

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 49: Alison Levine

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Alison Levine, a mountain climber who has climbed the highest mountains on every continent, She's the author of the NY Times bestselling book [On the Edge](#), and the executive producer of [The Glass Ceiling](#), a documentary about the first Nepali woman to climb Mt. Everest.

Whitney: I am so delighted to have you on the Disrupt Yourself podcast, and shoutout to Alden Mills for connecting us, though it sounds like we've got a number of various connections. Can we start off by you saying what your name is, and how you live your life from day to day? What do you do in the world?

Alison: So yes, this is Alison Levine. I'm a huge dog lover. And I am an adventurer, an explorer, a keynote speaker, and an author. Basically, my passion is mountaineering and polar expedition. So, throughout the years, I have climbed the highest peak on each continent, skied to both the North and the South Pole, and that's sort of what I speak about and what my book is about. I wrote a book called [On the Edge](#), which basically sort of recounts the lessons I learned in these extreme environments, and how people can apply these lessons to their everyday lives.

Whitney: Fantastic. Okay, so that is a wonderful introduction. Let's now back way, way, way, way, way up, because I'm kind of doubting that you thought you were going to climb Mount Everest when you were five years old, although you may have been planning on doing that. Um, can you talk to us just briefly, where did you grow up and, um, tell us a little bit about your childhood.

Alison: I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona. (Laughs) So, 120 degrees in the summertime, and I think because it was so hot all the time, I just gravitated towards these stories about the early Arctic and Antarctic explorers and the mountaineers. So, when I, you know, when I was growing up, I always loved these stories, and that's how I got into the sport.

But, grew up, you know, normal family, middle child of three kids, but was born with a hole in my heart, uh, which presented some health challenges for me. So, I actually have had three heart surgeries now. I'm 51. I had one when I was 17. One when I was 30. And one when I was 45. And in good health now, but growing up I wasn't, you know, necessarily in the best of health, so I never thought I would do anything extremely athletic or extremely extreme. Um, and just figured, well, I'd just read about these things and watch documentaries

about them, and that'll be good enough. you know, eventually, I decided that wasn't good enough and wanted to venture out.

Whitney: Okay. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, so hold on just a second. So, you were reading about polar expeditions when you were a kid.

Alison: Yeah, I just loved these adventure stories. I loved any kind of adventure story-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alison: And those were the ones that I really gravitated toward. But I climbed my first mountain at 32. So, it wasn't until I was much older that I actually went out and did it versus just reading about it or watching documentary films about it

Whitney: Okay, so you got your degree in, um ... what did you study in college?

Alison: So, I went to the University of Arizona in Tucson, and I studied communication. So, I was communication major, marketing minor, and then, um, went back and got an MBA, uh, 11 years later at-at Duke.

Whitney: All right, so, you leave Duke, and then what do you do after Duke?

Alison: It was the least likely job people thought I would take, but I ended up working for Goldman Sachs for just a couple of years after Duke. I went there for the summer as a summer intern, because I wanted to really stretch myself because I was a, you know, a liberal arts major with a, you know, degree in communication and minor in marketing, and I worked in sales and marketing.

I had no formal business background, you know, as far as accounting or finance. I never took an hardcore business classes, so I thought if I really want to learn about accounting and finance and some of the more applicable subjects that you really need to run a business some day, then I should try to go to Wall Street for the summer, but, gosh, I'd never actually work on Wall Street. I just want to try to go for the summer. And then I ended up at Goldman for the summer, and then ended up actually taking on a, uh, a full-time job there after business school. And it was something that was completely, you know, 180 degrees different from anything I'd ever done in the past, but I-I wanted to do that. I wanted to really stretch myself and try something that felt like it would be sort of a ridiculous challenge.

Whitney: Okay, so, so Alison, it's interesting to me, because you-you wanted to stretch yourself, and, um, tho- ... most of the people that are listening to the podcast know that Duke is not an easy school to get into to get an MBA, and, um, most people listening to the podcast know that trying to get a job at Goldman Sachs in

investments, no less, is an even harder task to do. So, what did you do to prepare yourself to make yourself competitive that you could actually get that job in the first place? Because you wanted to stretch yourself, but a lot-

Alison: Right.

