyond the credential and even beyond the, you know, the traditional benefits of an education. But for me, like I went to Wharton and Wharton for me was huge in terms of making me have much more confidence as a businessperson and building a network of people around me, particularly a few of my close friends who really pushed me. I mean, they pushed me to do things I didn't think I had in me.

**Whitney Johnson:** I want to come back to that story. That's one of the stories I wanted you to tell. Of all the stories I picked out. That was one of the stories. So, we're going to put a pin in that and come back to that.

**Asheesh Advani:** Okay.

**Whitney Johnson:** So. All right, so the education opened doors for you, but as you think about it. I suspect if you in a moment of reflection, you will find that the things you learned, you know computationally to think through finance, that it informs and influences what you do. But it's probably so much a part of your DNA at this point. It's hard to tease it out.

**Asheesh Advani:** Yes. Oh, you're absolutely right. I mean, I studied economics and finance, so I tend to look at the world sometimes too much through numbers and too much through ROI, and too much through this idea that you can assess through some utilitarian framework how you're going to derive happiness out of something. And my colleagues tease me about it all the time, because my whole lingo, my whole vernacular, is all about those metaphors. And I would say Wharton versus, you know, I went to graduate school in England. It was a very different experience. Going to business school versus doing research. Business school is very practical, and it's all about application and even the way we looked at development. Right? At Wharton, it was emerging markets. But I did. My PhD was developing economies. So, both are right, and both are somewhat different. But they're very, very similar concepts. So, it's I think one thing we learn in school, based on what we study, is how we start to use language to persuade other people. And if you study economics and finance, it gives you this wealth of language, which sometimes is great. Sometimes it really turns people off. Like, I actually don't talk about my PhD because some people these days are just so, they assume that people with PhDs are a certain type of person, so I just don't want to have to worry about that bias when I enter into a relationship.

**Whitney Johnson:** Interesting. Okay. So you, prior to Junior Achievement, you built two businesses and sold, exited both of them. And as you describe in the book, you were born in India, you grew up in Canada, you studied in England. You know, you've studied in the United States. So, you've had a pretty, you know sort of global trotting experience. But then you describe how Junior Achievement has 300 plus legal entities. You're operating in more than 100 countries. So, what's a leadership lesson that you've learned by managing this kind of organization that you didn't know, even in these very successful startups?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, it's been such a learning journey. Let me give you just a couple of examples, just to make it more concrete. You know, when I started, we had the complexity of China and making sure they were they truly felt part of this network. Right? So, you know, are we an American organization operating abroad, or are we a global organization that allows the people of China and our operations in China to truly feel they are Chinese, not working for an American organization? So, I made four trips to China to ensure that the regulators also understood what we were trying to do. Remember, we're operating in Chinese schools as a nonprofit, so there are one. There aren't nonprofit laws until not too long ago, and two, the Chinese actually for good reason. Just like Americans and others care deeply about what their kids learn. So, making sure that what we do actually respects the goals of the Chinese government is a complex topic in and of itself. And that's just China. I mean, we did this in other countries as well. Like, for example, we're one of the first organizations allowed into schools in Saudi

Arabia, both girls and boys. And some of my most actually impactful favorite stories are meeting young women in Saudi Arabia who have gone through our program and come out really believing that they are business leaders and can be business leaders and entrepreneurs, and having them so grateful that they got our program, but also making sure that we're very respectful of the laws and the and our partners in Saudi Arabia who give us access to the school day. And I don't know if you've been to Saudi Arabia, but that country has changed more than any country I've ever seen, sort of in the course of my life. I've been there a few times now, and like every six months I go into a different country. It's moving so fast on all the dimensions. You may think it's not moving on. It's moving.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wow. That's amazing. You know what you're reminding me? I had on the podcast, uh, probably about a year ago, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, Princess Reema Al-bandar, one of the most impressive individuals I've ever spoken to in my life. And her ability to advocate for, in this particular instance, women, but just advocacy, period. Without being strident. It was it was masterful and beautiful.

