

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 58: June Cohen

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest is June Cohen - former head of TED's media organization - where she grew views or listens of TED talks from zero to 1 billion (that's with a B) per year. She's currently the co-founder of [Wait, What?](#), a content incubator that invests in, develops and nurtures original media properties, the most prominent being Reid Hoffman's podcast, [Masters of Scale](#).

Whitney: I thought we would just start off by my asking you where you grew up? Where did you grow up and what did you think you wanted to be when you grew up?

June: Oh, that's funny. That's my, the first question I always ask, uh, people on interviews.

Whitney: It is the first question you ask?

June: It is. I always ask them to tell me their story and to start with, what they wanted to be when they grew up, 'cause it gives me a sense of their path. So I grew up in a little suburb of New York. And I am one of those people that wanted to be many different things. And so I think that's an, it's sort of an important part of my path. I wanted to be a writer, I wanted to be a teacher, I wanted to be a dancer, I wanted to be a doctor, I wanted to be a cartoonist, um, I wanted to be, uh, all kinds of different things.

And it's interesting because I think that, that, there, there are a number of threads in the things that I've always, have always pulled me that, uh, that came out as I got older. One of them was that I'm sort of hopelessly interested in everything, and that's part of what had pulled me to journalism in, in college because it was a way to sort of professionally be interested in everything. But storytelling had always been a part of what I love, whether it was in theater or whether it was as a writer. And, um, and I've always also loved things that were really visual. I wanted to be a cartoonist, I wanted to be a designer, I wanted to be an architect.

Whitney: One of the things, um, I remember reading somewhere, is that you spent a large part of your young life on stage. What did you do?

June: I did, although all, entirely in an, in a non-professional capacity. I loved to perform. My mom had been a ballerina and a Broadway actress, um, I think, and my dad was a wonderful singer. I think it was always in my blood. So I spent a lot of time as a kid, a teenager and into college, and actually well past college, um, performing on the side. I, I love to sing, I love being in musicals, I, um, love comedy, I loved improv. And so I spent, uh, I sort of think it was one, one of my parallel careers would have been in the, in the performing arts. It's always been the thing on the side that, uh, that pulled me.

And I love watching theater, too.

Whitney: What was your favorite role to play when you were doing theater?

June: (laughs). I was always the, um, comic relief (laughs). So I, always loved playing the characters that had big personalities and big, uh, big personalities and big flaws and, um, but that were very likable at heart. I don't have a lot of, uh, patience or interest in unlikable narrators.

Whitney: So the character that's coming to my mi- my mind, and you can tell me in a minute, but is Ado Annie from Oklahoma.

June: (laughs). That was, I would have loved to play that role. Yeah.

Whitney: (laughs). Is that the kind of character you're talking about?

June: Yeah, definitely. Like probably my favorite role I ever played was in, uh, to give you another example, was in Once Upon A Mattress. It's the tomboy princess in that, uh, in that show. Um. So-

Whitney: Got it.

June: So anything, I am very deeply willing to laugh at myself and allow other people to. So those are the kinds of roles I always loved.

Whitney: What's one of your favorite, um, musicals ever, of all time?

June: I-I think that a couple of the ones that come to mind are, um, I mean first of all, I adore Hamilton. I actually loved Matilda, which was just this like incredible blend of sweet and dark. So those are two that are like in recent memory.

Whitney: Um. So switching gears a little bit, you spent more than a decade of your life building [TED](#) into what it is today. How did you know that it was time to leave?

June: Well, I think your heart always knows. I think you always know what it is you're meant to do and when. And for me, I'm really a start-up person. So I, when I think of my, uh, career, I think of myself, I'm, as being half-storyteller and half-inventor. I love telling stories. Rich stories that have never been told before, but I also love to tell them in a form that has never been created before. So that is my happiest place when I'm blending media and, uh, technology in, in new ways. When I'm able to invent something that hasn't existed before. And, um, that's broadly, and then company-wise, I just love building things from the ground up. I-I've always been a builder and, uh, that's why I've always loved, um, start-ups.

And so when I went to TED, I mean I was employee five at TED. Uh, it was before TED was a media company. It was still a conference. And I expected that I stay there for two, three years, maybe four. And I was there 11 years. And so, um, that, and that's a testament to how much I loved it. I loved working with speakers, I loved the culture of TED, the idea of spreading ideas. I loved the mission, I loved the community. Creatively, it was time for me to, to, to make something new. And I could see all around me there was a, a renaissance happening in story-telling, and there are fascinating things

happening in every corner of media. A renaissance in audio and, and podcasting. A, a new forms being invented like VR. A renaissance in short form video. So many, um, fascinating new forms were being created and I wanted to be a part of it. And I just knew in my kind of creative center that it was time for me to, uh, to start anew.

Whitney: What did you study in college? Just 'cause I need to get us to being able to go from your childhood to your being at TED. So what did you study in college?

June: Well, in college, it continues to be really clear that I am hopelessly interested in everything. And there's two tracks to my college career. One is academics and the other is journalism. In my sophomore year in college I started working at the, at the school newspaper, which was an independent newspaper, meaning that it was operated as, uh, a separate company. It didn't have an advisor. It was run by the editor in chief, who was typically a senior or a fifth year senior. I loved working at the newspaper.

I actually first went to the newspaper because I really wanted to do, uh, I wanted to both write and I wanted to do graphic design. I wanted to do kind of the layout of the paper. And that became the dominant force in my, um, college career. I moved through just about every editorial role at the, the paper from entertainment editor, copy editor and news editor, science editor of news project, managing editor and ultimately editor in chief.

Whitney: Wow.

June: And that was really a career during college. It was extremely demanding and extremely rewarding, and, um, and really set me up for almost everything that I've, I've done and learned since then. We took our journalism very seriously and that was, um, a real force in my college career and a real, uh, unifying factor and I, because it, uh, it was, was very real professional experience and also I, I, I just learned so much through that.