Whitney: Of people want to stretch themselves-

Alison: Yeah.

Whitney: And they're not able to stretch themselves in that way, so what did you do to prepare yourself to be able to get those jobs?

Alison: Okay, I'm so glad you asked that, because it brings up, uh, a really important point, which is that sometimes, in order to get a job or achieve something, you don't necessarily have to be better, you-you can be different. Like, different in itself can m- ... is what can be ... can-can make you seem better and can make you stand out, so all my classmates who had come from investment banking in the past, you know, also wanted (laughs) a job at Goldman or wherever else, um, and a lot of them had come from Ivy League schools, and I knew I was competing with these people. And then what made it worse was that over the breaks, you know, we'd have fall break or winter break, and students would go to Wall Street, and they would do this week on Wall Street, where they-they would go and they would meet all the recruiters from the investment banks.

But, every time I had a break from business school, I would go to the mountains. And, so, I would ... Because that's what I was passionate about, and that's where I wanted to be, and so while all of my friends were my classmates, and you know, friends from Duke were visiting with these recruiters, I was somewhere on the side of a mountain, but what I did in order to stand out was, is I-I wrote postcards to the recruiters from the mountain, and I would say, "Hi-"

Whitney: (Laughs)

Alison: "This is Alison Levine here from the 20,000 foot camp on Aconcagua in Argentina. I know all my classmates are visiting with you right now, I really wish I could be there, but I'm huddled up in this tent getting ready for a summit bid, but I'm thinking about," you know, "thinking of you and really looking forward to meeting you when you come to campus and recruit." And I would hand that postcard, that pre-stamped postcard to somebody who was hiking down the mountain, and I would say ... because I was on my way up, they would ... people that had already summited and were on their way down, I would say, "Can you drop this in the mail for me when you get down?" And so, they would get down

to, you know, civilization, and they would pop this postcard in the mail, and these recruiters would receive my postcards.

And that was a way that I could stand out from the crowd. It was a way I could still do what I wanted to do during my breaks, right? Go to the mountains instead of going to Wall Street and schmoozing recruiters and important people. And I could still get my name in front of them in a way that was different, because I knew if I just went to Week on Wall Street, that I didn't think I would get very far, right? Compared to the people with Ivy League schools, you know, that-

Whitney: Right. Right. Because you had a degree in communications from-

Alison: Princeton undergrad and

Whitney: Yeah. From U of A, right.

Alison: From the University of Arizona, all right?

Whitney: Yeah.

Alison: Liberal Arts major, I had a sales background, and I thought, "Oh, these people with these Ivy League educations that worked in finance, they're the ones that they're going to remember. They're the ones that are going to get the job offer."

Whitney: (Laughs) That is brilliant. How did you get the idea to send the postcards in the first place? Does that come from your marketing background, your sales background? Because, I mean, that's brilliant.

Alison: Yes. Yes. Well, I was just trying to figure out what- ... you know, I'm-I'm not ... I know for sure I'm not going to stand out by my credentials, because I don't ... I really, I cannot compare to the other people that are there. They're going to, on paper, they're going to look like a much better fit than I ... than I look like, right?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alison: So, I just ... my marketing background did actually come in handy, because I thought, "What can I do to be different? What can I do to separate myself from the rest of the crowd? And how can I, sort of, have them be a captive audience where-where I can display my enthusiasm for this job?" Because everybody that goes to Week on Wall Street wants a job. Everybody's talking about how excited they are to be there. And I thought, well-

Whitney: Right.

Alison: Just be ... putting forth that effort to ... "I'm on the side of a mountain. I'm huddled up in a tent. I'm thinking about how excited I am to see you guys when you come to recruit on campus. I look forward to speaking with you, you know, got to run." Like, "Got a summit bid in four hours." And then I would just, you know, hand these postcards and pray the people actually made it down the mountain to mail them for me.

Whitney: Right. Right. So, you climbed your first mountain at 32. Is that right? Is that what you said?