**Asheesh Advani:** Fascinating. You know, we took our entire executive team to Riyadh for a team meeting. So, we typically do these team meetings once a year in different places, and we do them usually in predictable places. But I really wanted everyone to see what's happening in Saudi Arabia up close and personal, because they kept hearing me talk about it and it's not the same. And there were some women on my team who just didn't want to go. And I said, listen, it's your call totally. I leave the decision up to you. You can dial in and get the content that way. But they chose to come and every single one of them thanked me. Afterwards, they consciously said, Asheesh, I'm so glad you really encouraged me to do this, because I wouldn't have believed you until I saw it myself.

**Whitney Johnson:** That's fantastic. Okay, so the last time we spoke, not really spoke, but I interviewed you, your boys were 13 years old, and so by my math, they're probably 19ish now.

**Asheesh Advani:** Well done.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I'm wondering, as they are approaching adulthood, how has your perspective on youth empowerment and education shifted you?

**Asheesh Advani:** I wasn't expecting that question. Very nice and personal, which I love. So both my kids are, I think I've been a little bit lucky because they're interested in the same things I'm interested in which allows me to, when I give them advice or lean into all the things that parents do, I don't get as much of the, "oh that's not me or you're different than me thing. That's obviously a blessing and a curse, right? Um, but I, so I think one perspective on parenting that I think I've changed on is I realized, particularly as I've gotten older, that I want them to fail and I want them to make decisions which even ignore my advice, or I would avoid giving them advice so they can have that experience with failure. So, one of my sons, for example, is raising money for a project that he's doing, and I've had a lot of experience now raising money so I could really coach him. But I love the fact that he gets, knows and then still has to continue after getting a rejection. So, I'm actually letting him go and seeing how it works for him. And then he sometimes calls and asks me for advice proactively, which is very nice. Feels very nice, doesn't happen very often, but when it does it's great. But otherwise like normally like three years ago I would have been when he was in high school, I would have been like micromanaging his slide presentations to make sure he said all the right things. But I'm not at all doing anything, even close to that.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, your belief in giving youth opportunities to really fail has, has increased even more. It sounds like.

**Asheesh Advani:** Yeah, I think I probably would have said it, but not really meant it when they were, I don't know, eight years old, ten years old. And then when they're in their in their early teens, I probably would have meant it more because, you know, failure there just comes across differently and feels different. But now I think I really do mean it. I mean, like, one of my sons had an internship, and I stayed away completely from giving him any advice. It was really his first professional job, where he had to report to somebody and all that stuff. And I think I must have maybe said two sentences to him about it all summer, when that certainly would not have been the case a few years ago.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, we're talking about, this is a little bit of a clunky segue. But I'm going to I'm going to go with it anyway about achievement. Um, you shared in the book that your wife is a three on the Enneagram. So, she's an achiever. Maybe you are too, although you don't remember for sure, but you've got a new book out called *Modern Achievement*. So, for people who want to achieve, and I would love to hear why you decided to write this book? And what do you mean by *Modern Achievement*?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, let me start by saying the book has been such an incredible journey. I had no idea when I sort of spoke to Marshall Goldsmith, who's my coauthor, as you know, about the book, and we agreed to do this together. I really thought it would come across after some point, like a chore, like I really, I got into it, I thought, you know, this is going to be difficult. It's going to be a heavy lift. And I'm gonna at some point say, why did I do this? That certainly hasn't happened yet. Maybe that'll happen one day. Whitney, I mean, you've written more books so you can maybe guide me on this, but I have learned so much about myself. I've learned so much about other people. And this has been an energizing project, specifically achievement. And why I think the definition needs to be updated is a young person graduating from university or even high school these days is going to have, on average, at least 20 different jobs and at least seven different careers. If you believe some of the data coming from the World Economic Forum, and that may not be true for everyone. Some people will have jobs like being a doctor or whatever, where they won't be as much change after training. But on average, this is true, and some people are going to have even more change than this. And our definition of achievement and most books written about achievement have been very much about long term goal setting.

