

# In The Trenches\_ Conversation with Aaron Houghton

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Entrepreneurship, mental health, stress management, Aaron Houghton, Eye Contact, serial entrepreneur, burnout, optimal pace, human performance, cancer diagnosis, angel investing, business exit, work-life balance, high pressure, resilience., Optimal pace, maximum productivity, engine red line, impact, motivation, health journey, legacy, recovery protocol, neuroscience executive, definition of success, personal growth, adversity, courage, high pressure, leadership.

## **SPEAKERS**

Steve Divitkos, Aaron Houghton

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**S****Steve Divitkos 00:00**

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**A****Aaron Houghton 03:35**

Thanks, Steve. Great to be here.

**S****Steve Divitkos 03:38**

It's a real treat to have you. As you know, I've been pestering you for a number of months. I'm thrilled to get the opportunity to speak with you. Let's start with the easy one. Just walk us through your story. Walk us through the chronology of your career, some of the major stops along the way, and what you're doing today.

**A****Aaron Houghton 03:55**

I have been an entrepreneur for a very long time, and this is, you know, we'll talk some more about, I think, the mental health components of this later. So I'll start by using the word, like addicted to the to the game of being an entrepreneur. I love it. It's my favorite thing to do. Entrepreneurs are my favorite people. And I have built a dozen or so companies over almost 30 years now, and at 44 years old now, that tells you that I started really, really early. And I did. I started building my first companies when I was a teenager, growing up in a small town in western North Carolina, and trying to figure out how I would have money to, like, put gas in my car as a 14, 15, year old, and I was mowing lawns in the hot southern summer heat, and I made a business card, and I have asthma, and it was brutal. I was like, this is an awful way to make money. I wonder if there's a better way to do this. I couldn't breathe, about to pass out in the heat, mowing neighbor's lawns. Other than that, it was great. I think I got, like, 25 bucks a lawn. So you know the. Payback was huge as a teenager. This is a long time ago, and so I started trying to, you know, figure out if there was something else. And my dad, who was a professor of education at the time, actually put this, like printed out paper report in front of me, and it changed the trajectory of my life. And it was like 40 pages of how to start a web design business in 1997 and so this was a really early kind of concept of, like, what is a web design business? And he said, All right, you've been kind of like tinkering with computers a little bit and learning some early HTML. There's a way to actually make a business out of this. And the first question we had to ask was, can you own a business if you're not 18 years old in the US? Do you know the answer to that Steve?

**S****Steve Divitkos 05:47**

I have no idea.

**A****Aaron Houghton 05:48**

Yeah. I don't even remember the answer we came to at that time. But that was the first question of, like, can I actually own a business? I think my parents had to sign I think maybe we ran it as like a sole proprietorship for a while, and then later I incorporated a company. When I went off to college, it was an S corp, eventually. So here I am as this kid trying to, you know, figure out how to build this business for the first time. I live in a town of 2000 people in the middle of nowhere in western North Carolina, and I'm trying to kind of find my place in the world. And this little business turned into something great. I built a website for my basketball coach, I built a website for the local lumber supply company in town. And we were in a bit of a tourist market there, where people come up in the fall to see the leaves and stay in bed and

breakfasts and cottages. And so I started getting all these Bed and Breakfast and cottages and inns and small hotels and small resorts as clients who, for some reason, were allowing this teenager to come in and build a website for them. I'm sure they all thought I would fail, but I did a good job. Built websites, built marketing programs for them, started writing software, and then started writing software that would literally run companies. My first client, it was probably about 2000 2001 and I got the opportunity to build a piece of software that would run an entire business. This business was the software, and they knew what they wanted, and they actually had a bad version of it that wasn't working well, and they said, We need a version that works really, really well. Can you build something? And so I got paid \$25,000 as a college student on a two week turnaround. Can you believe it, a two week turnaround to build an entire piece of software that powered a company. I didn't sleep for two weeks, basically, still going to class as a full time computer science student. I built this piece of software, and it still runs that company to this day. I think they probably run 100 million dollars plus of transactions through it over the decades. And so here I am, now in college, I'm building software, and I built a piece of software that powered marketing programs for small businesses. Because I've been kind of doing it manually for some of these businesses as a service provider, and then they start signing up and paying for subscriptions. And that company ended up becoming my most successful company, which was named I Contact, which was in the digital newsletter and communication space, had survey tools and social media marketing tools as well. And that company still exists, and the brand name still exists. We built that. I built that with a co founder, a guy named Ryan, who is a college friend of mine, essentially. And we built that company to \$50 million in annual revenue, and sold it when I was 30 years old for 169 million dollars which is by far the largest success I've ever had among all the companies that I've built. And then I immediately started another company. Ran it for five years, found myself just feeling awful having more time and money and flexibility than I've ever had, and not being happy. And just my mental health was kind of at an all time low, low mood, stuck in it, drinking too many beers in the evenings, just, you know, trying to both be like a successful entrepreneur, that kind of was the force behind a bigger entrepreneurial community, and also a person who was still running companies and just found myself really, really unhappy. And so through all of that, I ended up starting this organization called Dory now, where I research human performance. And we look specifically at high stress business leaders, these are entrepreneurs or executives, and try and figure out what types of things can help them stay healthy through the level of pressure that they're going through. And I tell you that the primary thing that drove my interest in this was the first time I ever showed up in an emergency room having a panic attack and thinking. I was dying and super, super stressed from the pressure of trying to build my company, and the doc comes in, checks me out. I'm probably 25 years old, says, you know, look, you're fully healthy. Everything's fine. We don't know what's going on with you. They didn't even point to panic attack or even mention it, but they asked me this one question, which is, have you been under any stress recently? And I just thought that was, like, the most ridiculous question that you could ask me. They didn't know me, so it wasn't their fault. But I remember thinking like, like, Do you know what my life is like? My life is a constant ball of stress. Like, I have hundreds of employees that I'm responsible for, like, their livelihoods. I am 20 something years old. There all 40 something years old, have families and kids and retirements they're saving for and like, if I screw this up, the whole ship is going down. That would probably wasn't true, but I felt like that was true, that it was all on me. And I remember thinking, you know, to the doc. You just don't know who I am and what I do and and I also have zero interest in changing what I do. I love what I do. This is something I'm super passionate about, and at that moment, I kind of thought of myself as a bit of a martyr, like I will die on this hill, and like I might die because I felt like I was going to die that day. And so what I do now is help people that feel like they're under that level of pressure in their lives figure out how to

optimize themselves and thrive through it. Simply thrive through it, and honestly, outperform everybody else, because most people are getting disabled by that level of pressure instead of enabled by that level of pressure.

**S** Steve Divitkos 10:52

Well, it's a great segue into a number of questions that I want to ask you. And I would say that if anyone hasn't read, you know, gone on your website, read your blogs, they probably should, because you've been very open, very transparent about your struggles as an entrepreneur with mental health. And not only is it refreshing to read, but a lot of it resonates with my own experience. So it's quite meaningful to me personally. One of the things that you said on your website was my success came with the hidden costs of long term stress, including panic attacks, debilitating anxiety, burnout and mental breakdown. My first question for you is, when did you first suspect that your mental health was slipping? Were there any early warning signs that are maybe now only clear with the benefit of hindsight?