Alison: Yes. Yes.

Whitney: What ... what went into the decision to climb that first mountain? What was the mountain? And, actually, a prior question, why did you want to climb a mountain in the first place?

Alison: So, after reading all these stories, um, about these explorers and these mountaineers, after I had my second heart surgery when I turned 30 ... So, the first one when I was 17 wasn't successful. But the second one, when I turned 30, was successful. And that point, I had this newfound state of good health. And I just thought, the ... you know, "Wow. I should go do something that I couldn't do before." And then the lightbulb went on in my head, and I thought, "If I want to know what it's like to be these explorers in these remote regions, why don't I go to these remote regions instead of reading about them? Or instead of just watching documentary films about them? And if these other guys can go do these things, then why can't I go do them?"

And, granted, there weren't very many women at the time. You know, this was back in the late 90s. Weren't very many-many women doing these things, but I just thought why-why not? There's nothing stopping me. The mountain doesn't know whether someone's male or female. It's all the same. So, I just had this idea to go, and so the first mountain I ever went to, was Mount Kilimanjaro, which I recommend to people all the time as a great starting place if you want to go to the mountains and get a feel for what it's like, because it's really just a long trek. There's really nothing technical on that mountain. You don't need special equipment. You don't need special training. You just need warm clothes, waterproof boots, and you need to be able to put one foot in front of the other. I didn't own any of the right clothing or gear or anything, so I borrowed everything I needed from friends. A fleece jacket, a GORE-TEX® jacket, a backpack, a ... everything. The only thing I had were hiking boots. I went out and bought a pair of heavy hiking boots and ... so I had my own boots, but everything else was borrowed.

And I just ... I used my frequent flyer miles, and I went to Tanzania just by myself. And I found a local guide at the base of the mountain, (laughs), for a couple hundred bucks that was willing to take me up the mountain. And, so I-I just did the trek on my own, and I just ... I really loved it, and it was ... It was a special mountain for me, not just because it was my first one, but it was where I learned that, even when I felt like quitting, I could still take one more step. And after you learn you can take one more step, then you learn you can take one step after that. And then you learn you can take one more step after that. And, before you know it, you're standing on top of a mountain, and you figure out that you just got there from-from being resilient and from being determined, and you don't ... You know, I tell people all the time, "You don't have to be the best, fastest, most skilled climber. You just have to be absolutely relentless." That's really all it is.

Whitney: Hm. So, it's interesting to me, you ... your very first mountain climb, it was very ... It sounds like it was a bit slapdash and spontaneous, like, "I'm just going to go do this-"

Alison: Oh, yeah.

Whitney: "I'm going to borrow the equipment. I'm ... hire someone when I get there." Why do you think you didn't plan it out, and you just kind of did it spontaneously?

Alison: Well, one of the reasons was that I couldn't afford it, because all these trips that I looked into where you could plan and go with a Western company, you know, that organized all the logistics for you, and you went and you met with a group, they were kind of expensive, I would have preferred to have gone with a couple of girlfriends, but I also would have preferred to go by myself versus not going at all.

Whitney: Right. Right. Okay, so Mount Kilimanjaro, your very first climb. What happened after that? You-you climb this mountain, and so, then, how did you feel? What plans did you make? Sort of what-what happened inside of you after that experience?

Alison: So, the reason that mountain was special, it was that experience of thinking, "Okay, I-I'm not going to make it up this mountain," because I was so, uh, affected by the altitude, I felt sick to my stomach. I had a banging headache, and it was my first time at altitude, where you move so slowly, and you're completely out of breath after just a couple of steps. And I wasn't familiar with that feeling, and I thought, "Oh, something's wrong. I-I need to turn around."

But, before I turn around, I just ... "I'm just going to take one more step to see if the view's any different, you know, one step further." And I would take that step. And then, "Okay, well I know I'm going to go down now, but just one more step

before I turn around." Okay. One more step. "Okay, well, wait. Just one more step." And-and then, like I said, I got to the top, and, so for me-

Whitney: Wait, how l... wait, wait, sorry, Alison. How long did that go on? Did that go on for a couple of hours?