**Asheesh Advani:** So, you write down a goal, you visualize it, and the universe helps make it happen. That is like the classic achievement book of the past. But the advice that young people need today, and I certainly see this when I travel, and Junior Achievement, is you're going to have multiple jobs and multiple careers. So, it's about setting multiple goals and really leaning into the process and the journey of achievement and enjoying that journey in that process. Even if you're not going to be able to get some of the long-term goals you wanted because of reasons which are totally outside your control, the world is just changing, and AI is replacing, what, 40% plus of the skills that we need in five years? How can you possibly set a long-term goal and have any degree of confidence or certainty that the decisions you're making today are actually going to make an impact on achieving that long term goal? So, the book and the reason it's energizing for me is I get to tell story after story not only for my life and Marshall's life, but for the lives of all these young people I meet. And you who, thank you for agreeing to be part of the book experience, too, and other great leadership thinkers like you who can share some of their own wisdom, which is under the rubric of this new definition of achievement.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, it's such a good book. So, there are you talk about a “fixed, flexible and free style approach”. Can you first of all give us some definitions and, and also talk about the providence of the framework itself.

**Asheesh Advani:** Sure. It's a very simple framework. *Fixed, Flexible, Freestyle*. Some things are fixed. They don't change. Some things are flexible. They change based on time or place. And many things are free style, which means they're unique to you. They're about innovating and creating and designing you based on your personal strengths and aptitudes. So, we developed this framework, and we amplified it at Junior Achievement. And I have to do a big shout out to our previous board chair. His name is Jonas Prising, who was the chairman and CEO of Mastercard Group. I'm sorry, of Manpower Group. Excuse me. Manpower Group, which is a giant company with over 500,000 employees. So, he has an even more global and even more complicated organization to run. I've learned so much from him. I did a job shadow Whitney with him for a day, which, by the way, for any of your listeners, one really simple ask of anyone who's mentoring you or is friends with you, or somebody you look up to, is ask if you can just shadow them for a day. So almost everyone will say yes to this. It's very hard to get somebody to say no to this if you ask and give them flexibility to pick the day and you will learn so much. It's like a mini-MBA in one day. I learned from watching Jonas manage people interact with, you know, sticky situations. And then he shared with me this framework that he uses in this big global organization to get global things, which he considered fixed, and regional and local things, which he considered flexible and freestyle.

**Asheesh Advani:** And I just loved it when he showed it to me, I thought, this is what I need. It was my first year in the job, so I said, can I borrow this? And he said, not only can you borrow it, Asheesh, I want you to modify it,

adapt it, amplify it, and make it your own. And that's what we did over the course of my now many years at JA, over nine years, we've really adapted this framework to help our global board. We've got 6000 board members Whitney around this organization. We've got a global board, we've got multiple regional boards like Africa, Europe, and then a whole bunch of national boards. And then in some countries like the US and Sweden and Mexico and other places, we've got all these local boards who are from like the states or provinces or Canada and other places like that. So, with this kind of complexity, we needed some simple language to allow everyone to just be moving in the same direction, but really having the agency to control their choices. So *Fixed, Flexible, Freestyle* gave us that agency at JA. In the book we really adapt it to individuals because both organizations and individuals are experiencing change and the need for adaptability, and this framework really lends itself to that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay, so let's do some storytelling. So, when I went through the book, I found some stories that I especially loved. So, can I, like, can you be like a human jukebox for just a minute?

**Asheesh Advani:** Go for it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay, so let's start with fixed. I would love for you to tell the story about finding the people who push you and who's that person and what happened and what did all that look like?

**Asheesh Advani:** Sure. So, this is the college story you mentioned earlier?

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes.