**A** Aaron Houghton 11:36

Yeah, absolutely, I think the most common one that I experienced and that everyone else, not everybody, a lot of other people that I work with now talk about, and it's the funniest thing ever, I think. And it's very small. I'll go to the bigger ones next. But the very first one, that first warning sign, the shot across the bow, is having a twitchy eyelid. Have you ever had this?

**S** Steve Divitkos 11:58

I don't think I've ever not had a twitchy eyelids?

A

**Aaron Houghton 12:00**

Yeah, exactly. It's like, oddly consistent. And if you Google it, it's like, the answer is, like, why is my eyelid twitching? It's like, stress. You're just stressed out. And there's probably some other like, eye disorders that are very, very rare, that are that could be the cause. But for 99.99% of us, it's just like, your eyelid is twitching, my eyelid is twitching. And I'm like, what? Why are they doing that? And over the years, I started to realize that was such a good early, early warning sign, your eyelid starts twitching, like, I think, pretty long before you start to have other bigger challenges. And so I think that's, like, just the greatest, like, shot across the bow of like, Man, I could use a couple of deep breaths and maybe a day off or something, or pull back, or delegate something that's causing me a lot of pressure. But I'll tell you, the biggest thing that made me start to realize, and it's what it started to do, is frustrate me more than anything, was the reality that I was every once in a while and sometimes in bunches, taking multiple days basically off of work when I needed to be doing things. Not for vacation, not for fun, but because I just simply couldn't function as a person on those days. Like I was angry about something, and I just realized that going into the office would cause me to, like, set the place on fire, like, conceptually, that I would damage relationships, and that, like, things would just not go well, and I would honestly dig myself deeper in a hole. It was those days when I had the kind of foresight to say, the big problems we need to solve right now are not going to be solved by me, because I can't even focus like I'm not coming up with any creative ideas. I'm in this complete like fear response or disaster, catastrophication of everything. And you know, I'm not the person that that needs to be the leader of this company today. And so whether I was intentionally noticing that or not, the way these days would look is, you know, this is back in 2005 to 2012 when we still went into offices. So like, I literally wouldn't go into the office on those days. Then I would make up some excuse about, like, having a cold or something like that, like I just don't feel well. And never even myself admitting it was really like a mental health challenge in those days, and certainly not telling anyone on my team like that felt like that would be some sort of, like, huge weakness that would concern everybody if they knew that I was having, you know, anxiety to the level that I didn't feel like I could work today, or my mood was so low that I didn't feel like I could be around people, or just didn't have the energy to want to go in. So those were the days that really started to give me some awareness that the thing that frustrated me was I wanted to be the person who could solve those problems, and I wanted to be that dynamic leader that could run into the office and say, Everybody behind me, we got this, right, and on those days, I knew I was not that person, and it frustrated me, and I really wanted to be that person again.

S

**Steve Divitkos 14:48**

So whether it was something as simple as an eye twitch or something more meaningful, as you know, your unwillingness to go into work sounds like your kind of mental health was kind of whispering in your ear that something might be up, but I'm more I'm kind of wondering, was there an instance where it stopped whispering in your ear and kind of started punching you in the face? Which is to say, were there any like, acute moments, or, I don't know, customers, leaving key employees, quitting, something like that that triggered like, particularly acute struggles with mental health.

**A****Aaron Houghton 15:19**

For me, it was the prevalence of panic attacks which had been like very kind of trigger specific for me, before I was in this extreme amount of pressure, and then they just started popping up everywhere. And sometimes it wouldn't even be like the full panic attack type response, where I thought I was completely dying, but it would instead just be, like, my heart rate going from resting to like, 160 in like, 10 seconds. And you know, it would happen from time to time with specific triggers. It didn't really get in the way of work. And then I'm in a board meeting, presenting to our board of directors, and I feel my heart rate come flying up, and I'm like, oh my god, now, like, now is the moment we're gonna have this. Like, you know, yes, I'm under pressure and I want to perform in this moment, but like, now I'm losing my ability in the moment. Now I'm not thinking about what I'm gonna say and actively listening to the other people in the board meeting. Now I'm worried about myself, and I'm getting pulled out of that focus. So those are, those were the moments when I started realizing, you know, I don't have the abilities I used to have. I still have the skills and knowledge, and every day I have more experience, but for some reason, my ability to take those skills and put them into practice is kind of being hit with a hammer before the things come out. And so I'm not as capable as I used to be. And there was a day as well, where I was sitting at my desk, and again, very like non specific trigger. I was sitting at my desk in my office, and I called my head of sales, and at the time it was kind of probably number two in our business, and said, Something's wrong with me. I'm going to go to the ER right now. And it wasn't the first time I'd ended up in the ER for anxiety, but this felt very different. It was like my chest was tight. Honestly thought I was having a heart attack, and so I left the office, I got referred into like a stress echo. A few weeks later, checked out everything physically, everything's fine again. So here I am now being distracted by this anxiety response, and like, having moments where I have to scare my team and run out of the office. I'm like, this is not this is not the person that I want to be. It was frustrating. It was it was scary. It was losing trust in myself. Like, alright, what high pressure situation will I be in tomorrow and what's going to happen in that moment? Like, will the best version of me show up, or will the version of me that completely collapses in that moment show up? And then that's that anxiety loop of like, great. So now I can be anxious about what might happen tomorrow, and it started spiraling. And so that's that's the first time I ever sought help externally for anything that I would have called the word anxiety.

**S****Steve Divitkos 18:00**

So I know that you advise many entrepreneurs and CEOs. You mentor lots of entrepreneurs and CEOs. You're an investor in companies, naturally led by entrepreneurs and CEOs. In that capacity, having gone through what you've gone through, are there any like objective warning signs or indicators that you now watch for in entrepreneurs that predict a certain likelihood of burnout happening within the next six or 12 months? And if so, what does your intervention look like at this kind of first sign of potential trouble?

A

Aaron Houghton 18:36

If I was a physio expert and you know, some sort of athletic coach, and you are an athlete asking me that question, my answer would be like, come get in the physio lab. Let's check out what your body can do under pressure, right? I'm going to put you on a treadmill. I'm going to make you sprint. We're going to watch how your body changes. We're going to measure your VO two, Max. We're going to look at lactic acid thresholds. We're going to watch how your blood sugar holds, and electrolytes hold, and all of those things. And so what I've created at Dory now are all of those things, but instead of for the body, for the mind. And so we have tools that allow us to calculate something called optimal pace, which is a little bit like VO two Max in the physical world. It's basically the maximum amount that you can push your mind. And it's calculated daily. It changes by small amounts every day. It changes by large amounts over time. And what we found it's what is it's the maximum amount you can push yourself daily until your productivity drastically falls off because you're out of the optimal performance zone. Essentially those levels of things in your mind that are analogous to like electrolytes and lactic acid have fallen to a level that you basically can't perform with any reasonable output. And so at that point, you need to stop, and you need to do things that will refresh those levels. And so we call that optimal pace. And we've got a really simple, free tool that's on our website and on our Instagram, which is Thrive with Dory, D, O, R, Y. And people use this to calculate their optimal pace every day. And optimal pace is a number of hours. It's the maximum number of hours you can work today until you start to put yourself at risk. And so the simple answer to that question is, if you work at your optimal pace, you cannot burn out. It's the definition of it. We're watching things inside your mind. And so if you work at your optimal pace or below it, you cannot burn out. If you work below your optimal pace, you're not as productive as if you work at your optimal pace. So the answer for most people is, work at your optimal pace, you get maximum productivity with very, very, very low risk of burnout. So to answer your question, what would tell me that somebody is likely to burn out soon? I would calculate their optimal pace, which takes about 30 seconds for anybody to do. And then I would ask them how many hours they work today, and if it's more than that pace, they're at risk for burnout.

