

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 307: ANDRE MENEZES

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you grow your people to grow your organization because organizations don't disrupt; people do. And the building block of that growth. It's you. In order to be productively disruptive, to innovate, we look at things from different perspectives and push boundaries. That's what the Brazilian-born CEO and co-founder of Next Gen Foods, Andre Menezes, is setting out to do. He's on a mission to reinvent how food moves from the field to kitchen. Andre was the CEO of a food distribution company when he realized that farming inefficiencies and a fast-growing increase in meat consumption would mean that it would be nearly impossible to sustain future global meat demands. He's on a quest to make plant-based food so good. So meat like that for meat lovers like me, we will eat it, we will like it, and know we're doing something good for our planet in the process. He's an impressive no limits entrepreneur and a delightful human being. Enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, Andre, will you share with us a story about when you were growing up, something that was formative, that will give us a sense of who you are?

Andre Menezes: The funniest thing I remember partially, but I also I was told by my mom, obviously. Is when I was about four or five years old, and I had a complaint, you know, I came back home, and I was complaining to my mom that I was not liking school anymore because it has moved from that kindergarten, like, you know, all free playing and all that to a proper school setup. In which you've got to sit and really pay attention to the lessons and classes. But, and I was very dissatisfied with that is such a disruption, right, for a four-year-old, and my mom could one just tell me that's, you know, that's what it is. You'll get used to it. Or she could have said, maybe let me try to solve it for you, or what she has done, which is highly unusual, I would say, is that she told me. So, we're going to schedule a meeting, and you're going to talk to the supervisor, and you're going to convince her that this is important, and you're going to propose a solution to her. And obviously, back end, what she's done is that probably she went to talk to the supervisor, and she didn't tell me. I scheduled a meeting. I was there like four and a half, five years old, whatever. And during that meeting, I convinced the school to relook at the way they were teaching that four-year-old class. And that, in fact, they changed the way they do it just to be less disruptive for the kids. And there I was, four and a half years old, trying to solve my problems, being incentivized, and supported by my mom. But in a way that I was taking ownership and not feeling it was not possible to be a protagonist of it.

Whitney Johnson: That's amazing. Have you talked to your mom about that? You have, right? It's probably family lore at this point.

Andre Menezes: Yeah. And it's, I mean, she's a psychologist. I think she knows what she was doing. But, you know, that's obviously very small. I was, you know, a tiny kid. But I think that I can see so many times that that behavior has been present in my life across the board, professionally or personally. That I think if I were to relate back to that first moment in which that behavior of mine came across, that would be it.

Whitney Johnson: So, this behavior of, I have the power to come up with an innovative solution and solve a problem.

Andre Menezes: Yeah. And if someone can do it, why can't I? So, basically, not being a victim of the context or whatever, but really having a protagonism over whatever. If it's logical, if I have an argument, if there is a reason, if I can convince people that that's how my view makes sense and I can, why not? So, basically, your boundaries become much less restricted, basically. Right? Which is true and very important in our professional lives, obviously, and also, private for sure.

Whitney Johnson: All right. Well, shout out to your mom and shout out to you. It's fantastic. All right. So, you're four or five years old. Can you just talk us through briefly where you grew up? Just kind of give us a quick drive-by of your background that gets us to the origin story of your current business.

Andre Menezes: I was born in Brazil, and I lived in Brazil most of my life, and she was like, I guess, 27 years old. My family is mixed between Brazil and Italian, so I'm a dual citizen, you know, average, normal Brazilian middle class. I was lucky enough within that context that my parents were able to afford a good education. Which in a country like Brazil, it's not, unfortunately, it's not the rule. That has given me a very strong basis of understanding of various topics in preparing me to be not only within that ecosystem of Brazil, my hometown, and all that but obviously to be open to the world. So, that was a very important point for me as a background. I have had the opportunity to. When I actually started university mechanical engineering, and I realized very quickly that I didn't want to become an engineer or that I didn't want to just pursue that traditional career. And I started a company that was kind of own. It was a small kind of a company, not really a company that was a seed in there that was owned by my father together with two brothers, and they were doing equipment rental for large infrastructure projects like trucks and tractors, and none of them were actually working for this company, although they had it. So, it was basically one piece of equipment sitting there being rented on commission to someone else. Right. I actually got that during my university as I realized I didn't want to pursue a traditional career, and I always loved that entrepreneurial drive. I had a chance of starting up that business really as a business, and I did grow it up from one piece of equipment to maybe ten or 11, I don't know. But the biggest thing there for me was that it was big enough. So, my father could quit his corporate job and be employed by his own company, which was a long dream of his. And he did never want to take that step before because he was afraid of the downside, obviously getting out of the comfort zone.