**Asheesh Advani:** So, I, in my sophomore year of college, I met this young man. Probably the best way to put it, because he was not a boy, even though he was younger than me. But he. He walked and he was wearing like a blue blazer in, like, college. Okay. And I'll tell the story the way he would tell it. The day he met me, I was interviewing him for a role in the student magazine that I was at the time, editor in chief of. And the way he tells the story and it's probably, probably true, is I walked in and like all students, I had my feet, like, on the desk. And I was interviewing him. I was interviewing a bunch of other young people who wanted roles in the magazine. And by the end of the meeting, the way he tells it, he had his feet on the desk, and I was like, begging him to join. So, there is probably some truth to that, to be honest. So, he became publisher of the magazine. I was editor in chief. His name is Nobel Gulati. His parents named him Nobel after the Nobel Prize, because they really wanted him to win the Nobel Prize.

**Whitney Johnson:** And now here you are being nominated as a company.

**Asheesh Advani:** There is some irony there, although his parents are scientists, so the prize they would want him to go for was perhaps, you know, the Nobel Peace Prize is the only Nobel Prize which is run by the Norwegian committee. All the other prizes are run by the Swedish Committee, which are the science prizes and the other ones. So. Okay. It is a little bit apple to oranges in terms of the perfect perilousness of the story. But the reason that Nobel was so influential for me is he's just the kind of person who just works so hard and always pushes himself to do more. And so, by virtue of being around him, like we took eight courses one semester to tell you one story, there's so many stories of us, but, and because we thought like we really wanted to learn the stuff, we could do the work. So, we took eight courses, and the dean calls us into her office and like in December of our sophomore year or whatever, and says, I'd like you to drop two courses because our rule is you can only take six. And we said we've done all the work. Like literally we've done all the work. It's two weeks before the end of the semester.

**Asheesh Advani:** How can you ask us to drop the courses? And she said, I'm sorry. The school cannot sustain itself if people break the rules and we need to earn, you know, our tuition. So, we can't have you take more courses than the maximum. So, we went to the professors, and we told the professors, and they were like, this is really bad news, but I can't do anything. I mean, I know you've done the work. If you take the course again, I'll count all the work you've done, all the assessments against it, if you take it again. So, a couple of years later, in our senior year or my senior year, I went back to the professors, and I said, I've done all the work. And they actually at that time we had a different dean. So, I was able to get the credits retroactively counted, and my dad had already paid tuition for that semester. So, we got a refund, and I asked the school to give the refund in a check

form, not in ACH. In those days, you could do that. And they printed off a check. So, at graduation, I gave my dad a check for like \$8,000, which was pretty cool.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, there's so much I love about that story. So basically, a couple of things. Number one, the fact that your filial sense is so strong that you gave your father a check, that's let's just start there. But I also appreciate that you said, is it Noble or Nobel? How does he go?

**Asheesh Advani:** He goes by Nobel.

**Whitney Johnson:** Nobel? Okay. The fact that he. You said he pushed you. And I thought you were going to this place of. He pushed you to work hard, which I think is true. But what you also suggested is that he pushed you, in my words, to disrupt your thought patterns of how you were thinking about.

**Asheesh Advani:** Oh, absolutely.

**Whitney Johnson:** What you thought was possible.

**Asheesh Advani:** I'll give you another example. So we convinced, he had a summer job for an investment bank called Raymond James. It's still around. And you must know this because you're in the industry in the past. So, Raymond James, it's one of the top brokerage and research organizations in the investment management industry and investment banking, really. And so, at that time, you know, India was just deregulating. So, we convinced Tom James, who at the time was CEO of Raymond James, to let us go to India and basically negotiate a joint venture, or I think the way we phrased it to him was do a feasibility study, but we, so we, quote, dropped out of college in our junior year and we told our parents we were doing study abroad. We told the university we're taking a leave of absence. But I guess strictly speaking, we were just gone, and we went to India, and we start to meet Indian industrialists with little business cards we printed saying that we were representing Raymond James in India, and we did a whole bunch. I met Ratan Tata, who's like one of the great industrialists of our age, and he gave us time. We sort of flew the Wharton flag a little bit and dropped some names. And we got into all these meetings, and I think we met like 10 or 20 of the most interesting business leaders of the age. And because we were one of the first US investment banks looking at partnering there.