S

Steve Divitkos 20:51

You mentioned this concept of refresh. If they are above their optimal pace, some sort of refresh mechanism is necessary, and I presume, but correct me if I'm wrong, my refresh looks different than your refresh. Can you just talk about any commonalities you've seen like, does refresh mean time away from work? Does it mean engaging in hobbies? Does it mean meditation? Does it mean none of the above?

A

Aaron Houghton 21:13

Yeah, what it ends up meaning, and we've got a big study that we ran around 3000 different things that people can do. It's movement, it's mindset work, and it's connection work. Those are the top three categories. And if you'll notice, mindfulness did not make the top three. It's lower in the list. It's closer to 10 in the top 10, so it's still something that's used as a category by high stress, high performers who are under lots of pressure. But it's not one of the top three. The top three things that work for people that are under pressure, that's rated seven out of 10 on a 10 point scale. So high pressure is moving, so just get it, whatever it is for you, like move your body. Some people that's yoga, some people that's skydiving, whatever it is, move your body. Connection time, pretty straightforward, but living in those relationships with with people. Now we haven't updated this to look at like relationships with AIs yet. So whole another conversation there. But like relationships, whatever the important relationships are in your life, we'll call those people for now. So that's friends, that's siblings, that's children, could even be co workers. It's connection time. It's not being isolated, whatever it is you do. So if you can combine those two together, movement plus connection, really powerful. Go on a group cycling, ride with 10 people. If that works for you, that's a common category. And then mindset is around beliefs. So that's doing things like gratitude, journaling or positive thinking, priming and really kind of intentionally putting thoughts, visualization could even be in there. Intentionally putting things into our mind to try and sort of guide where we're going. So those are the top three we have. We have this app called coach Dory that's in the iOS store, that anybody can use, that's free, that has 3000 of these things. We call them plays, and it uses community recommendations to tell people exactly what they need. So it's a cool app people can use. You check in, and it you answer some questions about what you're experiencing right now and how much pressure you're under, and then it says, based on exactly kind of what those different levels are for you, here are plays that are most likely to work for you, and it's from this list of 3000 things that we have about 7 million data points of what works and what doesn't for individual people as well.

S

Steve Divitkos 23:23

Yeah, what I love about movement, mindset and relationships is like to put a label on. It almost feels like active recovery, like nowhere in that refreshment, like recovery or refreshing mechanism is rest. You know, watching Netflix for a week. This, these, these feel like active modes of recovery that require real, deliberate allocation of time and energy and effort.

A

Aaron Houghton 23:49

Yeah, I think that's the right way to think about it. There's this myth that I had, that I held for years, and we can see it in our data now that Dory that says, you know, the myth is when I go to sleep at night, no matter what I've done to myself to abuse my mind today, I will wake up tomorrow at 100% and we know that's not true with our bodies, right? If you have a huge workout at the gym, you wake up the next day you're sore. You wake up two days later, that second morning after a big workout, you're even more sore. And so we know that with our bodies, but there's this myth with our minds that we go to sleep, we wake up the next day, we're fully refreshed. So on a 100 point scale, we measure this. So what level is someone's mental reserves at when they first check in, before 9am in their time zone, in the morning, where do you guess the average person is zero to 100? 100 would be fully refreshed. So if the myth was true, the average morning check in would be 100%, what do you think the average actual check in is across 100,000 data points in our studies?

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Steve Divitkos 24:44

Oh, man, I look forward to seeing how wrong I am. I will guess 60 out of 100.

A

Aaron Houghton 24:49

Yeah, really close. 72, not that far off. Yeah, and the optimal performance zone is actually much higher than that. It's usually around 80, 85 number. And so on average, people that live high pressure lives wake up each morning and start below the high performance zone and just go lower, and then they go to sleep, and they come back up to 72 and then they get pushed out again each day. So yeah, we've got to actively recover. We can't just go to sleep and even a good night's sleep, right? That's just saying, like, let's say we got a great eight or nine hours of sleep, which is not realistic for many, many high performers and people in high pressure situations.

S

Steve Divitkos 25:26

One other thing that's on your website that you discussed publicly is a cancer diagnosis that you received in 2009. I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind telling us about that, and you can kind of take that in any direction that you'd like.

A

Aaron Houghton 25:39

Yeah. As a 28 year old, my that most successful company I talked about earlier would go from, I think, 14 million to 26 million annual recurring revenue. In that year, I decided to go to Nepal, not to become a Buddhist, but to actually try and be the most performative version of myself and go consider whether I wanted to climb Mount Everest or not. Been reading a lot of books about it at the time. And so I got a group of friends together, and I said, we're going to go to

Nepal, and we're going to go to Everest base camp on foot for 21 days, carrying packs, and we're going to go look at the thing and make a decision right there whether we want to come back in future years and climb it. And in order to do that, I needed a couple things. I needed some emergency high elevation medication that's needed in case of emergencies. There's types of steroids you can take if you get high elevation sickness at really, really high elevations like that. So as a 28 year old, I went and did something that no 28 year old males, at least in the United States, and I went and saw a doctor because I needed a prescription for this emergency medication that I would only take in case of emergency. And the doctor I went to happened very randomly to be an expert in high elevation medicine, I literally went to, like, the closest Urgent Care in my town. And he's like, I've been to Nepal, and I've even done this, like, study in high elevation science. I know exactly what you need. And we also need to do a physical exam before we give you this medication to make sure healthy. And in that physical exam, we found a single symptom, which was a little, tiny lump in the side of my neck that I don't think I'd even noticed up until that point, then he said, Man, we need to, we need to watch this. I don't know what that is, but that shouldn't be there. Let's give it some time. And so I actually went to Nepal, went to base camp, and when I came back, did my follow ups on this, and it didn't go away. And it didn't go away for weeks and weeks. And finally somebody said, we need to biopsy this, and we biopsied it. And I got the call where they don't tell you the results over the phone, and they said, You need to come into the office. And the worst in here, here are the results, which, you know, definitely made me think, well, these aren't going to be good. And they weren't. They said it's cancer, and they, I think, initially, didn't even know where it had come from. It ended up being diagnosed as thyroid cancer. And the thyroid is a small organ right here that I didn't even know existed, and it had cancerous nodules in it that had spread to lymph nodes in both sides of my neck. And so that extreme activity of deciding I wanted to go to Nepal, in the midst of running a company that was growing rapidly, this hobby, and this sort of extreme decision, saved my life in 2009. I got an early enough diagnosis that we were able to have a big surgery and use radiation and get ahead of it. And here I am, 15 years later, and I'll share with you as well that one year ago, almost exactly to the day it was, it was the first week of October of 2024. I got another cancer diagnosis a year ago, and the same sort of pattern emerged now I do as a 44 year old man, I do see doctors more frequently now than I did back in my 20s running my businesses. But it came off of an extremely violent mountain biking day where I didn't get the right mountain bike that I wanted to rent because I wasn't even planning to go mountain biking, ended up on this, like old jalopy of a bike. My friend said we're going to go ride for 45 minutes. We rode for three and a half hours in the desert, ran out of food, ran out of water. I was, like, completely, absolutely beat up by the terrain we were riding on this, like terrible mountain bike, which was fun. It was a great challenge. I loved it. And I come off of that, I come back home here in Boulder, Colorado, and I get in a wood fired sauna with a friend of mine that we've built up in the woods. And so we're out in the middle. You have to park and then hike a trail to get to this sauna. It's like the coolest thing. We heat this thing up way too hot. It was probably, I think it was 195 and we sat in there for an hour, which is way longer than anybody should be in heat. And I definitely got kind of like mild to moderate heat stroke out of this thing, but we were doing it. It was like intense. It was fun. The next morning, I finished my morning meetings, and I have a new symptom, and I go see a doctor, and I get diagnosed with a new type of cancer, unfortunately. And so I just spent the last year going through 84 days of chemo and seven surgeries that have saved my life. I'm now down like four organs that I had when I was born I no longer have, and I'm actually in a really, really great place, which is incredible, but this pattern in my life has continued to show up. We're doing those extreme things, that crazy mountain bike ride and that ridiculously hot sauna, and then, boom, I have a symptom immediately afterwards. And I think that living this type of extreme life continues to save my life.