But your actual question was my major, and I, you know, I'm one of these people that did, I did love school. I love, I love looking through a course catalog and true to my point earlier of, um, being hopelessly interested in everything, I actually changed my major several times. I ended up majoring in political science, but I had completed full minors in human biology and African and African American studies, in anthropology. Um. I had a lot of, of varied interests and I, I loved being able to ex- explore them.

Whitney: Fascinating. All right.

June: (laughs).

Whitney: So, um, and just, just for the record, you went to college if I, if I'm, uh, remembering correctly, you went to Stanford?

June: I went to Stanford, yeah.

Whitney: All right. So, now we're gonna go two steps back, or forward, I would say. So, you, you've been at TED for 10 years, you realize it's time to do something next. You know, one of the questions that's coming up for me, June, as I'm listening to you talk about how you're hopelessly interested in everything - I talk a lot in my work about the power of constraints. And I, I get the sense, and I know this is gonna make you feel a little bit uncomfortable, but that you're good at a lot of things. When you don't necessarily have the constraint of only being good at a few things, how do you impose your constraints on yourself so that you actually can get something done?

June: Well, gosh, it's an interesting question that plays out in, in different ways at different times in life, right? I think some of the most challenging moments, and I've heard this from many people, is moments when you're in between careers when you've left one thing, but have not get started the other, because it opens up every question in your life, which is the direction that I want to go? And I've gone through those transitions several times in my life. After college, after my, my first job after college was with Wired. After I left Wired after six years, after, and after I left TED.

The wisest thing I found to do is to make a decision and to lean into it. And to see how you feel. So rather than spending too much time in the, in the land of indecision, in that in between place where you, where you don't know what you, what you want to do, is making one decision and, um, and testing it. And seeing how it feels to live with it. And if it feels like, if it's something that, that feeds you and is, and is working and speaking to you, lean into it. And if it isn't, change course. But I think it's very hard to find answers when you're inactive. I think it's very hard to find answers just by thinking about it. I think you have to live your way into the answers. And so making your decision and living your way into it, and even just finding that it's wrong and going in another direction, is better than remaining a long time in indecision. I didn't express that exactly correctly, but that's, that's what I've learned.

Whitney: Yeah, that's really interesting. So what, what I'm hearing you say is that you're allowing the decision itself, the willingness to make a decision, to be the constraint. I made a decision. Now I've gotta figure out what to do with the consequences of that decision. And it never had occurred to me that our willingness to actually make a decision does impose a sort of constraint.

June: It's an interesting way of expressing it, and I, and I think that's right. And it's interesting because even, I'm not sure I've thought about this, um, myself in this way, but two thoughts. One of my absolute favorite moments in Masters of Scale, which was our podcast that we, we launched last year, is this [great quote from Eric Schmidt of Google](#), where he is describing what he learned by being a pilot. He learned to fly, uh, while he was I think CEO at Novell. Um, he said the-the-the discipline that he learned from, from flying, that what it learns is, is it teaches you to make very quick decisions. Decide. Decide. Decide. And then go from there. And that he has always brought that into his business life, that the best thing you can do as a leader is to decide. A decision is better than no decision.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

June: Always. And I tend to be a very open-mind, open-minded/open-ended person and so having always thinking about that discipline of constraints, not just at decision points in my life but every day as a leader, really helps me. I mean, there are days literally when I'll have Eric Schmidt just, I'll think of him in my head and when I'm looking at 500 things that need to happen in front of me. And I'm like, all right, June, decide, decide, decide. Just keep moving

Whitney: Okay. So, now, we're back to where we were before we took a very long detour. Thank you for doing that with me. How did you decide what you were going to do next when you left TED?

June: Well, I knew when I left TED, I knew broadly what I wanted to do. I knew that I wanted to be creating again. I knew it comes back to this feeling of being half-storyteller, half-inventor. I wanted to have my hands back in the clay. I wanted to be creating something from the ground up. I wanted to be telling stories, I wanted to be doing it in mediums that were emerging and mediums I hadn't worked in before. And really, as I was leaving I got a lot of inspiration. There was a year, a year between when I left TED before we launched our new start-up, and when I first left, I got a lot of inspiration from my partner and co-founder, Deron. And his advice to me was, um, to, to basically try several things at once. And to set things up that were very concrete.

So what I did, was I looked at, um, the mediums that I was most interested in working in, and, and companies and people I was most interested in working in. And, in my first year out of TED, I worked, I did kind of three, I sort of embedded myself into three different companies at once. Once was a, the, a VR company, I think the, the best VR company in the world, uh, run by Chris Milk and Arran Coughlan. Um. And they are two just media visionaries and thinkers who I've admired for a long time. And so I, part of what I did was I collaborated with them in creating new VR and we developed a VR documentary series together.

The second one was audio. There was, there was and is such a renaissance happening in audio and I stepped into a role at [Audible](#), uh, alongside Eric Nuzum, who had come out of NPR. Eric and Deron and I had launched the [TED Radio Hour](#) together, and so I also embedded with [Audible](#) and Eric and Jesse Baker and, and some others. There were a couple of shows that I had, uh, pitched and ended up launching the Esther Perel podcast with them, [Where Should We Begin?](#) So we, uh, Deron and I originated that idea that was produced by [Audible](#).

And then the third was I also worked alongside the wonderful George Kembel at the [Stanford d.school](#) and we did some work together for a while. But what I did, so the, but the overall picture of what I did, was I, I had picked three of my passions and I leaned into them. And I didn't just pick them, I actually just focused on a number of people and companies and areas that were really interesting to me, and just talked to people. So I have a number of other conversations outside of that with other people and other products that I found interesting, and I leaned into the three where there are some things really specific, a really specific project and context that I could jump into with them. And my goal there really, like I said, was to invent again. I had to, I think that

many of us have these cycles in our careers and one of my cycles is that I love to build things.