**Asheesh Advani:** So, it was the right time, right place. And we did a deal with, ironically, my wife's college roommate's uncle was somebody who met us, and he ran a very successful brokerage firm where he and his partner did. And so, Raymond James did a partnership with Asit and Samir Koppikar, Raymond James, and many years later got bought by Morgan Stanley and Nobel, to his credit, he actually, after graduation went and worked for and ran this joint venture. I was there just for the earliest stages where we were negotiating and but that's kind of like crazy stuff, which I don't think I ever would have done without the benefit of somebody like Nobel, sort of pushing me outside of my comfort zone. One of my favorite stories, Whitney, is we went to India and we're meeting Samir for the first time, and my knowledge of business beyond the little coursework I took was like watching *Family Ties* episodes. So, I kept asking myself, what would Alex P Keaton do in this circumstance? That was the source of wisdom. So, at one point we're having this dinner meeting, and I said, you know, Alex Keaton would make everyone take off their ties. So, I said, as a symbol of our partnership, I'd like us all to take off our ties. And it worked. Whitney, it worked. Everyone took off their ties and I went, oh my God, this stuff works.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I just, I don't even know. I don't even know. This is so fantastic. What's Nobel doing now?

**Asheesh Advani:** A Nobel is very successful. So, he became managing director at City, and then he went to Two Sigma, which is one of the biggest hedge funds in the world, and he was chief operating officer there for a while. Now he is running a quantitative hedge fund with a business partner called Numinous, which is very successful.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. So, this is a fixed principle, bringing it back to the framework because you think no matter what the circumstances are, you need to have people around you who push you to think beyond how your normal patterns of thinking. Is that right?



**Asheesh Advani:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. So, you had him. He's kind of saying, think bigger, helping you disrupt your patterns. Was there anything that was kind of stabilizing you as you were going through all this so that you didn't go, like off the rails too much?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, my now wife, then girlfriend Helen was definitely, especially compared to Nobel, a stabilizing feature in my life. I mean, she's ambitious in her own ways, but it was wonderful to have. Like, for example, I went to Nobel's wedding, and the day before his wedding, we were sailing in Bombay harbor. He got married to an Indian woman, and he wanted to jump in Bombay harbor, and he dared me to jump in. And Helen at the time just dug her nails into my arm and saying, this is like the most polluted harbor. We're getting on a plane after this wedding. I do not want you getting sick. It would be really, really stupid. And for him as well. But before his wedding. But that's the kind of crazy stuff that he would push me to do. So, you need people who are your guardrail, people who keep you, sort of grounded. And I think Helen pushes me in different ways, but certainly compared to Nobel, I would say she's been the grounding influence. Yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** Love it. Okay, so that's your fix. Now let's go to flexible. So, I'm putting in my coin. Here's the story I want on this one. Leave them wanting more. You told a story about pitching business. Um talk about that principle of leaving them wanting more. And why is that a flexible principle?

**Asheesh Advani:** So, Mark Thompson is our common friend, is the one who really helped me refine and develop this one. He actually had his own contribution in that part of the book about his own, leave them wanting more. But for me, the way it worked for me is, you know, when I was raising money for my early businesses, I realized that I was really never going to be able to meet somebody and close an investment in one meeting. So that meant that the goal of the first meeting really was to get a second meeting. That was the only goal of the first meeting. In fact, everything else was a detail. Of course, getting along with people and communicating with them honestly about what you're doing, etc. is important. The goal, though, was really to get a second meeting because that's how the relationship would get built to lead to a yes over time. And by the way, that's still true even now in my role here, where I'm also, you know, working with a great team to raise resources for junior achievement, it's unlikely in the first meeting that somebody is going to be philanthropically motivated to give to the organization substantially. So, everything's about relationship building.

