

# DOING THE OPPOSITE BUSINESS DISRUPTORS

Conversations with  
**Jeff Dewing**

## EPISODE TWO

### Doing the Opposite: Challenging Business Norms

**Jeff Dewing – Teaser:**

*You talk about fear zone. I mean, why do people go on a roller coaster? They go on a roller coaster, they want a bit of fear. Because fear is where life is, that's where the energy is. And it's about turning fear into excitement.*

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**Sam Walker:**

Hello, welcome to Doing the Opposite Business Disruptors Conversations with Jeff Dewing. This is the podcast where we explore how leadership, culture, and courage can transform business and also life.

Jeff Dewing has built a company, the Cloudfm Group, by breaking every rule in the book. After losing everything, he came back by doing the opposite of what conventional wisdom said that he should. In this episode, we're diving into what it really means to challenge those norms. How daring to think differently can really spark innovation, growth, and trust.

Jeff, 'Doing the Opposite'. I mean, it isn't just a catchy title, it's actually your whole philosophy. What does it actually mean to you, that phrase?

**Jeff Dewing:**

I guess it's not following the herd. I saw a film years and years ago, I can't remember what it's called now, but watching a load of buffalo running for their lives, being chased by lions, and the herd all fall off a cliff. You think, 'well, that's not very smart, is it'? So for me, the doing the opposite is just challenging the norm, challenging the status quo. You don't do the opposite for the sake of it. You do the opposite because there's probably a better way. And those that don't seek the better way follow the herd. And you know, and if the herd go off the cliff, you go off the cliff with them.

**Sam Walker:**

So it's about not really trying to compete harder within the system, it's about tearing that system up and saying that actually doesn't work.

**Jeff Dewing:**

Yeah, or saying that maybe there's a better way. You know, things change, atmospheres change, communities change, the world changes. God, we've seen the world change. So if

you look at the political institution and the fact we go from one government to another government to another government in all countries, and yet everyone complains, has the same complaints about any government, every government, because the institution hasn't changed for 500 years.

**Sam Walker:**

Is it a little bit as well about realising you don't need to have the answers before you take one foot in front of the other?

**Jeff Dewing:**

It's a bit cryptic, but I think you know, the phrase I love most about anything, when people say to me, 'what's the answer'? I say, 'No, that's that's wrong'. The first thing is 'what is the question'? And until you get the question right, you'll you won't get the answer right. So focus on the right question.

**Sam Walker:**

I mean that takes real guts, though, actually, doesn't it? And I think you know, a lot of people, not just leaders, but in life, we are we are scared of doing something different and putting our head above the parapet. But when you're talking about business, when you're talking about leadership, you've got investors, you've got board members who expect things to be done a certain way, who expect results. How do you start to have the conversation with them then about changing things up?

**Jeff Dewing:**

It starts with having the right people around you. Do they believe what you believe? And when you talk about any subject - you talk about putting your head above the parapet... We're all familiar with the word comfort zone, right? So we go to work at nine o'clock, we come home at five o'clock, we have egg and chips on a Monday, sausage chips on a Wednesday, and all the various bits and pieces that happen, and we watch Coronation Street on a Friday, and God forbid we miss Ant and Deck on a Saturday night. So you know, this is stuff where people are in their comfort zone, and if that's where you're happy, there's no problem with that.

**Sam Walker:**

It feels safe, right?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Of course it feels safe because you're doing, you know what you're doing and everything's planned out for you. But when you step out of your comfort zone, you move into a thing called the fear zone and the fear zone is 'oh my god, I'm doing something different'. And that might be someone going abroad for the first time or getting on an airplane for the first time, right? That's the fear zone. And then you move into what's called the growth zone. And in the growth zone is where you push way, way beyond the fear zone, and that's where the magic happens and you get to do stuff. So you look at people that have emigrated to Australia, you look at people that have suddenly said, like I did, 'I'm moving to Portugal five years ago'. These things were beyond our thinking 15, 20 years ago. So when you're prepared to come out your comfort zone, that's when some real sexy stuff happens. But

you've you've got to be prepared to do it, unless, of course, you are happy in your comfort zone, and there's nothing wrong with that. What you're not allowed to do in your comfort zone is complain about being in your comfort zone.