Whitney Johnson: So, you're in college, so, you and your dad and your brothers have this idea for an equipment rental business. You end up being one of the leads on this business. You're able to grow from one piece of equipment to ten pieces of equipment, but it gets big enough that your dad can quit his day job and do this full-time. And yet it's your; it sounds like, in many ways, you were in the driver's seat making this possible. Is that is that accurate?

Andre Menezes: I was the only full-time person that, actually, yes. So, that's exactly right. In a way, I was, you know, that 21, 22-year-old just telling my father he should, typical millennial, right? That I should tell him that he should pursue his dreams. He always told me he wanted to be an entrepreneur, and he wanted to have that as a retirement plan, basically, but never really quit his corporate job. And there I was, telling him how he should do it. He should pursue his dreams and ambitions, and see, one day, he came back to me and said, Well, if you're saying I should do it, why don't you do it then? And then I said, Can I really? And he was like, Well, as long as you don't mess up your studies too much and promise that you are not going to abandon it, of course, you can do it right. And then you're right. I took it from being that one single equipment. There was nothing, and then suddenly there was like proper, like ten-ish equipments being rented across, generating cash flow. And that obviously evolved from the

acquisition of equipment to the construction of headquarters, implementation of systems, and everything you can imagine.

Whitney Johnson: So, part of the conversation I hear you having is you're the millennial like, Dad; you need to chase your dreams. Your dad's like, Well, you need to chase your dream since you're telling me to chase your dreams, Oh, I'll chase my dreams. And like you're both pushing each other to be more and disrupt yourselves.

Andre Menezes: Yeah, exactly. And I was, in a way, very happy because, I don't know, back then, I was pushing him, and I was trying to incentivize him as if I, like, you know, just that drive idealistic drive to for him to pursue his ambitions. But he just turned it back to me, and I said, Wow, that makes sense. Again, why not? Right? And so I did. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So, you have that business, and you're 22 years old, so keep going.

Andre Menezes: Still running until today. I'm very happy with that. It actually became the kind of the retirement for my father and my two uncles. So, that's definitely, yeah, it was it was one of those life-changing experiences I had and was really good. But that stopped when I decided that I wanted to. That was, although I really loved what I was doing, I wanted to expand my horizon and lead an international career. I never really liked being stuck in one perspective. I think I'm very much about perspectives, and to me one of the things I could do to broaden my perspectives and ability to relate to different cultures was to live abroad. And so, you know, I decided, why don't I, instead of seeking for an internship in Brazil, as in university as everyone would do, can I just try to get an internship abroad? And my brother was then working for Siemens in Germany, and all I asked him is like, Can you connect me with someone who I could potentially just study for a while, possibly for a semester, and do a full-time internship there? So, I did, and I applied for it, and I got it. And they were incredibly kind to support that crazy foreigner coming with poor language skills in Germany, in German. So, I went.

Andre Menezes: It was another life-changing experience for me because, you know, living abroad, different culture, different environment, working full time for the first time within a company. I learned a lot, and that changed my life again. So, a big shout out to my brother there, obviously, for enabling that. I came back to Brazil and finished my studies. By then, I knew that I wanted to pursue a career that was not classic corporate, and I also knew I would want it to be global, based on those two things. Right? I went to work for a private equity firm, just like, you know, that's something that I needed to learn according to my perspectives. I wanted to learn about the capital perspective, about how do investors think that was completely foreign to me. I have never had any contact. I didn't even know what private equity was when I joined a private equity firm. To be frank, I was the outsider coming from engineering school. It was a great experience, fantastic life-changing again. I had a chance to work with the founder and CEO of that fund, incredible, talented guy Pedro Faria. From that journey, I started as an investment analyst covering a meat company. That meat company, then I decided to join and work inside it really to understand the operation.

Andre Menezes: So, I learned the investment angle. I wanted to understand the operational angle. So, I went to work for really get my hands dirty in operations all the way down supply chain farm to fork in the meat industry. Partially in Brazil, working with supply chain from farms to exports, let's say this way. And then, in line with my global ambitions and careers, I did seek for a posting abroad. BRF was back then expanding in many geographies, and one of them they had a few things going on in Asia, very nascent, and one of them was a joint venture signed in Singapore. Which I signed up to join because I knew it was a, it was a big challenge for the company, to it was a turnaround case. It was a big challenge. No one really wanted to go there. And to me, that sounded like an opportunity. So, I went to that. You know, during Singapore, that company, that joint venture, was the largest food distribution company in Singapore. And I literally learned all the rest of the value chain from imports to distribution of meat in to supermarkets or kitchens. That was obviously a very important step of my journey. I ended up leading that company after a couple of years. It was a very successful turnaround.