S

Steve Divitkos 30:35

Well, first of all, thank you for sharing that incredibly moving and personal story. I'm wondering if, I guess, maybe a two part question, like, what's the lesson, if any there the fact that your extreme actions have led to life saving interventions more than once? And also maybe going back to your first diagnosis in 2009 now that you've had the benefit of time and hindsight and reflection, like, Are there any ways in which that experience continues to color your day to day life today in 2025?

A

Aaron Houghton 31:12

I mean, probably the takeaway I didn't need as a really, really passionate, Like, motivated, hard driving person, because I already felt like Life is short. Let's, you know, live a very unique life. I've always wanted to live a life that, you know, not that somebody else would turn into a movie, but that in my own head would be a damn good movie, not a normal one. You know, man drives down the street, goes to work, comes home again, and hugs his family. Like I wanted something more interesting than that, and so, you know, I'm happy to have experienced these extremes on the business side. I had 250 employees, full time employees, when I was 25 years old, signed a \$16 million lease with a personal guarantee on it as a mid 20 something entrepreneur. I had these incredible experiences. I built this product that still exists today, that I built in like 1999 like, programmed it myself on my laptop in my parents house. And that product still exists today and has over \$750 million of total revenue that it's generated. It'll probably pass a billion someday. Like these are just extreme experiences that I've had in my life. And then I've had this other side as well, where, you know, I've spent time wondering if I would survive a disease that I probably didn't do anything wrong to get just sort of bad luck. And, yeah, it's made me, you know, it just made me continue to feel that life is so precious. Life is so short, and you know this most recent round, chemotherapy was a little bit different than the radiation I did 15 years ago, because it made me really isolated, because I couldn't be around people from a safety risk standpoint, because my immune system was offline for 84 days. In the middle of cold and flu season in Colorado with two school aged kids, so the level of precaution that we took to keep me safe just completely separated me from the world. And you know, if there's one takeaway that I have from that, it's that the only thing I wanted in those moments, you know, wasn't anything that I owned. It wasn't even to go anywhere specifically, it was just to be around people like I had these recurring dreams of just sitting at a dinner table with 12 of my friends, and we had just cooked dinner together, and we're having a glass of wine and eating a steak like that was all I wanted out of life in those moments, was that.

**S****Steve Divitkos 33:34**

Yeah, you know, I've read books on I think It was Brawny Whare, the Five Regrets of the Dying. I think that's what it's called. I'm probably butchering the title. And there's another book that I've read by Carl Pillemer, where he interviews centenarians and asked them to reflect upon their lives and ask them, you know, what would you change, ecetera. And it seems to me that one of the through lines among many is that the quote, unquote, ordinary moments are anything but. Like, when you are worried about your mortality, you're not dreaming about like, your exit that you might not get the opportunity to get. You're dreaming about like, Can I have one more bedtime, right? Can I have one more bath time with my kids? Can I have one more dinner where, you know, we tell a silly joke? To what extent did that resonate with your experience really being thoughtful of the quote, unquote, ordinary moments?

**A****Aaron Houghton 34:31**

Everything that's happened since I've been able to be back on my feet again, which was roughly April 1st of this year, so October of last year through April 1st just, you know, basically a bomb went off in my life. Everything changed. I'm in isolation. I'm sick and injured. In recovering, I had five tubes coming out of my abdomen for about six weeks. The mobility you have with that is like zero. Can't move, can't even get comfortable. And, yeah, it's led me to to these moments that I've experienced now, like every single holiday that comes around. I think it's maybe similar to what people experience when they lose a loved one, and then you relive each holiday without them, you know, as it comes? You're like, oh, this is our first Christmas without grandpa, right? And this is our, you know, we always had this tradition and blah, blah, blah, so I'm like, living that backwards. On the other side, I think, where, you know, every little thing that is part of my annual routine, you know, this festival at my kids school, or Fourth of July, or long holiday weekend or something, feels a bit like I'm cheating. It feels like I got another one. So to your point of like, that, that one more, that one more evening, or something, each one of those things, when it comes up and it feels like an annual tradition. And I'm pausing in awe and realizing, like I'm here for this, like I there was a good period of last year where I didn't think I would see another Fourth of July, or I would watch a movie during chemo, and I would see somebody celebrating outside, doing something in summer at a picnic table, and I would think to myself, I don't know if I'll live to see the weather get warm again for the next summer. So each one of those things just has a whole lot of extra meaning right now, and those moments feel really, really special. It's not just Labor Day weekend and we have a long weekend. It's like, my first Labor Day weekend, it's all new again.

**S****Steve Divitkos 36:37**

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**A****Aaron Houghton 38:53**

I think it's helpful to have a written job description for yourself, because I think that gives us a little bit of the bandwidth we need to understand that piece of thinking. You know, we'll write things down as a leader like, you know, my job is to set the culture and to set the strategy and to hire the right people and to put them in the right seats. And we have to pause for a moment and realize that part of that means that we need to make really good decisions about all of those things. And part of that means that we need to have really good ideas about all of those things, and we can't make good decisions, and we can't generate good creative ideas when we're in a state of fear or when we're emotionally responsive or we're highly reacting to pressure in our lives. So I think there's two parts to it. One is trying to find. So the first one, I would say, is probably scheduling the time for it, blocking time either once a week or a week long, or a multi day block every quarter. You hear about some of the greats, like, you know, Bill Gates going away on a two week, think, every year. And he's actually has specific people he wants to be on that, think with because he knows they'll bring out the best in him and they'll bring out the best in each other. So there's things like scheduling it. And I think the other piece is is really hard to predict when we get into that moment, if there won't be some sort of massive crisis causing us problems. And how do we let go of that? So I think we need to have some flexibility to maybe it's not going to be this week after all, there's a crisis at work, and I am going to get pulled back into that. Or even if I took the time away from work, I couldn't be present, to be creative and to think and to really dive in on some of these issues, because I'm

