

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 55: Carter Cast

On today's show – “And so I would coin this phrase to the students, um, don't worry about what other people think of you because they're not thinking of you. They're the protagonist in their own play and they're, you know, they are not worried about, they are not judging you as much as you think they are. They're not watching what you do as much as you think, so that shouldn't make you depressed, it should free you up to do what you want to do.”

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest today is Carter Cast – former CEO of WalMart.com, professor at management at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Business, and author of [*The Right—and Wrong—Stuff: How Brilliant Careers Are Made and Unmade.*](#)

Whitney: So Carter, I am really excited to interview you and let's just start with the basics. Uh, 25 years ago you were young, well educated, highly ambitious, you were on the fast track at Pepsi when you were told you were “unpromotable”. Will you set the scene for us? Where had you been? What had you done? And then what did you do?

Carter: I had been a marketing manager earlier on in my career, uh, coming out of college in a startup division of PepsiCo. Pepsi, it was called, it's no longer functioning, it was called PepsiCo Food Service International, which was the international division for Pizza Hut, Taco Bell and Kentucky Fried Chicken. So we were going out and opening up new markets, so we were going into Canada and all over Europe and, and different parts of Afri, Africa, Middle East.

And so I, um, I loved it because it was fast paced and there was, you know, if you have self-starting tendencies like I did, it was really fun. Then after going to business school at Northwestern at Kellogg, when I went to business school I was still employed by PepsiCo. I was transferred into the Frito Lay division which was big, uh, traditional packaged goods division, you know, kind of trying to eke out a market share of growth every year. And it was a very abrupt change for me and I did not react well. I did not respond well to the different, uh, culture. Um, I was always itchy and I was trying to move quickly and I didn't understand how to grease the skids with other departments and, uh, really align with other functions.

And, uh, eventually I got a boss who was, um, fairly, uh, let's call it participative. (laughs) Uh, I responded by basically ignoring him and going about my business and I ended up getting called into his office at, at review time and he said that I was insubordinate, difficult to work with, recalcitrant, I remember having to look that word up at the time-

... and, uh, and he boot, and he, and he, I said, "Mike, am I getting fired?" And he said, "Well, not technically but I want you off my team. So good luck finding somebody who's gonna want to work with you."

Whitney: How did you feel? How did you feel when that happened?

Carter: You know that-

Whitney: Had, had you ever had someone say something like this to you before in your life?

Carter: No, I, not that I, well actually that's not true. My swim coach, I was a swimmer through college, um, my swim coach was heavy handed but he was brilliant. He was a Hungarian who fled Budapest during the revolution in '54 and landed, luckily for us, in Indiana, I grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana, uh, where his sister or his cousin lived. And so we had this Olympic, he had Olympic champions from Europe and so we, we ended up having this Olympic coach but he was very tough. And I, uh, tended to fight him. You know, I was a, a good swimmer-

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: ... and I didn't like, uh, him being heavy handed and so I got in trouble, kicked out of workout, you know, had to take out all the lane lines. Um, that's, there's a whole story there 'cause he's one of the most influential people in my life but I had this love hate relationship with him that was really intense. Um ...

Whitney: Well tell us about it. I want to hear. I think it sounds interesting.

Carter: Uh, Stefen Hunyadfi, uh, rest in peace. He, um ... he was a perfectionist. Uh, he was a stroke technician so he really helped me understand how to swim breaststroke properly. My knees were not meant for breaststroke. I wasn't loose and limber and I couldn't rotate my ankles and my, and my, I couldn't snap the kick like you need to, so he taught me how to do all this. He took me to Europe five times to compete when I was eight through 12.

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: Um, he bought me, he helped me buy art to teach me the, you know, sort of the finer things in life. Um, and he had very high expectations for me 'cause I was a fast swimmer. And so, um, he was like my father but he was also very tough, literally they wouldn't allow him to do what he did to swimmers today. He would hit, he would hit me with a, a strap that had a little metal piece at the end that would give me a welt.

I fought him and fought him and fought him. And when he, uh, when he was very ill, I flew back from Canada where I was working at PepsiCo Food Service, that story I was starting. And my mom and dad said, "Cart, uh, Mr. Hunyadfi is not, you know, doesn't have long to live," and so I got on a plane and went and saw him. And I went in, uh, I knocked on the door, he, he opens the door and he didn't recognize me 'cause he was so old.

Whitney: Mmm.

Carter: And I said, "Mr. Hunyadfi, it's Carter Cast." And he goes, "Vah?" And I said, "It's Carter Cast." "Vah?" I said, you know, I said it again, he finally goes, "Oh, Carter," and he brought me into his house and it smelled like dog pee. His dog was, this little dog was running all over this small apartment and it smelled just overpoweringly of urine. And we sat down and he, he had forgotten the little English he knew so he spoke to me in this kind of garbled Hungarian, Italian, little pieces of English and, uh, I finally got up to walk around and look at his apartment. He had a wall, basically the wall of his resume.

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: Uh, all the swimmers he'd ever coached, Sharon Wichman the gold medalist, different gold medalists from Europe. And, you know, I was on this wall. I was a, a good, you know, I was American record holder in the 400IM. And I, uh, I looked at this thing and then, and sat back down and finally I just said, "Mr. Hunyadfi, I've got to go but I, I just wanted to see you." And he, uh, I got up and he said, "Carter, you are good boy."

Whitney: Mmm.