Whitney Johnson: So, you left the company, or you led the company?

Andre Menezes: I was leading it.

Whitney Johnson: You were leading it. Okay. All right.

Andre Menezes: I went as a consultant, supply chain consultant, and then very soon took over sales director or whatever. And then, I was growing until the CO retired, and I replaced him. So, that was a successful turnaround. And one of the things, though, that happened to me is that I was combining everything I've learned from my investor perspective on the meat industry, plus everything I learned from farm to fork. And I reached the conclusion that although meat is loved by all of us, taste and texture-wise, it was not a future. And we cannot really feed 10 billion people with growing consumption per capita of meat coming from animals in 2050. Then, you know, loving meat as much as I do and understanding how people really do love meat. I needed to be convinced that there was another option other than just basically telling people just to eat veggies or making the price so expensive that only a few people would have access and the rest wouldn't. That's how I got connected with the plant-based sector. I started bringing some brands to Singapore as part of that journey, still to the meat distribution company. I was bringing in some plant-based into it. Until again, that moment of myself questioning myself, Well, wait a minute. If you know, if I see all those companies doing great progress, why can't I do it right? So, I decided to quit my job, which I had no reason to do. It was a great career other than the drive to build a business. And then I decided to start. Serendipity happened, and Timo, my business partner, he was selling his first venture in this space, plant-based meats in Germany, and we started a company right then, together, in Singapore. Now, fast forward two and a half years, we have raised \$130 million. We are in about nine countries right now, but the main ones are US, UK, and Germany. And yeah, we are about 70 people in the company right now, and we're growing. So, still early stage, it's a very challenging space, very nascent, but it's going on.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, what are what, what are the core elements that you're building your business around? I understand you've got three core elements. What are those elements?

Andre Menezes: Yeah, we, back in 2020, when we were designing the business. We, given the fact that we're already experienced in business, we wanted to design a business. You know, one of the biggest mistakes that you can see that startup founders do, is that they are so passionate about the product or the technology or the brand or whatever, that they are single-minded about that, and they forget about the fact that what they're doing is actually a business. We started from a business. We had a mission in mind to try to accelerate the replacement of animal farming. And that was the mission, right? You know, in a way, that was a pleasure, not a pain. And then, with that mission in mind, we designed what are the key aspects of the business elements. And then we decided on three things only. One is obviously product R&D, technology, and product R&D because, at the end of the day, it has to taste great. It has to be nutritious and healthy. So, that's number one. Number two, brand communication, why is that so important? Meat We don't think about that this way, but meat has a very strong brand. You don't need to explain to anyone that meat is good. People already like it and respect it. So, meat as a category has a very strong attachment, emotional attachment to consumers, and that is what I'm calling brand here. And we, for plant-based, we need to build that as a category. And the category has, in fact, has been for so long associated with terrible taste and cardboard that that becomes a very relevant piece, education number two. And then number three, you know, kind of the business IP portion is that if we're not doing the factory of manufacturing ourselves, if we're not doing distribution ourselves, what how do we manage all those partners in the network, the business network we are going to have to operate the business with? Those are the three key elements we do only. So, we're completely asset-light.

Whitney Johnson: Let me recap. So, it needs to taste good. You've got to build a brand for plant-based meat, and then how are you going to manage your partners across the supply chain?

Andre Menezes: How do you scale, basically?

Whitney Johnson: How do you scale? Okay. Can you go back to Andre? Just recap really quickly. What was the question that you started with is that meat is not sustainable. So, what was your opening question that you had?

Andre Menezes: Yeah, for us, it was very clear that everyone loves meat. Meat consumption per capita increases as countries get more affluent, and families do get more affluent as well. But by 2050, with 10 billion people and obviously the incredibly resource-inefficient animal farming industry, there is no way we can keep growing meat production as we do today. So, the opening question that we had was like, okay, how do we fix it? Because what we really love about meat is the taste, the texture, and the recipes you can make out of it, but not the fact that it's coming

out of slaughtered carcasses. Right? Then that was how we started. Make our, yeah, we made our mission to do that a pleasure, not a pain. And we deliver on it with those three aspects.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, so. And what product did you come up with?

