

## Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

### Episode 54: Build an A Team

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, speak, write and live all things disruption.

Macy: And, on today's episode, instead of being the host, Whitney is going to be the guest. My name's Macy Robison, and I'm Whitney's Project Manager. And, today, we're gonna be talking all about her new book, [\*Build an A-Team: Play To Their Strengths And Lead Them Up The Learning Curve\*](#), which is out on bookshelves today.

Whitney: Way to disrupt me, Macy Robison.

Macy: That's what we do around here, right? We're always changing things up.

Whitney: That's . . .

Macy: We're gonna just disrupt things.

Whitney: That's exactly right. So, I have no idea what you're gonna ask me on this episode. It should be a lot of fun.

Macy: I'm kind of excited about it. I have to say, so first of all, congratulations. The book is out today. Um, it's been really fun to watch as we've launched the book. All the encouragement and retweets and social media and things that we've seen from, from people who've read the book in advance. From people who are, it's just been really fun to see. So, I hope, I hope you've felt that as well.

Whitney: I have and in fact, you know as we're talking, I'm thinking I would love to give a shout out to some of the people who have been so helpful on getting this book out and about.

There's this wonderful quote that I used in the acknowledgements for the book and it's Benjamin Franklin. I just read his biography not too long ago and he said, most people return small favors. Acknowledge the medium ones and repay greater ones with ingratitude, and I think for me that's just such an easy thing to do. To be really ungrateful for the really big things that people do, but I'm going to try to be grateful at least a little bit. So, I'll just walk through a couple people. Maybe we can just talk about them and like what they've done and how they've been helpful in making this book come about.

The first person that I actually acknowledge is Clayton Christensen. He is an intellectual giant. He's actually a giant in general, because he's 6'7", 6'8. I absolutely stand on his shoulders. You can see his imprimatur throughout this book in terms of my development intellectually and the underpinnings of everything that I talk about and I'm so grateful to him for having been able to work with him and learn from him for over a decade and then Sarah Green Carmichael at Harvard Business Review Press.

You know she's been my editor for almost ten years when I first started writing for Harvard Business Review, um, Eric Hellweg was my editor and then Sarah was actually pretty new at that point and I started to work with her and have been to work with her for almost ten years and it really, this book would not have happened um without her shepherding me through the process and working with Tim Sullivan who's now no longer at Harvard Business Press, but I'm so grateful to both of them for helping make this happen.

I think sometimes when we talk about books, there's this sense of this lone person, this solitary person, um writing something. They go to the mountain and then it's all revealed to them and yet you realize in the course of a book that it's, there's so many people involved in actually making it happen like with anything.

I really have this tremendous, debt of gratitude to Heather Hunt, so she's a really interesting person in that she and I worked together at the Orem Public Library when we were in college and became fast friends and then lo and behold, a couple years ago, we had moved to Lexington, Virginia where my husband's a professor at Southern Virginia University. It's a small town. It's like 25,000 people clear on the other side of the United States and she and her husband happened to move here as well and so we were able to reconnect and she is a tremendous writer, a tremendous editor and her conceptual editing, her actual line editing has been so important and valuable throughout this book and really over the last couple of years.

Macy: I love that and I think that, that's important what you said about you know, it takes a village. You don't just go into the shed and write the book and emerge and it gets out into the world. It's one of those things that the writing is only part of it and I think to some extent it's the easiest part. Um, getting those ideas out to people is, is, is a big piece of it and it, you know, I think, I think it's great to acknowledge that.

Whitney: I know for me, I'll have ideas of things that I want to write and you know, because we've worked together and we've actually worked together before on projects when you were singing and I was accompanying you on the piano, which we talk a little bit about in the prior book [Disrupt Yourself](#) for anybody who's interested in like, I remember her name. I think that you know, I tend to have these ideas and my head is going so fast, I can't get everything down on paper. Anybody who's worked with me at all, they know that like I write a rough draft and they're like, and you can attest to this. You're like I have no idea what you're saying right now, because I missed so many words, because I'm trying to get it down so quickly, and so having people around you that are good editors are really important. So for anybody who's thinking about writing a book and thinking you have to do this all on your own and I know I said this in my solo podcast a couple months ago, it's just really important for you to get, you know one if not two, if not three really good editors and readers around you who can help you test your ideas and, and help you get what's in your head out on paper.

Macy: I love that. Well, so speaking of the first book, that's actually where I wanted to start a little bit. Your first book [Disrupt Yourself](#) is about laying a framework that makes it safe for people to make changes. Whether, they're starting a business, whether they're deciding to you know quit their job and what makes, what I think makes it powerful is

sometimes change feels chaotic. It feels uncertain. It feels like we're leaping into this giant void and we don't know what's going to happen, but your framework that you lay out in [Disrupt Yourself](#) is exactly that. It's a framework. Um, and I feel like it's the basis on which this new book is built, so I wondered if you would just take a minute and talk through those seven points, those seven parts of disruption that you lay out in [Disrupt Yourself](#) and expand on in this new book.