So I go through periods where I, I need to cast off all of, you know, the organizations around me and I need to put my hands in the clay and create something, and then start building. And then over time, that kind of builds into a team and an organization and, you know, and the role transforms as, as an organization becomes larger. And then I have to start over and, and do it again.

Whitney: What are you building now?

June: So we are now one year into our content incubator. So my partner, Deron Triff, and I launched just over one year ago a start-up called [WaitWhat?](#), and we are content incubators. We don't know of any other content incubators, but that was the best name we could come up, uh, to describe the ethos of what we're building, which is a media start-up where we, um, develop different media properties over time. The goal is probably to launch around three or four a year. Develop new media forms, each of which is inventive, is, um, genre-defining, um, that doesn't just imitate what's out there but create something sort of brand new. And we find ways to develop them to great scale. So we love creating things that are kind of excellent and new, but that can also really grow and reach a lot of people.

We don't limit ourselves to sort of unlike other media companies. Most media companies tend to think of themselves as either being defined by format. They're a podcast company or they're, uh, a video company, or they're, uh, sort of a digital news company. We don't define ourselves by format. We work across every different format, primarily in digital. Some companies define themselves by demographics, like who, who they're trying to, to reach. Some by, uh, a content area. Um. You know, women's content or tech content. And we actually define ourselves not by who we're, what we're creating or who we're trying to reach, but by what we want people to feel.

Whitney: Hm.

June: So what we're aiming for, is the feeling that we want people to have when they watch or listen or experience it. We want people to experience certain contagious emotions, uh, curiosity, wonder, awe, mastery. They're emotions that are very, uh, positive and optimistic. They are emotions that help people, um, feel lit up and alive. They help people reach their potential, but perhaps even more importantly, these are emotions that have been shown to be contagious. When you experience curiosity or awe or wonder or mastery, you want to share with somebody else.

Whitney: So you're agnostic as to format and medium. What you're looking for is that it's contagious and it elicits, as you said, feelings or curiosity, wonder, awe, mastery.

June: Yes.

Whitney: So let's talk about a couple of your current projects and, um, content that you're incubating. The one that I think is, at this point, probably the most prominent is Masters of Scale. So tell us a little bit about that and what you're hoping people will feel after they listen to, listen to one of those podcasts.

June: Sure. So [Masters of Scale](#) was our first pro- it was our first wholly owned property. We had, created and contributed to others like Sincerely X from TED, the anonymous TED Talks and, uh, Esther Perel show on Audible. But this was our first wholly owned podcast, it launched last May. And the idea behind Masters of Scale is to create, um, a business show that doesn't sound like any other business show out there. It features Reid Hoffman, the totally delightful, uh, founder of LinkedIn. He was also, he was also pretty widely acknowledged as one of, if not the most successful, uh, Silicon Valley investors of all time. He invested in Facebook and Airbnb and Dropbox and a dozen companies that have gone from zero to a gazillion. But he is also a deeply wise soul. He has this contagious, uh, enthusiasm and this really interesting way of looking at the world.

And so we approached him with this project, uh, for him to host and the idea on the show is that in every episode Reid kind of explores a theory on how companies actually scale. How do they achieve great scale? And he does each episode through a conversation with one guests, and these guests have included people like [Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook](#) and [Howard Schultz of Starbucks](#) and what really makes the show special is, is a couple of things. It's both Reid's personality and insights and his, uh, you know, just his, uh, willingness to, to share what he, he knows. His generosity. It's also the, um, the way he knits ideas together. He has this really unusual way of combining thoughts.

But then on top of that, we, uh, we've added original music. So every episode is composed. And this leads to a really surprising and engaging soundtrack that, again, doesn't sound that any business, uh, show you've ever heard. We add in cameo appearances by people like pastry chefs and Olympic athletes, and, um, try to start each show with a cold open that it just surprises people. You know? And in [one episode it's a gospel choir coming in to sing the chorus of No's behind the founder, actually Kathryn Minshew of the Muse](#), who's talking about the series of rejection's had and she's talking about how she kept hearing no, and then a gospel choir comes in behind her singing No.

Whitney: That's fantastic.

June: It's very amusing. And the reason we do that is it's actually really in our company name. Like everything that we create, we want people to say, "Wait, what?" Like, wait, what did they do? Wait, what did they just say? Wait, what's possible? We want everything, every episode to give you that WhatWait? moment. We want people to be, to stop in their tracks and, and listen closer, or rethink something that they knew.

Each of these episodes also has just very counterintuitive theories being put forward. Like there's an episode where he talks about how entrepreneurs, um, they're always fires burning when you're an entrepreneur, but if you're gonna be successful and really scale, you have to let fires burn. And you have sometimes have to let fires burn really

hot. And, which is such a hilarious and counterintuitive and freeing things to hear, to hear is an entrepreneur, like, oh, I'm supposed to let some fires burn. Well, that's good, 'cause there's a lot of fires burning (laughs) right now.

Whitney: So June ... What, what fires are burning for you right now as an entrepreneur?

June: Oh my gosh. Every fire. I mean, it's actually, it's actually been one of the like wonderfully, uh, informative and freeing things about doing a podcast for start-ups when you're a start-up, is like every episode speaks directly to us. So my fires that are burning. One - we need to hire a lot of people and, uh, it always takes longer than you think. So one of the things that, one of the fires burning right now is I really should be reviewing my candidates that, new candidates that have come in for the social media role (laughs). So that is something that I should be doing right now, as well as our writer role and our head of brand partnerships role. That is one.