Carter: And I started crying (laughs), I started crying.

Whitney: Mmm.

Carter: Um, and left and never saw him again but it, you know, I, I equal parts was horrified by his, um, by the way he coached but also it was brilliant. Um, and you know, he showed me the world and he taught me art and, and we listened to opera. He drove me to swim practice, he'd play an opera, Italian operas.

Whitney: Wow.

Carter: Uh, when I was eight or, you know, seven, 10. (laughs) So I have this very complex relationship in my head with this, this man.

Whitney: What a wonderful story. Thank you for letting me derail (laughs) you to share that story-

Carter: (laughs)

Whitney: ... for just a moment.

Carter: Oh.

Whitney: It's really powerful. So, so I guess coming back to Pepsi, you-

Carter: Yeah.

Whitney: ... you had had someone who had been really tough on you but it sounds like, at least in reading through your book, it felt a little bit different this time. And so maybe you can pick back up on, on this story.

Carter: Yeah, so this, this fellow, Mike, he wrote me yesterday, Whitney. Yesterday. He got the book and wrote me yesterday. I could read you the note.

So he, um, he kicks me off his team. I found another guy to work for who'd just moved from Canada so he didn't know my reputation. So I found a sucker. And, um, he took me in and that fellow, Stephen Quinn, and he ended up, I think, resuscitating my career. He, he learned about me and said, "Look, you, you know, you're, you're considered to be a problem," and I said, "I know." And he said, "If, if you want to progress here, you have to listen to me and you have to learn to self-monitor, um, this sort of anti-authority gene you have." And so I tried really hard and I put a bunch of little tools in place to help myself. Um, (laughs) I read a lot of books on Buddhism. I would try to meditate. Uh, I had a, I had a rubber band around my wri, my wrist that said, um, B for breathe. So I did all these little mechanisms to try to remind me just to not be so hot wired.

Whitney: Right.

Carter: Um, and, uh, it didn't happen with, it only happened when I was, I felt the heavy hand on authority on me that I would have these, these destructive tendencies. So anyway, I call Mike 20 years later when I was writing this book and said, uh, I'd reached out through LinkedIn, I said, "Mike, Carter Cast. Do you by chance remember me?" "Oh yeah," he writes back. (laughs)

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: That's all. "Oh yeah." (laughs)

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: Uh, and then I said, uh, "Could I talk to you, I'm, I'm writing this book," and he said sure. And so I quoted him in my book but he basically relayed what happened to me. So then he reads the book and writes me this yesterday.

"Carter, I wanted you to, I wanted you to know that I'm reading your book. It arrived from Amazon the other day. I'm about 100 pages in. I'm very much enjoying it. It's a useful perspective not found in many business books. Quote, for a bullet. First, let me say thanks. You were very generous in your portrayal of me and a little hard on yourself but refreshingly authentic and humble. I loved your," blanks, though, I can't say the guy's name, "I love your blank story having experienced him like that myself."

Um, "Second, I like your book. Your premise is a good one. There's too many books talking about success and very few talking about failure. Third, a clarification. When I described you as smart and charming, I didn't mean it as negatively as you interpreted it."

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: (laughs) "There's nothing wrong with being smart and charming. All people have their go to moves."

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: (laughs) Oh.

Whitney: Oh.

Carter: Anyway, then he says, "I hear you're gonna be in Dallas next week, I'd love to see you." So, you know, it's nice that he was generous in his note to me but the truth of the matter was I was a pain, uh, to manage and I had to change.

Whitney: Okay, so clearly you'd learned your lesson. Um, enough of a lesson anyway 'cause you, you went on to be the VP of product and marketing at Electronic Arts, the founding CMO of Blue Nile, CEO at Walmart.com, CEO at hay net, hay, Hayneedle, I can't say that, Hayneedle, before retiring into academia. Um, so at which point you have taken up a study of derailers, because at that point I think you would argue that you were potentially derailing. And so I'd love to hear how you decided of all the things you could have studied, you know, when did you say, "You know what, I'm gonna study this. I'm gonna spend the next five to 10 years of my life thinking about this and talking about this"?

Carter: You know, it was a confluence of things that occurred that made me realize that this was a topic I thought that was worthwhile. One is there was just so much talk about Tom Rath's [Strengths Finder 2.0](#) and [Now Discover Your Strengths](#) by Buckingham and the whole Gallup organization. And I think that's good stuff but, uh, my experience in business was that your strengths can take you pretty far but a, a, a real negative you have, a vulnerability or a blind spot can just sweep you at the knees.

So I was curious if there was research that identified common reasons that good people don't succeed. There was just this thought in my mind and I counsel MBA students. So I talked to so many people and, you know, they'll say, "I'm thinking about Bain, going to a Bain or BCG or maybe this Series A startup, and Professor Cast, what do you think?"

And I'll go through the typical, "What are you passionate about, what do you love," you know, "What quickens your heart," um, "Where do you see yourself in three to five years, what kind of thing are you doing?" And people will be zipping along on those kind of questions, then I'll say, "What about you could hurt you?"