Andre Menezes: Yeah, in line with our vision of creating the biggest possible impact, we have looked at the meat consumption and what were the types of meat that were global because climate change is a global topic, and we couldn't afford to be local. Chicken comes highly ranked on that, and so does, with the fact that it's the most widely consumed animal protein, land animal protein, and it's also the fastest growing. So, global, fastest growing. And you know, around 60 billion birds are being slaughtered every year for human consumption only. Sounded like a great starting point for us. And we decided to create Tindle plant-based chicken to take on that market.

Whitney Johnson: How does it taste?

Andre Menezes: Like chicken.

Whitney Johnson: That was the right answer. Right? So, so, where are you in terms of the rollout of this product?

Andre Menezes: We're now present in about 1.5 thousand restaurants around the world and only restaurants right now. And the reason why we started with restaurants only was remember the second piece, the education. If I ask you or any of the listeners right now, what is your best food memory you have and the best food experience you have, I can bet a sizable amount of money that is going to be at a restaurant with friends and family or loved ones and very likely traveling. So, what this tells is that food is much more than just an ingredient. Food is a social aspect. It's so much more connected to our upbringing and the relevant social experiences to have. And we can't afford, in our view, just to launch nuggets that you can sit down with Netflix and eat in and think we're going to change the world with only that. That's why we started restaurants only just to raise the bar and educate consumers about how great plant-based meats could taste. And then, obviously, from there, we will go to supermarkets, which is something for 2023.

Whitney Johnson: So, you launched two and a half years ago.

Andre Menezes: We started a company two and a half years ago, and we launched for the first time in March 2021, only.

Whitney Johnson: I know you; you're privately held, so you can't reveal all of your statistics, but what are some of the? And you've said some, but like, can you give us an idea? You said you're in 1,500 restaurants, is that right?

Andre Menezes: That's right, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Can you give us an idea of, like, revenue, or what statistics can you share with us?

Andre Menezes: Yeah, we don't, we do not disclose revenue, but I think interesting data points that could, you just understand in terms of distribution where we are and how we're growing. Like, one year ago, we were in 150 restaurants, so we have 10X'ed year in year. Yes, from a small base. But you know, we only launched less.

Whitney Johnson: 10x is 10x.

Andre Menezes: Yes, 10x is 10x from a small base, but it is interesting. Another interesting data point is that we, one year ago, we were not in the US, we're not in the UK, and we're not in Germany. Those three markets right now represent over 85% - 90% of our business on a recurrent basis. So, that's very interesting as well. You know how new markets that were recently opened just become so meaningful for us. And we also have like 130 distributors selling things around the world right now, mostly US and Europe, but some in selected places in Asia.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, so you've 10x your number of restaurants. You're now in the United States. You weren't a year ago, and you've got 130 distributors. And a year ago, how many distributors did you have, roughly?

Andre Menezes: Five.

Whitney Johnson: Five. Okay. So, that's exponential growth.

Andre Menezes: Yeah, it's, it's impressive to see how, I mean, we had a strategic view on what markets to tackle. And obviously, back then, one year ago, we didn't even have the resources to do that because, obviously, the series a of 100 million was closed in February this year.

Whitney Johnson: Good for you, Series A.

Andre Menezes: Yes, it's the largest ever in this space.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Okay. So, you consider yourself a food startup, is that right?

Andre Menezes: Yes. But we're very clear that, you know, just the tech side of the food is not enough. You know, that's just an enabler. The product must taste good, and the texture must be great. But it's not, you know, it's still a business that has to be distributed and scaled, as the food business would. Then we're kind of like, let's say food technology for us is just an enabler for us to do the product that tastes good, which is an enabler for the rest.

Whitney Johnson: Your business is growing like gangbusters, but you have undoubtedly had some setbacks in the business. And I'm wondering if you can share one of those and just tell us how did it feel at the time and what's something positive or something that you learned as a consequence of that setback? Meaning how was that setback a setup for something good to happen?