**Asheesh Advani:** So how do you end that first meeting with anticipation on their part to want a second meeting? And then how do you under promise and overdeliver when you have that second meeting? So over time, through lots of trial and error, I realized that everybody, particularly when you're raising money for a for profit venture backed for profit, you need to have some milestones because the organization obviously is too young to be able to have milestones that are purely financial, where you can show audited financial statements of how much progress you've made, you know, quarter to quarter, year to year. So, the milestones have to be something that's more qualitative. So, we would set a slide in every presentation we made to these pitches. And I would say here are the things I want to accomplish. And intentionally I would leave some things that I knew I was going to get done or frankly, already pretty well gotten done, that I would then not check the box on in case they said, yeah, I want to meet with you and I want I want to meet with you next week because I want to be able to show progress between meetings, because at the end of the day, people are investing in you.

**Asheesh Advani:** They're not investing in the idea. They're investing in you and your ability to actually execute. So how do you convey that to people in these short time frames? So, we just have these milestone slides, and we leave a bunch of things unchecked. We always had one thing checked just to show it was like a progress to an end where you had some results already, and it really helped because it got us it. And the reason it's flexible is it really depends on what you're doing. Obviously, at JA, we have a very different risk profile than these startups, so I couldn't do things like that. There's a much larger enterprise and also depends on your sort of where you are in your achievement journey. When you're really early and you're trying to prove yourself. These types of techniques are very helpful when you're in a later stage of your career and you have more to lose, frankly, and your risk profile changes, you know you can't have that kind of a milestone slide. It's a very different way to show that you're good at execution. So that's why I would put it in the flexible category. Not in the fixed category.

**Whitney Johnson:** Interesting. Okay. So, it's going to be you need to be able to show progress. But what that looks like and how you demonstrate it's going to look very different depending on where you are in your career. Okay.

**Asheesh Advani:** Absolutely.

**Whitney Johnson:** Great story. All right. So, freestyle story, naive audacity, embrace your cluelessness, which I love because as you know, I think about I think of the world in s curves. And so, this one really maps nicely to being embrace the fact that you are at the launch point of the curve, and you have no idea what you are doing, mostly. So, what's your story there?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, I will say this is one of the lessons that I found has resonated most with people, partly because I think almost everyone is insecure about their knowledge curve. They all feel they don't know enough before they do something, certainly before they quit their job and launch a business. I don't know anyone who's ever said, geez, I know everything, I am ready, I'm going to launch this. I have all the confidence and wisdom to go. So, everyone has some degree of I'll use the word insecurity, but you use a different word. And for me, I in my mind started to reframe that as a strength. Right? So, when I launched my first business, Circle Lending, I didn't know anything about lending money or about the regulatory nature of it being state by state in this country and all the complexity of building an internet business, let alone one which was a fintech business before fintech existed. I mean, we coined the term social lending in the *New York Times* when they did an article about us, just to give you a sense of how early we were in the life cycle of all these wonderfully innovative fintech companies that have come since. And so, when you embrace your inexperience, it allows you to actually be more ambitious. So, we would say things like, we're building an alternative to the banking industry. I mean, which is a little bit ludicrous to say now, but at the time, remember the early days of the internet? Yeah, it felt like we could actually do that, right? Never doubt that a small group of people can do things that change the world. You've heard that quote. Well, we were 15 people, and we were very ambitious about thinking about the change we were bringing to the world and society.

**Asheesh Advani:** We were lowering the cost of capital. We were making repayment flexible because people could borrow money off individuals who didn't securitize the loans. So, the reason people can't miss their mortgage payments, by the way, is not because the banks don't want to let you. It's because they've securitized the mortgages and sold them to somebody else in a package. So of course, one person can't miss their payments without triggering all sorts of consequences. But if you lose your job, you're still really going to be good for the money, because in six months you're going to have a new job and you're highly educated. And of course, the world is going to, you know, kind of reward you for your education. There's no reason you should fall into default and foreclose on your home, right? So, we did things like we allowed people to miss payments and restructure mortgages with complete flexibility. If they lost their job, we were like, sure, no problem. As long as your individual lender agrees, we'll do all the paperwork. In fact, it became a revenue, a revenue source for us because we charged a little bit for the restructuring as well. So, but I'll just give you that example because we didn't know what we didn't know. So, we figured we could go ahead and change it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Right.