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: And I would get these, "What?" And I'll say-

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: ... "What, what about you could impede your own career progress? Where are your vulnerabilities? What are your allergic reactions? What are your soft spots? Mine is a authority problem, I have to very closely self-monitor," and then I tell the story of the dean where I got in trouble again-

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: ... um, with this authority issue and said, "You know, the difference is now I immediately apologize and move forward, um, versus sort of blame, blaming it on someone else." And I would get very, uh, sketchy or no answers at all. And so the third point is I talked to an old boss of mine who is more talented than I, more accomplished than I, and he flat, he bottomed out at a level below what many of us thought he would and I hadn't talked to him for about 10 years. And as I hung up the phone, I mean I could hear this, this disappointment in his voice as he talked about his career.

And I hung up the phone and I wrote on a sticky note, "What impedes the progress of talented people," and I stuck it on my wall. And so all those, you know, my getting derailed, uh, and blindsided by my own sort of, sort of, uh, anti-authority hubris, the students not seeming to nail that answer when I would ask that question to try to help them and then this conversation I had with an old boss who had flatlined way before I thought he would, I just said I'm gonna, I asked the dean, um, Sally Blount, "Can I take off a quarter and just do deep research in this?" And she said, "Yes, if you write a white paper on it for the school."

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: So I wrote this white paper and it started getting used by other professors.

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: So I thought, "Huh, maybe there's something here."

Whitney: Yep. Interesting.

Carter: So then I talked to this, I went to the CCL, talked to the Center for Creative Leadership folks and they said, "Oh, we've got a lot of data on this, a lot of information." Then I went to Korn Ferry and Lominger, um, and they had a lot of information by mining the data from 360s on what the top, you know, quartile of, uh, performers do from a competencies profile standpoint and what the bottom quartile don't do.

Interestingly, this, this made me decide to write the book, I was talking to Korn Ferry and a researcher and I said, "Do you have a derailment assessment tool to help employees understand where they," they said, "Yeah, we have one that we make available for companies." And I said, "Well, do they buy it?" And he said, "No."

And I said, "Well why?" And he goes, "Because it's uncomfortable."

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: So I thought, "Oh, you know, I'm gonna, I'm gonna do this." So I spent about 18 months researching it, I interviewed 100 people who'd gotten fired or demoted, managers to VPs, then I talked to, you know, HR VPs, executive recruiters, headhunters, CEOs and then looked at all the secondary academe, academic research on it. And then I, I found that five, five reasons came up over and over and over for why people derail and to make those reasons more accessible, easier to talk about, I created this little archetypes or characterizations to describe them, to make it more fun as you talked about the topic.

The first one and the most prevalent I labeled Captain Fantastic. This is, this is the guy who has the sharp elbows and bruises you on his quest for the Holy Grail of the corner office. These people have interpersonal issues often due to ego, poor listening skills and as a result they have poor working relationships with their coworkers. This is the number one reason senior level executives derail. Poor self-awareness and, um, you know, they start, they start thinking they have all the answers themselves and they stop listening.

Whitney: Before we go to the next one, um, if I'm a manager or a coach or a board of directors in this particular case, 'cause the, we're, it sounds like we're now talking C suite, what's one question or one symptom that I can look for to say, "Oh, I got a Captain Fantastic on my hands"?

Carter: They're using the word I.

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: 'Cause business is we. I mean it's a set of interdependencies that are complex and-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: ... interesting and-

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: ... you have to align, you have to enlist. And when you hear I a lot, that's a-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: ... big, a big, a big watch out to me. I was listening to one of your podcasts and Peter Sims was talking about, um, Steve Jobs and I was in three meetings with Steve Jobs when I was at Walmart and you know, I'd heard all these kind of horror stories about him. I'll tell you, my experience with him was he asked more questions and listened better than anybody in the room.

So, you know, I think when you see someone that says I all the time and someone who doesn't listen well, um, your buddy Clayton Christensen, when he wrote the book Innovator's DNA, talked about discovery skills, um, innovators and leaders with discovery skills and one of their characteristics is there's an average ratio of questions asked to statements made of six to one.

So that's the first one. So look for I and look for people that just opine and talk and they don't ask questions.

Whitney: All right, so let's go to Solo Flier. What is that and what can we look for?

Carter: This is often a really good individual contributor who can, you know, uh, bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, you know, do it all. And when they get promoted because they're good at executing their initiatives, when they're pro, promoted into managerial positions, they have difficulty building and leading teams. They tend to either micromanage or they, you know, they try to do the work themselves and their teams become demotivated and dissatisfied and, and, you know, disempowered and eventually there's a coup d'etat.

Linda Hill who wrote, uh, Harvard professor who wrote Being the Boss and Becoming a Manager, she studied, um, 20 managers, like, kind of like ethnographic research, and she followed 20 managers who became, who were promoted and found these, you know, these characteristics in poor managers. And besides micromanaging and continuing to try to fish instead of teaching the folks to fish, they also, they task managed their teams instead of realizing that their job as managers is to build bridges cross-functionally to allow the teams to get resources to do their work.

So they didn't, they didn't manage the context surrounding their teams.

Whitney: You had a great story about this, your black bean dip story that you talked about in the book. Will you tell that, 'cause I think this is a great illustration of the Solo Flier.

Carter: I was, uh, product manager of Tostitos salsas and dips and we created this thing of wonder, this black bean dip that had nothing in it but black beans, jalapenos, um, garlic, a little bit of cumin and we retorted it, which is a, a way we cooked it so we didn't have to add, um, any vinegar to kill the microorganisms.