Whitney: So basically the big ah-ha that I had um for people who are new to this podcast is that when I was working with Clayton Christensen and we were developing out the Disruptive Innovation Fund and identifying opportunities on the basis of disruption, which is this idea that a silly little thing can upend the world, Toyota disrupting General Motors for example. One of the really big ah-has that I had was that this theory that we were applying to products and for investing actually applied to people and that at a very high level, it's a framework for managing change. That begins with the individual and so this theory of personal disruption that I spent the last five years researching and codifying helps you whether they're trying to scale an organization or build a team or just trying to manage your career.

And so the seven steps are levers of change that I talk about in the first book from the point of view of you as an individual and then build on in the second book. Here's what they are and then we'll talk more about the second book or *Build An A Team* in just a minute.

So the first one is to take the right kinds of risks. Whenever we're trying to make a change, there's this tendency to want to do something that looks like okay, I can see it. It's right in front of me. I've got projections that tell me that there's an opportunity here or I can see the job posting and so I'm going to go for this and that's what's called competitive risk. And even though it looks more certain, it's actually more risky, because the probability that you're going to be successful is in fact lower. And what the theory of disruption states and where your odds to success are six times higher is when you're willing to take on market risk, which is where you don't know if there's a job. That you see a problem that needs to be solved or you don't know if there's a product for their, for your product and yet you, again you think there's a problem that needs to be solved.

And when you're willing to play where no one else is playing, your odds of success go up and so disrupters are always in search of a yet to be defined market. Whether your business or whether you as an individual and that's really the first tenet of this making a change and making it successful.

The second thing that I talk about is the importance of playing to not only your strengths, but your distinctive strengths. The things that you do well that other people around you don't. So if you're really great at marketing. That's fantastic, but what you want to do to have it be even more fantastic is to be in a room where you're the only marketer. So in a room full of 20 marketers, that's good, but one marketer in a room of 19 finance people is brilliant, because then you're able to contribute in a way that no one else can contribute, so that's number two. And when you're willing to play to your strengths, then you feel strong and when you're willing to, when you feel strong, then

you're able to play where no one else is playing, so the odds of success again, they go up when you played your strengths in a place to no one else is playing.

So that's number two. Number three is embrace your constraints. Like whenever we start something new, there's this tendency of like, oh if I had more time. If had more money. If Oprah were my fairy godmother I could make this happen. And yet what we know from the laws of physics is that we need constraints. We need friction and so whenever you're trying to disrupt yourself. When you're trying to climb a learning curve, you actually need that friction, those challenges, those constraints of not enough time, not enough money, not enough expertise in order for you to, to successfully change. The number four is to battle our own sense of entitlement. This is like for me, this is the sneaky saboteur of any kind of innovation, whether it's you or your business, because it's that place when we're learning where things are starting to work really well.

Your, your margins are expanding. Your revenue's growing. You feel like you've got it figured out. Your feeling quite competent at work and so we start to believe that this is the way things will and should always be and so when we've got this basically cognitive bandwidth. We've got this emotional bandwidth to really question what we're doing, right at the time we don't and so we're at risk of actually sliding back down our learning curve instead of kind of making that final push up to the mastery on our, on our learning curve.

Macy: I think that's the point that I understood the least when I started working a little bit more closely with your material and it's one of the most important ones. Like I hear other people in this space, like Gary Vaynerchuk, talks about self-awareness and I, that finally clicked into me and like, and what you just said, like when you finally have the opportunity to take a look at what you're doing, you have the time. You're not like, throwing everything that you have at this new opportunity, that's when you don't do it, and it's when you should.

Whitney: Exactly.

Macy: Do it.

Whitney: Exactly, and you know what's so interesting about this Macy, I'm, I'm really glad that you said it, because this is the, this is the lever of change that I find that whenever I'm speaking, um, I struggle with this one the most, because it's so slippery and it's just such this kind of Medusa with all these snakes . . .

Macy: Uh-huh.

Whitney: It's like for every single person it's different and so ah, because sometimes for example we can be, we can be entitled, because of what we just said, like everything's working, but we can also be entitled when we haven't gotten maybe a promotion that we deserved and then we're like, well it's not fair, so I'm going to stop trying. The world owes me and everybody's in my debt and I've certainly done that.

Whitney: I think we probably all have and so, and so it's the one that's the hardest to get your hands around, like you just said and yet, it's the one that I, I really believe is the most important that we continually try to tackle.

Macy: Absolutely.

Whitney: Okay, so that's number four. Number five is uh, step back to grow. Sideways can be a slingshot. I have to tell you, this is the idea of, you know we think about, we love linear. You know I'm going to take a step forward and then another step forward, then another step forward and it doesn't work that way. Like, if you think about with disruption and you think about the actual, you look at the math of it, you step back, because you believe that if for any math geeks out there, that the slope of your trajectory is going to be steeper, but more simply put. Every time you want to jump, you crouch first before you jump. If you want to punch something, you bring your fist back before you punch. You always have to come back before you can move forward and it's the same with disruption.

