

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Achieving your dreams with Saul Blinkoff

Jen Fisher (Jen): Hi, WorkWell listeners, I'm really excited to share that my book, *Work Better Together*, is officially out. Conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you inspired this book. It's all about how to create a more human-centered workplace. And as we return to the office for many of us, this book can help you move forward into postpandemic life with strategies and tools to strengthen your relationships and focus on your well-being. It's available now from your favorite book retailer.

So, when I was a kid, I wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon. You're probably asking yourself how does a kid even know what an orthopedic surgeon is? Well, I got hurt a lot, so I had to visit one on a few occasions in my childhood. And I think what sparked my interest wasn't the orthopedic specialty, I think I was drawn to a profession that helped other people. And as you probably realize, I did not become a surgeon, but I did achieve my dream of helping others through my role as Chief Well-being Officer. It wasn't easy getting here and there were many bumps along the way, but I believe with hard work, perseverance, and the right tools anyone can achieve their dreams.

This is the WorkWell Podcast Series live from the World Happiness Summit in Miami, Florida. Hi, I'm Jen Fischer, chief well-being officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being. I'm here with Saul Blinkoff. He's a filmmaker who has worked for many high-profile clients, including Disney, DreamWorks, and Netflix. He's also an animator, voice actor, inspirational speaker, and host of The Life of Awesome podcast. Saul speaks around the world sharing practical tools for success, meaning, and fulfillment in all aspects of life.

Jen: Alright, Saul, welcome to the show.

Saul Blinkoff (Saul): Thank you. It is so good to be here with you guys.

Jen: Great to have you and live from the World Happiness Summit.

Saul: Yeah, this is an exciting place. I mean it's amazing to be in an environment where so many people are vulnerable. That's a quality I find that is absolutely necessary for growing. Vulnerability means we need to be real. And when you are around so many people like here who are vulnerable and connecting, it's really an incredible energy.

Jen: It's powerful and we need more of this in the world. Saul, this is about you, tell me about yourself, tell me about your life, how you became a filmmaker. We want all the gory details.

Saul: I grew up in New York.

Jen: Couldn't tell that.

Saul: You couldn't tell. So, a fast-talking New York guy, I grew up loving drawing. I saw the movie, *The Little Mermaid*, it propelled me to want to be a Disney animator. I didn't know any Disney animators. I didn't even know that was a career choice that was even possible. I mean, people I knew were lawyers and doctors or teachers, businessmen, and women. I didn't even know there was a creative job that it was something that was even possible. When I saw that movie, *The Little Mermaid*, it just spoke to me. I just saw my love of drawing and filmmaking, put it together, it was Disney. And the music of that film was just under the sea and part of your world, it was enthralling, amazing. And my mom took me to Disney World to find out how to become a Disney animator, because I didn't know how. There's no websites back then. Today you want to be a Disney animator, you go into Google and you type it in and you'll find out how. Before then you had to do it the old fashion way. My mom really took me to Disney World and walked me around Disney World, just asking Disney cast members, that's what they call their employees, how to become a Disney animator. And we found out through an interview that Disney recruits their artists from a very specific list of eight universities, and these were universities that promoted very strong drawing programs. So, I ended up going to the Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio, CCAD, as it's known. And the first week in school I was sitting in an auditorium, I remember it vividly 750 students were in there, every freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior, and a representative from the Walt Disney Company came to our school, he stands on the stage, he looks out to this huge sea of students and he says how many of you want to be Disney animators, and every hand went up. And he said just so you know, out of the 750 of you, maybe, just maybe four of you will ever work there. That's how competitive it is. And when he said that I remember thinking, I wonder who the other three are going to be.

Jen: Good for you!

Saul: Because look in life, I think this a lot we either believe in ourselves for real or we don't. I don't mean what we tell people on Facebook or Instagram. I mean, deep down, do we really believe that we can accomplish? And at that point in my life, I did believe it. And I worked very hard on a portfolio of drawings. I sent it in my sophomore year, and it got rejected, but I didn't even care. I was just happy the Disney company knew I was alive, that my name printed on like that.