By retorting it, we just cooked it in a vat and it was a, it had this very mellow taste. So the taste tests were off the charts high. We had a winner on our hands, but the product was so ni, nichy at the time in the 90s, black bean dips were not, you know, Mexican, Hispanic food was, was spreading but it wasn't like it is today. And so we had to be very careful how we rolled it out. We had to go to, you know, certain Hispanic markets around Texas and San Francisco and certain areas around Chicago and et cetera and we couldn't just blast it nationally.

Well the field sales guys at Frito Lay over-ordered because they were excited by the product and I did a poor job as the leader of this initiative in connecting with the field

and explaining them the demographic and psychographic profile of who the buyer was- and how much to order, that we needed to sort of bleed this product into the market and let it kind of work its magic on its own versus slamming it into full distribution like you do with a new flavor of Lay's potato chips.

Because I didn't, hadn't established those strong relationships with the field sales folks, they ordered, over-ordered and I didn't have the influencing power to walk them down from their orders. They were like, "Who is this guy? Why is he telling me what to order? Ordering is not his job, it's my job," and the product got released, everyone over-ordered and it would, it was staling in supermarkets because they ordered too much, too high a quantity and they were putting it in markets that weren't accustomed to Hispanic food.

And it died on the vine and I was crushed, but it was my lesson that my job is to, I have to align with manufacturing, with sales. I have to align with these folks and they're an extended part of my team and I'm part of their team and I didn't made the mistake, that mistake again.

Whitney: Such a great learning (laughs), for you and for everybody who's listening and reading, uh, absolutely. So with Solo Fliers, is there one piece of advice you would give to a manager, um, to be able to flag, "Oops, I may have a Solo Flier on my hands.

Carter: One of the ways I can sniff out a Solo Flier is if you go to their team members and ask them what the top three priorities of the, of their group is, generally you get different answers from everybody.

And if you ask what the key success metrics, you know, the KPIs are, you'll get different answers from everybody because they don't align the team towards, you know, vision, mission, key objectives, key deliverables. They don't, they don't, um, unite the team towards a direction because they're busy just tasking different members of their team. So you can sniff these guys out pretty quickly by just asking, let's say they have six people on the team, asking each of them, "What are your, what are, what are the top five goals of your, of your group and how do you know when you get there," and you'll get different answers.

Whitney: So let's go through the last three. Version 1.0.

Carter: This basically with the rate of change we're seeing, this can happen to all of us. You basically, this person derails because they aren't adaptable. They get comfortable in their routines, they're kind of skeptical of change. They resist new learning skills that would help them adapt to rapidly changing, you know, business environments. And sort of they have this attitude of rigidity, uh, if it ain't broke don't fix it. "Uh, I do sales, I don't need to understand all this digital marketing mumbo jumbo."

Well yeah, you do actually. The digital marketing mumbo jumbo is your best source of lead generation for sales. And, you know, the reality is when you're, uh, especially as

you get more seniored in an organization, the people below you know much more than you do because they're closer to the customer, closer to the business.

So, you know, we, our job should be, as senior managers, to be, um, talking and asking questions and roving the halls to find out what's really going on, not assuming we know because we're a senior vice president or vice president or whatever. So Version 1.0 doesn't stay fresh.

Whitney: And so as, so what's interesting for me on this one is this really plays very much into what I talk about, is a person, they're at the top of the learning curve and they like it just fine. (laughs) It looks pretty good to them and, um, they like things just the way they are and not understanding that they have to disrupt themselves 'cause if they don't, they're gonna get disrupted.

Carter: Amen, amen.

Whitney: So what do you look for for this? Is this, what kind of language cues do you look for?

Carter: Resistance. Just ... uh, resisting the new software that you're gonna use. Um, resisting a new boss and saying, "Well I prefer the old boss." There's a lack of flexibility and open mindedness, um, to this person, to this profile of being either fearful of change or, um, not believing change is necessary.

So you can ask certain questions like, "Hey, when's the last time you were out in the field watching customers buy our product? When's the last time you went and interviewed a supplier, talked to a supplier about our product? When's the last time you did a competitive audit on the business? Um, who are you following on podcasts? How many podcasts do you listen to a week? What white papers have you read about the business recently? Who do you follow on Twitter? How many of them are thought leaders?" You know? You can ask those types of questions and you'll get, you won't get the answers that you probably need to given how much change is going on and how, we have so many great methods to stay abreast of change now that there's really no excuse for not doing so.

Whitney: Okay. All right. One Trick Pony.

Carter: One Trick Pony. This is probably my favorite one. It is completely solvable, I believe. This is someone who is deemed as not strategic. They're good at one thing. They have topped out and aren't gonna get another promotion because they're viewed as being an expert in one area, competent in one area but they don't see how all the pieces fit together in the business because they've gone up through one narrow band. And so they top out. Um, they've, they're so reliant on a signature skill that over time they become un, unpromotable.

So the question here is at what point do you, have you learned enough about your skill area?

First, I'll tell the students, you know, at the leadership T, the bottom of the T is rigor and that's the five years getting good at something and the top of the T is sort of managerial leadership skills to broaden, to, you know, the horizontal part of the T. What happens with this person is after they get that four or five years, they don't find those broadening opportunities and as a result they're pigeonholed.

Whitney: So what I found really interesting as I was reading about this is, well two things, one is your story about being at Electronic Arts and when they said, "Okay, here's what you, you would need to do in order to go to the next level," and you realized that, I think you, you would have to be a game developer and spend all of your excess hours on that and you didn't love it enough so you realized you were actually on the wrong curve and you left within a year. Am I getting that story right?