In your career and in your businesses often times that sideways or backwards is exactly the slingshot that you need and so that lateral move, whatever it can feel like and, and oftentimes this is one where people like, have you lost your mind? Like really, seriously? Like you have this great opportunity and you're going to step back from it. That's because you know as a disrupter it's potentially going to slingshot you forward.

Macy: Well and to me that goes hand in hand with what you talk about with constraints. Right? Like there's opposition in all things. That's just a universal law and even when you apply constraints, like artificial constraints, so that you can get that friction to grow. I think sometimes people look at you like you're crazy in those situations as well, but particularly in this one. I think that's an expansion of that point, that you, you really do. You, you pull your arm back before you throw a punch. There needs to be, if you really want momentum you have to be willing to step back and, and let yourself slingshot forward. And that's one of my favorites.

Whitney: Yeah, yeah and oh you know I love that, that you just said that too, because this idea of the constraint, when you're doing that, you're actually self-imposing the constraint.

Macy: Uh-huh.

Whitney: And, and even think about when you're dancing, right? For anybody who's ever done any kind of dance like the cha cha, right? You step back to cha cha forward.

Macy: Uh-huh.

Whitney: You just see it over and over and over again. Which goes to the next one which is give failure it's due, is this idea of a step back can be a slingshot forward. Certainly when something doesn't work, um that is a step back where we have to look at it and examine it, and re-trench and this to me I think is really important, because the up and the downer part of personal disruption and, and anybody you ever talk to ever, ever, ever

that's like more than 20 years old or even probably ten-years-old, maybe not ten. Let's say 20. We'll say you know what? Some of my biggest lessons that I've learned in my life have come because of something that didn't work.

Like we all say it, once we reflect back and, and try to make meaning of our, of our lives and this one for me is so important, because um, I think that the thing, we know that failure is important, because of what we can learn and yet sometimes we really struggle with it, because of the shame that comes and so this to me is in important one, is that it's not failure that limits us from disrupting, it's really the shame that does and so the shame comes, because we've somehow attached this sense of our identity. Like and this happens for anybody who's ever been kind of smart and a lot of people are kind of smart, is that you start to tie your identity, like I got an A, therefore I'm smart. I got a B, therefore I'm dumb.

And so we go over and over and over again, kind of wiring that into our brain and so then when you get into the workplace and something doesn't work and you're like I'm a failure, I'm dumb. And so as we grow up if we can start to separate out our identity from, you know Zig Ziglar said, failure is an event not a person.

Macy: Uh-huh.

Whitney: And that to me is super powerful and so if we can start to separate out those two from I'm disrupting, I'm trying this, let's see what it, what it looks like. Separating it out from our identity, then we're able to move up our learning curve much more quickly. I've talked a lot about my different failures, like bombing speeches and being fired and backing businesses that imploded. We all have them and actually I'm going to say one more thing. To anybody who's listening, who's ever been fired um and about 15% of the workforce loses their job every year so either fired or laid off, so that's a lot of you, including me. Here's what I want you to remember. It's possible that you knew it was time for you to jump to a new learning curve and you wouldn't go.

Um and so, so the universe, it just gave you a nudge and so it forced you to jump to a new learning curve. So why not really think about the fact that maybe you got, you got this little nudge, because it was time for you to go and you didn't quite have the courage to do it, so, so you got some help. So that's number six.

Number seven, this is the last one. Number seven is this idea of being driven by discovery. Um, you know, as a disrupter you're playing where no one else is playing which means you don't know what your opportunities are going to look like and I think this is really applicable to everybody, but especially to people who are just coming out of school. Who are like, what am I going to do and the fact is, is you don't know what you're going to do and that's okay, because 70% of all successful new businesses end up with a strategy different than the one they started with. Like Netflix for example, so what you want to do is you take a step forward. You get lots and lots of feedback. The constraints are going to give you feedback. Failure is going to give you feedback and then you adjust and you keep going. And that to me is really, you do that all along the curve. At the top, the bottom and everywhere in between.

But those seven levers of change if you will apply them. Once you make the decision to disrupt yourself. Once you make the decision to try something new, those levers of change are going to allow you to be effective um and move up your learning curve successfully so that you can learn and then leap and then repeat and start all over again.

Macy: So talk about the learning curve for just a second, because you mentioned that. Um, these seven levers of change are an important part of the framework, but I feel like the S curve, the learning curve is an important part as well, so I'd love to have you talk about that and then I want to move on to ah, to how that applies to the new book.

Whitney: So if you can picture an S in your brain, it looks a lot like a wave and the S curve was popularized by EM Rogers in 1962 and what he was doing with that was to look at how an innovation or an idea is adopted and so if you picture that S, um and, and this is now, well okay, so again, the insight that I had around this was that we were applying it for innovations and then I had this other ah ha, which is that it helped us understand learning and the psychology of change. So at the bottom of the S you think about, you know it's kind of flat, so what that means is a lot of time passes and it feels like nothing's happening and at the bottom of the S, because you're trying something new, you're inexperienced.