being pulled back into the other thing. So I think there's an opportunity to give ourselves some grace and flexibility around it, and not cancel it, but shift it to two weeks later into a period where we think we can bring the best version of ourselves to it. This is something that we look at in our assessments with people at Dory, when we're looking at where their mental reserves levels are, and if they're in that high performance zone, or if they're out of the High Performance zone. And so this is something where you know, if we were talking about a specific person, I could say now is a great time to go actually take the Think and Do the think. Now is not a good time to do that, because you're not in a good place and or your point of active recovery earlier, here's what you would need to do to get from where you are to actively recover back into that optimal zone, and then you can go have that thinking time. What we find is that people with really, really high mental resilience. So we have this model that scores people's mental resilience from our little assessment that people can do, and it's on a zero to 100 scale. And what we find is that the model gives people scores of 85 or higher if they're what we call superhuman mental athletes, where their their mental reserve level never seems to fatigue under any level of pressure. And so these people have a superpower which allows them to be more like, think enabled more often. It allows normal work to feel really, really easy to these people. It allows them to be really creative and have really, really big creative bursts almost whenever they need them. And it allows them to handle any type of crisis that might come up and derail that. That ability at any time, they just have capacity for all of this. The average mental resilience score across the 417 leaders in our most recent study was 65 out of 100 which is not a terrible score, but it just means these people have capacity for like normal work. That's about it. If they need some sort of big creative push, they're not really in a great place to do it. If a crisis comes along, it's going to completely take their ability away, and they're going to lose the ability even to do normal work for a period of time. Start pushing up into the numbers around the 70s, you start to be able to be a little bit creative, do normal work, not handle too many crises. You get above that 85 number, 85 up to 100 these are people that are not going to be derailed by anything. They could be creative whenever they want. They can handle 10 things on fire at the same time and be creative and still get their work done.

S

Steve Divitkos 42:47

So a think week or a clarity day, as I often called them. I think I was a day a month, or maybe even a day a quarter. My memory is somewhat fuzzy at this point. That's probably exemplary of working on the business, as opposed to working in the business, as I'm sure you know from your first hand experience as an entrepreneur, but also your second hand experience as an investor and CEO. That's a notoriously tricky tightrope for entrepreneurs to balance, and it changes as the company scales. So can you just walk us through like your experience navigating the transition from working primarily in the business, versus working primarily on the business, and any generalizable lessons or takeaways that you extracted from that experience.

A

Aaron Houghton 43:29

There was this book that one of my EO, my Entrepreneurs Organization forum mates, recommended to me very, very early on in our journey, called *Leading at the Speed of Growth*. I don't remember who wrote it, but that's the title. And the concept was just this. It was like, you're an entrepreneur, you've started a company. You're doing everything, and the speed of growth refers to, like, the thing is growing. You're hiring people, you're building systems, you now have a different job. And so it walks through that process of going from being the doer to being the manager to being the leader of managers, and then, kind of, like, all the way to the top of the company. Although, you know, we're all the top of our companies when we're the only person at the beginning, but there's just nobody underneath us. And so the job role is really different. So I just like to think about the businesses that I've built, and businesses that that CEOs I advise and invest in now are building as they're just machines. And you know, if we're in there, like, turning the handle on the machine to make the pasta come out the other side, you know, then that's our job. And we don't have a lot of capacity for the thinking and the strategy and figuring out what type of pasta we need to make in three years. Or we need to make something else with this machine, other than pasta, or, you know, troubleshooting the high level mismatches in the market, where there's now a faster pasta machine that just came out. And so we need to figure out how to do better than that. So you know, we've got to lift our heads up as soon as we can. I think the challenge is figuring out when that is, and trying not to remain somebody who micromanages the processes underneath them and really empowers people. And I think my favorite single takeaway that I think people can use for this is, anytime you hand off a job or a process to somebody else that you used to run, there's an opportunity to figure out what you need to know about that process or that job or that role, and all the things you don't need to know basically don't make that list. So I like to ask founders and leaders, what are the minimum number of things that you can measure about that role that will let you know with pretty high precision that it's on track and that it's doing great? And then at what frequency do you need to measure them? Less frequent, the better. You don't want to be looking at these things every single day or having to ask every single day. Now there's periods where, like that process is on fire and you got to fix it, and you dive in. But generally speaking, you're looking at these things monthly or quarterly, maybe sometimes weekly, in a report, and what are the things that you need to know in order to know it's going well. And then if it stops going well, even when the numbers look good, maybe you're going to change those numbers, you're going to add a number, you're going to ask a different question, and that is how I continue to move myself up in the business, because I needed to move up and get out of the way. And that's how I recommend that other people do it now. Shortest list possible for each roll or process that's underneath you.

**S****Steve Divitkos 46:15**

You referenced, certainly your largest exit. You mentioned \$169 million exit before your 30th birthday. I want to ask you a few questions about selling a company, both commercially, psychologically and otherwise. I mean, at a title page level, selling a company for \$170 million by your 30th birthday, sounds like the dream of every entrepreneur, and I'm sure in many ways, it was, but that also strikes me as a potentially disorienting experience, for lack of a better way to put it. So to begin with, can you contrast your actual experience, both during and after the exit with your expectations for those experiences? And were there any notable discrepancies between your actual experience and your expectations going in?

**A****Aaron Houghton 47:02**

The number one thing I felt when we sold the business, and it's an emotion that I remember feeling. I remember plenty of excitement, you know, watching the bank account for the wire to come in, that was huge. It took multiple days longer than I thought. Became stressful. What's going on? Wire comes in. Excitement went away. I mean, it was there, but it was like, All right, you know, milestone locked in. That's great. But the biggest emotion I remember feeling was going into the office and, like, clearing out my stuff. So I was out the day of the deal. My co founder stayed in for another 90 days, so we were both out pretty quickly, and the acquirer brought in a GM to run the business, kind of like a CEO. This was a big public company that bought us, and, you know, putting things in a box and walking out like I'd been let go. I guess, technically, I had been let go, and I wanted to go. And I've been running this business for a decade from basically age 20 to age 30. So a third of my entire life, and like, 90% of my adult life at that point, I had been building this business, which was incredible. I got exactly the outcome I wanted. But I walked out of the office, and as I was walking out, this just wave of emotion came over me, and this is what I was feeling. I was feeling the reality that all of the problems we had in our business, that I had been living and breathing with an amazing executive team and this huge team of people, I think we were above maybe 350 people on the team at that point. We had been trying to solve and really struggling with these were, like, the biggest challenges in our industry and in our business that we're working on, that I had zero responsibility for any of those problems anymore. That's what occurred to me in that moment, like, I don't need to solve the thing that I have been thinking about for 24 hours a day for the last five years. I don't have any responsibility to getting the right to coming up with the right answers to that problem, which was posing a real challenge for us at the time. And that was the biggest, I think mismatch, you know, I kind of pictured like, wow, it's going to be, you know, champagne bottles and corks, and there was plenty of that too. But the piece that feels like it hit hardest was that, realizing that the pressure and all of those people's livelihoods was now shifted to somebody else who was going to take care of them, and the big market problems was shifted to somebody else, a new leader that was going to have to take care of them.

**S****Steve Divitkos 49:22**

And what label would you put on that emotion? Would you call that relief?

A

Aaron Houghton 49:26

Yeah, it was relief. It felt like I took off 100 pound backpack and sat it down on the curb and walked away. Yeah, and I don't know if I realized I was wearing 100 pound backpack until that moment that I took it off too.