Carter: Yeah, exactly right, yeah. That's exactly what I said-

Whitney: Okay.

Carter: ... about Bing Gordon, the founder, one of the founders, um, and he said, "Carter, you, we gotta get you out into the field into the, one of the development offices to learn how the games are built and be an executive producer." And I realized that I, I love reading books and I see people gaming and I just think, "Oh, they should be reading."

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: And I realized, "You should not have taken this job because you have no passion for this industry," uh, and, and I left soon there, that was my, that was a great company and it did very well-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: ... but it was a mistake for me because it flew in the face of what I adored which is literature and books.

Whitney: Fascinating.

Whitney: Um, in reading through notes you said, "The number one career derailer for men is an overdependence on a single skill." Does that, which, which does that, which category does that fall into of these five?

Carter: That would be a piece of the One Trick Pony.

They get really good at one thing, um, and they over rely on it. The women, it is, the number one derailer and this is Korn Ferry research of hundreds of thousands of 360s, was, um, viewed as non-strategic, don't understand how all the pieces fit together, don't have a holistic view. So it's, it's sort of cousin to one dimensional, um, but I think there's a perceptual issue here too. Um-

Whitney: Yeah, I think-

Carter: ... wom, yeah, I think it's unfair.

Whitney: It, yeah, it's interesting because I, I, I, one of my sort of ... experiences is I remember I was a number one ranked, actually double ranked analyst at Merrill Lynch and I remember going into a boss and saying, "You know, I'd really like to find opportunities to do other things to move up and," et cetera, and their comment was, "We like you right where you are."

Carter: Yeah.

Whitney: And so I wanted to move from being a One Trick Pony but I didn't have the opportunity to do it so I thought it was really interesting in reading this, is that sometimes people want to expand but it may not necessarily be available to them. So when that happens, do you have any particular advice for people? 'Cause it, you know, it happened to me but it happens to lots and lots of people where they're like, "I don't want to be a One Trick Pony," but they don't have an opportunity to do that. So what would you, what's a, what's a good workaround for people?

Carter: Wow, that's a good one. Um, so Boris Groysberg of Harvard did a lot of research around women and because the internal network is not available to them as it is to a man-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: ... unfairly, they do a better job with an external network than men do. So they align well with suppliers and customers and they are, um, talented women who do well, are able to progress in their career using their external network to get ahead because the internal ones shut down on them. So that's one thing, is make sure your external network is strong. Like Sheryl Sandberg's.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: She was working for Larry Summers at the Department of Treasury and was at a party and met Eric Schmidt which got her, and she said, "I'm gonna go to New York Times," and he said, "Why would you want to do that? It's a declining business. Come work at us, come work for us." Um, and she was there and then she was at another event, somehow she met Zuckerberg. So she was using external networks, um, probably because it was hard for the internal network to help her.

Whitney: That's fascinating.

Carter: So I think that's, yeah, that's one of them for sure. Um, another one is, and I know this is overused, the term, so I, I use it very delicately, which is mentors. I mean I know everyone talks about, "Well if you ask, you, you, you scare people when you ask them to be your mentor." I think there's a way of doing this. My sister's kind of brilliant at it, Jennifer, she's an executive at Amazon.com, Jennifer Cast.

She has done a good job of making sure that through social activities and, and, uh, you know, playing tennis and clubs and things that are associated with the, um, um, with the company, that she's met people that can, um, help her, uh, and met, she's met them in a very relaxed, normal basis, and then developed a collegial relationship that lead to people wanting to help her.

Whitney: Yeah.

Carter: So, you know, how do you, how do you, how do you activate a mentorship network? It certainly isn't by walking up to somebody and scaring them by saying, "Would you be my mentor?"

Whitney: Right.

Carter: You know, it's, it's, it's probably going to them in an area that they have a piece of expertise and saying, "I know you're an expert in package design, would," you know, "would you mind if I bought you a cup of coffee and could you give me your point of view on, on several designs we're looking at?" Well that's flattering. The person will probably say yes, then if you have a good cup of coffee, maybe you venture to say, you know, "Could we do this again some time in the," you know, "in the future?"

Whitney: So for people who are One Trick Ponies, they can't necessarily broaden their skillsets inside of their organization, it could be women, could be men, it could be either, um, look at external networks for ways to, um, to broaden, broaden your network. It kind of reminds me, I don't know if you remember that little visual, uh, trick where they'll have like nine dots on a piece of paper and they'll say, "Connect all the dots with a single line," and you try to do it and you try to do it and you try to do it and you realize you've gotta go outside of the line or the box in order to connect the dots and I think that-

Carter: (laughs)

Whitney: ... example applies really well here for people who are One Trick Ponies and the internal network isn't necessarily available to them.

Carter: Yeah.

Whitney: Is there one thing that you would recommend that managers look for to know that this person might be a One Trick Pony?

Carter: Generally One Trick Ponies are shown when there is a, they don't have perspective on a business issue that's complex. So if you say, "We are a direct to consumer internet e-commerce company and we're thinking about selling wholesale to Nordstrom, should we do this," the One Trick Pony won't have a framework to, uh, to use to evaluate that question.

They will, they will, they, they know their area, uh, they're a controller, they're an accountant, they're a sales manager, they're a marketing, digital marketing manager,

but they won't have the ability to examine that from different points of view. So one of the tricks, not even tricks, one of the activities I do with One Trick Ponies is I'll say, "Let's lay out the value chain of our company and look at the critical path," the critical path being the road to consumer satisfaction, the, the road that creates differentiation in your product and makes consumers happy.