But knowing that time is going to pass and it feels like nothing's happening, because your brain is just kind of starting to put pieces together, that helps you avoid discouragement at the low end of your learning curve. And typically you're going to be there six months, maybe a year when you try something new. But then when you put in that effort you hit that knee of the S and then you move into the steep part of that S where everything starts to hum. Things are working and your feeling pretty competent and therefore you're feeling confident. Your brains like, firing all these neurons. It's just a really good place and it's, it's what we call the sweet spot of your learning curve and you're there for two to three years.

Again, this is mapping against the 10,000 hour rule. Then as you move all the way up to the curve, you're going to get to the top and that's where you've achieved mastery. Notice it's flat again, so what it means is you may be doing stuff, but not much is happening, because you've learned most of what you need to learn. Like a jigsaw puzzle, it's almost put together. You know what to expect and so because your brain can start chunking, you start to get bored and so when you start to get bored, if you don't jump to a new learning curve, then you might get pushed off that curve, because your brain needs to be learning again. So that's what the basic learning curve looks like, is the bottom inexperience, middle sweet spot of engagement and the top of the curve is where you achieve mastery, but you start to get bored and so that's the basis of [Disrupt Yourself](#), but it's also the basis of this next book, [Build An A-Team](#) and how you use that to build a great team.

Macy: Yeah and the thing I love, I think about the S curve and these levers of disruption is you look at any task you take on, like whether it's a new job or, you know if I'm, if it's a real personal thing, like I'm trying to lose weight or I'm trying to start a new habit or I'm learning how to be, like when I learned how to be a photographer. I taught myself how to be a photographer. When I look at that S curve of being a photographer, I can go back

and see all of those levers in play that you talked about, when I move from the bottom to where I'm reading everything, but nothing's happening. My photos look terrible, to where I move to the sweet spot, where no, like people want me to take their picture and they're going to pay me to do it and this is amazing and then getting to the point where, you know I've got figure out new ways to use this skill.

Because just going out and doing photo shoot after photo shoot isn't as interesting and I've got to find a, a different curve to layer on top of that or a different skillset to add to that. And I just think it's such a valuable framework when you can look at the things that you've done in your life and layer that on top of it. When you look forward at the things that you want to do and you want to try, knowing that that framework is underpinning everything makes those leaps so much easier to repeat and so I just love that. Like [Disrupt Yourself](#) is this personal way of, of figuring out those learning curves for yourself and then [Build An A-Team](#) feels like another zoom out, like a step backwards to say okay, if everybody's on a learning curve here in this workplace where I work, how do I manage these people?

Whitney: Well first of all I love how you pulled in the zoom out. Your photography background, right?

Macy: Yeah.

Whitney: That was fantastic, so the question I have for you before I answer that question.

Macy: Yeah.

Whitney: Is so when you got to the top of the learning curve in photography, what did you do?

Macy: I, yes.

Whitney: Do you remember?

Macy: I started making websites for people, um, because I needed, I had in the process of learning to be a photographer, when people started to pay me to do it, another learning curve popped up of how do I run a business for myself? I don't know how to be an entrepreneur. I've got to get, you know, my name out there somehow, so I've got to learn how to build a website, so how do I do that and how do I make it so people can understand what I do and it's communicated clearly and, and all of those things. And they've just now dovetailed into what I do now, which is marketing and, and things like that for small brands, so it's kind of been all these layered learning curves on top of each other.

Whitney: Right.

Macy: And now photography is a creative outlet for me. I still do sessions, but I have learned that I love photographing families and kids and that's it. I don't like weddings. I don't like real estate. I don't like, like anything. When people hear you're a photographer, they



think you can do all the things and I can, but I don't like it. So through the process of going through that learning curve, I also learned what it is that really lights me up about photography and that is taking family photographs, and so now I . . .

Whitney: Interesting.

Macy: A couple times a year, but it's not necessarily to make money as a business, it's because that's the thing that I enjoy.

Whitney: Yeah, and what's interesting too is that what you're, what I think I'm hearing, I'm hearing you say is that this idea of photography has now and, and a discipline and the, and the domain expertise around photography I suspect informs all of the other work that you do.

Macy: Yep.

Whitney: In fact I don't suspect, I know, because I've seen your work. Um, is that it informs how you [build a website](#). It informs how you talk about a story um, it, it informs, the, the [StoryBrand](#) work that you do. It informs all of that, so I think that's really interesting. By the way I have to tell you, the other day I got on a plane and I saw two people sitting on a seat with [Donald Miller](#) StoryBrand, so . . .

Macy: Oh that is . . .

Whitney: So shout out to [StoryBrand](#). I know I should have taken a picture but I didn't.

Macy: That's awesome.

Whitney: Any way, okay so I know, I digress, so what?

Macy: And well that, I was going to say that turned into a coaching session for me, which you're really sneaky about that sometimes with your guests and I did not intend that to happen.