Alison: Hours.

Whitney: Did it go-

Alison: It went on for hours and hours (laughs). But every time I took one more step, I thought, "Well, I just" ... I didn't think I could take ... I didn't think I could go any further, and I just took one more step, so let me just take one more. Okay, well, let me just take one more.

Whitney: Hm.

Alison: And that's really where I learned that I had that voice in my head that could help me to keep going when I really thought I should quit. So, the next time I went to a mountain, and I felt like quitting, I was like, "Wait a minute. I have felt this way before, and I was absolutely certain I was going to turn around, and that's how I feel now. But I took one more step. So maybe I can take one more step right now. All right, maybe I can take one more-"

So, once you find that voice in your head, and everybody has it. Everybody has that voice in their head, you just have to find it and listen to it. And so, now, every time I feel like quitting, I can summon up that voice that says, "You know what? It's just one more step." And who can't take one more step? Everybody can take one more step-

Whitney: What's been your hardest mountain, and why?

Alison: My hardest mountain ... Well, Everest, for sure, was the hardest mountain because, um, in 2002, I was the team captain for the first American Women's Everest Expedition. And, we were this high profile expedition sponsored by the Ford Motor Company, and 450 media outlets were following our climb because we were the first team of American women to climb together. And then we [missed the summit by a couple hundred feet](#). And, so-

Then, you come back, and you're just the butt of Jay Leno's opening monologue joke. And how does that feel? And you feel like this big failure, and you had this dream, and you didn't achieve it, and I felt like the whole team was deflated, and we let our sponsor down, and just feeling like we let America down. And then I went back eight years later and tried again. And, for me, it was the hardest climb

because I just felt so much pressure to-to get to the top because I felt like, "Oh, God, if I don't make it again, how's that going to look?"

And what people forget is that the summit of any mountain is only the halfway point. It's never ... It can never be the goal. It has to only be the halfway point, because you still have to get yourself back down. So, um that's why most of the deaths that occur on Mount Everest occur after people have reached the summit, because they use everything - people use everything they've got in them to get themselves to the top, and they don't have enough left in them, to get themselves back down. So, that's why most of the deaths actually occur, um, shortly after people have reached the summit, when they're on their way back down. And I thought, "I really have to make it to the summit on the second attempt, but I also know it's-it's only the halfway point." And, so I put a lot of pressure on myself, and I think was stressed out, and I was climbing in honor of a friend of mine that had passed away very suddenly, a girlfriend of mine who I always wanted to climb that mountain with, and she died, just ... She-she actually died, uh, just actually a few months before I left for the mountain. And that was my motivation to go back, after this friend of mine, her name was Meg Berte Owen, after she passed, I was like, "Oh, I always said if I was going to go to Everest, I would go back with Meg. And since she died, I-I want to go back and honor her."

So, I engraved her name in my ice ax and went back to the mountain. And it was hard, because I felt so much pressure and ... climbing in honor of Meg and not wanting to fail a second time, but what I realized when I got to the top of the mountain o-or I should say when I got... Even when I got back down (laughs), making it back home, um, is that-

Whitney: (Laughs)

Alison: Standing on top of a mountain doesn't change anything. And, to me, I learned that it's just not important. What's really important are the lessons you learn along the way, when you're fighting like hell to get up there, and then what you're going to do with that information to-to be better going forward. Because every time you get off a mountain, what you have to realize is that, you know, even if you did your absolute best, there's still more mountains to climb. So, you, you know, you got to keep getting out there.

Whitney: Did you take eight years to go back to Everest because of the failure, or was there something else happening?

Alison: No, I just...I know. Well, I told ... I was so scared to ... of what would happen if I went back and failed again. I was so afraid of failure that that's really what prevented me from going back, and now I really regret that, because, um, you

know a-a lack of failure tolerance is-is a problem in our society. I think a lack of failure tolerance really stifles progress and innovation and prevents people from taking risks. And if you're going to take risks, and if you're going to try really, really hard things, you're going to have to give yourself, you know, and your teams, the freedom to fail. Just come back from it better the next time around. And the way you have to look at failure, is that you have to look at it, not just in terms of, "Gosh, I'm so disappointed I didn't achieve what I set out to achieve." You have to look at it in terms of doing a favor for the people who are going to follow in your footsteps down the road, because if you look Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, right? First guys to ever summit Mount Everest, most-most people know those names, Sir Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, right? They're the Everest guys.