Jen: That you got a rejection letter.

Saul: I hung that up. People were coming into the dorm room like wow, Saul you're so lucky the Disney company knows you're alive. It was awesome. And then a year goes by, another year, and it's my junior year. I take my drawings in again, and so does my best friend, Andy. He was the best artist in the school. Incredible artist, and let me just say for a moment, also me being friends with someone like that made me a better artist. Because who we choose to be friends with actually affects who we become. I'm a parent, I have 4 kids. And how careful do I want my kids to be by who they spend their time with. Because you see those values of those other kids seep into our children. Well, it is the same thing for us. Who are the people that we spend time with? What are their values? Because those values will become

ours as well. And like I said, just being friends with a guy like Andy made me a better artist. So, Andy and I got our best drawings together. We sent them into Disney, and he got in, and I got rejected. And that was a bittersweet day. Look, it was sweet because I was happy for my best friend, but it was bitter because my dream was shattered. And he goes off to the Disney World, the happiest place on earth, I'm going back to Ohio in the wintertime.

Jen: Not the happiest place on earth.

Saul: Well, the most depressing place on earth. No offense, if anyone from Ohio is listening. And when I get back to school, I felt like a loser. And people were coming up to me like Saul, what happened to Andy? Wow, he got in, but you didn't. I became known as the guy that was friends with the guy that got into Disney. And I felt like a real loser. I felt like the guy who didn't get what he really, really wanted. And then I came up with a brilliant way to take that feeling away. And if anybody that's listening right now, if you ever have that feeling that you're not accomplishing something, and you feel like a loser, you do what I did and that feeling will go away in a second. You know what I did? I gave up. Yeah, I gave up on the entire dream. Because reality said, the reality was Andy was awesome and I was just average. You know every single one of us listening. Every one of us has a shoulder angel on our shoulder telling us that we could accomplish. We can aspire for greatness. But we also have that shoulder devil, telling us who do you think you are to go for that. You're just average. You can't do that, and I bought into that shoulder devil, and I gave up on my dream.

A week later I go to the movies, and I see another movie that changes my life. I saw the movie, Rudy. The football player and it's a true story. It's a story about a guy who's 5 feet tall. He's not even athletic and he dreams of playing football at Notre Dame, gets rejected; another year, rejected; third year, rejected again. And if you were friends with Rudy Ruettiger, this is a true story. If you were friends with this guy and he told you his dream was to play football at Notre Dame, you know what you would have told him as his best friend, dude I love you, get a new dream. You're not even athletic. Who do you think you are? But do you know what Rudy would say, 'yeah we'll see about that.'? And he tries to get in a fourth time, boom. If you look at the movie poster for the movie Rudy, it says when people tell you dreams don't come true, tell them about Rudy. And he gets in and I'm telling you guys tears are streaming down my face, because all I'm thinking is if an unathletic kid could get into Notre Dame with an insane amount of hard work, than what I thought was an untalented artist would get into Notre Dame with an insane amount of hard work, and I vowed to never give up again. And then the next day, I call up the head of Disney who does that? Well, I do. I get this guy on the phone, and I asked him how close was I to getting in, he said Saul, what do you mean? Well, how many did you pick out of how many portfolios? He said, we picked 17 portfolios from over 3,800 from around the world and you made it to number 20. Exactly, I had missed it by three. Do you know how many times in our lives we could be so close to achieving something, but we feel we're miles away and all we needed to do is push a little bit more, than I asked him the million-dollar question, why did I get rejected? What was missing from my work? You see we're human beings. You know what that means, we're going to fail. That's what it means to be human. And when we fail, when we find out the answer key to why we failed, that is the only method to grow. Turn our weaknesses into our strengths. And the guy from Disney said you need more perspective in your drawing. Don't just draw, you know, people and animals from where you're standing, stand up on a stool or go down and look up, give us a dynamic perspective. Boom, that was the answer key. I went back, drawn more, I went to the zoo, drew an elephant in the cold. I'll never forget that freezing day in Ohio, my hand shivering drawing this elephant outside, walking back and