Whitney: I'm a sneaky saboteur.

Macy: You are.

Whitney: In our interview, right?

Macy: Oh my goodness. So I'm going to flip this question back to your background actually, which I thought it was fascinating you know to use my photography term again to zoom out and see these people as individual learning curves. You know you say in the book that as you were speaking around the country, around the world, that people were coming up to you and saying, I have a learning curve. How do I get my boss to see it, or boss is saying you know my people don't have learning curves. They don't care about my job, like my whole thing is to get them how to care about my job. But you in the book

talk about and you bring your background in investing into play, how you can look at your team of people you're leading, whether it's in the workplace, whether it's in your family, whether, whatever group of people you're leading to look at them as a diversified portfolio.

Whitney: The thing that really occurred to me and I remember I was delivering a keynote and, and this one CEO said to me, he's like, I said everybody is on a learning curve and he's like, no they're not. Like, I, you know, no. I've got 90% of my people who are on a curve, they just don't care. I was like, no they're on a curve, it's just that they're disengaged. They don't like the curve that they're on and so maybe they're on the wrong curve, and so really the big insight for me was that every single person is on a learning curve in the workplace. But we're probably all on multiple curves at any given time, but your organization, your team is now a collection of those learning curves and you build a great team when you optimize those curves and, and look at where people are on their different curves at any given time.

So for example, with a team, you want 70% of your people in the sweet spot on, at you know today. You want 15% of your people at the low end, that inexperienced area and you want 15% of your people at the high end. And when you optimize your learning curves that way, what will happen is you have people who are mostly in the stage of learning. So for example, the people at the low end, they're inexperienced, but because they're inexperienced, they don't know what they're doing. They're asking lots of questions, like why do we do it like this? And those why do we do it like this questions, while they may be annoying and even may be a little threatening are gold, because they tell you, they give you information, like yeah, why aren't we doing it like this.

And this potentially gives you an opportunity to play where other people aren't playing. Then you want 70% of your people in the sweet spot, because these people are as we said a moment ago, very competent. They know what they're doing, but they don't, they're not bored yet and so if you will give them challenges and I'm telling you right now, there's probably someone on your team that's in the sweet spot and you are not challenging them enough. But if you will challenge them more, give them more constraints, they're going to be incredibly innovative, so that's contributing to the innovation of your team of finding ways to play where no one else is playing. And then you only want 15% of your people at the high end of the curve, and we tend to hire people where all the time that are at the high end and you don't want them there.

You want maybe 15%, because they're the keepers, you know the guardians of, of information um, they understand what, they're, they're at the top of this curve. They've got this view, this perspective, this vista that's very helpful. They can bring other people along, but if you want to know as an organization, if you are about to be disrupted, the only thing you have to do is take the pulse of your workforce. Because if you've got too many people behind, like 25, 30% of your people who are bored, then you're at risk. Because bored people don't innovate. They get disrupted and so for me this, this gives you this wonderful quick, quick back of the envelope way of seeing where your team is. Making sure you remain innovative and in the process, because you're managing the individual learning of every single person on your team, you become a boss that people love to work for.

You're like this talent magnet, because you're like if I hire this person as my boss, I know they are going to make it possible for me to learn. Just this week I was talking to two different Millennials and they said to me, the thing that I want on the job more than anything else is I want to learn. Can you please tell my boss to stop telling me to sit down and shut up, because what I really want is to learn and I want to question it and if you can make that possible for me, I will follow you to the ends of the earth.

Macy: You know it's so funny. I was listening to you explain this again, um, because I, I have the chance to hear you give your talk and, and . . .

Whitney: Oh just once or twice.

Macy: But I was thinking like, and so this is going to reveal, I've, I've had a lot of shame for several years around all the different things I've done in my life, um, but then I heard Tim Ferris say, you're not a jack of all trades, master of none, you're a jack of many trades and that gave me a lot of comfort, so I digress. So before . . .

Whitney: Go Tim Ferris, we love him.

Macy: We do.

Whitney: A shout out to Tim Ferris.

Macy: Before, before I was a photographer I taught school for about 13 years and hearing you just explain that again, that distribution of 15, that's 1, 5% of the people at the low end and 70% in the middle, 15% at the high end. That applied to my work as a teacher as well. You think about, like if you were standing in front of a class. There are kids that are really struggling. There are kids that are just you know humming along and then there are kids that are bored and the success of a class really depended on how you were working with all three of those groups of people. And were you challenging the people in the middle, because if you weren't they were going to get bored and there were more of them. I taught choir classes of 90 kids and if I wasn't keeping that middle group challenged, it really became a problem, but then if the 15% fall behind, that's also a problem.

And if there's too many people that are really bored in a choir, like if I had a select choir, that would be a problem too. And so it's just, it's such a fascinating thing.

Whitney: Um-hm.

Macy: Just like the stuff in [Disrupt Yourself](#), I feel like this team thing applies not just to work, to the workplace, but to so many different areas and applying this to education I think would be such a fascinating thing, um.