Andre Menezes: It's interesting because, through my life setbacks, I never looked at them as setbacks. I just they are usually, and when I look back, there were setbacks that trigger something bigger coming and they were always great. But I never look back at them as setbacks in a negative way. But there were moments, obviously, and there are every days that are moments in which we're challenged, and that our assumptions may be just challenged in a way that we have. We are forced to reconsider and re-pivot. I think one of the things that could say right now that's very relevant to not only me but to any listener that is running a company right now. Is that, I don't need to share how capital markets have really contracted this year and how the mood has shifted from a very liquid environment with abundant capital. Which like Chris, one of your guests and our friend and advisor and a bit of investor as well has always said the blitzscaling, you know, mindset was so important. That was the reality until 2021 and early 2022. But with the current macro challenges this year, one major setback that the entire industry and I think the world is facing right now is how to deal with that new reality on capital markets. There are two ways of seeing, and one is to take a victim approach in which it would be just, you know, yeah, you know, oh my God, what do we do now? It's challenging, but, you know, that setback actually, from my perspective, makes us think about how to be more efficient, more sustainable as a business, how to be more really looking at optimizing the company. There are some negative things that come with it naturally, like, you know, the reduction of structure, having to let some people go, maybe giving up some markets that we were planning to launch so we can focus more. So the way we deal with setbacks to our original question is basically we look at them as an opportunity for us to improve. And I think that resilience is what keeps us going. Frankly, the setbacks happen every now and then.

Whitney Johnson: So, the obstacles you look at as opportunities to improve.

Andre Menezes: Absolutely. I mean, there is no way to solve death for all the other things in life. I believe there is something that we can do about it.

Whitney Johnson: I wanted to say thank you to your mother yet again because she set you up to be able to take this approach to the world. Right. Like, okay, what are you going to do? How are you going to figure it out? How are you going to deal with this? And just a quick note. I had forgotten about the Chris Yeh connection. So, to all our listeners will put a link in the show notes so that you can go back and listen to that episode as well. So, very fun. We actually, Andre, first connected. You shared with me that you were applying the S Curve of learning our framework in your work. And will you tell me more about how you applied it?

Andre Menezes: So, very interesting, actually, because, you know, when I first heard your podcast was when Chris Yeh commented on your post, and I really love his work and everything, big fan. And when I listened to his episode, I was like, Wow, this is a very strong podcast. And I started listening to all of your episodes. Since then, in my morning walks in Singapore and then after I moved to Chicago, the same thing. So, yeah, really grateful for all of that. And one of the things that came out of that, and I'm really, really grateful to you; it's that framework for the S Curve. It's so clear and easy to apply for so many aspects that I actually started using with the credits to in every single town we have with the company and every opportunity to have like I actually bring S Curves and where we are in each one of them and what's going to be the next one and what, how is it going to feel as we, as we enter the next one. And in general, we have realized that every three months, we have a very relevant S Curve. As a company, it feels overwhelming in the beginning. It feels really hard, and we don't know what to do as something new approaches. For example, how we're going to launch this.

Andre Menezes: We have no idea. We have never done this. We don't have basically anything. And then we start to get that clue on how to do it, how to solve it, how to work with, and then suddenly becomes that progression until we reach a stage in which we are already taking for granted everything that's done and up to the next one, then what's happening right now is we are preparing for launch in supermarkets, right? So, the same thing in the beginning, that anxiety. How is this going to work? We have to set up an entirely new supply chain for supermarkets, develop all the new products, and make sure everything is right, develop new packaging, labels, everything in multiple countries. So, I bring to the team, and I am able to communicate very clearly with them that over the next three months, this is how it's going to feel. And, you know, just keep your heads, you know, focus on solving the problems. It's going to be okay. This is going to feel hard in the beginning. We're going to master it, and we're going to move on and not even forget. I do that every single town hall. And it became just it's a slide that I don't change. I just move our dot across the desk here.

Whitney Johnson: You are here, right? Yeah. Yeah. And it's interesting to hearing you. I love how you're applying it collectively as a team, so you can obviously use it with individuals. But I like how you're saying, here's where we are collectively. We're going to feel this way as we go into supermarkets. And so, it normalizes the experience that your entire team is having. Do you find too, Andre, that people will use, or have they ingested this at all in terms of talking about their own individual experiences, like here I am on the S Curve. Do you find any of that?

Andre Menezes: Yeah, absolutely. Obviously, there are some team members that I work closely with, and they are more they're more comfortable being vulnerable and sharing that with me. And so, I am to those I have heard many times, you know, this is where I think I am in my S Curve. I'm feeling anxiety here. I don't know what to do with this new thing or new setup. And what I just mentioned about the setback on a market perspective, obviously, many people came to me, and they're like, Oh, what's this going to be like? And how, you know, what are the plans? I feel anxiety. I don't know if that's how we're going to go through it. And then after a while they come back and say, Hey, now I got it. Actually, that makes me so much more excited because now we can do it a much better way and then comes to a new normal, and then everything just comes for granted. I see that happening.

Whitney Johnson: So, I just want to clarify. So, supermarkets, you are going to launch a year ago, and that got postponed. Is that right?