Whitney: Yep.

Alison: But there were dozens of climbers who tried and failed before those two made it to the summit. But those two had the benefit of the 411, right? All the information from those previous climbers, and maybe if those other guys hadn't tried and failed first, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay would never have made it to the summit.

Whitney: Right. So, here's the question for you. So, now that you've learned that lesson ... so, there was an eight-year gap before you went back up, how have you closed that gap now? So, since that ... learning that lesson, when have you iterated around failure more quickly, when it's come to your-your mountain climbing?

Alison: Well, now it's interesting because it doesn't really haunt me the way it does. I just look at it as an experience, and I've been to plenty of mountains where ... you know, plenty of mountains since then where I didn't make it to the summit, and sometimes it's bad weather. Sometimes, it's you-your own lack of physical ability. You just run out of steam. Sometimes to the conditions on the route, you know there's too much avalanche damage or the route is in horrible condition. Um, and so you just have to turn around and now it just doesn't bother me, and I just immediately, instead of dwelling on how disappointed I am, I just think about all the cool things I learned along the way, and what I'm going to do with that information on the next mountain.

And, I also ... I feel like I'm better at helping other people, uh, sort of embrace the feeling of disappointment, because I've been on mountain with friends who just, literally when they know we're not going to make it, we ran out of time, we're moving too slowly, whatever the reason, um, and just ... I've seen people just plop down with their head in their hands just so distraught. And I'm like, okay, think about this for a second. This is a mountain. What is a mountain? A pile of rock and ice. Who cares? It's just a pile of rock and ice, you know? And

standing on top of a mountain isn't going to change you and isn't going to change the world. It's really about the lessons you learn along the way. And-and we've learned some good ones here, so let's chalk this up as a great experience and get the hell off this mountain.

Whitney: Interesting. All right, I want to ask you about your skiing. So, when you skied to the poles, what did that look like?

Alison: Oh, boy, it looked like a bunch of white and nothing else. So, that's one of the challenges of skiing to the poles, so, for example ... Uh, and South Pole, North Pole, its, they are ... they are trips that present you with quite different challenges, but on the South Pole expedition ... So, it's almost two months on the ice. You're skiing 12 to 15 hours a day, and you're on Antarctica, which is the ... It's the coldest, windiest place on earth. It's basically 98 percent ice and two percent rock, and there is nothing to look at on.. (laughs)

Whitney: Then why did you do it? Why did you do this? Why did you do this, Alison? What? The way you just described it makes it sound so unappealing-

Alison: Well. A-and-

Whitney: So, there's some reason why you did it.

Alison: And don't forget the 150 pound sled that's harnessed to your waist, of all your gear and supplies-

Whitney: (Laughs)

Alison: That you're (laughs) hauling with you. (Laughs) There's an explorer I really admire quite a bit. I worship him. Uh, his name's Reinhold Messner, and he's this legendary Italian explorer that I've read about for years. And he had pioneered this route across West Antarctica that nobody had duplicated since he had done it. And, I just thought it would be really cool to do the Messner route across Antarctica.

Alison: Part of the challenge is there's nothing to visually stimulate you at all, um, and-and you're skiing for hours. And it's not like you can look behind you and say, "Look how far we've come." Because you can't see anything behind you. Just ... Everything's just white. So, that's, uh, that's a challenge there. Uh, what's challenging even ... Even more challenging to think about the north pole is that, while the South Pole is on the continent of Antarctica, the North Pole is up at the Arctic Circle, and there's no land mass there.