S

Steve Divitkos 49:37

That was my experience. Now, I certainly didn't sell my company for \$179 million but almost all I felt was relief. I remember describing it to my wife as like I feel like I've exhaled for the first time in a decade, and now that means, certainly, that was my first hand experience, and now through second hand experience, talking to dozens and dozens and dozens of CEOs who. Sold their companies almost to a person. The emotion is relief more than anything else.

A

Aaron Houghton 50:02

And then what about the second piece? My second piece was, like, the second thing I felt is I, like, shifted back into normal life. Was trying to understand who I was and my personal identity. Did you feel some of that as well? Like you were the CEO of this company for five years. I think you ran that the business seven years. Yeah, it's better part of a decade. And then you get the relief, but now you're not the person that you know it says CEO on the business card. Like, what was that like?

S

Steve Divitkos 50:36

Interestingly, so one of the things that that we were talking about discussing before we hit record is this concept of like an identity hangover post exit all I know, a lot of entrepreneurs experience that, for whatever reason, I actually didn't struggle with that. I struggled with plenty of other stuff, let's be clear, an identity hangover was not one of them, for reasons that honestly I can't quite articulate, yeah. How about you like did you experience an identity hangover of some sorts after selling I Contact?

A

Aaron Houghton 51:09

Yeah, I think, you know, one of the challenges probably being a young founder like that, and really starting this business at a smaller level before I was even 18, and then really starting to scale it up when I was around 20 to age 30, was that it was the only thing anybody ever knew me as professionally. Like everyone I had ever met, from a professional standpoint, knew I was the founder of this business, and that's just who I was. And so every new relationship professionally that I'd ever built was was around that, and then lots of personal relationships were developed in that time. It's such a pivotal time in anybody's life their 20s, when they're like, finding their place in the world and starting a career and finishing up at university, and, you know, like it that phase that was just like my entire life. That's what everybody knew me as. And so I, after that exit, immediately started another company, because I think that's all I knew how to do. And I ran that for five years, and then I decided that I really saw the weakness in only being a CEO and founder as my identity and as my personality, because how the business went is how I went. My ego, my identity, my self worth, my self confidence, was tied to how well the business was doing. And that next business had some great joys and some great struggles, and I found myself kind of riding like perfectly with the wave. Instead of staying somewhere in the middle and being slightly pulled, I would go all the way to the top and all the way to the bottom. And so I decided to take two years off. And my only two goals, actually, I decided to take one year off. It became two years. And I set two goals for myself. One was, I'm going to not have any professional identity for the entire time that I'm taking time off, and I would meet people actually moved across the US to Boulder at the time as well. So I was like, I'm going to start new relationships with people. And when they ask me what I do, I'm going to say, like, I'm a software developer or something like that, which was true. Computer Science degree, and I once wrote some code, or I'm going to tell them that I'm a mountain biker, and we're not even going to talk about work, and I'm going to just rebuild my like social fabric around a new identity. And then the second piece was really kind of deep rest in the discipline. Was one thing a day. I only do one thing a day. So if I was doing this podcast with you in that era, this would be the only thing I do today. I would take my kids to school, I would do this, and then the rest of my day, I would not allow anything to be scheduled or anything intentionally. Now I might get into something, but it would be all serendipitous. It would be whatever I felt like doing and felt like I needed most in that moment. And that one year became two. I always joked that I finally found something I was really good at not working. It took me a while, and honestly, the first six months of it, I was really frustrated to not be the person I was before, and that's what I felt like. The problem was, I was like, I'm gonna keep doing this until I'm totally comfortable with just being a guy who mountain bikes and skis and, you know, people ask me, what I do? I tell them, I take my kids to school in the morning, like not a professional identity, and not selling something, not having a product to sell, but just being me and rediscovering who that is.

**S****Steve Divitkos 54:07**

I do want to ask about, like, the personal and psychological implications of being a serial entrepreneur, because on your website, I think you listed like nine different companies that you either started or co founded or led as a CEO. So clearly, I think it's reasonably fair to describe you as a serial entrepreneur. I'm curious, like at the conclusion of each of those nine companies, whether you sold or you just left or whatever led to the conclusion of that company, how did you think about what to do next? Like, why become a nine times entrepreneur instead of trying something else, more typical of a post exit entrepreneur, like an investor, an advisor, a board member, or even just straight up retirement like, how did you what decision criteria did you have in your mind to help you decide what to do next?

**A****Aaron Houghton 54:52**

There wasn't a lot of thinking about that. And I think there's some I have some regret there of just wishing I'd maybe paused and been more, were intentional. I started investing in companies, probably the first time I took money out in an equity round in my most successful business in my kind of mid to late 20s. And it was always fun, but not that fun. It was fun to be able to back other companies that I believed in, and it was much more about the people that I believed in. And it just wasn't the same as being in the game. I just loved it when the ultimate accountability and responsibility stopped with me. I love being a leader, and I love being a problem solver, and I'm a real tinkerer at my core, like I would love to have a product team come to me and say, they cannot solve this problem with the product. And I would love to jump in and help them as a player on their team, instead of their coach, to tear the thing apart and figure it out together. Everybody high fives and we fix the problem. And I just don't get that from being an investor. I get little tastes of it here and there come an AI company I invested in two years ago. Just sent me the screenshot of the first dollars transacted through their platform last week. It was like, 3000 bucks. Like, product works, it connects multiple systems. It made money. It sent checks out to partners. Incredible. And so I was thrilled for like six hours. I was like, that's great. Like, this is amazing. And the thrill wasn't like, I'm gonna get a big payday someday. I mean, so much risk. First dollars into a company who knows, the thrill was like, wow, I was the first check into this company. Like That felt great. Like, wow. I believed in them. I helped them. I was the first check in their second round as well. And so that felt great, but it just went away so fast. Like, it honestly made me want to fly to the east coast and show up at their office and get my hands dirty, but that's not what I'm going to do as an investor. I'm a strong believer in stay out of their way and let the innovators innovate. So yeah, it's just not as interesting for me. All of the other stuff, coaching and advising isn't even that interesting, and that's why, like, what I do now is most people in my role now would probably be making money by coaching CEOs directly on how to build and scale a business, and I don't do that. I have built a framework for human performance that I work with people and guide them, sometimes one on one, but often in a broader community, for how to be the best version of themselves, at work, in their personal lives. And that feels like a real passion. I'm building tools. I'm running studies like I feel like I have a product and something that I can work with. It's not just sharing advice. I find the sharing advice kind of boring.

**S****Steve Divitkos 57:29**

We discussed the quote, unquote, identity hangover that a lot of entrepreneurs have post exit, and looking at someone who's been a nine times founder slash entrepreneur, I'm wondering to what extent did serial entrepreneur as part of your identity inform what to do next? So said another way, was there any aspect of you that wondered if Aaron's not an entrepreneur and a founder, well, then who is he? Did identity specifically, that of a serial entrepreneur and CEO. Do you think that consciously or maybe even subconsciously, compelled you to continue to found startups?