**Asheesh Advani:** And so that's the term naive audacity. And I think over the course of my career, and once again, I don't know if this is just my reframing or whether it was true in the time, but I really do believe that when you enter industries or enter jobs where you don't have all the information, you can position it as a weakness or a strength. And I definitely feel particularly in entrepreneurship, it can be a strength.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, for sure. Mm. So good. All right. And there was a quote in there I don't remember exactly where it was, but it was something that Marshall said. You can tell me if you remember where, but this just really stuck for me. Self-efficacy is born from personal responsibility.

**Asheesh Advani:** Yes, I love this quote too. That's why I think it's in there a couple of times. So self-efficacy, first of all, is more than self-confidence. It's more than self-belief. It is this unshakable belief that you will succeed despite the hardships and roadblocks in front of you. And that level of confidence is something which you can

learn and something which can be taught. So, you can actually develop that, particularly if you start at a young age of developing this unshakable belief, which you actually are going to need if you're going to have 20 jobs and seven careers. Let's be frank, some of them are going to be involuntary transitions, like you're going to be fired a few times in your life, right? So, in our generation, you know, that was hard for people to take. Now it's going to happen, and people have to be able to embrace it and look at the positive in it, not just the negative in it. And so, I think this is something which Marshall also realizes. And he's, he's made it so that you can actually look at self-efficacy as something which is up to you to create. It's sort of your responsibility as opposed to your school will teach it to you or you're going to get it from somewhere else.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. For sure. Yeah. And I mean, this goes, and I think you even talk about this in the book of like, Martin Seligman and flourishing and how the only way you can really flourish is this idea of personal responsibility. And if you if you truly take responsibility for your life, you will feel self-efficacy. I don't know, how do you say that. Self-efficacious?

**Asheesh Advani:** Self efficacious.

**Whitney Johnson:** Self efficacious. If you do that. So, I just love that quote. And I wanted to call that out. So, as you think about this book being out in the world, what's your call to action? What's your hope for this? What job are you hiring this book to do?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, I think the first thing which I wrote it for was really because I think young people have been trained through their schooling system to be very focused on these shiny objects, like good grades, like doing the right activities to get into college and to check all these boxes. But in reality, when you enter the workforce, it's such a different set of skills that you need, particularly if you're going to have multiple jobs and multiple careers. So, the real goal of the book, I think, was originally focused on preparing young people for a future that's going to have a lot of change and making sure that they embrace this idea of the journey and the process being just as important as goal attainment.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mhm. Okay. And that's why you wrote the book. What book are people actually hiring it to do now that it's out in the world?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, you know, one thing I've learned is that while the book was written for a younger audience. Older audiences love it just as much, maybe even more. And that's because when a book is not written to give you advice for yourself, it's written for advice for somebody else. You embrace the book differently. If you're an older person and the book is written for a younger audience, you're like, oh, I like this lesson. I like that lesson. That one resonates with me. You get to pick and choose, and it's so much less you approach it with less defensiveness, I think. And so I, you know, this book, I'm not sure if you saw some of Marshall Goldsmith's social media posts about this, but number one in the US, Canada and UK and it's categories on Amazon, top ten in India, international bestseller in less than a month Whitney. So, I am shocked, frankly. Really. I mean genuinely shocked that it resonated with these older audiences that it really wasn't originally written for.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, so good. All right. What's been useful for you in this conversation as we wrap up?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, I haven't told the story about Nobel Gulati in a long time. It's in the book, but I haven't had to share it verbally. So that was a fun, fun memory to relive. But, you know, you've reminded me, frankly, about many of the reasons why I wrote this and what energizes me about it. So that's been wonderful. Thank you.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh. You're welcome. All right. Final thoughts. Words to both the youth and the parents of the youth that you wrote this book to.

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, there's a wonderful. So, first of all, I haven't mentioned that Ayse Birsal is the illustrator of the book. We both know Ayse. She's an amazing designer, amazing woman. And she, this is the first time she's ever illustrated a third, you know, a book written by somebody else, not her. And I think there's a graphic in the book about purpose. And I want to end on this note, because a lot of parents and frankly, a lot of young people, but particularly parents. They think that they the kids have to have their life purpose pretty early in their careers.