forth. I got all my drawings together. I sent them into Disney and when you wish upon a star. I got in. It was one of the greatest days of my life, and I started with Walt Disney Company on the film, Pocahontas. Then I worked on the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Mulan, and Tarzan, and lots of other Disney movies and television shows. And I'll just tell you now reflecting, you asked me about what's my story? Well, my story really is, and I hope everyone listening realizes, you're not just hearing, you're not hearing from a person who was a very talented artist that got into Disney. That's not who you're hearing from. You are hearing from a guy who was the worst artist in his school, who achieved his dream. Nobody wakes up great at anything. Michael Jordan became Michael Jordan because he took 1,000 jump shots every single day before breakfast. So, for anyone listening right now, never forget that each one of you has a unique purpose, because each one of us in the world is unique, and because we have a unique purpose, we need to ask ourselves the question. How can I make an impact in the world by sharing what makes me unique? And with a lot of hard work, tenacity, and resilience I think we really can achieve our dreams.

Jen: I love that. So, tell me what it's like to see your creative ideas come to life on, I mean it's on a big screen, like this is huge now.

Saul: Yes, it is. The first thing I ever drew was in Pocahontas. It was a very dramatic scene where Pocahontas is talking to John Smith in the forest at night, Coco, who was the Native American guy she's supposed to marry, he finds out she's talking to someone else. He's not very happy about that. He walks through the forest at night, and he peeks through these leaves and sees her talking to John Smith. And I was asked to draw the leaves, and that's it. And you know what, I was okay with that, because on a piece of paper you do a drawing of a leaf, it's small, but on a movie screen it's a 50-foot leaf, it better be a good leaf. And actually, I remember taking a Xerox of that first leaf drawing I ever did. I sent it home to my mom. She puts it on the fridge with my art that she had when I was a kid. She tells everybody in our community, you know, my son draws leaves for Disney. She's so proud, but look, it really is exciting and humbling to be part of a company like that. And one time, I remember I was traveling the country promoting Pocahontas, and I'll never forget this old man who came up to me. Must have been in his '80s, I was probably 24 at that time, and he came up to me and he said, I just want to thank you for making Fantasia, and Fantasia came out in the '40s. I was not alive to make Fantasia.

Jen: Maybe you just looked really good.

Saul: Maybe I looked good for my age. So, as I walked away, it hit me. He wasn't thanking Saul; he was basically looking for an opportunity to express his gratitude to the Walt Disney Company for making an impact in his life. And it was that moment that I realized I was part of something much bigger than me. It humbled me in a beautiful way. And to this day, I really look at any art that I am lucky enough to create or a team and I work with, I look at it as a responsibility. I don't just draw because I enjoy it. I do it because it's a responsibility. For anyone listening, if you have any abilities or passions think about those skills or interests or gifts that you have, and look at them as a responsibility to use them to impact the world, because ultimately I think that when we think about how to express ourselves with our abilities and we take that responsibility, then we're getting something more than just a life of happiness, we are getting a life of meaning. And that ultimately is really the goal, I think.

Jen: We call it a life of awesome.

Saul: There you go. That's right, life of awesome, you got it.

Jen: So obviously, you are an incredibly talented artist, but how does creativity show up in other part, like how does it influence or how does it show up in other parts of your life.