**A****Aaron Houghton 58:13**

I wanted to do things that I felt good at, and in those moments when I sold companies or closed companies or jumped from one company idea to the next, the only recent memories I had at that point, because I was so far on this entrepreneurship game that would tell me that this is something that I'm likely to be successful at. We're building companies and building products. You know, there's a lot to my identity. And using the example of, like, you know, a father, a son and a brother and a mountain biker and an adventurer and all these identities that I hold, I didn't have recent stories at that point that really lent a lot of credibility to those things. Like, I was a decent sibling to my brothers. I was a good enough son to my parents. I was a very below average mountain biker who is super out of shape for spending too much time in the office, despite my passion and enthusiasm for it just didn't feel like something that I was going to be good at. And so I was craving that validation of like, let's go do something I'm good at. So I'd start another company again, and then I'd have less space for all those other identities again. And it just continued to perpetuate until I till I really rip the band aid in 2017 and force those two years off. And then I started develop some recent stories of man, mountain biking is really fun. I'm pretty good at it. Like I'm getting in pretty good shape. And, you know, I set a new PR on that route today, on Strava like that feels good. And I started to just be able to see progress and see improvement and all these other areas of my life. And wow, that was great to be there for that, you know, distant relative family funeral that I probably would have skipped, you know, two years ago when I was running the company, but now I can live into that identity of a family member and a supporter and like, wow, that felt really good. So I just, I lost those stories. I lost touch with how I can be happy and successful and fulfilled in those other roles in those moments of building, because I loved building, and it just continued to whittle it down to the point that I'd kind of forgotten who I was, until I forced the function to bring all those pieces back to life again.

**S****Steve Divitkos 1:00:14**

How do you select which companies to get invest in today, either as an entrepreneur or as a mentor slash advisor. Like, are these purely economic considerations that any other investor would use, or is there something else different or unique within the decision criteria that you use to select what company to get involved in next?

A

Aaron Houghton 1:00:34

I'm probably the worst angel investor by like dollar performance of all times, so you don't want to fast follow this strategy. Is that a good way to start the answer? Everyone's going to skip to the next part. No, my angel investing is in, it's people building real products that have scale, that can change the world. In large part, investing in people that I've worked with in some capacity before that. I believe in and want to help give them a platform to do the things that I've done in the past, if that's what they want to do. And most of them, if they're coming to me for capital for a business, that's what they want to do, is build a big company, have a big impact all of my angel investing. I think this is correct. No, I did one in Illinois, but I was every other one has been back in North Carolina, where I built my most successful business. And I just feel a lot of loyalty and appreciation for all the people and the culture there and the leaders there that helped make that company successful. In fact, the company in Chicago I invested in was somebody I knew from North Carolina who just happened to move to Chicago. So it's back in that network of people that helped me, and sometimes new founders, I don't know, but from that region, just been a big believer in it. And you know, there's still, there's a couple that are really up. They just haven't exited yet. So I'm hoping someday that it'll actually look like a really good angel portfolio return. I've got probably close to 20 deals that I've done over 15 years or so, and so I think it'll come around. It's hard to judge. But you know, you always know about the ones that are going to go out of business first, because they go out of business first, and the other ones are still holding on, yeah, so that we've got a couple companies that'll probably go to \$100 million. One that can go to a billion, that's very small now, and a bunch of others that are, you know, doing what lots of companies do, and chugging along trying to find their place.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:02:36

So you're writing a book currently called Startup Burn, about how entrepreneurs experience and manage stress, and want to see if I can try to articulate this question properly. I've read a million biographies and autobiographies written by successful entrepreneurs. In a lot of those books basically say something to the effect of like, Do what I say now, but don't do what I did then. And in a way, it's almost hard to believe that advice, because some of what they did then, as unpleasant as it was, might have been necessary inputs into their success formula. So as you write your own book, like, how did you think about the sources of pain and stress and sacrifice, like, which were actually necessary ingredients to your success, unpleasant though they may have been. Versus those that were totally unnecessary and not at all predictive of your ultimate commercial success. Like, did you explicitly contemplate that as you were writing the book? And if so, how did you kind of manage that tension?

A

Aaron Houghton 1:03:38

Yeah, I think we all love that advice. Of like, you know, as a first time entrepreneur, you know, cut down the stress of travel by taking your private jet, right? Thanks. That would be nice, you know, from everybody who's exited for a billion dollars, and you know, it feels out of touch, or it certainly feels like, from like the other side of the experience. And I think I felt a little bit of that, even from from my, like, big city private equity investors when I was running my business too. These guys are, like, super healthy and training for like, a 10k together. And I'm like, well,

wouldn't that be nice to, like, have any time to do anything for myself? They're like, You should join us. And I'm like, I have like, 40 pounds overweight and haven't exercised in a year. Like, yeah, sure. Like, I would die. Thanks. Like, it just felt kind of like, out of touch, right? It's like, thanks. But like you guys are probably working 40 hours a week, and you know that you'll have money, even if my deal goes south. And I could be broken on the street and starting over at 30 years old if this doesn't go well. There's like, very, very different amount of amount of skin in the game. I think the question that I think it's similar and maybe more challenging, is, can you build a successful business and come out of the other side of it healthy and thriving and happy about how the experience went? And not have to spend multiple years trying to kind of, like, decode a bunch of trauma that you gave yourself along the way. And that was my experience is coming out of it, not super happy, and needing to spend five to 10 years, like decoding and unwinding traumatic events from that period of time where I didn't take good care of myself, and I didn't manage or pay good attention to my mental health. And so I think the answer to that is yes, and that's what I've built tools around, is trying to help people who are in that moment, under that high level of pressure, figure out what decisions they can make. With a very limited number of things we can actually control in those moments, as a CEO and founder and a leader, to figure out when is the right moment to push harder, when is the right moment to push back? I think about this is like, there's this car analogy I like to share around, like a high performing engine and a race car. And as entrepreneurs, or, you know, high performers, what we often do is we get in our metaphorical car, which is us and our minds as we use them at work, and we realize we need to go as fast as possible to the next place we're trying to get to. So we put the gas pedal all the way to the floor, and the engine crosses the red line, and we go as fast as we can, and we make it to work the first day, or wherever we're going, and we say, Wow, big success. I went extremely fast. The engine sounded like it was going to blow up, but it didn't. Thank goodness. All right, new pattern developed. This is how I drive every day. So the next day we get in the car, we put it all the way to the red line, and after a couple days of doing this, the engine blows up. And we come out of that experience with the wrong learning, and we blame ourselves, and we say, man, if we were just a tougher engine, we could go this fast all the time. And then the second thing we do is we blame the car, and we go out and buy a new car in the metaphor, and then we go back and do the same pattern again the next day. And the reality is, there's a better optimization to be made, which is to work right below that red line. If we can figure out where that red line is and to work right below it, that is the fastest we can safely go. And some days that answer is like three hours. You can work three hours today. That's it. Beyond that, you're going to blow up the engine. And some days, for some people, I work with, it actually can sometimes be as high as 18, which is in our model and our system that we've created to calculate this for people is the maximum. We don't ever suggest anyone works more than 18 hours, but that someday, for some people, is their maximum where it says, like you have the capacity to actually go for 18 hours today. We're not telling you you should, but if you need to, or there's some sort of crisis that pulls you in, or you want to sit down and solve all of your company's problems in one day, put them on a whiteboard and lock yourself in a room. You got 18 hours. You know you can actually do it. And so I think knowing where your red line is, and working right below it is the way to get through this thing. Not just coming out the other side feeling like you had a great experience and you don't have 10 years and \$100,000 worth of baggage that you need to unwind on the other side, but actually also be maximally productive along the way, because when you're constantly hitting crossing the red line and blowing up your engine. You know, there's the downtime and the cost of buying a new car and the downtime of finding a new car, and all this productivity we lose. We started this conversation by you asking me, what were those warning signs? And those were those days off, right when I, like, couldn't even come in because I couldn't function. I couldn't operate. Those were the days when I'd blown up my engine and I was out buying a new car, and I was wasting time and productivity with that. So I think there's this magical intersection between maximum

productivity and maximum happiness and maximum health, and they all overlap in the middle with this concept of optimal pace, which is that red line. What is your red line every day? Work right below it. So I think that's a tool that anybody can use when they're in the moment, when they're in high pressure, and they don't have to have the experience or the wisdom or the financial resources that I have now in order to do that, they can use that on day one in their first company, starting with nothing like I had when I started.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:08:56