So like if you're at Walmart, the critical path includes only three or four things. Sourcing at the cheapest price, distribution, uh, in and out of the warehouses, merchandising in store along actionality and merchandising assortment strategy and pricing. So there's like, if you lay out the value chain and say, you know, real estate's not on the critical path, marketing's not on the critical path, finance is not on the critical path, so lay out the critical path of activities that make you better than the competitors as a company.

And it might take getting other, uh, functional experts involved in that conversation, but if you can, if you can work with them to be able to lay out the value chain of the company and talk about the activities that are critical to making customers happy and you can say, hey, inter, have them talk to a warehouse manager for an afternoon, have them spend time in a Supercenter with the shift manager talking about labor management software they use. You can do this in five or six days, have them meet with these different experts and then they will have a more well-rounded view of the different parts of the business and how they interact with each other so when you have this question that comes up like, "Should we go wholesale," or, "Should we," you know, "create a different, uh, footprint," they will be able to draw from their knowledge of the way the business works to talk about it.

Whitney: Whirling Dervish.

Carter: Whirling Dervish. Smart, creative people full of ideas but the ideas just disappear into thin air. Um, over, um, uh, overleveraged, uh, too many activities on the plate, probably has a problem, uh, difficulty saying no, can't prioritize what's critical for the business, difficulty planning and organizing and bite off too much, their eyes are bigger than their stomachs. And so as a result, they don't deliver on promises made and people slowly but surely distance themselves from this person.

Whitney: So that one you can just, that's a pretty easy identify of they're not delivering on what they say they're gonna deliver on. Is that correct?

Carter: Right.

Whitney: Okay.

Carter: That's correct.

Whitney: Okay.

Carter: That's correct. Also Pleasers. You can see it in Pleasers and I'm a, I'm a grade A pleaser so-

Whitney: Huh.

Carter: ... I had to read, uh, uh, William Ury's book. [The Power of a Positive No](#) is a beautiful book.

Whitney: It's a great book. Actually-

Carter: Oh.

Whitney: ... interestingly enough, recently, uh, Claire Diaz Ortiz, who was an early employee at Twitter, [she put out a piece that's 50 different ways to say no](#). (laughs) Very valuable, I must say.

Carter: Oh, I should grab, I should get that.

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: 'Cause I still, it's still a problem with me, is wanting to please, you know, just my personality profile is a, is an empathetic pleaser and I find myself, uh, muttering and saying, "Why did I commit to that?" Um-

Whitney: It's so fascinating, an empathetic pleaser who also, um, you know, bucks against authority. I still find that fascinating.

Carter: (laughs)

Whitney: I have to say is a very complex profile to me as you've found yourself, when you have, would have these very participative bosses, kind of, you know, kicking against the pricks and yet as a young boy, you had a very autocratic coach who you, I suspect you did not badmouth very much. And so it's, it's fascinating to, like, analyze that and I don't know what conclusions there are to draw but it's still interesting, and the complexity of us as individuals.

So, so can derailers change over time? 'Cause as I was reading through this I thought, "You know, at one point in my career I was more this and, you know, at another point I was more this and now I would have to say I'm a little bit more," I saw a little bit of myself in Whirling Dervish and that frightened me just a little bit, but can they change over time? Your derailers?

Carter: There's different reasons people derail. Um, if they're skill based derailers, you derail because you don't understand how the business fits together-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: ... and so you're viewed as not strategic, absolutely that can change. You can get promoted, have different assignments, learn how the business works and pretty soon you're called strategic and a visionary.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: So that could change. The reason people derail that doesn't change have to do with personality characteristics that they don't want to work on.

So, you know, if you're fear based and an, an, anxiety ridden and you don't learn to dissect it and understand it, um, it can, you know, and you're, and you're a skeptic. You know, you're one of the derailment profiles, can be a skeptic and cautious so you don't put yourself out there and disrupt yourself. You know, you don't try. Um, so I think if their personality characteristics or, here's my favorite derailer, I call it the great derailer, this is the sixth one, you're in the wrong context.

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: You shouldn't be doing what you're doing.

Whitney: Right, right.

Carter: And so you're-

Whitney: Wrong job, you're on the wrong curve. (laughs)

Carter: Wrong job, wrong curve, and then, that's why, I was talking to Dan Pink about [Drive](#), he has a great book *Drive*, and then I was unpacking all this research of David, um, McClelland from Harvard, and so he writes about motives. You know, achievement, affiliation, power and then I would add, based on talking to Dan and doing research, uh, autonomy, which is, I'm clearly motivated by, and, um, purpose. So purpose, autonomy, affiliation, power and achievement.

If you are in a job that appeals to your natural motive, you know, motives are your source of energy. They're, that what, that what's drives you.

And so, you know, what is your, what's your motive profile and does the job you're in fit your, your natural motive structure?

Whitney: Yeah, and so what's interesting hearing you say this is there are some that are more personality driven and some are, that are potentially a little bit more context driven almost, right?

Carter: Right.

Whitney: Some of these derailers.

Carter: Much, very much so, that's right.

Whitney: You have a history of public service in your family, um, and do you want to just talk about that a little bit? And then I want to ask you what is President Trump's derail and what could he do differently?