**Sam Walker:**

I mean, there's that phrase, isn't there, that good is the enemy of great, and so many of us stay in the good. But it's terrifying. It's terrifying, especially when you know conventional wisdom says, 'oh, don't want too much. Why do you want to be different? Why do you want to step outside of you know the circle that we're all in'? Where did that drive come from from you? Where did that confidence come from from you?

**Jeff Dewing:**

I hate comfort zones because I find it so boring. I find it pointless. You know, the reason that we all survive, or the reason we all exist, is to grow, right? To evolve. That's how you've gone from the caveman to where we are today. It's evolution, it's about the learning steps of life and the ability to, you know, can you imagine in the 1920s talking about AI? I mean, clearly, this is a evolution. So we only exist to grow and to help each other grow. That's the reason we're here. And you're not going to grow sitting in your comfort zone. What are you going to learn? You talk about fear zone. I mean, why do people go on a on a roller coaster? They go on a roller coaster, they want a bit of fear. Because fear is where life is, that's where the energy is. And it's about turning fear into excitement. People used to say to me when I did my keynotes, 'aren't you nervous getting up on stage? You must be really nervous because I know if I'd ever be asked to do it, my mouth would go dry, I wouldn't be able to do it, I'd freeze'. I said, 'you turn the word nervous, which is a negative connotation, into excitement'. No, I'm never nervous, I'm excited. It's all about mindset. Everything's about mindset. And I said, What's the worst gonna happen? I'm not gonna die on stage. I might look stupid, I might say something stupid, I might fall over, but I'm not gonna die.

**Sam Walker:**

In the previous episode, we talked a lot about the fact that after you had this loss where you, you know, you'd lost your business, your home life, all your comforts, the things that made you feel safe. You then went into this intensive period of reflection and you needed that period of reflection, you know. And it's a tough place to sit in, right? Because we think we should be moving on, moving on, moving on. But then you then began on this journey where you built a business in a completely different way. Where did those first kind of seeds start to grow in this period of reflection? What was then that next step from sitting in your, as you put, sitting in your garage and your dressing gown all day? Where did where did you first start to pull yourself out of that despair and say, 'I'm seeing a vision, I'm seeing a path'?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Well, I didn't. I had no vision, I had no path. What I did was I reflected on what had gone wrong and how I was responsible for it. And I had to understand how I felt at that moment. And after that point of reflection, what I learned was that despite running what was a successful business whilst it was successful, I'd become head of HR, head of IT, head of finance, head of accounting, I'd become a lawyer, I'd become an accountant because you had to do all these things to run a business, right? You had to learn fast at lightning pace. And whilst you are successful, you're in this false sense of security of thinking you know it

all. And it isn't until you sit and reflect afterwards to say, actually, now I realize I knew sweet FA. I knew nothing and that false sense of security sent me down the wrong road and put me in a safe space that was clearly unsafe. So I then learned and realized I had a lot of learning to do, a huge amount of learning to do. It was almost the nemesis that the success had put me in this comfort zone. It wasn't so much a comfort zone, but somewhere I believed that I knew what I was doing. And it wasn't until it all crashed I realised I didn't know what I was doing. So therefore, what I learned, and what the what the outcome of that reflection was, is I need to go back to work, back into the world, and I need to learn the things I clearly didn't understand the first time round. So that was a journey that I went on. And it wasn't a journey for three months, six months, or a year, it was a journey for seven, eight years. And it wasn't until after that seven or eight years when I decided, right, I'm now ready.

**Sam Walker:**

Can you remember a time? Was there a moment where you you made that decision 'I'm gonna do the opposite. I'm gonna switch things up'. And how did that pay off?

**Jeff Dewing:**

So working in the various organizations that I worked in when I went back to work, I went into a small um owner-managed business about 10 million turnover, I then went into another one at 50 million turnover, I then went into another one at 100 million turnover, and then I went to the corporate at one and a half billion turnover. So I'd experienced all of those stepping stones in the world of facilities. And there was one common thread. It was full of hundreds of thousands of people behaving badly. And it was all because they were in this environment that said it's all about the numbers, it's all about the money, it's all about the quicks, it's all about the three-month forecast, it's all about a budget. You don't fail your budget, otherwise you die. It's all about the margin. If you don't hit the margin, you die. It's everything was numbers-driven. And people became frightened of their shadow! So if you had a contract manager or a project manager or account director that held an account that was not performing or was at risk of cancelling, your ass was on the line. You were out of a job. So what then happened was people were then forced to be very economic with the truth. They would say everything's fine when it wasn't fine, because they were in self-preservation mode, because the hierarchy and the environment said 'you will pay dearly if any of these things happen'.