And the reason they think that is, they think purpose should guide all choices. Which sounds wonderful. It sounds great. You know, it sounds great in a blog post or in a social media post. But in reality, a lot of young people don't have enough experience to actually have a core life purpose. So, what Ayse has is this wonderful illustration in the book of ready-made purpose moving to self-made purpose. And I love it. And I've made presentations about the book several times now. And inevitably there's a parent in the audience who comes up to me afterwards, who talks about their kids and how they want their kids to move in a certain direction around a certain purpose. And the advice I always give them is in the early career, they're going to have self-made purpose their employer, their university, perhaps their social network Perhaps their parents will tell them, you know what? Some of these elements of purpose are...

**Whitney Johnson:** The ready-made early in their career.

**Asheesh Advani:** Ready-made? Yeah. The ready-made. And eventually they're going to move from ready-made purpose to self-made purpose. And it happens for people at different times of their life according to age. That's what midlife really is. Your midlife crisis could be the moment where you move from ready made to self-made purpose. And I do think there's a lot of validity to this, because I think it happens for different people at different times. I mean, if you're, oh, goodness, the Swedish young woman who's focused on climate change, Greta Thunberg. So, Greta Thunberg has herself made purpose at a very young age. But most young people are not Greta Thunberg. They just don't have that yet. So, to impose upon them, frankly, your need, your parental need for clarity or purpose is actually very challenging, and it could get in the way of the plethora of experiences they need to get to the point where they truly believe in their self-made purpose.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, so here's my actual final question. What is your self-made purpose?

**Asheesh Advani:** Well, now it's much clearer to me, much clearer to me. And that is to help people realize their full potential. I mean, I'm doing it in ways that I love at JA. It's such an amazing organization. I have a privilege of, you know, working with some amazing colleagues. I get to do podcasts like this, but there's thousands, literally thousands of JA volunteers, staff members and board members who are making it happen. And it's as energizing for me to spend time with them because they're fulfilling their purpose, too, as it is for me to spend time with the young people who I get to see up close and personal, actually growing.

**Whitney Johnson:** Asheesh, this has been delightful.

**Asheesh Advani:** Thank you. Whitney. I'm so glad. We didn't get a chance to talk about your contribution. But thank you so much for contributing your own personal story to the book and being so focused. In fact, I just read your chapter before this and it reminded me, frankly, that it's an area of growth for me. So, thank you, Whitney.

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There were so many great takeaways in our conversation. I loved how Asheesh connected the dots between the entrepreneurial hope and preparation of our kids to overall economic prosperity and progress in their communities. He also brought home the point of surrounding yourself with people who inspire you to greater challenges and S Curves. In Asheesh's case, his collegiate friend Nobel not only pushed him toward taming challenging loads of coursework but also disrupted his patterns of thought and problem-solving as to what is possible in business. And, finally, the fixed, flexible, and freestyle framework. Things that are fixed don't change. The things that are flexible are typically based on time or place. But many things are freestyle, meaning that they are unique to the individual.

To learn more about this framework, take a look at Asheesh's new book -- it's titled *Modern Achievement: A New Approach to Timeless Lessons for Aspiring Leaders*. For more insight from Asheesh, check out our previous podcast

discussion in [Episode 91](#). If you're looking for ways to redefine success, I'd recommend [Episode 267](#) with Marshall Goldsmith, who co-authored this book. And for more on self-improvement, take a listen to my talk with Bob Proctor in [Episode 208](#). (Who happily I met -- when I spoke on a JA panel several years ago.)

Thank you again to Asheesh Advani and thank you for listening. If you have a function that needs to improve, a process you need to implement, and you need a high-performing team to do that, we at Disruption Advisors can help. You can reach us at [workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com](mailto:workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com).

Thank you to our producer, Dave Mecham, our senior editor, Doug Fox, our production assistant, Etta King, and our production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been *Disrupt Yourself*.