Saul: Look, right now in my career I've done lots of different jobs in animation. And I've been an animator and a director and now a supervising producer, and I find personally that the job I have now while I am creative as a storyteller, I find in leadership, in creating a culture for a production is really one of my greatest goals. I work at DreamWorks now, and I say to every single person that I interview, is it cool to be at DreamWorks? Yeah. Is it cool to be working on a franchise that's made a billion dollars because I produce a Madagascar show right now? And yeah, but more important than all that I want every artist that I work with, every person I work with to go home at night and feel like they're contributing to something bigger than them, that they're feeling appreciated and respected, and I find creativity as far as leadership is something that I revel in and really enjoy working with other leadership at DreamWorks to create that culture of respect and appreciation.

Jen: I think that's really important and so much of what we've been talking about here at the World Happiness Summit, kindness, respect. You also talk a lot about getting out of your proverbial comfort zone or getting uncomfortable when it comes to success and dreams and achieving dreams. Can you talk about that?

Saul: Sure. I mean, you know, the whole theme of this summit is resilience, and you can go look it up. Resilience is, you know, when you fall, can you get back up. When you go through adversity, can you stand up again. And nobody's life escapes pain. What it means to be a human being, it's not to go through the pain, it's to grow through the pain. And I once heard an incredible speaker, David Aaron, he said we're not human beings, we are human becomings. We grow, we evolve, we change. The essence, I think of really being resilient and working through adversity is to first know that you will fall. There will be challenges and when you're motivated to step over those challenges, you can accomplish. By the way, forget career, it's the same as relationships. I'm married now 20 years, and I have a great marriage, only because of one thing, because my wife and I are committed to working at the relationship. And if you're listening to this and you have a teenager, and you think it's easy to raise a teenager. You're not doing a good job. We need to have expectations that to be great at something, it's going to take work. Something I tell my kids all the time. My kids are like, dad is that going to be hard to do? I'm like, it's only hard if you want to be great at it. If you want to be average at it, believe me, it'll be easy. And you mentioned the word awesome, I host a podcast called Life of Awesome. And the reason I came up with that name is because, I don't think we all want to just settle for good. And we don't just want a life of great, we want a life that's awesome. If somebody comes up to you and they say how's your day going? You'd be like, it's good. But if they come up to you and say how is your day going? And you go let me tell you how my day is going, it's awesome.

Jen: They want to hear more.

Saul: But they'd also be like why, what happened? Did you win the lottery today? No, no, it's just awesome. What do you mean it's awesome? It's awesome to be alive. Every day we have the ability to get that taste of something awesome, whether it's our relationships, our career, and ultimately when we look in the mirror, we should see somebody that we love. We should be excited to be alive, because if you're alive, it's a gift.

Jen: So, you accomplished your dream to become an animator.

Saul: The first dream. There's many more.

Jen: So that's where I am going. So like you should have more than one dream, because once you accomplish that proverbial dream then what do you do?

Saul: Look I have different dreams now. I have this podcast, like I said, and I love the opportunity that I'm getting listeners from all around the world who are emailing me or DMing me letting me know that it's impacting them. But I'll tell you the greatest challenge and the greatest dream of my life is still the most difficult task that I have, and that is to try and be a better human being. Someday, I hope this doesn't sound morbid, but someday I'm going to die. I'm going to be in the ground just like everybody else, and my kids are going to look at a gravestone. It's not morbid, it's reality. And when you know that you're living on borrowed time, nobody knows how much time we have left, what are my kids going to say about their dad one day? They're going to say well my dad had his name in a lot of Disney movies. Like, who cares? You know what they will hopefully say, they will hopefully say that you know what my dad tried to be the best father he could be. My dad tried to be a better human being. He tried to live a life of integrity or humility. The greatest dream I have is still the greatest battle I have and that is just working on myself. You watch, I have four kids, so I can tell you the difference between a one-year-old and a two-year-old there is huge difference. And the difference between a 2-year-old and a 6-year-old it is night and day. And the things that they can accomplish, but what about us? When we become 30, we can't be as amazing at 31. We can't be better at 34 or 35. We should be like wine, we should get better with age, and that means what, each one of us should make a list of our negative attributes. We all have them. You know what life's about? Take that list of negative attributes and just make it smaller. And then make a list of our positive attributes and make it bigger. That's to me the greatest struggle and the greatest dream of my life.