So therefore, I became very disruptive by saying this is all wrong. And that's why I couldn't hold a job for more than two years. People paid me lots of money to leave because I was causing so much chaos. Whereas I'm sitting down, 'why don't we just do the right thing'? Yeah. And then after I went through the corporate, and the same thing applied, they said, Here's a load of money, Jeff, please leave. You're upsetting everybody I then realised I can't turn the oil tanker I'm gonna have to do this embryonically, and that's when I realised that, and I've realised that the whole time, we've got to be, we've got to behave differently to what the whole industry is behaving. It's a 200 billion pound industry, and everyone's behaving the same way. And it was all about the environment, it was all about the culture. So I then knew the only way I was gonna get my piece was to do what I wanted to do embryonically because no one was ready for that you know material change.

**Sam Walker:**

And what happened when you took that step?

**Jeff Dewing:**

I grew a business from zero to sixty-five million three years.

**Sam Walker:**

How did the rest of the industry that had always done things in this way react when you popped up saying, okay, you wouldn't listen, I'm gonna do this. I mean, that must have ruffled some feathers.

**Jeff Dewing:**

It did, but then you've got ego and you've got all the rest, but then they went, Oh, they they're just a flash in the ointment, they won't last long, you know, they're they're just a little spark, it will all go away and fade away. Because they went, Yeah, it just all nonsense, really. You've got to keep doing the same thing. So there was a lot of that, but then of course, as we grew, and more importantly, we didn't grow to tell anybody that we were better than them. We were thought leaders, so we were we were trying to educate not just in industry, but also the clients. The clients were as much to blame as the industry because the clients were driving the wrong behaviour as well.

So, all we'd done is we said, look, everybody's our friend. We want to we want to get you to look at this differently. So we had a philosophy of a small number of large clients. We weren't here to take over the world, we were here to show how you can do things differently, behave in the right way, and not chase the money. The money will follow! Don't make the money the primary objective. The money is something that will follow the journey that you're on to make create a better world. Um, and the more we gained momentum, the more people looked at us. Um, and then of course they do become fearful, although we're still a minnow compared to some of the big organisations. But what they do do, what we've learned, is they respect the business, they respect the brand. I guess one of the things that's really nice is that when people in our organisations leave, which we encourage them to do when they're growing and there might not be an opportunity for them in our organisation. What's lovely is the feedback we get that said, as soon as the new company saw Cloud on my CV, I had the job. And things like that are - that's about having a credible brand. So yeah, that's quite rewarding.

**Sam Walker:**

Now, all of this thinking that we've been discussing, it requires a lot of self-belief. But it also requires a lot of humility. How do you balance those things?

**Jeff Dewing:**

We're back to what happened to me originally. I have zero fear of failure. Because if you don't try new things, you don't evolve. Um, if you sit in your comfort zone or you create an environment where everyone's in their comfort zone, there is zero creativity because you're frightened of trying new things in case they fail. Failure is the most important word in our business. If you don't fail, you don't succeed. Every success on the planet comes from initial failure. You look at all these scientists that are trying to cure cancer every day. Do you think

they come home every day to their husbands and wives go, 'Oh shit, I'm a failure, I didn't cure cancer'. They're moving forward every day, right? And the key is failure is a learning moment. And if you don't fail, you don't succeed. And if people in our business don't fail, then we question what they're doing.

**Sam Walker:**

That's a risk though, isn't it, for a company's reputation to have that attitude. If you're bringing people on board and saying this all might go horribly wrong, are people not afraid of that?