Andre Menezes: No, it was the plan since the beginning to have only food services first and then go for supermarkets. The thing with supermarkets is that I mean, it's a new channel, and as a new channel, you need to have new products, new labels, new supply chains, and everything.

Whitney Johnson: From my perspective, you are, in many respects, in the sweet spot of the S, where you're going fast. It feels fast; it's exhilarating, it's exciting. And I'm sure that there are some places like you said, every few months you're also on a launch point. But as a business, you could argue that you're in the sweet spot. What are you doing to manage the stress and the strain of going so fast? How are you managing that, managing your energy, the resiliency that comes with going so quickly so that you don't derail?

Andre Menezes: That's a great question. And I told you right now I'm actually in Colorado taking some days off and now being in the nature skiing. And this is one of the things I do. I try to be very diligent on taking time off,

even if it's short like I'm taking four nights off, you know, and that I really shut off. I don't look at my emails. I don't respond to anything. And the reason why I do that is just to clear my mind and be able to look from that macro perspective again and see if we're not missing anything and the big picture. Because when you get out of the weeds and you, as you said, right, then you look at where we are. Like we're a company that we are blessed in a way. We're well-funded. We have great partners, we have great investors, we have a fantastic team. The traction has been great so far. It's a very challenging environment, but we are in a great situation. When you get out of the weeds and you look at where we are, you're just looking with a growth mindset and perspective. And one of the things I do is just to get out and look at it, make sure to be diligent about it.

Andre Menezes: That's one of the things I do very carefully. But what I do on a daily basis that I may sound like a crazy optimist that is looking at everything from a positive perspective. But in fact, I'm not necessarily an optimist all the time. And what I have learned that works really well to keep me on track and keep me with the optimist side on. And that drive is basically to go through potential worst-case scenarios. So, instead of being afraid of anything, what I realize is that for me, when I tackle worst-case scenarios, and I solve for them as if they were real, and I get comfortable with the solutions I have, suddenly I have a wide range of potential outcomes that I can imagine I get myself comfortable with. And that just gives me strength to not be worried, frankly, about the drive that we're going forward that keeps me positive and with growth mindset to proceed forward. While I'm not on a fearful way of anything that can go wrong because I already got myself comfortable with all of that.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, that's so interesting. Andre. So, because so many of us are very, very uncomfortable visualizing or imagining what could go wrong. How do you get your brain to be willing to do that?

Andre Menezes: The first time I got that happening was in 2018. It was a very challenging year for me. I mean, as a career is interesting because it was a brilliant year in which we're delivering turnaround in the company, the previous company. But at the same time, there were challenges involving shareholders and aspects that were out of my control. And I was living in Singapore. I didn't really want to leave Singapore, but I was kind of like, What is going to happen between the companies, a joint venture, one of the shareholders, and going through a major crisis. How is that going to turn out to be? And that year, I was forced to instead of just worrying, I was forced to plan, plan A, B, C, D, whatever you call it. And then, I realized that I was actually comfortable with any scenario I had. I really wrote them down, and I said, look, you know if this happens, what does it mean for me if B happens? What does it mean for me, and what would I do? And I'm a problem solver. So, I started seeing that as a problem-solving exercise, which excites me. And then suddenly, I was comfortable with any of the potential five outcomes I could imagine. And some are better in some aspects than others, but they were all good. And I got my brain to just learn how to do that. And I do that every day.

Whitney Johnson: I love that. So, what I think is interesting is we think a lot about the notion of visualization. And if, you know, whatever you focus on, you get more of. And so, one could start to argue, well, if you're thinking about what could go wrong, then you may make it happen. But what I hear you saying is you're just focusing on, okay, here are potential scenarios, and now I'm going to use my problem-solving ability to get out of it. And once I do that, it sounds like it becomes an exercise in innovation as well of, Oh, this could happen, and then we could do this. And you come up with ideas that you wouldn't have thought of otherwise. And I'm wondering, have you actually ever implemented some of these ideas, even when the, you know, that scenario, that worst case scenario didn't materialize?

Andre Menezes: Yeah. And one of them was this company that we are now running. Like. So, I yeah, it's interesting to say that because it's not at all like in a way to be focused on, you know, the best possible outcome. Not at all is just to give me a sense of one ability to understand all options out there, not being like narrowly oriented in that sense, but also to be able to step back and really look at everything that's possible. And, you know, the start of this company was part of that exercise in 2018 when I saw that things could go wrong with one of the shareholders, and it was happening. I didn't know how that would or not affect me and how that would not affect me staying and living in Singapore, a place that I really didn't want to leave. But I was there employed, you know, on a visa employment visa for that company. There were many aspects of professional private life combined, and I planned for a scenario in which I wouldn't need to rely on. And one of the scenarios I had to say, you know what, maybe why don't I start my own company? And that's one of the scenarios that I and then I started looking at say, well, this is not a backup plan. This is actually better than the original. Why don't I just do it? Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So, you turned a very large constraint into a tool creation, which I think is really compelling. What else are you doing to grow yourself, to grow your people?