Whitney: Um, that is so interesting Macy, yeah and it is and I love what you said about the kids in the sweet spot, that middle. You know, I think because everything's working for them we tend to be like, oh well, things are fine and so we ignore them instead of appreciate

them. Because like you said, we've got enough problem children and, and it tends, the problem children tend to be the kids at the top, right? The people at the top.

Macy: It can be.

Whitney: So if you can, yeah, yeah, you're right they can be, but because they're getting bored, they can be, or they just check out. But if you can keep that 70% humming and appreciating, they can actually help bring the 15% at the low end along and so, anyway it's, it's super interesting. I love that you applied that to the classroom. I hope all the teachers that are listening, um, find this useful.

Macy: You mentioned optimizing the people in the different areas. So, I'd love for you to give a tip, um about hiring well. Um, bringing people onto your company's learning curve, um because I think that's, that's another thing that stuck out for me in the book as well. Like, I've been hired into positions where I was already near the top of my learning curve, because of the way the job description was written. I already had a lot of the skills that they needed when I walked in the door and because of that, I didn't stay engaged in the job for very long, and I ended up leaving before they wanted me to leave. So I'd love for you to talk about that a little bit.

Whitney: Right. Yeah, that's so interesting and that happens all the time. We write this job, so before I go there, let me tell you this quick story, because I think this will really illustrate it. There's this wonderful town in the United States called Butte, Montana and it's known as the richest hill on earth. It's a, it's a mining town and the reason it's known for that is that in the mid 1800's you had all these miners arrive there and they were looking for gold and hoping to you know get gold and silver. And the early speculation really kind of didn't work and so a lot of these people were disheartened and they sold off their claims. Well what happened is that this next wave of miners discovered copper and initially copper wasn't valuable. Ah, it was just sort of blah, but as technology advanced and electrical wiring became a thing, then copper became extremely valuable.

So for these people who were patient they ended up becoming known as the copper kings and I think this is really applicable when it comes to hiring people. We tend to want a top of the curve expertise, the gold standard, the silver, you know even silver, when copper will do. There are, in fact there are very compelling reasons to go for copper, to hire for potential, not for proficiency. To really view people as the resources we claim to view them as, or claim to view ourselves as and to be willing to develop them over time. And so when you're willing to hire people at the low end of the curve, what that means is that time is on your side. Um and so instead of having someone be there, it takes them six months to kind of figure out what they're doing in terms of navigating things politically and then their bored and they disengage, but they're not going to leave, because they don't want to be job hopping every six months.

If you're willing to hire at the low end of the curve, or even in the sweet spot, then you're going to get two to three years out of this person, where they're highly engaged, very happy, highly productive, which is good for them and good for you. And so one of the ways that you can do this is when you're writing your job descriptions, hire for the job that you really need. Look for and be willing to talk a little bit about potential. Um,

especially because women in particular, men do it, but women really do it. We only tend to apply for jobs where we seem like we're 100% qualified, which means guess what? You're going to be bored immediately.

Macy: Yes.

Whitney: Just like you were Macy, so you can re-write your job descriptions and then really look for okay, is this a person who can't maybe do it today, but in two to three years they'll be fantastic at this. You win and they win and then the company wins.

Macy: Absolutely. You know my, my stepdaughter um is in Silicon Valley and it's been interesting to watch her navigate her career. She's um super good at what she does. She's a data analyst and you know she talks a lot about how people just hop from company to company to company. And I think that's a lot of it. Like you're bringing in these engineers who are at the top of their game and you try to throw all these perks at them to get them to stay, but what really people want is to be learning and to be engaged and a ping pong table and a free drink fridge are not going to keep people in your, in your company, in your culture for very long.

Whitney: That's right. That's right and you know what's interesting about that I'll just add is that one of the things that can happen in a really hot job market like, like Silicon Valley or even like in Salt Lake City. I know not too long ago, I spoke at this Silicon Slopes Tech Summit in Salt Lake and I found that, I did some analysis on where people were on their learning curves and we saw that a lot of people were on, were jumping curves really quickly and so there's something to be said for staying on a curve too long. But there's also something to be said for jumping too quickly and that sometimes comes with people start throwing perks at you instead of like letting the learning play out for a little bit of time.

So it's interesting how, how there's both sides of it. Um, it's not the ping pong table that's going to help. And if you're willing to let people learn, sometimes you just need to be willing to, to play it out, so that you can climb those curves before you jump to a new one. Otherwise, it's sort of arrested development. Right? You just sort of kind of move in the sweet spot. Then you move again, so you never actually get to really move up in the sweet spot. So, so it's interesting to try to figure out how to balance it depending on where you are, what your skillsets are and where you are in terms of your career as well.

Macy: You talk about embracing market risk and as far as your personal disruption goes, but I would love to hear you talk a little bit. You talk in the book about hiring based on market risk in terms of looking at populations of people that you wouldn't necessarily look at in order to you know, bring on market risk. Bring in those people that might be in the sweet spot, um, can you talk about some of those groups of people, because I think that's a great, that was a great takeaway for me as well.