I'm wondering what motivates and fuels you today. I mean, I don't know this for certain, but I would imagine that at least financially speaking, you probably don't need to work. So what is it that gets you out of bed in the morning, gets you excited to invest, to mentor, to lead, to write, how do you think about your fuel? What is it that keeps you energized and motivated today?

A

Aaron Houghton 1:09:22

This is really my moment to have an impact in other people's lives, because I'm here on Earth and alive today, and I have energy, and I have a fair amount of wisdom and experiences from all the companies I've built, and all the personal roller coaster moments along the way, and the things that I've learned from that. And so I just feel this huge amount of energy around having that impact while I can have it. And part of that is my health journey, where some things around the future are uncertain. And part of that is I feel like there's this really nice intersection at 44 years old now, where I've seen a lot of things and I still have a lot of energy. And I can only imagine that's going to change a little bit as I get older. I've seen more things, but I'll have a little less energy. And so I just feel like there's this huge opportunity right now for me, like this is the inflection point to have an impact in other people's lives. And you know, some of it is kind of like a legacy, thought of like, it sure would be cool that someday, after I'm gone, people will feel that I made an impact on the world or humanity, or even just them individually. That feels good to me, but that will only feel good to me for as many days as I'm on this earth after that that doesn't go with me. And part of it is, is those moments now where I can interact with somebody. And for instance, I'm doing a one on one work with the recovery protocol I do right now with a neuroscience executive on the East Coast who's launching a neuroscience drug to market. Right now he's working 14, 16, hour days. This is a huge inflection point in his life, and hopefully we'll launch him to whatever is next for the rest of his life, which could potentially be never working again, or it could be something completely new that he's passionate about as well. And to be able to be like in the room, in that moment with somebody is such a gift for me, that pays me now in terms of the gratitude I hear, the impact I can have the results that we see together. The ability to help somebody feel more calm through a difficult situation by saying I've seen this playbook before. Here's what I would recommend you do today and tomorrow and the next day and so that just that feels really good.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:11:35

I'm wondering what your current definition of success is, and whether that definition of success has changed or evolved over time.

A

Aaron Houghton 1:11:46

Yeah, when I was 14 years old, starting my first software business, success was literally these people that I was seeing in in paper magazines. Do you remember magazines? They used to print them on paper? Yeah, like Fast Company and wired and business 2.0 and reading these articles as a 14 year old about, like, you know, 27 year old CEO of blah, blah, blah on the West Coast of the US, and just thinking to myself, like, 27 year old CEO? Like that doesn't exist in any other world, like, you know, you put in the time, you work in the factory, you become the CEO, maybe when you're like, 72 and you get a couple years in the seat. And so there was this new world where people with tech skills and business skills could be the CEO at 27 and I remember that article, it was like, this is his third company. Like, third company at 27 like, what? So that was success to me. That was somebody, and it wasn't even the huge exit that they had had, per se, but it was that somebody would call them CEO at 27 years old, and that they had done it, you know, enough multiple times that people would respect their opinions on things. And is this kid growing up in a small town, 2000 people, I'm looking at this going like, well, that's a path forward for me in this big world, to find, you know, relevancy and to have an impact. So that's what it looked like. Then what it looks like now is is moments living in my non professional identities, which for the most part, comes down to time doing activities that I love with the people I love. I think that's it.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:13:28

And the concluding question that I try my best to always conclude with is, what is the most meaningful lesson that you've learned over the past 12 months, and that could span any domain of your life, commercial, personal, family, ecetera. Does anything come to mind?

A

Aaron Houghton 1:13:44

In the last 12 months? Yeah, I thought we were going to go, I was going to give you one across my whole life. I think the one across my whole life is just try to have an impact with one person. So like when I give a keynote, I gave a keynote last Tuesday to 75 global executives here in Colorado for their annual retreat. My goal is that one person thinks about something differently or gets some value from that. Not that all 75 people do, but that just one person does like I've lowered the bar so far that it allows me to say something and share something or be someone, that inspires one person really strongly. And I find that more valuable than inspiring 75 people moderately. And so I've tried to really be true to who I am and the things that I believe in and not worry about. I might have offended 65 of those people, but if one came out of it saying, like, Wow, man, you really changed my life with what you just shared there. I'm going to think about things and do things differently. Now that's the win for me. I'm going to try with the 12 months one too, because it's been a really wild 12 months for me. So I would say that if there's one big takeaway, the universe is made of people and people are what really matter.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:15:04

Yeah, I said that was the last question. But I'm gonna ask you one more. You've dealt with a lot of adversity. Started in 2009 from your first healthcare. You had a healthcare more recently, you've dealt with a lot of shit, personally and professionally. What have you learned about yourself through the course of dealing with all this adversity? Like what do you know about Aaron today that you didn't know 1, 2, 5, 10 years ago?

A

Aaron Houghton 1:15:36

I shared this quote in that in that keynote last week. I need to keep the book right here so I can read it, but I'll paraphrase it. But I'll paraphrase it. It's we spend all our lives trying to increase our bank account or increase our status or buy nice clothes or buy nice jewelry in order to try and find safety in our lives. There is no safety. The only path forward is courage. And this was in a book that had nothing to do with business or self development. This was a beautiful story about a general saving a kidnapped girl in the post Civil War era in Texas. It's called News of the World, if anyone wants to read it. It was right near the end. And that's the thing I've learned about myself, was that all of the things that I thought I was doing to create safety in my life, going back to this living an extreme life, maybe saved my life twice now, all of the things that I thought were creating safety in my life actually were not the useful tools when things got really, really dark and really, really hard and I didn't see a path forward. The only tool that I really needed in that moment, and that I used, and I've seen myself use, is courage.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:16:47

What a treat Aaron, to speak with you today. I've learned a lot. And for anyone who is interested in getting in touch with you, learning more about your book, reading some of your content, ecetera. What's the best way for them to go about doing that?

A

Aaron Houghton 1:17:03

All of the research and the work I'm doing now lives at [thrivewithdory.com](http://thrivewithdory.com) and on our Instagram, which is at Thrive With Dory and I'm sharing almost daily updates on what we're learning with our research and progress with the book and what we're learning and working with 1000s of leaders under high pressure all around the world. So please come check us out. We've got a community people can join as well, and we'd love to support anyone.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:17:26

What a treat. Thank you so much, Aaron, and what a pleasure it was speaking to you.

A

Aaron Houghton 1:17:30

Thanks, Steve. Appreciate your time.