**Jeff Dewing:**

No, because there is a process, it's not simply you don't create anarchy by saying, here's all this freedom, you know nothing about it, but just go do what you want to do, just don't break the law. There's a journey that says we have a clear purpose, a clear set of outcomes we're trying to achieve. We're currently doing it this way, we have no fear of trying new things and here's the clarity of the lines within which we have to operate. And the one thing that protects everybody is 'no one is an island'. So you don't come up with some weird and wonderful idea and just go and execute without any form of collaboration or knowledge or bouncing. So anyone that comes up with an idea, radical or otherwise, have a responsibility to engage a wider team on that journey. And what that does is it creates balance. What you can't do is come up with some weird and wonderful idea on your own and then just you know go it alone. Because we had this philosophy that said, 'if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together', right? So collaboration is the key. You collaborate, you bounce stuff. And with me, I might come up with some weird and wonderful idea, which I come up with lots. But I say to my team, I've got this idea. They go, 'oh shit'. So I say, 'no, no, seriously, this is a good one'. But you bring them on the journey and they go, 'Yeah, but Jeff, that the impact of that is that'. And you 'go, yeah, good point. Okay, maybe I've pushed that too far.' That's how you do it. You debate, you discuss. And it's not because it's your idea it has to work, it's about, and we have a philosophy in our business, you're not allowed to say yes, but you can only say yes and. So if you come up with an idea about something, you don't say yes, but this won't happen or this, you say yes, and we could do this to protect it, and we could do that to make it stronger. So you're only allowed to say yes end. And it's a lot of fun we have because occasionally people slip out and they say yes, but we go, who said but? Who said but?

**Sam Walker:**

We are gonna get on and talk about company culture and and the value of people within an organisation over profit. But I what you've just said resonated in a way that if you as a leader are prepared to say, 'I don't have all the answers, and it might go wrong, but that will be okay because we're all gonna do it together'. That then enables other people, because they are not gonna feel alone in making a decision or moving forward with an idea that perhaps does disrupt what's gone in the past.

**Jeff Dewing:**

We are back to the environment and the culture, but you know, you win together, you lose together. That is the key. And the only time you don't win together and lose together is

when you're an island. Therefore, if you're an island, you are very exposed. So don't ever be an island.

**Sam Walker:**

So for leaders who might feel stuck because that's the way things have always been done, where should they start? And by that I suppose I mean can you can you train somebody to kind of think outside the box to think the opposite?

**Jeff Dewing:**

You can you can train somebody to understand the importance of environment and culture. So if I was a leader that was stuck with the knowledge I now have, the first thing I would do is I would select a team, my team, the team, that I trusted that work with me, and I'd say, we're going away for three days, we'll lock ourselves in a hotel, and we're just gonna ask ourselves some radical questions. We're gonna fire for the moon because thinking costs you no money. Executing costs you money. So the thinking costs nothing. So let's go think. And what you do is you create an environment just in that three days, away from the environment of your business or your norm, and you start radicalising on what we could do. What if, what if, what if, what if, what if. And you just and you use flip charts, you do all sorts of stuff, and you just stimulate the environment. And then people start saying, Yeah, but but Jeff, we haven't got we haven't got no we've got no money. I say, assume we've got billions, forget the money constraint, assume we have everything we need. How are we gonna think? And there's a lovely rule I say if you shoot for the moon and you miss, you land in the stars, and so it's still a great outcome.

Let's push the boundaries of our thinking. And I'll never forget the first time we did it, and we called our strategy days room 501, and that's because it was the number of the room I was staying in the hotel. And we all got together, and at that point we had probably 36 quid in the bank, and there was about nine of us, all board directors, and we came up with these radical ideas, and they said, we said, 'right, what we're now gonna do, stage two is now we come up with these ideas, we're now gonna go and cost them. What do we think they're gonna cost, and when do we think it's gonna cost us money?' We come back and it works out it's gonna cost us half a million quid, and we went, but we got 36 quid in the bank. I said it doesn't matter. If we went on this journey, it's gonna cost us half a million quid over two and a half years, so it's gonna be 30 grand then, 70 grand, then 200 grand, then whatever, whatever. And we plotted this out and we executed because we had a clear plan of what we had to achieve to create the money to do the thing. We had focus, right? And we were on that journey and we achieved exactly what we set out to achieve. Whereas at the start of that conversation, if that had been a boardroom in my office, it would have stopped after half an hour because we've only got 36 quid. So there's no point talking about it. Wait until we've got some money, then we'll talk about it. And that was the wrong approach. You create the journey, you say it out loud, like I did – 'I'll be a supervisor at 19', you say it out loud, that's what we're gonna do. How are we now gonna make that work? And it creates it's a mindset.