Whitney: One of the best ways um, we're talking about disruption. You play where no one else is playing like you just said. Well, one of the ways to do that and to find copper is to hire

where no one else is hiring and some groups of people that fall into that category are first of all internal candidates. I think so often when we work with someone, they become like wallpaper to us and yet, and they'll raise their hand. We'll be like yeah, you can't do that. I'm going to find this other person over here the, you know the greener, faster, shinier, sleeker, whatever version of something. And when if you were willing to unpack and, and have them do the work of unpacking their skills and do their component pieces.

And you're also willing to repackage your perception of that person. You might find that there are some internal candidates right under your nose that could be terrific in terms of hiring for potential, not for proficiency, so that's one group I, I really strongly advocate for. The second are on rampers. These are people who have been out of the workforce either caring for parents, caring for children. Um, they likely, not even likely. They will absolutely have had a crash course or a master class, however you want to think about it in soft skills. And what we all know if you look at the manager literature, what people need more of are soft skills, which I would argue are leadership skills. People who have been caring for children and for parents have leadership skills in spades.

The third group are people who are boomerangers. People who have worked for you and left. This stigma is kind of leaving a little bit and, and now want to come back, sorry. The stigma is leaving a little bit, but I think there's still this sense of you know, they worked for you and now they jilted you like a boyfriend or girlfriend, so why would you take them back and yet, like that is so stupid.

Macy: Right.

Whitney: That's so juvenile, right? Because, this is a person who they worked for you. You know that you can work with them. They know they can work with you and by the way they still want to come back. And they have been getting trained for a year or two and someone else is paying for the training. I, that's pretty good ROI for you, so you also want to consider boomerangers and [Lee Caraher](#), I quote her in the book, she's a great example of that and take a look at what she's doing with her business at Double Forte. And then the fourth category are people who are self-taught. In the United States at least, um about ah, more than half of the population does not have a college degree, so there are a lot of people that don't have college degrees, but does that mean that they don't know anything? Like, really? Seriously? It doesn't. Um, you still have to credential them of course and there are companies out there like [Degreed](#) that allow you to do that.

But who would not want someone who is self taught, who on their own initiative, the autodidacts figured out how to do things. Those are the kind of people that once you're able to credential them and you want inside of your organization, because those are the people who are willing to play where no one else is playing, because this is what they've been doing just on their own. And so those are four areas where you can really mine for talent by hiring where no one else is hiring. You've got, you're actually in a position to be very, um, um innovative and they're not over picked. They're not over priced and they're often quite hungry with something to prove.

Macy: I think that's why that spoke to me, because that's me. Like and I have a Masters Degree in education, but I'm self taught in all of the areas that I'm working in now and it, you, you feel like you have to prove yourself but you do, it just helped me feel like I had some value, so that I really appreciated. That's probably why it spoke to me.

Whitney: Yeah, yeah and, yeah and for what it's worth. You're really good at all the stuff, so yeah, I love that. I didn't even think about, but yeah you're right you've got a Masters in Education, but in all these areas that you're working now, that's not what you're trained to do, but you're an autodidact, and yeah.

Macy: Well thanks.

Whitney: Great case in point.

Macy: I wasn't looking for a compliment, but I'm going to take it. Okay.

Whitney: Yeah.

Macy: So the last thing I wanted to talk about, because I think it's the scariest part is leaping to a new curve. Um, you know you have some great stuff in the book about keeping people in the sweet spot engaged and how do you do that and how you create constraints and, and all of that, um. And I think that's so valuable, but I think when people really need to jump to a new curve, like you mentioned when you were talking about the, the levers of disruption. You may have gotten fired from a job in the past, because you were at the top of your learning curve and you didn't have the courage to jump on your own, to look for a job on your own or to, or to seek out some kind of stretch assignment that would put you on a new learning curve. So I'd love just to kind of wrap up this talking about the book is how you create opportunities for people, helping them know how to leap or helping them know how to do it.

Whitney: Um, yeah. So we coined this fun little acronym called Come To Their Aid, um A-I-D. So once a person on your team gets to a top of a learning curve and they'll know it and you'll know it actually. Ah, you want to applaud to what they've been able to accomplish and memorialize it. I think we, we memorialize birthdays and anniversaries. I think we want to memorialize when people reach a top of a curve and be like, okay, let's just take a moment and look at everything that you accomplished here and, and how much our team and our organization benefited, because you were on this curve at this point in time. Really just acknowledge that. Um, the second thing is then to I – A-I, identify a new learning curve if you haven't already.

In most cases um, if you're really taking this to you know playing this by the play book you will have already been having conversations with them um, to identify that curve of what they're going to do next. And then the third is to deliver um in helping them jump. Now in an ideal world there will be something for them on your team, but we all know the reality is that that many times that is just not going to be a possibility. And so you can also help them find something inside of your organization um, and, and when I say

help them find, I mean help them find and sponsor them and help make that happen. Like pack the parachute so that they're able to jump to that curve.