Andre Menezes: That's a phenomenal point. And by the way, I love your book. I did read it after that, the new one. But yeah, I think for myself, one of the things I do that is has shown to be more powerful for my learning is that I try to surround myself with people who are much better than I am in one specific topic or many. You know, I don't take that anyone to be, you know, perfect in any in everything. But I do know that some people are incredible in communications, in strategy, in execution, in whatever. And I do surround myself with people that are much better than I am in each one of those things. And then I try to learn from them, not specifics, but I try to learn about the way they think. And that's one of the things to me that has allowed me to grow, you know, better than anything else. So, basically learning how to learn. But from a perspective point of view, like not from specific skills, I think that's one thing I keep doing to myself, and I keep it's interesting because the more we go into this journey, the more create people we get connected to, the more I learn, and the more my networks are stronger and the more I can absorb and learn from that. So, that's one thing I do to me that I think it's the most powerful.

Whitney Johnson: You have a business partner, is that right? Yeah. What do you learn from your business partner?

Andre Menezes: When I say that, I'm not always an optimist. He actually is. Right. So, he is someone who thinks completely without boundaries every single time. And one of the things I learned with him is this like is if you think something's crazy, you know, he doesn't. And, you know, together he can think really totally without boundaries and very on an always on a very positive way. And where I come in very nicely that I can then, together with him, think of how we can actually achieve that crazy ambition. Right. So, what I learned from him all the time is that that drive and, you know, just that inspiration about why not. Right? Again, but on a much bigger way, in a much broader way than I have ever done previously. Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: All right. And then the two of you. So, he takes your instinct to do that, 10Xs that, and then you've got the whole execution capacity because of your training, both as an operator, as an investor, as an entrepreneur. And then the two of you put that together and build.

Andre Menezes: Yeah, it's fascinating because, yeah, I was always the craziest person around, and I was the one thinking without boundaries until I met him. And then yes, he 10Xs that, so that's, that's exactly right. One of the most powerful things, which I also have learned more with my business partner, was the importance of self-awareness and how powerful it is to really understand. Now that I'm talking to you about how I know I can go to a place of fear, you know, if I don't, that is self-awareness at the end of the day, I know how I behave in a certain set of elements and, and then with that self-awareness, I can work on them. So, that's one thing for me that's very important. And I do it all the time. And in terms of the team in the people, like, frankly, this is the most important thing for any company. A company is basically a group of people moving together towards a set objective. And that's what a company really is, right? Especially in our case, we are asset-light. Our value is not, you know, in machinery and cement and buildings is basically in people. Right? So, the company transforms itself every six months, given the new markets, new realities, a new size. And what I'm seeing the most is that's the most helpful is how can I empower the team to learn, multiply, be comfortable with uncertainty, and be constantly guiding them, but not really guiding them, but really being able to listen and see how I can actually help them. Dealing with whatever challenges they're going through. Sometimes the technical small challenge, a big challenge, or sometimes is a feeling, anxiety, uncertainty. The bottom of the S Curve is basically. That's one of the most powerful things I can do with the team, and I have seen how that has enabled many of them to grow. And by having them growing, our company grows the ability to execute in a disproportional manner.

Whitney Johnson: As you think about building this business, apart from your business partner, is there anybody that you think about and you think, if that person weren't around and I'm going to exclude your family. Because I know you're going to say, I know you're going to say your family, your wife. But if they weren't around, who, from a professional context, would you not be able to do this without that person?

Andre Menezes: The team, the team members that actually started this together? Like, I think when we started in the beginning, you know, Gene, our CMO, John our CTO, Maria, our first employee. Like those guys, we were

together doing this when there was no one. And I don't see how we would be able to build what we have built today without each one of us, like, from Temo, my business partner, to myself and Gene and John, Maria. I think this special, it's the small group within a 70. Yes, all of the rest have been incredibly important to the journey. But those few, obviously, we were there when there was nothing and everything else that came after. It was a multiplication of the work of those. Right. So, to me, without those, we wouldn't be able to have done it.

Whitney Johnson: How many languages do you speak, by the way, and how many countries have you lived in? And how does that impact your ability to you talked about perspective. Tell us a little bit more.