Jen: So where are you on that journey? Which list is longer right now?

Saul: Well, it depends on who you ask? My wife, I have an incredible wife, and my wife and I have certain customs that we do to keep our marriage growing, and one of those things that we do is we have what we call whisper time. So, when you're raising four kids and you have careers and all these things, we're like passing ships in the night, but every night we get into bed. We have like 3 minutes at least, where we can just catch up on our day. And it's not just talking about all the responsibilities we have and the meetings, it's not just that. It's just talking about where are you today? How are you feeling? We just have these moments that we try to stay vulnerable and talk about where we are. So, because I have that open relationship with my wife, she's the one that is able to help me see what my list really looks like. And for everyone listening, this is so important in any partnership or relationship, if two people always have the same point of view, one person is useless. The reason to get married, the reason to have a partner, the reason for the best friend is because through that person perspective, if I really trust what they say, they can give me a perspective about me and only when I have that perspective on me from someone else, can I use that perspective to grow. Boom.

Jen: I love that. That's Mike Trout moment. You have a filmmaking job. You're an international speaker. You have a podcast. You have a family.

Saul: Boy, I sound busy.

Jen: Yeah, you sound busy. So how do you manage it all? What does well-being look like for Saul?

Saul: Well-being for me is balance, first and foremost. I tell this to my wife all the time, when I'm with her and the kids, I think setting parameters for our lives, setting up a fence to protect the most valuable thing we have which is our time. My family and I, every Friday night, we have a family dinner, every Friday night. And guess what, our phones are not allowed at the table. We shut off the phones. We shut off the screens, and we dress up in our finest clothes, my wife makes a beautiful dinner, and we will have a four-hour dinner and we just talk about the week and the kids seeing and we do, I mean, when they were little, we would do shows and plays, and even now they're still goofballs, and we have the best family time together. But I think the secret to balancing everything is to putting parameters around our time. Because what can happen as years go by, and you're like where did it go? Today, you can be working 24/7, and with email and all the technology that we have, every moment of the day, I have text coming in. I don't need to look at it all the time. I have time with my family. It's family. We go out to dinner; we leave our phones at home. That's right people, you heard me say it, we leave our phones at home. So, I urge everybody set up those parameters to protect the most valuable thing that you have, your time and make sure you find that balance. A lot of people think that the goal of life is to get so much money, so they can go on vacation and sit in jacuzzi in Hawaii somewhere. And while yes, it is nice to have comfort and sit in jacuzzi in Hawaii, I've done it. It's amazing. That's not what life's about. We don't work through the week to get to the weekend. We rest during the weekend to revive ourselves, to have the energy to go back to the week and hopefully impact other people and do the real work of what life is.

Jen: I love that reframing of the weekend. That's really powerful. So, tell me, like I said, you speak all over the world. You've inspired people all over the world. Is there one story or one piece of feedback that you got from somebody at some point that just has stuck with you?