Number two is we are, um, you know, on a weekly deadline for just for Masters of Scale. So there are some fires burning in terms of upcoming episodes, particularly 'cause my writer has the, the flu. Another fire burning is that we have three super interesting properties in development that are very different from Masters of Scale. They're all in very different formats, and each one of them is demanding, um, our creative input. And of course, we're a start-up, so we're always you know, just sort of one step behind on, on that. There's always a fire burning.

Whitney: So you, so you mentioned, um, earlier that one of the things that you love is not only to be a story-teller, but how stories are told. Is there a property that you're developing right now that you can talk about that you're incubating, that you're really intrigued by how you're telling the story?

June: Yeah. Well, it's interesting actually. I think actually all of the properties we're developing have that aspect to them. And so I can tell you a little bit about them. They're still under-wraps, but I think I can tell you enough that it will be, that it will point in the direction. Um, so one of the properties that we're developing has to do with the, the moment we, the moment we find ourselves in the American political landscape. Um. So we're obviously, you know, in a super divided moment. In a moment where there is uh, conversations around politics are very fraught, and where there is a widespread sense in, in the country that we are very divided. And we are really locked in mutual incomprehension that, um, there are, you know, entire swaths of the population who feel they have nothing, they don't have anything in common with the other. And who absolutely just cannot understand the viewpoint of the other side. And this is being, I believe, really stoked in the media on either side of the political, uh, divide, so that different people are hearing very different narratives about this moment.

And we have a project under development to kind of bring the narrative back to the people. And to find ways to cultivate personal story-telling. Creating a project that allows individual Americans to express what it is they care about most deeply in the context of their own personal life, in a way that other people can understand. I can't say too much more about it right now, but that notion of unlocking story-telling on a personal level as a way to break through the noise and the anger in the political

conversation right now. Like we are living inside mostly living inside an outrage machine right now. And we want to do something entirely different from that, and that almost something that can help inoculate us.

Whitney: Mmm. Mmm. I look forward to it.

Whitney: Is there anything unique about the actual, um, vehicle that you're using? Like you talked earlier about a project that you had done, you had embedded yourself inside of a VR company. Anything around that, that you can share?

June: I think with this one, there's a lot of partnerships involved in it. And really everything we do as a start-up, we are looking to partner with, right? And I think that's actually just really, it's actually not always the thinking that media companies have. Many media companies are kind of driven toward bringing just bringing the audience to themselves and the, the eyeballs to themselves. And we think a lot about who can we partner with to, um, to further what we're doing and what, what they're doing. We often joke that we don't ask people to do what we want them to do. We ask them to do what they already want to do. We try to find organizations that are already working, or people who are already working in a direction that's interesting to us. And so for this, they'll be, both a partnership with a, um, a well-known professor who looks at narrative, who has a kind of a structure and a theory around this kind of personal story-telling.

And then also looking for a number of partners with kind of, um, looking with a talking to partners who have kind of broad reach in the U.S. so that we can reach populations kind of unconventionally. Both to solicit the right people for the project 'Cause you have to have people...

Whitney: Right.

June: Who are t- a true diversity of people in a, in a project like this. And you don't do that just by, sitting in your office in New York (laughs).

Whitney: Correct. Tell us a little bit about your team at WaitWhat? What do you love about your team?

June: Oh, everything. So my team, we're, we're very small right now. We're, um, eight people and eight people and growing, or trying to grow fast. But what I love about my team is several things. So, we have this very specific eye toward hiring, or several specific eyes toward hiring. So everyone on our team identifies as a story-teller/inventor. It's all people who are part story-teller, part inventor. They, they love expression and story-telling but also doing it in new ways. And whether that's expressed in audio, whether it's expressed through visuals, whether it's expressed through the writing itself or expressed through technology. Um, we're kind of putting together a team with people who have very specific deep skills that, who that they can bring to bear on it. And look, and everyone on my team just has this kind of wonderful combination of deep talent and deep generosity of spirit. So they are people who are very skilled at what they do but very humble, and just have this incredible drive to contribute - both to contribute to a

team and contribute to the world. Every job description that we have that we put out always ends with that we, we only hire extremely nice people, and an edict we live by.

The, the other thing about the team is that, um, we, we really believe in gender balance as well as diversity of all kinds. And so the gender balance, the team is 50/50 men/women by design, and it's a really interesting thing to actually balance as you begin to grow. I feel quite passionately, actually, about the power of 50/50 balance, and by saying that, I'm actually not talking about making sure your team has enough women. I'm actually just talking about a true 50/50 balance. I think that teams that lean too heavily female or lean too heavily male or too heavily female are imbalanced and don't function as well as they could. And so we, we're striving to actually always keep a direct 50/50 balance on the team, which is a kind of a funny thing to balance when you're very small because, you know, two hires can (laughs) completely throw you, throw you off.

And then of course we're looking at it for ethnic diversity and religious diversity and geographic diversity and diversity of, of all kinds as we, as we grow. I just really believe in diversity as a, um, just as a disrupter. That it's a strategic advantage, as the more diverse your team is, the more opportunities you're gonna see.

Whitney: We hear a lot about that and the importance of having diversity and how it increases your ability to problem solve, et cetera. Have you seen to date a specific instance where because you had 50/50 men/women, you said yourself, huh, that's interesting? That would have gone differently if we were all women or we were all men. Can you think of any instance where it really did play out as you would have hoped because you've made this commitment to having this balance?

June: Definitely. I'll give you an example from WaitWhat?, and then an example from, from my years at TED.