Andre Menezes: Well, I lived in Brazil, Germany, Singapore, and now the US. I used to speak German. It's probably gone by now, ten years in. And I do speak Spanish, English, and Portuguese, naturally. And I do understand Italian. So very basic. But you're talking about perspectives. Nothing is as powerful to me as in terms of broadening your perspectives and your ability to understand other people, other cultures in the world, as living abroad. And dealing with, really, when I say living abroad is like really getting yourself ingrained into different cultures. Not living in a bubble ex-pat bubble somewhere, but really connecting deeply in each one of those. At first, it feels weird and strange because that's the first one we get out of our own perspective, paradigm or cultural paradigm. Everything feels strange and weird, but later able to actually detach, and you're able to learn every single culture, including our own original one aspects of them. And to me, that's so powerful. It just adds a lens to your ability to have different perspectives. And this is so good for personal, and professional life. Comes with one side effect usually is that, you know, people who went through that, usually they don't know where it's home anymore, and they don't feel at home anywhere. I do feel this way. Singapore is the place where today feels more like home to me. When I'm landing in Brazil. I don't really feel it's home to me when I'm there. I love the country. I love the people. My family is there. US is home to me right now, is where I'm living, but the place where I land. And I feel like I really get this place. I really understand it, and I feel welcomed, and I feel like this is the place where I'm from that I, you know, it's Singapore, which is interesting, right? My family is not there. It's far away. But it's just that connection.

Whitney Johnson: So powerful. And I think about I think I told you; I lived in Uruguay for a year and a half and had that experience of for a good portion of it not being around any English speakers and just speaking Spanish, and because of that, and I think you would probably say the same thing. I have a deep, deep love for the language for the people because I was immersed in that. And I think to your point about perspective, when you go to a different place, when you do learn the language, you feel differently about the people that you're with. And it allows you to, the perspective-taking to do the empathy piece. It's so important as a person, but also certainly as an entrepreneur.

Andre Menezes: Exactly.

Whitney Johnson: What's been useful for you in this conversation?

Andre Menezes: I mean, just like, you know, countless episodes I've listened from your podcast, it's incredible how you're able to. Read what I'm saying. Telling you the stories and the things and then structure it in a way that actually in a way that I haven't been able to do it before. And that is so enlightening. So, the way you connect back the stories about behaviors and where they did it really come from. How that has affected my life and how my behaviors shape the way I operate. I think, you know, you're able to do that in a very interesting way. And that's what I felt today throughout our conversation. It's just that ability to dig in on whatever I'm saying, find the meaning, understand where it's coming from, how it affects me. And this is so powerful with me. It's great.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts.

Andre Menezes: I just really want to thank you for the opportunity to be here. It's about a year ago, I guess is when we when I first heard the Chris podcast, its probably about a year ago. I've been a big fan of your podcast since then. Listening to all the episodes, it's been really very important to understand many things from your guests, and that I could relate to. And it's a pleasure to be here with you today, sharing more about my life and who I am, and how my business is. And I just hope the listeners could take something useful out of it.

Whitney Johnson: Andre, thank you.

Andre Menezes: Thank you.

Thank you again to Andre Menezes, CEO, and co-founder of Next Gen Foods. Let's touch on three things that I wrote down from our talk. First of all, I wrote down how Andre uses the S Curve in his company's town halls, charting where on the curve they are. And his awareness that there is a new curve for the company about every three months. Which makes it easier for the company to move forward, like with launching into supermarkets.

Second, how Andre talked about solving your worst-case scenarios one by one, just like any big problem-solving exercise, figure them out like they're real. Like you have no other choice but to push through. It's terrifying. But you'll end up with a stack of solutions as high as the problems you've identified. Last thing. Learn, learn, and learn some more. Each S Curve leads to the next one, and learning is the way to do it. Because Andre is always aware of the curve and where he is on it. That perspective helps him manage his emotions. It helps him grow.

As for further listening, we recommend futurist Amy Webb, who talks about synthetic biology, including food. [Episode 261](#). Chris Yeh, coauthor of *Blitzscaling* with Reid Hoffman and who sits on Andre's advisory board, [Episode 221](#). And the inimitable Bob Proctor, [Episode 244](#) on mindset. Thank you again to Andre for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, hit subscribe, so you don't miss a single episode, and share it if you know of someone who would find it useful. Thank you to our producer, Justin LeVrier, audio engineer Whitney Jobe, Stephanie Brummel, and Alexandre Turk, production assistants, and production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.