Alison: So, you're just skiing across these ice flows. And what happens is sometimes the ice breaks up, and you're floating. And so you could ski for 12 hours, pitch your tent, go to sleep, and the drift ... like, you're on this big ice flow that's drifting backwards, so you wake up the next day, and you are further away than you were the day before when you started. (Laughs)

Whitney: (Laughs) Okay. So, why did you do it? And, or ... I'm sure that there is a leadership lesson in here somewhere for all of us. Give us the why and what you learned.

Alison: So, the why ... So, this was kind of a strange why actually, this one was. Um, there was this women's networking group. It's now called the [Ellevate Network](#), but it used to be called 85 Broads. And it was started by this woman named Janet Hanson in New York. And at the time, some friends of hers were leading this North Pole expedition.

Alison: And so she approached me and said, "Hey, these great friends of mine, uh, Allen Chambers and Pete Goss are leading this-this North Pole expedition. The 85 Broads Network wants to support them. We want to send someone on this expedition. Would you be up for going?" And I thought, are you kidding me? This-this amazing opportunity just landed in my lap. Uh, it-it was incredible. So, that-that was really what motivated me to go on this North Pole expedition is the opportunity, um, to go and represent this women's network and, uh, and travel with these really, very accomplished polar explorers. It was really also my first time on skis. Oh, my God. So, I ...

Whitney: (Gasps).

Alison: It was so hard for me. I took off my skis a lot and walked. I walked a lot of it because I could walk faster and get further than I could on the skis. I kept falling over. Because you're not skiing on smooth snow and ice, it's like these big ice boulders everywhere, and it's kind of like skiing through snow rubble-If that makes any sense. And, my sled-

Whitney: Yeah.

Alison: My sled was heavier than I was, and it kept pulling me over. You know, the weight distribution wasn't correct, and I really, really struggled. Hey, by the end, I had it down pretty well, but at the beginning, oh man.

Whitney: What's one of your big lessons from that experience?

Alison: Um, well, one of the lessons from that experience is to accept help from other people, even when you think you're a strong athlete, a strong performer, a

strong leader, even the-the best, most experienced leaders need to accept help. And with people around me that could, you know maybe they didn't have the mountaineering experience I had, but they were much better skiers than I was. And just learning from them, and just th- ... they were so kind to help me with my technique and to help me with the weight in my sled, especially on my South Pole expedition. I had my bigger, stronger teammates who were ... You know, I'm small. I'm about 5'4", you know, 112 pounds. My teammates who were 6'2", 6'3", 220 pounds, they could drag that 150 pound sled a lot more quickly and efficiently than I could. And just they ... you know, they took weight out of my sled and helped me lighten the load, and that allowed me to ski faster. And at first, I felt horrible about it, and I was really self-conscious about it. And oh my gosh, these guys are having to pick up my ... for my slack, you know? I feel awful. I don't want to be that teammate that people have to take on extra weight or extra responsibility because I'm not performing. And what I had to accept was that I'm not going to be a strong performer in every setting and in every environment. And if we'd been on a side of a mountain, I would have probably been the one helping them up the mountain,

Whitney: What's interesting about that is, that you've, um, there have...you've been quoted as being someone who used to think you should cut weak links loose. And it sounds...Was that experience something that changed your mind? Because in that particular context, you were a weak link, but like you said, there were other contexts where you wouldn't be the weak link.

Alison: Yeah, so that-that experience from that South Pole expedition completely changed my leadership philosophy and my philosophy about teammates, so I was that person, initially, when I'd be on expeditions and somebody was weak or ... You know, I would just use ... I would look at weaker people and think, "Wow, well they didn't train," or they didn't do "this," or they didn't do "that," and, "this is their fault." And, "we would be so much better if we didn't have these weaker people." Even in business environments, right? When you had a weaker person in your team. "Oh, God, maybe that person will quit or transfer to another department," or, "maybe look at the hints that they-they're not doing well here, and they'll leave."

And now, from that expedition, I learned that-that it's my responsibility to look at weaker people and help them find their sweet spot, because everybody has one. And while my strength was not going to be dragging 150-pound sled across the ice, I mean, I just ... the law of physics b-basically dictates that somebody that's 6'3", 220 pounds is going to be able to haul 150-pound sled faster and more efficiently than somebody who's my size.