And when you're talking to other people in other departments you can even if you want say to people, hey I think so and so, I'd love to see them jump to this new curve and they'll be like are you sure they're not damaged goods, because you're letting them go. And one thing, I, I remember hearing someone say once, so what you say to them is I think they're that good. You take them, but if you don't like them I'll take them back.

Macy: Uh-huh.

Whitney: So that's what I mean by real sponsorship. And then if there's really not something inside of your organization, then help them find something with a client of your organization. Um or help them find something with a vendor. This is what I mean by being a boss that people love, a person who develops talent. A talent magnet. A person who builds vast networks of A teams across your career. Because every time you help someone learn, they are going to be able to be more productive and, and in the long term this goes back to that you know that law of physics where you push against something and its friction, you get it back. It's the same when you push people forward, whatever you need is eventually going to come back to you in some form or fashion.

So that's what it looks like when people get to the top of the curve. It may be a step back for you in the near term, a loss of productivity, because this person was a high performer, but you understand that that short term step back is a slingshot forward in the long term. Or as Mike Gamson at LinkedIn said, he said you suboptimize the present in order to optimize the future.

Macy: I love that. I think on that note, um I would just love to hear if there's anything else you want to share about the book or anyone else you want to acknowledge or just any parting thoughts you want to leave with your listeners on why they should go pick this book up today.

Whitney: Yeah, so a couple of, yeah. I'd love to do a couple of quick more acknowledgements. So Amy Jamieson, another fantastic editor, Brandon Jamieson has done all the graphic design work on the website, well you and, Macy you and Brandon. Um, have been just tremendously helpful. A couple people read early drafts which was tremendously helpful. Alex Osterwalder, Patrick Hodgdon, Franz Bussy, Melissa Davis and Jake Smith. Your reviews of the book were tremendously helpful. I remember um with [Disrupt Yourself](#) someone read it who was a friend, they're like you've got all this jargon. Get rid of the jargon and so you were readers that were super helpful in helping me get rid of the jargon of the book.

Um, so thank you to you. Um, I finally I would say um in terms of the book, I hope that when you read the book you find it useful to you in terms of thinking of the learning curve that you're on. In terms of the learning curves that the people that you are leading, um that everybody is on a learning curve including you, including everybody on your team. And I hope that as you read it if there is a boss that has, that you have



worked for that has made it possible for you to learn and it doesn't even have to be a boss, but just someone in your life who has made it possible for you to learn. I hope that you will ideally send them a copy of this book, but even if you don't do that, I hope that you will write them a note and just say, thank you.

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So, as the official host of this episode of Disrupt Yourself, I told Whitney that I was going to do the outro that she usually does at the end of every podcast episode – which I'm really excited about, because I want to tell you why I love this book so much.

As we mentioned in the podcast, I'm a former teacher. And because of that, if there is one thing I really geek out on, it's finding a framework or a principle or some kind of true – deeply true eternal truth that that applies in several settings. It just makes it so much easier to teach when you're basing what you're teaching on those types of things.

So, I'm actually reading another book by Clayton Christensen right now called *How Will You Measure Your Life*, and as I started the book, I finally found words for why I get so excited about frameworks like this. Clayton talks about how good theories are important because they don't tell us what to think - they teach us how to think. They teach us to categorize, to explain and to predict. And I loved this quote from him - good theory helps people steer to good decisions - not just in business, but in life too.

And that's why I'm so excited about Whitney's book, [Build an A-Team](#).

It's rooted in good theory that will help you make good decisions. Decisions about how to lead a team well. How to treat people like the truly valuable human resources they are. How to balance that talent development with meeting your goals as an organization. How to hire well, how to maximize people's learning while they're on the job, to prepare them for their next great adventure instead of letting them languish at the top of a learning curve. How to build an A-Team

So, some really amazing thinkers and leaders like Clayton, Marshall Goldsmith, and others have read the book and loved it - you can see their endorsements on her Amazon page - and I can tell you that if you're leading a team at work, this book is going to help you do that better. I can also tell you - as a working from home, solopreneur mom of two - there is so much great wisdom in this book for me as well. We all have opportunities to lead in our homes, in our volunteer work, throughout our lives, and the theory Whitney lays out in this book will help you steer to good decisions when you're leading any group of people. Not just in business, but in life too.

It's on shelves starting today, and you can pick it up wherever books are sold. And if you want to check out the first chapter for free, visit [whitneyjohnson.com/ateam](http://whitneyjohnson.com/ateam)

If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes, we hope you will leave a review, on [iTunes](#) or wherever you listen to podcasts. It really is just life for us that work so hard on bringing this content to you every week, so hope you'll take a moment to do that.

Thank you again to Whitney Johnson for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, who is amazing. Content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I am Macy Robison, here for Whitney Johnson

And this is Disrupt Yourself.