Carter: Wow. So, um, my family, my mom and dad started a school called the Canterbury School for K through 12 and I think my love for, when I said I was gonna be a teacher on LinkedIn, I updated it six years ago, like I got a bunch of people who said, "Of course, this totally makes sense," and of course I was the last one to know, right? (laughs)

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: Um, but it was there in the back of my mind because my parents started a school and that, my dad said and my mom said was the most important thing they'd done in their lives, was this school in Fort Wayne, Indiana, called the Canterbury School. And my sister was chairman of Lambda Legal which is, uh, an organi, uh, a law, a law organization that fights for gay rights for-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: ... equal rights for gays. And so there is this history of, of, of public service and especially around education. So I still have this thing I want to do some time and it's not articulated yet, but I want to do something to help people that are struggling, struggling with their careers but, but struggling so much that it's, that it's dangerous, that, you know, they're depressed. They're, they're, uh, having, uh, substance abuse issues, they're having mental, you know. I want to, I want to, I don't know if it's a place or if it's a, a peer network. I don't know what it is yet but I'm drawn to helping people that have experienced real turmoil, uh, that their career precipitated.

Whitney: Hm.

Carter: And I don't know what it is yet. I've talked to the, I've talked to the dean about it too. Like I don't know if it's, uh, uh, it's something we build off, off next to Kellogg. Yeah, I don't know what it is. So, we'll see.

Whitney: Yeah it's interesting. So just to, just to mention that one thought briefly is I remember talking to a fellow. His name's, uh, Tom Loarie and he's in California and he works with people who have been laid off of their jobs. So it's like lots and lots and lots of people and I suspect that in this, all this research that you've done, there's gonna be a subset of people who, they, you know, they derailed and they can get back on the rails.

But within that, within that group of people there's gonna be a subset of people who have derailed for reasons that are much bigger than, or, you know, they don't quite have the, the mental or emotional wherewithal to actually figure out how to fix it on their own and I suspect you're gonna be able to find a slice of those people there and, and potentially can help in that way, starting with, you know, potentially just giving them your diagnostic that you include in the book to help them figure out where they're

derailing as a starting point and then provide them with support, um, and services that they need along there. So that's just brainstorming.

Carter: I think that's-

Whitney: Um, as we're talking.

Carter: ... that's wonderful. I give this, um, presentation at the exec ed center, the Allen Center at Kellogg called Notes to Myself which is-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: ... uh, thoughts I've had on, uh, where I've struggled in tough times and what I've done to try to get out of certain holes I've dug for myself over the years, personal issues. I just go ahead and let it all hang out in this presentation. And afterwards, Whitney, it's unbelievable what comes out of the woodwork. I, people will tell you stories after story after story of what, they drop the edifice, they drop the, the, you know, all of the business talk.

Whitney: The façade, yeah.

Carter: All the façade drops and they talk about themselves and what they're really feeling. And it's the most, it's the scary, every time I do it it's scary and then it's gratifying when I end up having these very real conversations with people about their fears, their, you know, trouble they're having with their spouse 'cause they travel too much, being, you know, distanced from their kids, feeling like they're, they have the imposter syndrome, and, you know, all, and, um, I know there's something here that, that could be mined a lot more than I can, I think, I don't know if I can help with but I'd like to try to.

Whitney: What's a story that you tell people that really is initially something that you thought, "Oh, I'm not gonna, I, I can't tell that," and then you have? You finally got up the courage to share that story and you find that people just really, it, it, it allows them to, to make sense or make meaning of their lives in a way that they hadn't, you know, hadn't thought of before? Is there one particular story?

Carter: Yeah, there is. And, and I, I don't tell it in full 'cause it's, it's sordid, it's difficult, but I tell enough of it that people, it sort of, jaws drop in my class. So my last class, I do this, um, I, it's, it's a, it's actually an extra lecture.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: So we have 10, I have 10 three hour class, 10 three hour classes and this is the 11th class. And so I say, "You don't have to come, I'm just going to get up there and talk if you want to come." And so people come if they want and it's this Notes to Myself class and I talk about bottoming out, um, in 2009 and, you know, lit, literally the dark moment of the soul, the, the, you know, stare, kind of staring into the abyss and feeling completely like I didn't know who I was and what I was doing and where I was going. Um, I wasn't

sleeping, I was getting very heavy, um, my, I had a lot of heart arrhythmia. My triglyceride count was terrible, I wasn't sleeping at all. I was sleeping sitting up 'cause I had terrible GERD. Uh, I was drinking too much. I was melancholy all the time.

And, um, I came to this sort of, for me, a bit of a eureka or a revelation which is I don't want to live the, God willing, I don't want to live the second half of my life like I've lived the first half which is trying to do what is expected of me. I want to do what I want to do and I want to do it well. And so I would coin this phrase to the students, um, don't worry about what other people think of you because they're not thinking of you.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: They're the protagonist in their own play and they're, you know, they are not worried about, they are not judging you as much as you think they are. They're not watching what you do as much as you think, so that shouldn't make you depressed, it should free you up to do what you want to do.

So I just did a absolute disruptor yourself reset. I quite my CEO job. I, um, for a year I just sat in coffee shops and read. My wife's like, "Uh, are we figuring things out yet?"

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: You know. I would come home and she's like, "How did it go today?"

Whitney: (laughs)

Carter: You know. And I ended up, um, becoming a teacher and I work with entrepreneurs on their ideas now. And a writer, so-

Whitney: And you've written a book.