But, I did find a place where I could contribute more than my bigger, taller teammates. And that was when it came to, uh, building a snow barricade around

the tent. So, you ski for 10 to 12 hours, you pitch your tent, and then you have to build a barricade around it to protect it from the elements. And what I noticed was these taller guys really wrenching their backs trying to lean over and shovel snow with our short, little snow shovel that we ... that we had with us. And, as-as a shorter human being, who's closer to the ground, I can use a short snow shovel without screwing up my back, so I became the person that shoveled the snow barricades around people's tents, and that was the way I could contribute. And that was the way that I could be valuable.

And it was just funny because I just ... I just volunteered to-to shovel the snow because my teammates had taken weight out of my s- ... out of my sled. So, I said to our team leader, I said, "Hey, can I, you know, shovel the snow around your tent?" And he was like, "You want to do what?" And I was like, "I want to shovel the snow. I want to make the barricade around your tent." And he said, "Why do you ... what?" I said, "Yes, I-I love to shovel snow." And, he said, "Come on, you love to shovel snow?" And I said, "Yes, because I grew up in Phoenix, so it's a treat for me to be able to shovel snow because I never got to do it as a kid." And, so he was like, "All right. Here you go." And he handed me that-that snow shovel, and I became the person who shoveled the snow. I was the best, damn snow shoveler on that trip, because I knew that was something I could do to repay my teammates for taking the weight out of my sled for me.

So, it was great learning experience for me, and I-I know now on every trip I look at people who maybe aren't strong performers in certain areas, and I know it's my job to help them find their sweet spot and to help them, not overcome their weakness, but compensate for it. Because there are some weaknesses that people will never overcome, ever, but you can always be creative, you know, and-and compensate.

Whitney: That's a great story. How do you get people who are afraid of taking risks, how do you encourage them to take risks?

Alison: So, for me it goes back to talking about failure in terms of being a positive thing, and it actually encouraging people to try things that they ... they're pretty sure they're going to fail at. Um, and-and one of the things that I go back to is, um, I have a friend who wrote a book called [Rejection Proof](#). So, really, with failure, what are we afraid of? We're afraid of what people will think, right? I mean, that's a lot of it. How will I be perceived? What will people think? How will this hurt my reputation? And, I-I go ... There's a book called [Rejection Proof](#), that my friend Jia Jiang wrote, and basically, he boils rejection, which failure, in-in a sense when we're afraid of failure, part of that is kind of afraid of rejection, right? Or what people will think.

Alison: Um, and he t- ... He-he reminds people in this book that rejection is nothing more than one person's opinion at one point in time. That's all it is. And, so I kind of have, uh, expanded that definition of rejection to also encompass failure is failure is one thing you did at one point in time, so it doesn't define you. It's not even a big part of your life. It's just one thing you did at one point in time. And sometimes it's going to work and sometimes it's not, but what you have to think about is, um, from ... You know, if you take a risk, and if you don't achieve what you set out to achieve this time around, you know, going back to my Sir Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay analogy, think about the favor that you are doing for the people who will follow in your footsteps down the road. And these people that you-you don't know, and that you may never know. But, someone else is going to try this and be better at it, because you had the guts to try it first.

Whitney: Love it. All right. So, very last question, Alison. This has been such a treat listening to your exploits. Um, what will you do to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

Alison: Well, couple of things. First of all, I am [working on a documentary film](#) that I think really will change the world, because it was about a major disruptor. This woman, Pasang Llamu Sherpa, who broke through all the gender barriers in Nepal to become the first Nepali woman and the first female sherpa to climb Mount Everest, so I'm making a film about her - I'm just the executive producer, but the director is Nancy Svenson, who's actually a family member through marriage to the ... to this woman, Pasang Llamu Sherpa.

But, I feel like this film could be a major disruptor, because this woman was the most unlikely of heroes. Couldn't read, couldn't write, couldn't speak the national language, yet had the guts to go up against the government of her own country to fight for racial and gender equality, so, um, I've never made a film before. I do ... I have never made a film. This is ... Nancy and I are working together for both of us. It's our first one. So, it's kind of just-

Whitney: Congratulations.