So at WaitWhat, one of the projects that we're developing that I haven't mentioned yet, is a project that is about, it's all bottom-up story-telling. It's a platform for people to share their own stories, and it's actually a platform for the exchange of advice around life experiences. And for people to kind of share what they know based on their life experience. And in the course of just coming up with, and just coming up with names for that property. One of the things that we've discovered, is that men and women just hear things, often broadly speaking, hear things differently. So there-there are certain terms and certain phrases that will be very appealing to, um, the women on the team, and then almost universally not so appealing to the men on the team. And not only, not always for reasons that we can explain. One of the things I've learned over time, is always to think about putting a ... Not to always, not to always put a gender filter on things, 'cause that's not correct thinking, but to contemplate whether there is a gender filter in, in play. So, how people talk about things or how they like to see things.

Let me give you a concrete example from my years at TED. Maybe eight years into my tenure there, we undertook a whole, a redesign of TED.com. And TED.com had always had the same homepage and it was a, it's a very big deal to redesign a website, a very well-established website at a company. And so I decided to hold a series of workshops for the entire company that every single person in the company would come to a, a

workshop around the direction for the new, the new site. And one of the things we had people do, was design their ideal homepage for it. There were two or three really clear directions that emerged from that. And two of the very clear directions, is that there were, there was a whole camp of people who really preferred one single item on a homepage. Just really focused, one story, one click, that's it.

And then there was another school of people who liked to have many things. You know, and whether, whether you kind of frame that as a magazine or kind of a Pinterest-like compilation. They like to have many things, many options. And there was an incredibly clear gender split in, in those preferences. Um. Men overall, almost universal, not almost universally but, uh, predominantly preferred the single thing on the page, and the women predominantly preferred many, multiple things on the page. And if you were in a room that only had men, you would assume that everybody preferred one thing on the page. If you were in a room with all women, you would presume that everyone preferred many things on the page. But that's the kind of insight you, you miss when you don't have a diverse team.

Whitney: Right. That's really interesting. And it's a, it's a micro thing. I mean, it's almost a micro thing, and it's all those little micro things that add up over time.

June: Yeah. That's right. But and, you know strategically that could lead you to create a product that loses half of its potential market.

Whitney: Right.

June: For us, most of the things we do, we are trying to hit both genders with what we're creating. And so it would be strategically devastating to lose half the audience just because you didn't have, um, the right representation in the room when you were making small but key decisions on what something looks like or sounds like, or is named.

Whitney: Interesting. You're making me think, so right now my team is predominantly female, and I'm thinking, hmm, I may need to do something about that, because, um, it's working very well but as I'm listening to you, I think, well what am I missing? And I think, you know, just as it's important for as women talk to men about diversity, I think men could say to women that you need to be diverse as well. And so there's always the risk that when you're trying to be diverse that you end up doing the very thing that you meant not to do in the first place. The pendulum can swing too far.

June: I actually believe that's true. I, I do believe that's true, Whitney. Now, in small teams, part of it comes down to the chemistry between the people, right, when you have, you know, two, three, f- four people. But, but I have to say in my years at TED, I saw as much, as much dysfunction on all female teams as I saw on all male teams.

Whitney: Let's go back to story-telling. You've made a career, you're building a life, out of, out of story-telling. Out of, out of really mastering the craft. For people, listeners, who are thinking, "You know, I want to tell better stories." What are one or two pieces of advice that you would give to them?

June: So a few things come to mind that, and I think the first thing is to, is to make it personal, that stories always come down to an individual. Even when you're trying to explain something that is an idea, um, ideas stay with people. That ideas stick when they're told in the context of a story that involves a human and their journey. A quick example of this, this is how we kind of play this out on every episode of Masters of Scale, we're always trying to get a theory across - a theory of how companies scale. But the episodes always unfold in the context of a single person's journey. People have a sort of a magical connection to another human's story. They learn best through stories, they remember things best through stories. So any time that you can take something that's theoretical, idea-driven, or even dry, and, and illustrate it with a story, a real story, um, from a real person, it's going to stick more. And longer with, with an audience.

And sometimes people shy away from that, by the way. They think that if it's their own story, they think their story is too small or it's too personal or no one would be interested, and often it is the small personal details that, that really make a story work. If it's your own story you're telling, it doesn't mean sharing the most difficult thing that ever happened to you, or the most personal details, but just your humor and your passions and your interests and your personality. And letting that shine through.

The other thing that is super powerful is to tell a story that includes a lot of sensory detail, and this is one of the tricks, um, that I've learned over the years and, especially in, in oral story-telling. And whether you think of oral story-telling as a, as a TED Talk on a stage or a, or a podcast on something you just listened to, but it works in all forms, which is that using sensory details of you're telling a story of something that happened. The more you can share with someone, what it looked like, and what it sounded like, and what it smelled like, and what it felt like, it'll help them mirror your experience in their minds. It'll help them really picture what it is you're describing. So actually just adding a couple of sentences into a story that describes the blue of the sky or the sound of the cars on the street, or the feel of the carpet under your floor. You know, or the, the echo as a door closed. Those, those kind of little details, those sensory details, really cement a story in someone's mind.

Whitney: So two questions on that. Is there, um, first of all, is there a TED Talk that you feel like has done an especially good job of, of capturing those sensory details? And, is there an episode of perhaps Masters of Scale or another, um, property that you have out right now that you think does a particularly good job of telling a story, a personal story, that allows us to understand the broader theory that people are trying to convey or share?

June: So the best example, I'll work backwards in time for me. Um, but quickly Masters of Scale, the episode, actually our very first episode, [Handcrafted with Airbnb's CEO, Brian Chesky](#). Brian Chesky has a gift for story-telling. He just naturally explains his strategy as a CEO through the lens of these really vivid stories that offer, for a person in media, are really fun to work with. But you can also see how it, how it has just helped him succeed. And so I think in listening to that episode, you hear him tell the story of how he went in the early days of Airbnb, they went door to door, visiting their users in New York in their apartments. Like literally the two co-founders would just go door to door, to, to go photograph people's apartments so that they can ask them about what their experience was like and understand what they needed. And it's super vivid.