Carter: Yeah, so-

Whitney: And you've written a book.

Carter: Yeah. So anyway, I, um, I was living somebody else's life, I was living the life that I thought was my dad, I thought my dad thought was pretty cool- and I thought my friends would think is pretty cool and the reality is I'm not motivated by power. And so being a, a, a CEO was very difficult for me because I didn't, I didn't have that sort of orientation around sort of willing people to a direction. I just, I just didn't, I like to be creative with a small group of people and build new products but I didn't want to move an organization.

Whitney: Wow, that's quite an insight to, to get. And aren't you glad you got it, you know, in your 40s as opposed to in your 60s or 70s?

Carter: I really am. It's very fortunate. Because I'm very happy and very content now and I was not before.

Whitney: Hm. So, okay.

Carter: Trump.

Whitney: Quick (laughs)-

Carter: (laughs)

Whitney: ... quick thing on Trump, um, and then, and then we'll wrap up.

Carter: I'll just say this. Um, one of my dear friends who's a, an executive coach, um, I asked her what person, what profile of person is almost impossible to work with, is really difficult?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Carter: She says, Boy, it is hard, hard, hard to change narcissists because they aren't, um, you know, they're a, it's the, it's the, the tell of narcissists, right? The reflection in the pool, that's what they see. They don't see themselves accurately and there are these big blind spots and you can't dig at them. You can't get to them. So, um, you know, if I were trying to deal with our president, there's, there, how can we hold a, a mirror to blind spots, um, I don't know. With the personality profile he has, I don't know, but clearly some of the things he said and, you know, some of the behaviors, uh, he would do well to, to have a trusted advisor or two who he trusts enough to be able to be honest with him about the impact of some of the statements or some of the decisions, um, but he's, you know, he's a classic Captain Fantastic who-

Whitney: That's what I was gonna guess. Okay.

Carter: ... classic Captain Fantastic-

Whitney: Yeah.

Carter: ... who has trouble, who's having, you know, who has trouble taking into account other people's points of view, I think.

Whitney: If you could talk to your swim coach today, 'cause I know he's, you said he has passed away, um, what would you want him, what would you want to tell him?

Carter: Um, I'd want to say ... I appreciate how much time you put into, uh, developing me more out of the water than in the water.

Whitney: Mmm.

Carter: With music, with culture, taking me to Europe. I appreciate that more than you'll ever know, and then I'd say, "And I'm sorry I was a pain in the neck too, uh, Coach."

Whitney: Carter, thank you, um, so much. I really enjoyed your book. It's, it's interesting and, um, I think it's gonna be really, really helpful for a lot of people. I certainly, I would recommend it to anybody out there who does any sort of coaching. I highly recommend it. It's, um, uh, it's very, very good. Very thoughtful, very insightful, very research based and very readable and, um, again, thank you Carter so much.

Carter: Thank you Whitney, I really appreciate being on here.

What an interesting interview. First, I'm still thinking about Carter's swim coach and what a powerful influence he was. I had a piano teacher like that. Her name was Mrs. Sills. Mona Sills. Love. Hate. Hate. Love. She made piano feel magical. She taught me how to blow bubbles with my gum. But it came at a price. I still remember (and it's been decades) her asking me what I thought of the Van Gogh Exhibit in San Francisco. When I said I didn't like it, she said, "Only a moron wouldn't like that." She asked my opinion, now I'm a moron? Which, by the way, wasn't possible because only adults that act like eight-year olds can be morons. I was eight. Indelible. In reflecting on Carter's story now that I'm an adult, do I have that much power over younger humans? Assuming that I do, how can I use it in positive ways? Like maybe I can acknowledge the children in my life calling them by name.

Second, love the black bean dip story. Not just because I like Mexican food. Whenever someone starts working for you, regardless of where they are on the learning curve, one of their first tasks must be: identify your stakeholders. All the people who have the power to help you or stop you from getting things done. Give your new hires credit for doing it. This isn't just a nice to do. It is a must.

Finally, I'm really fascinated by Carter's work on derailers. That question -- what about you that could hurt you? Do you know what it is? Do I know what it is? Well, no because we don't want to look. Fortunately, there's the spoonful of sugar that is the 360 review where we get the bad with the good. Don't spend all your time here just make sure it doesn't become an Achilles heel.

P.S. I [took his quiz](#) and will include it in the show notes. My derailers they aren't what I thought they would be. I guess that's why they're called blind spots.

Practical tip: If you haven't done this recently or ever figure out what could hurt you. Take Carter's quiz. Then don't fixate (cause that could make it worse), but do be aware of it, and take steps to remediate.

If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes, we hope you'll leave a review ([Stitcher](#), [iTunes](#)) even one sentence. For the first three people who do, email us at wj@whitneyjohnson.com and we'll send you a copy of Carter's book.

If you aspire to be a great boss, one with the right stuff, check out [*Build an A-Team*](#), my book with Harvard Business Review Press, that is available where all books are sold.

Thank you to Greg Summers for writing in. After listening to Michael Bungay Stanier in episode 43 Greg is going to apply “being lazy” (I’m doing air quotes right now) to sales training. Also he liked my conversation with Dan Pink in episode 39. It got him thinking about his larger goals in life. Thanks for writing in Greg.

Thank you again to Carter Cast for being our guest. To sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager and editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emily Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson. I’m Whitney Johnson and this is Disrupt Yourself.