Alison: Thank you. It's, like, disrupting our lives, our careers, but I think this film could be a big - This woman, Pasang Llamu Sherpa was a major, major disruptor-Um, in the sherpa culture and in the country of Nepal-And when she died, her funeral was like Princess Diana's funeral. I mean, the whole country was out in the streets mourning her death. She became a-a hero to her country. So that's kind of my-my big thing. And it's scary for me because I've never made a film before, and I ... But-but I just feel like I really want this story to get out there, um, because I think that people that watch this film can look at themselves and say, "Wow. Here's a woman who couldn't read, couldn't write, couldn't even speak the national language. She changed a country. So maybe-"

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alison: Maybe I can ... I can be an agent of change or an architect of change as well in my family, in my workforce, in my community, in, you know, local government, so that's what we're ... That's what we're hoping that this film will cause a lot of other people to want to disrupt their own lives and-and-and really pivot.

Whitney: Alison, this has been amazing. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me and to talk to all of our listeners. I know they are going to be absolutely inspired and intrigued by you and your journey.

Alison: Um, well, my gosh, thank you so much for having me on your podcast, I'm so honored to be a part of it, and, uh, and thank you.

Whitney: You're very welcome. Take care.

Alison: You too.

There are so many lessons here. Like how Alison got her job Goldman Sachs. I've already passed along her advice to our college-age son. This is a great example of taking on market risk in your career of playing where no one else is playing. Or in climbing where no one else is climbing. Whether on the job, and or in getting the job.

Also, I loved how she just showed up at Mt. Kilimanjaro. This is a great litmus test for us. So often we say I really want that thing. And yes, we need to prepare for something we want (like I shared with our newsletter subscribers a few weeks ago)... But there's a both-and here. Sometimes we just need to just show up. And if we're not willing to show up, then this is information that this thing that we want - we want it, but we want other things more.

Alison is also a great example of how constraints can be a tool of creation. Actually, if you were to pull out your copy of [Disrupt Yourself](#), right now, you'd see that Alison is a textbook disruptor. She plays where no one else is playing, she battles her sense of entitlement -- that people are going to hand things to her -- and she embraces her constraints. Like her heart condition. Instead of resigning herself to a sedentary life, she dreamt of becoming an adventurer. It became something that she had to do. And then she did it.

Hearing her talk about how she dealt with this constraint, led to an unexpected insight. Within the last week I've said at least 3 times, "Women speakers get paid less than men speakers. That's how it is." And like Eeyore - woe to women. But is that always true? As I think about it. I'm quite confident it isn't. In fact, women sometimes get paid more. I bet Alison is one of those people. But even if it is true, how do you turn the constraint of a deeply held, limiting belief into a creation - or a tool of creation, I should say. A first step to embracing this constraint is to go back to Mark Barden and Adam Morgan's book [A Beautiful Constraint](#) that I cited in [Disrupt Yourself](#). They say, the first step is to move from

being a victim of the constraint, to a neutralizer, to a transformer.. If we are wise, we will accept every constraint we have as a gift.

Practical tip: The next time you think to yourself or find yourself saying to someone -- well, you know it's like this. There's this thing, that I can't do. Stop yourself. Because if you keep saying it, it will be true. Instead of taking it lying down, like Alison did NOT, ask how is this an invitation to you to become a great adventurer in your own life? Then act on it.

Now, if you want to support [Alison's documentary about the glass ceiling](#), we'll share a link in the show notes. If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes, we [hope you will leave a review](#), even one sentence and then share your twitter handle, so that we can thank you. iTunes like anyone else wants to look smart when they make a recommendation, when you tell them you like the [Disrupt Yourself podcast](#), they can recommend us with confidence -- knowing all their friends will thank them.

Finally, heads up! You can now pre-order [Build an A Team](#) on how to build a great team, which you heard a terrific example of, when Alison was skiing to the South Pole. You can download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Alison Levine for being our guest, to former guest Alden Mills for introducing us, thank you to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Emilie Davis, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.