And then another example would be, there are several episodes of [Sincerely X](#), which is the anonymous TED Talks podcast, that, where people gave these anonymous TED Talks. Um, because it was for audio only, we really specifically coached them toward being very sensory in their details, so that people would be able to picture them and picture their lives. And there are a couple of examples from that that really sing. One was, um, uh, an episode it's called Rural Woman. It's a woman talking about her wonderful rural hometown, and then specifically what needed to change there. For the older guard to change how they viewed women and to give women an opportunity to advance as much as men. But it's a talk that comes from this total place of love, but the way she just describes her hometown is so vivid, you could feel yourself there.

Whitney: I have to ask this, I'm so sorry, but I'm going to anyway (laughs). Do you have a favorite TED Talk child?

June: (laughs).

June: I have a few. I have a few. It's always, it's always really tricky but I'll tell, I'll tell you a couple. I'm willing. Um. One of them is one of the first six TED Talks we ever put online. Uh, when we launched TED Talks, we launched with six Talks in 2006. It was our first experiment and one of those six was a talk by Hans Rosling. He went on to have 10 TED Talks, and this was his first in 2006. I think it was called [The Best Stats You've Ever Seen](#). And it's, Hans Rosling is this Swedish professor of global health. He's talking about the third world. It should, by all rights, be the most boring thing you've ever listened to in your life, and it sings because he finds this way of both visualizing statistics and then narrating them like a sportscaster, that is like nothing you've ever seen before. And he just lights up the screen with his passion. And I think that that was, for me, one of the Talks that really defined the, the trajectory of, of TED Talks with his just passion and enthusiasm. So Hans Rosling is one.

A second would be, uh, Ken Robinson's original Talk. I have this kind of particular love for the first six that we put online because I feel like, you know, we grew up together. And this is a Talk that probably everybody listening has, has heard. Ken Robinson, uh, [Do Schools Kill Creativity?](#) He is so brilliant and so natural and so funny. Like he, and both of them are really master story-tellers, because they have, they have told so many stories so many times to so many audiences, to, to hear what, what works.

Whitney: Okay, so before you go any further, in the spirit of gender balance, who are your two favorite women?

June: Yes, I was gonna go on. My next two were gonna be women.

Whitney: (laughs). Okay, good.

June: The, um, this is my, it's my natural inclination always. Um.

Whitney: I love it. I love it.

June: It's a tough one. I'd have to say that, one of them for sure is, Esther Perel, and I can't ... It's actually Esther Perel. And I cannot choose between her two talks. But I think I'm gonna choose her [second one](#) because it was, it's a really daring talk. And it's a talk that's about infidelity. I think infidelity is in the, the headline for it. But the way she talks about it, how to understand infidelity is so counterintuitive, it's so counterculture, it is so honest, and it is so widely, like, applicable to anyone. It actually doesn't matter whether you have experienced infidelity in your life, you will learn something about your relationships from this talk.

Whitney: Wow.

June: She is, um, incredibly adept at interpreting, uh, and understanding our love and relationship lives through this, through this intellectual lens. It's, it's not overly intellectual, but it, it analyzes it in a way that just feels so true, and also so fair. The interesting thing about Esther to me, is that her audience is half men, half women. There's, very few men are drawn to like the relationship advice space, but they flock to Esther. As do women, um, because she just has this truth-telling aspect to her. She's very wise. So Esther Perel, either of her talks, but especially [the one on infidelity](#), um, 'cause I think she also manages to bring the audience along. There are so many ways in a talk like that to lose the audience and she doesn't.

For the other one, I think I'd say I love, I love Elizabeth Gilbert's talk. I love, it's particularly that I love the back, the backstory behind it, the one on the, um, the myth of genius or how, how do, we have two different titles for it over a time, but it was like [How To Bring Out Your Own Creative Genius](#). And she was, it was a real joy for me to work with her, and that this was an idea she had been hatching in the background for sometime that really came to life for the first time on the TED stage. And that's always thrilling. But she just has this way of capturing, um, and talking about, um, uh, the way to keep your creative, uh, fire lit, um, without being so dependent on external success that I, I just love. So those are, those are my four.

June: Oh, but they're very white. Oh, see now you have to give me more time.

Whitney: Oh. Okay. One more. One more. Bonus. Bonus.

June: They're not, they're not, they're mostly non-American, so they're actually geographically diverse.

But so that gives me an opportunity to add in a Chimamanda Adichie. I mean, who, who's her, her Talk on the single story. I actually just think is a, is an essential concept for anyone to understand the ways in which stories can limit people by telling a single, uh, story about them, instead of, um, the many, many, many stories that could be true about them. And, um, [Brian Stevenson](#). Another like master story-teller talking about the, the tragedy of, of mass incarceration of, of African American men, uh, today.

I could go on and on. Honestly, see, this is, you see how bad this is. I could just keep, I could keep going. But I won't. There's probably other things we could talk about (laughs). Right?

Whitney: Well, so just to start to wrap up - What's a story that you frequently tell about yourself?

June: There's actually three related stories that I could tell quite quickly that all have the same theme. And these are stories I tell very often because there's a lesson in them that is so universal. And, um, the first story has to do with, um, I won't, I won't tell the, the stories in detail, but the first one has to do with the launching of, of TED Talks. That one, I took on the, uh, came to work at TED and, uh, pitched the idea of developing TED Talks as a podcast. Chris Anderson already knew he wanted to bring TED out to the, the world and I pitched the idea of doing it in a podcast form online. Absolutely no one thought this was a good idea. So this is one of the, the hidden truths behind, uh, TED Talks is that when it was under development, when I was pitching it, whether kind of early on we pitched it to TV networks and then we were just pitching it as a podcast series.