Saul: Years ago, I was an animation instructor for one semester in college. It was after I was animating at Disney, right before I became a director at MTV. And I was doing a figure drawing class, that I was leading. And I was inspiring this group of students, and I was telling them all about the movie Rudy and inspiration, I would play the Rudy soundtrack to pump them up, while we were drawing. And we had a live model in the middle of the room, and everyone was in a circle around her drawing. And one kid in the corner was just very, very frustrated. He was struggling with his charcoal, I remember, it was breaking, he was just frustrated. And then all of a sudden, he just packs up his stuff, after like 10 minutes. It's still like another hour and a half of the class. He walks over to me and hands me a piece of paper and then walked out of the room. And I opened that piece of paper, and I will never forget, I still have it, it said on a piece of paper, not everybody is Rudy. And that made a big impact on me. Because what he was saying is not everybody is going to be great. And I remember that moment thinking, is he right? Yeah, it's true. Not everybody is going to play football at Notre Dame. Yeah, it's true, not everybody is going to get into Disney. Not everybody is going to do whatever. There's a lot of hard, competitive, difficult jobs out there. But firmly do I believe, and I was saying it earlier, I do firmly believe that we can find real greatness, true greatness, in the way that we approach each day. You're walking down the street and you see someone, and you smile at them, you just impacted their day. On my podcast, I interviewed George Foreman, the boxer. George Foreman became heavyweight champion in the world at 20 years old, before that he was living in poverty, ate one meal a day. He was in crime. I mean he had a very difficult life. And at 20 years old he became heavyweight champion of the world. After that he took a leave. He boxed for a couple of years. He lost to Muhammad Ali, and then fought again 20 years later, being heavyweight champion the world again. He's done everything and when he

was on the podcast, I asked him this question, George what's your legacy? What do you want your kids to remember about you? What do you want the world to remember about you? He said you know what I want them to remember about me, and by the way, this is coming from a gazillionaire who has got the greatest sports accolade a single person can have, heavyweight champion of the world. He's done everything. He said there's only one thing I want the world to remember, that I loved human beings and I tried to make an impact. You see, not everyone is George Foreman. Not everyone can win the heavyweight title, but each one of us has the ability to make an impact. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you something insane. After I interviewed George Foreman, I went back and looked at one of his fights, the fight the night he became heavyweight champion of the world, he was 20 years old. And in that moment right after he became heavyweight champion of the world, think about what he was feeling. He went from no bank account to millions of dollars in a matter of moments. Think about the emotion, the jubilation, the excitement going on in him, and one minute after he wins some commentator comes up to and puts a microphone in his face and says, 'George what are you going to do next?' And George says, 'I'll tell you; I'm going to go tell all the kids in the world out there that you can become who you want to be? And that you should believe in yourself.' It's the first thing out of his mouth. The commenter is like no, no George, I don't mean that, I mean in the ring. What are you going to do next in the ring and George says, quote, 'the world is my ring.' You see, he knew that greatness isn't belts. The real struggle of life is out there, and now that I am the heavyweight champion of the world, how can I use that to change the world, to help other people achieve their limitless potential. So yes, I do travel the world and I speak a lot, and I have people come up to me, and they'll tell me, yeah, you know, Saul, I didn't believe in myself, but I heard your story, and if you could accomplish that, I can accomplish this. And I've had people tell me that their teenagers will listen to the podcast. My teenagers now are pumped up and they believe in themselves. All the feedback I get it means so much to me, but it really all starts with that one note that I got from that student years ago when he said, not everybody is Rudy, and inside I say to myself, well maybe you're not Rudy, but you know what you are? You are you.

Jen: I love it. Well Saul, thank you so much for this high energy, packed with wisdom, you're awesome. Thank you for being here today.

Saul: Look, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you guys. And if I could just leave you all with one final thing, you know there's that line from Disney song, it's no matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing the dream that you have will come true. And I am a dreamer, and I've achieved many of my dreams, but I still have so much to do, and I know it's going to be difficult, and I hope all of you listening, you should know that of course, as you know, life is difficult. There's challenge around us, but there's nothing stopping us from achieving our unique potential. There was a woman, Margaret Mead, she had a beautiful quote she would say to her children, she'd say to her kids don't ever forget you are created unique and special, just like everyone else. Because we think being special means I have to be better than everyone else, but because each one of us is unique, that means we have a unique potential. We have a unique purpose. You're not in competition with anybody else. We have to be uniquely ourselves. Only then will we find the highest sweetest levels of happiness. Thanks for having me.

Jen: Absolutely, thank you. I'm so grateful Saul could be with us today to talk about his journey to becoming a filmmaker.

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