**Sam Walker:**

I was thinking about the fact that you quite often say this isn't business lessons per se or leadership lessons, it is about life. And you talked about, you know, how relationships and

family life shouldn't be a place where you behave any differently. And I think about that phrase, you know, it's very easy to fall in love, it's very hard to stay in love. So the story you've just told about getting in that room and kind of having these disruptive conversations, is this something you need to do to check in to kind of keep yourself on that track? Is that something that as a business you should say, 'this is something that as a team we need to do regularly'?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Yes, and we and we do do it. We have our strategy days every three, three months religiously. And those strategy days are reflecting on the strategy we've already got, how we can improve it, what's changed. Um, and but they've got like everything else, fail to prepare, prepare to fail, right? You've got to have structured days. You've got to decide, you've got to have your strategy. And I had this philosophy that says, you know, our destination has been set already. The destination never changes, but the route to the destination can change, and sometimes it has to change. You come across a mountain, do I go over it, through it, or around it? So you you've got to decide, you know, the routes will always change, but the destination never changes. And everything is about how do we push harder. And the more success you get over these milestone achievements, the more momentum you get. The flywheel goes harder and harder. And the more you're doing that, the more people are pumped and the more they've bought into it because they can see that you're actually moving forward. Whereas some companies get it wrong, they have a great big chat about stuff, and then nothing gets executed. And therefore, you think, well, what's the point? So, therefore, the next strategy day is just going through the motions. So you have to be focused, you have to create accountability, who's doing what part of that journey, and they're held accountable for executing that part of the journey and then you you see these monumental changes.

**Sam Walker:**

It's a bit like the difference between buying a gym membership and actually going to the gym, right? It's very easy to kind of go, you know, or buying that self-help book or watching a great YouTube series... because that's almost the challenge, isn't it? It's easy to get motivated, it's quite hard to stay motivated. How how do you set up that kind of accountability path?

**Jeff Dewing:**

Communicate, communicate, communicate. So whenever we have a plan of any type, there's one golden rule in life: don't try to eat the elephant, right? And the million dollar question is how do you eat an elephant? And the answer is one bite at a time. So forget trying to eat the elephant, because that's when you get lost, right? So you have to realise that I'm gonna do this bite, then this bite, then this bite. And as you progress through those bites, you go, Wow! I'll never forget this the other day. I took some friends of mine uh out for a meal to an Italian restaurant, and and I ordered calzone. I don't know if you've seen a calzone, it's bigger than my head, right? And you think, how on earth am I gonna eat that? And suddenly, before you know where you are, you've eaten it because you did it one bite at a time. And yet when it first came at you and I'm never gonna get through that, and then suddenly you're through it. So for me, it's about the one bite at a time, and the more you create these milestones, so it's not about eating the elephant, it's not about 'shit, we

haven't reached the destination'. No, we're on the journey to we've reached the second petrol station. Whoopi fucking, well, excuse my language, whoopie-do, right? So now suddenly you realize, and what you've done is you've created momentum. And the reality is that this is where some people get it wrong. Uh, I need to motivate my team. You can't motivate your team. You'll never be able to motivate your team. Only your team can motivate your team. You are you own your own motivation. What your job as a leader is, is to inspire, right? Create an inspirational environment to give them a reason to be motivated. And the motivation comes from achievements. When you achieve something, when you get recognition, that drives motivation. It helps the motivation process. But you can't motivate somebody, they can only motivate themselves.

**Sam Walker:**

I love that. Thank you.

If you enjoyed this episode, do share it, please, with someone who is ready to challenge the norms, the way things that have always been done. Next time, Jeff and I explore leadership with vulnerability and how humility and honesty and openness can really not only change the way that you lead, but how you can connect. Until then, keep questioning, keep leading, and of course, keep Doing the Opposite. To find out more, do head to [jeffdewing.co.uk](http://jeffdewing.co.uk). With big thanks to Nicola Crawshaw at Cloud and to Michael Blades at What Goes On Media. I'm Sam Walker and Doing the Opposite, Business Disruptors is a What Goes On Media production.