I had many, many, many, many conversations with people, either for advice or for partnership. And I think it is fair to say that I did not talk to a single person that, that, that genuinely thought it was a good idea. Um. Mostly I got a lot of, um, of pity (laughs). You know? Of people who are like, "That's really interesting. Your project's gonna fail," kind of looks.

Whitney: (laughs).

June: To most people it seemed like a very small, very bad idea. That the idea of putting taped lectures online was just not something that could ever succeed. But for me, I really believed in it. I, I believed in the Talks, I believed that, in how I felt when I was sitting in a room listening to these Talks and the audience. And I believed that that feeling could be, could be transferred to a video. That if you capture these Talks correctly, they would find their audience. I never in a million years imagined that they would find an audience to the tune of a billion views a year. Um. I thought they would find a nice, small committed audience, a geeky audience, of people who loved school.

But there's a lesson there in, um, in owning what you believe. You know? That often times when something doesn't exist yet, other people can't see it. But if you can see it, you can use that as a kind of a torch that lights the way. Like your own belief that you are creating something that at least a small group of people will, will love. And you have to fight through those no's, um, which is of course, this is a theme we explore in Masters of Scale frequently.

Whitney: With a gospel choir.

June: With the gospel choir. Exactly.

And then the second story, um, was at TED. One of the projects we launched that is lesser known was an open translation project. So it was a project that recruited, uh, that

allowed volunteers around the world to translate the Talks into any language. And, um, it was completely volunteer-driven and in the process of launching that, there was a lot of fear on the team. Uh, because any time you're opening yourselves up to volunteers who you don't know, especially with a project like that where you're trusting, your Talks to people you don't know around the world, who's like, who people you don't know, who's speaking languages you don't speak, it's this leap of faith. And throughout that, we kept having questions. How will it work? What will go wrong? And we took all of our fears, uh, we took all of the, the danger seriously but we didn't let them cripple us. It's easy on a project like that to get paralyzed by fear and by not knowing all of the answers.

And what I really learned along the way is that, is that you can't know all the answers from the beginning, but you just have to keep moving in the direction of the vision, and trust that the clouds will part. And I think with that, is it's such an essential part of the creative journey in whatever it is that you're creating or working toward, that you cannot know all the answers on day one. And you have to trust in the process. Kind of what we talked about at the beginning. Decide, decide, decide. Keep moving forward. And it will keep revealing itself.

Whitney: So you still have Eric Schmidt on your shoulder (laughs).

June: Always. I don't even know Eric. We've emailed once. But he is always on my shoulder. Decide, decide, decide.

Whitney: I, I, I think there's a little bit of a dare in there. I think, I think you need to email him and let him know how much he's inspired you.

June: (laughs).

June: I will. I will do it today.

Whitney: Okay. Fantastic. All right. What's your third story?

June: So the third story is a, is a current one. And I mean it's, um, and it's actually really essential to a number of the things that we've been talking about. So in the launching of WaitWhat?, my co-founder Deron and I, uh, decided from the beginning to have this commitment to 50/50 gender balance. On our staff, in our, on our, eventually on our board. We don't have a board yet, but eventually on our board. In our investors, and in our media properties. And there's two important stories that unfolded there.

The first one is on Masters of Scale, which, um, is the only American media program that has publicly committed to a 50/50 gender balance, which blows my mind. Like, I just cannot believe that there's not another media program that's done this. There are other media programs and properties that, that work toward it, and that achieve it, but none that have committed to it. We did that early on. We did that in probably one of our first several meetings with Reid. What happened was we had written down the names of all the people we most hoped to get on the show. You know, the blockbuster names that

we knew that would draw an audience. And we did our top 10 and we looked at the top 10, and there were nine white guys and Sheryl Sandberg. And all of us, we were like, "That won't do." That, I mean, we're not creating a show of, of white guys. That's just not how we work.

And so we, um, just pitched the idea to Reid. And we're like, "Why don't we have a 50/50 gender balance and just decide that we're gonna do half men and half women?" And he was like, "Yep. Absolutely." First of all, I've never had such a fast conversation about 50/50 gender balance, and that speaks to who Reid Hoffman is as a person. It was not even a discussion, it was just like a yes obviously. So part of the story there, is that I deeply believe that to have a gender balance, but particularly in the media aspect, you, you have to just decide. You just have to decide that you are going half/half, and that when if you have 10 guests in total, that once you hit five men, you stop inviting men and you focus on getting five women. And I say it that way because men, um, uh, say yes much more easily than women when it comes to appearing publicly on, on programs.

And I found that over the years, uh, categorically, uh, from working at TED to working on Masters of Scale, women are much harder to, to smoke out. You, you really have to work at it to get women guests. And if you haven't made that decision up front to be 50/50, you will have a mostly male program. I remember this from my TED years, as well. I ran one program where I had, I invited seven men and seven women, and six men said yes and six women said no. (laughs). And, and that's, and that was typical. And so that's kind of how I acquired this, this really deep seated belief in setting, uh, those goals. Uh, you know, and those, those quotas really (laughs). It's a, it's a dirty word in public, uh, discussion around it, but, um, I think it's actually essential.

So in any case, there's this story of, of Reid, which was the most wonderfully easy conversation about gender balance I've ever, I've ever had. Deron and I also decided that this is the approach we would also take to funding our company. That we wanted to make sure we ultimately had a, a gender balanced board and a gender balanced set of advisors. And if you're gonna do that, you have to have a gender balance set of investors. And we believe that you have to do that from day one.

And so we began noodling over this idea of having, gender balance angel investors. And honestly, we mentioned this idea to many people (laughs) and honestly everybody thought we were bonkers. They were like, "Well that's a, that's a nice idea, but you know, take the money where you find it." (laughs).

Whitney: Right.

June: Like, you know, "That's a great theoretical idea, but at the end of the day, you're just gonna have to like take wherever you can get the money from." And we're like, no, that's not how we're gonna play. We're, we're actually gonna, we are going to have a, a gender balanced, uh, group of investors and we're gonna do that by getting the women first. And so for probably five months we, um, only talked to women angel investors. And, we had like hilarious conversations along the way where, you know, we'd have to

say to people, "Sorry, no, we're not talking to men investors yet." (laughs). Which is just a ridiculous thing to say.

But in the end it, it worked. We were able to find, uh, women investors who have committed sort of the first half, and in the end we have, um, 12 angel investors. It's two, two institutions, um, one VC firm, one media company, and then five men and five women. And they're very, uh, uh, decent ethnic diversity, lots of geographic diversity, age diversity. They range from late 20s to early 70s. But we did that by, again, we decided. We just decided that that's what we were going to do and we didn't listen to the people who thought we were crazy for it. We decided that is, that is how we are going to start this company. And it was actually easier than people thought it would be.

Whitney: All right, so - last question for you. If Reid Hoffman were to interview you for Masters of Scale, what would you want the theme of the episode to be?

June: (laughs). That is such a great question. I love that question. Um. So, I think if he were to interview me ... I think that because each episode has a theory, that the theory would have something to do with tapping the individual potential and passions of many, many, many people. And that by giving people a way to express and realize their own potential within the context of your platform, that that is a key to scale. It's a theme that has, um, I've thought about throughout my career. When I was at Wired in the '90s I developed Web Monkey, which was a, a site that taught people how to use, uh, how to create websites, but also highlighted the same people who are creating them. And it was all about kind of empowering people to use, um, the web.

At, at TED, um, I think the way to really think about TED, uh, over time, was less that it, TED wasn't just a video series or a, a conference. TED became a, TED was an ecosystem. It became a platform for spreading ideas. It became a, a path by which many, many, many, many people could contribute their talents and realize their potential, whether it was by giving a talk at TED or the many TED-X events. Whether it was by holding a local TED-X event, whether it was by being one of the 100,000 people who translated the Talks into other languages or by, uh, people who showed those TED Talks to their classes and to their, uh, families to realize part of their potential in their life. It was a potential tapping machine.

That is part of what really inspires me and it's what we aspire toward at WaitWhat?. It's why we, um, focus on eliciting contagious emotions, both because those emotions of awe and curiosity and wonder and mastery, they, they light people up. They help them individually reach their potential but it also draws more people in. It's, um, the things that we're doing, Masters of Scale, is really focused on broadening the pool of people who have access to the tools to realize their entrepreneurial visions. It's why our next properties have to do, as one, has to do is, uh, unlocking story-telling on individual level among Americans today, to kind of break through the, the, the political impasse we're in. Another one of them has to do with empowering people to, um, share their experience with others to kind of exchange advice on a one-to-one way that allows the advice-giver to understand what they, what they know and to share it. And the advice-seeker to find it.

And then others that just, again, kind of tap into this idea of, of, of unlocking potential and doing it in a way that can, can grow. I think it's not just the unlocking of the potential, but doing it this kind of specific way that allows people to contribute to a larger platform and a larger idea. I think there's something very essential in humans that makes us want to build something together, and to be a part of something that is being built.

Whitney: So your theory that you would have him interview about, is the potentially tapping machine and how you scale it?

June: (laughs). It is something along those lines, is like if you, you want to scale something broadly, tap the potential of everyone.

Whitney: Love it. June, thank you. This has been such a pleasure. I, I've just enjoyed every single minute of it. Thank you, again.

June: Thank you, Whitney. Thanks so much. I hope I stayed on point.

June Cohen is a woman who LOVES to learn. The challenge of not know what she's doing, figuring it out, mastering, and then jumping to a new curve. Learn. Leap. Repeat. She could have stayed at TED forever--the top. I bet a lot of people were looking at her pretty sideways. Wait. You're going to do what? But that's what you do when you disrupt yourself. You are willing to become a silly, little thing so you can take over maybe not THE world, but certainly take over YOUR world. Loved the insight about making decisions. Decide. Decide. Decide. I have a list of daily questions that I ask myself. Maybe I should include this: what did I decide to do today? Did I make a decision. Did you?

And finally, her suggestions about how to be a better storyteller. Make it personal, share sensory details... And I would add - Start with the personal...because that's your point of connection... but then find a way to make it universal. Or as [Donald Miller shared in Episode 34](#), the best storyteller is the guide, and makes you, the listener, the hero.

Practical Tip:

The next time you give a presentation--try and include something that allows people to hear, touch, taste or smell whatever it is you are talking about.

This week we decided we are going to try something new, introducing our review of the week. Thank you to Alison Faulker, of The Alison Show. This is a great idea. So here's a podcast review from Emily Orton. She says:

*I consistently find valuable content on Disrupt Yourself. I'm always engaged and come away smarter and bolder from my listening time with Whitney. She interviews fascinating guests and draws out the meaningful instructive moments from their experiences. Disrupt Yourself positively impacts me professionally and personally. Whitney, keep disrupting! (Recently loved *Eric Ries, Nick Gray, *Alison Levine, Stacy London, Richie Norton, *Lee Caraher, Peter Sims and Alden Mills)*

Thank you Emily! If you'll send us an email at wj@whitneyjohnson.com, we'll send you \$25 Amazon gift card to purchase a book of your choice, since you were already kind enough to purchase [Build an A Team](#) and leave that review. Since you loved the podcasts with [Eric Ries](#), [Lee Caraher](#), [Richie Norton](#), [Peter Sims](#) and [Alden Mills](#), you may want to pick up one of their books. They're all excellent.

If you'd like to learn more about my new book [Build an A Team](#) my book with Harvard Business Press, download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to June Cohen for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis, Heather Hunt and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.